Abstract

Within the framework of what has been called “structural relativity” (Lucy 1996), a number of studies have sought to examine the influence of grammatical gender on speakers’ thinking about the world as ‘female’ or ‘male’ (e.g., Bowers et al. 1999, Sera et al. 2002, Boroditsky et al. 2003, Vigliocco et al. 2005; and partly, Mills 1986 and Flaherty 2001). Some of this research indicates that grammatical gender effects appear systematically in languages with a two-gender system and that they are confined to specific semantic categories. Another finding suggests that the language in which instructions are given may affect the speakers’ behavior in performing the task. Drawing on this tradition of experimental research, we examine—in on-going project—two languages with a three-gender system, Greek and German, on the basis of a sex-attribution and a memory task.

The present paper discusses our findings mainly with respect to the Greek language. In particular, we focus on the fact that the two experimental tasks do not yield congruent results: while the sex-attribution task provides, among other things, evidence for grammatical gender effects on cognition (the sex attributed to an object/animal is in accordance to the gender of the noun denoting it) and for the influence of the language of instructions, the memory task rendered no such results. This discrepancy, along with the partial match of our findings with those of others across different experimental paradigms suggest that the current picture of research on gender and cognition is not coherent on several levels. Although cultural effects may well be at play (cf. e.g. Lucy 1992), it should also be taken into account that the methodological divides among the various approaches are indicative of different understandings of ‘cognition’, ‘speakers’ thinking for speaking’, etc.

References
