

Abstract and Background

Background: As children learn their native tongue, they learn how their culture understands gender and its biases, especially favoring the masculine gender (Vigliocco et al., 2005). A language system is known to be a source of implicit gender bias (von der Malsberg et al., 2020). These biases tend to lead to gender stereotyping which is the belief about a characteristic of a group, as well as prioritizing men over women. Research has found that gender bias is shown within all languages to some degree by way of grammar (Gygax et al., 2019). These degrees consist of grammatical gender language, natural gender language, a combination of grammatical gender and natural gender, and genderless language (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012).

Methods: The study used the New York Public Library’s Best Books Lists for 2022 and 2021. For the natural gender language, it used English books from the lists. For grammatical gender languages it used Spanish. The study analyzed each book’s main character’s gender, target audience, and whether they are enforcing gender stereotypes.

Results: The research results found more similarities than differences in gender bias within natural gender language and grammatical gender language within the context of children’s literature. The results were that both languages had more female main characters than any other gender, which demonstrates different data from previous research. Also, within both languages, the key result was that most books did not enforce gender stereotypes and those books that did reinforce gender stereotypes were more likely to have female main characters.

Conclusions: Grammatical and natural gender languages have more similarities in terms of gender biases within children’s literature than thought by previous research.

Introduction and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to understand how gender bias is developed through language. The topic of this study was focused on how gender bias is shown through gender languages. Gender is shown within the human language in the form of nouns, verbs, and/or pronouns that correspond to female and/or male versions of specific words (DeFranza et al., 2020). Gender bias is understood once gender is understood within a language (Smolik & Blahova, 2019). Each language consists of a degree of gendered language. These degrees consist of grammatical gender language, natural gender language, a combination of grammatical gender and natural gender, and genderless language (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). This research focused on comparing gender bias within grammatical gender language and natural gender language. Specifically, it compared English children’s literature to Spanish children’s literature. This research is meaningful because it supports the idea that a person develops their concept of gender through their native language. It is important to understand this because it can offer insight into why humans have biases towards one gender over the other and how these biases are reinforced.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways are gender biases found within natural gender language within children’s literature?

RQ 2: In what ways are gender biases found within grammatical gender language within children’s literature?

RQ 3: What are the differences, if any, in gender biases in children’s literature between natural gender language and grammatical gender language?

Methods

The research design used a quasi-experimental static-group comparison design. Since the purpose of this study is to show how gender biases are represented in children’s literature in different languages, it identified how gender is represented in children’s literature and how different languages portray gender differently. This study compared gender bias within grammatical and natural gender languages. These language comparisons were chosen because each type of gender language has a distinct way of representing men and women (Gygax et al., 2019). These distinctions have been found to lead to an increase in gender prejudice and gender stereotypes (DeFranza et al., 2020). The study used children’s literature in English as a basis for the use of gender bias in children’s literature for natural gender language. This study used children’s literature in Spanish as a basis for the use of gender bias in children’s literature for grammatical gender language. It used NYPL’s books for the English and Spanish selections. They were the most appropriate to use because they were selected by expert librarians and educators who, out of thousands of newly published books, decided that these are the most recommended and appropriate books for children (Sherwood, 2022; Nati Per Leggere, 2023). Research was done for both the 2022 and 2021 lists of NYPL’s Best Books to increase the amount of both English and Spanish books for this research.



New York Public Library

Research Question 1 Data

English Main Character Gender		
	N	%
Male	51	26.6%
Female	83	43.2%
Unknown	39	20.3%
Multiple	19	9.9%

English Books Enforcing Gender Stereotypes		
	N	%
Yes	82	42.7%
No	110	57.3%

English Main Character Gender * English Books Enforcing Gender Stereotypes Crosstabulation							
		English Books Enforcing Gender Stereotypes				Total	
		Yes		No			
		N	%	N	%	N	%
English Main Character Gender	Male	36	43.9%	15	13.6%	51	26.6%
	Female	42	51.2%	41	37.3%	83	43.2%
	Unknown	0	0.0%	39	35.5%	39	20.3%
	Multiple	4	4.9%	15	13.6%	19	9.9%
Total		82	100.0%	110	100.0%	192	100.0%

