Short Research Note

Why Using Feminine Job Titles in German is Profitable for Women: Ascribed Linguistic Competence Enhance Prospects of Being Hired

Magdalena Formanowicz[1], Lea Hodel[2], and Sabine Sczesny[3]

[1] Center for Research on Social Relations, SWPS University, Warsaw

[2] Department of Psychology, University of Bern

Corresponding Author:

Magdalena Formanowicz, Center for Research on Social Relations, Department of Psychology,

SWPS University, ul. Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warszawa, Poland.

E-mail: mformanowicz@swps.edu.pl.

Abstract

In German, symmetrical treatment of women and men through gender-fair language is well established and the use of feminine forms is evaluated positively. In the present study (N = 331), we examined the mechanisms behind this positive evaluation. Female job applicants were evaluated as more linguistically competent and as more competent in general, which translated into more favorable hiring decisions when using a feminine (vs. a masculine) job title. These results illuminate positive effects of successful language reform for women.

Keywords

grammatical gender, gender-fair language, linguistic competence, inclusive language

Language reforms towards gender-fair language aim to treat women and men symmetrically in communication (see, however, the contributions in Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001, 2002, 2003). Measures to achieve this aim include making women and men equally linguistically visible by abstaining from the use of so-called masculine generics, i.e., the use of grammatically masculine forms for all genders or for professional titles designating people with an unknown gender. Since the 1970s, new forms have been introduced into many languages to increase gender fair language use. This is relatively easy in languages with natural gender which have relatively few gender distinctions such as English, where the few gender-marked role nouns of the type of *chairman* or *stewardess* are replaced with gender-unmarked forms such as *chairperson* or *flight attendant*.

In languages with grammatical gender, where almost all human nouns are grammatically marked for gender, linguistic equality is achieved, for example, by introducing feminine forms for professional roles where they have been lacking (e.g., German *Ärztin* 'female doctor' or *Ingenieurin* 'female engineer'). The introduction of gender fair forms in grammatical gender languages have had varied results. For some languages, such as Polish or Italian, previous studies documented difficulties in introducing language change, as traditional feminine forms were associated with status loss (e.g., in Italian, Merkel et al., 2012; in Polish, Formanowicz & Sczesny, 2016) and people using novel feminine job titles for women were evaluated negatively (e.g., in Polish: Formanowicz et al., 2013; Formanowicz et al., 2015).

For German, where gender-fair forms have been used more frequently than in Slavic-speaking countries (Hodel et al., 2017), speakers using gender-fair language were evaluated more positively (Vervecken & Hannover, 2012). In the present research, we further examined positive effects of gender fair language use in German by analyzing whether and how women using feminine compared to masculine forms result in their positive evaluation. We tested speakers perceived linguistic and general competence as potential explanations for the impact of language forms on evaluations. We examined this effect in the applied context of hiring to assess how women's use of feminine vs. masculine job titles may influence real-life outcomes (Sczesny et al., 2016).

Gender-Fair Language Across Languages and its Effects

Recommendations for gender-fair language (also called "non-sexist language", UNESCO, 1999, or "gender-inclusive language", Stout & Dasgupta, 2011) are based on empirical evidence that masculine generics fail to represent women and men equally. Over the past decades, many studies have shown that when utterances contain masculine generics, speakers lean towards the grammatical cue and visualize or recall mostly male exemplars of the respective person category (e.g., for English, Hamilton, 1988; Moulton et al., 1978; Wilson, & Ng, 1988; Gygax et al., 2008; for French, Gygax et al. 2008; for German, Stahlberg et al., 2001; for Polish, Bojarska, 2011). Gender-fair forms, on the other hand, reduce this male bias. When women were explicitly mentioned, female exemplars of the category became more readily available (Stahlberg et al., 2001; Horvath, & Sczesny, 2015). The introduction of feminine forms, however, varies in different languages.

In the present study, we focused on the German language, a grammatical gender language where the generic use of masculine job titles was well established in the 20th century but has been challenged and begun to change since the 1970s. Since then, the process of introducing feminine forms has advanced. This is not surprising, as feminine forms can easily be derived from masculine forms with the highly productive feminine suffix *-in*. It was therefore relatively simple to create terms such as *Bundeskanzlerin* '(female) chancellor', *Soldatin* '(female) soldier' or *Managerin* '(female) manager'. Nowadays materials and job lists published by the German federal employment agency Arbeitsagentur, for example, provide all job titles in the feminine as well as the masculine form (cf., BERUFENET[1]) and masculine forms are no longer listed as generic (Dudenredaktion, 2020). In comparison to Polish and Czech, for example, Austrian and Swiss German job advertisements utilized more gender-fair job titles (such as for example masculine-feminine word pairs) rather than gender-specific, mostly masculine job titles (Hodel et al., 2017).

Even though not all speakers of German refer to women with feminine job titles in all contexts, such terms are available and so common that they do not strike listeners or readers as odd. That is, gender-fair language use in German like the use of feminine forms to refer to women is nowadays a common practice. Accordingly, recent research has found gender-fair language use is positively evaluated by German speakers (Formanowicz et al., 2015; Vervecken & Hannover, 2012). A social initiative that addressed its female proponents in a feminine form was more supported among German-speaking participants than the very same initiative utilizing masculine forms (Formanowicz et al., 2015). Further, when evaluating applicants based on the language they used in a speech—containing either masculine generics (e.g., *Ärzte* ‘medical doctors, masc’) or word-pairs (e.g., *Ärzte und Ärztinnen* 'medical doctors, masc and fem')—results clearly indicated that speakers who used masculine forms to address a mixed-gender group were evaluated less positively than speakers who used gender-fair language; that is, those speakers who used masculine forms were less likely to be hired, and perceived as less competent and partly as less warm (Vervecken & Hannover, 2012).

