Roger Levy
MIT

Gender bias in preferred linguistic descriptions for expected events

Language production and comprehension reflects rapid integration of diverse information sources. Stereotypes---implicit mental associations among concepts---can influence event expectations and thus bias preferred linguistic descriptions. Do linguistic biases transparently reflect event expectations, or can the mappings between event expectations and preferred linguistic descriptions themselves be biased? Here we demonstrate that the mapping from event expectations to preferred linguistic descriptions can indeed be biased. In particular, when making pronominal references to individuals whose gender is not known or determined, expectations that the individual might be female manifest in feminine-pronoun preferences at a lower rate than expectations that the individual might be male manifest in masculine-pronoun preferences. In a large-scale experimental study during the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, this pattern was strongly manifested in comprehension and production of pronouns referring to the next U.S. President. This pattern also generalizes more broadly in pronominal production preferences to a wider variety of contexts. These findings constrain the structure of quantitatively precise theories of pragmatics. Additionally, these findings exemplify how quantitative, experimentally controlled psycholinguistic investigation can identify biases in mappings from events to preferred linguistic descriptions, revealing and deepening our understanding of implicit cognition.