Research Question 2 Data

Spanish Main Character Gender		
	N	%
Male	19	26.8%
Female	27	38.0%
Unknown	21	29.6%
Multiple	4	5.6%

Spanish Books Enforcing Gender Stereotypes		
	N	%
Yes	24	33.8%
No	47	66.2%

Spanish Main Character Gender * Spanish Books Enforcing Gender Stereotypes Crosstabulation							
		Spanish Books Enforcing Gender Stereotypes				Total	
		Yes		No			
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Spanish Main Character Gender	Male	8	33.3%	11	23.4%	19	26.8%
	Female	15	62.5%	12	25.5%	27	38.0%
	Unknown	0	0.0%	21	44.7%	21	29.6%
	Multiple	1	4.2%	3	6.4%	4	5.6%
Total		24	100.0%	47	100.0%	71	100.0%

Results and Conclusion

Results:

Research Question 1

The findings showed that 43.2% of books had female main characters according to Table 3. The findings showed that 57.3% of English books did not enforce gender stereotypes. The findings showed that books with female main characters are more likely to enforce gender stereotypes than books with male main characters and multiple main characters

Research Question 2

The findings discovered that there were frequently more female main characters than male, multiple genders, and unknown gender of main characters. The findings showed that 66.2% of the Spanish books did not enforce gender stereotypes. The findings showed that books with female main characters are more likely to enforce gender stereotypes than books with male main characters and multiple main characters.

Research Question 3

Both languages showed that the most frequent main character’s gender was female. Both languages showed that most of the books did not enforce gender stereotypes. Both languages showed that books with female main characters were more likely to enforce gender stereotypes than books of other genders.

Conclusions

The grammatical gender language list had a higher percentage of books that did not reinforce gender stereotypes. The grammatical gender language list had a higher percentage of unknown gendered main characters. Had more female main characters than any other kind. Previous research reveals that children are more likely to be surrounded by significantly higher amounts of male than female literary characters (Harris et al., 2017). Did not enforce gender stereotypes which leads to the stimuli for sexist attitudes (Wasserman & Wesely, 2009). Female main characters were more likely to enforce gender stereotypes than books with male main characters and multiple main characters. This supports the “Cinderella Complex” (Xu et al., 2019).

Future Work

1. Future researchers can expand upon this research by not only comparing more book recommendation lists but also more languages. Since there are different degrees of languages, there could be thousands of different possibilities that researchers can compare.
2. Future researchers can perform a similar study as this one but instead of using literature as the form of content, they could use one of the many other forms.

References and/or Acknowledgments

DeFranza, D., Mishra, H., & Mishra, A. (2020). How language shapes prejudice against women: An examination across 45 world languages. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition*, 119(1), 7-22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000188>

Gygax, P. M., Elmiger, D., Zufferey, S., Garnham, A., Sczesny, S., von Stockhausen, L., Braun, F., & Oakhill, J. (2019). A language index of grammatical gender dimensions to study the impact of grammatical gender on the way we perceive women and men. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1604-1604. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01604>

Nati Per Leggere. (2023). I Libri Consigliati da NPL. Home. <https://www.natiperleggere.it/libri-consigliati-npl.html>

Prewitt-Freilino, J. L., Caswell, T. A., & Laakso, E. K. (2012). The gendering of language: A comparison of gender equality in countries with gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages. *Sex Roles*, 66(3-4), 268-281. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0083-5>

Smolik, F., & Blahova, V. (2019). Czech 23-month-olds use gender agreement to anticipate upcoming nouns. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 178, 251-265. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2018.10.004>

Vigliocco, G., Vinson, D. P., Paganelli, F., & Dworzynski, K. (2005). Grammatical gender effects on cognition: Implications for language learning and language use. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 134(4), 501-520. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.134.4.501>

von der Malsburg, T., Poppels, T., & Levy, R. P. (2020). Implicit gender bias in linguistic descriptions for expected events: The cases of the 2016 United States and 2017 United Kingdom elections. *Psychological Science*, 31(2), 115-128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619890619>