In general, such effects of language use can be considered a sign of changed language norms. If the so-called masculine generic forms are no longer perceived as a language norm, people using such forms may be "punished" for violating linguistic norms and evaluated less positively. In a similar vein, speakers using a non-standard speech variation are often evaluated less favorably than speakers of the so-called standard speech (e.g., Giles & Watson, 2013; for recent reviews see Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020; Witkowska et al., 2023). Building on this line of reasoning for the German language, we examined whether women are advantaged when using a feminine—rather than a masculine—form of their job title in a hiring simulation paradigm. We expected the following:

H 1: Women applicants using feminine forms of their job title are evaluated as more hireable than those using masculine forms.

Moreover, we examined why women’s use of feminine forms, in comparison to masculine forms, could result in their more positive evaluation. In German, feminine forms of job titles are well-established (Dudenredaktion, 2020) and may thus constitute the standard for denominating women

in professional roles. Indeed, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland most women use feminine job titles to refer to themselves, though some women continue to use masculine forms (Schröter et al., 2012), indicating a variability in the gendered forms of professional titles used in reference to women. Importantly, gender-fair language rules were followed especially when speakers' linguistic competence in German was high (Kuhn & Gabriel; 2014), suggesting that the use of gender-fair language forms signals linguistic competence. On the contrary, violating language standards signals linguistic incompetence, as has been shown in research on the devaluation of foreign language speakers (Giles & Coupland, 1991). A person not meeting a linguistic standard may not only be perceived as linguistically incompetent but also as incompetent in general, both of which may translate into negative outcomes for the speakers (e.g., Vervecken & Hannover, 2012). Based on this line of reasoning, we predicted that:

H 2: Women applicants using feminine job titles are attributed more linguistic competence and more competence in general than women applicants those using masculine job titles, which in turn results in their increased hireability.

Finally, besides competence (agency), we explored further dimensions of agency and communion as potential explanations for the effect of language forms of job titles on the evaluation of women applicants. Violating a linguistic norm may be considered not only a sign of (linguistic) incompetence (e.g., Giles & Coupland, 1991) but as indicative of a more general propensity to violate norms. This perceived propensity to violate norms could also be punished with lower communion ascriptions (Bettencourt et al., 1997). Driven by the developments in the field of social perception (Abele et al., 2016), we explored the role of assertiveness and competence as subdimensions of agency, and warmth and morality as subdimensions of communion as potential mediators of the effects of language on the evaluation of speakers.

Method

Participants

The online survey was initiated by 673 people and completed by 437. We excluded 10 participants who failed to indicate their first language and another 24 who declared that German was not their native language. Moreover, we excluded participants who failed the manipulation check, requiring that the participant remembered the gender of the applicant. Specifically, six people failed to remember the applicant's gender and 66 participants misremembered the applicant as male[2]. The final sample consisted of 331 participants (230 women and 101 men; M_{age} = 25.51, SD_{age} = 4.49 years). This sample size was adequate to detect a medium effect size of f = 0.25 (Cumming, 2014; Mayr et al., 2007) with a power of 80%. The cut-off value for significance was set to p = .05. This study was not preregistered, study materials and data are available at the OSF platform https://osf.io/d5ux7/.

Materials and Procedure

We invited participants through the mailing system of a Swiss University and asked them to take part in a hiring simulation study in which they would evaluate one application for an open position. Participants were instructed to assume the role of an HR manager making a final decision based on a motivation letter. We chose four male-dominated professions based on Swiss graduation rates (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2010a, 2010b) that vary in their social status: *Schreinerin / Schreiner* 'Carpenter' (89% men), *Bauzeichnerin / Bauzeichner* 'Draftsperson' (77% men), *Physikerin / Physiker* 'Physics' (80% men), and *Chemieingenieurin / Chemieingenieur* 'Chemical Engineer' (78% men). We decided to use male-dominated professions, because for these professions the use of the masculine language form would be most common, providing us with a conservative test for our hypotheses. We collapsed the results for the four male-dominated professions.

We provided participants with the motivation letter of the applicant. The motivation letter was identical in all conditions except for the professional title and the organization where the applicant

applied. The job title occurred four times throughout the letter. The professional title of the applicant was presented either in the masculine form (e.g., *Physiker* or *Schreiner*) or the feminine form (e.g., *Physikerin* or *Schreinerin).*

Measures

Dependent Variable. The dependent variable hireability was measured with two items: "Would you invite this person for a job interview?", "Would you hire the person?" (adapted from Hoyt, 2012; Dipboye et al., 1984; Formanowicz et al., 2013). Both items were rated on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*) and combined to create the scale "Hireability" (r = .79), with higher overall values indicating a more positive evaluation of the applicant.

Mediator Variables. We assessed linguistic competence with the following item: "How proficient is this person in German?" This item was rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Following past research (Vervecken & Hannover, 2012), we also measured a more general form of competence, along with other aspects of person perception embedded in the two scales of person perception agency (AA: assertiveness and AC: competence) and communion (CW: warmth and CM: morality), validated for German (Abele et al., 2016). Each subfacet was measured by four items (AA: 4 items, e.g., self-confident, α = .68; AC: 4 items, e.g., competent, α = .82; CW: 4 items, e.g., caring, α = .84; CM: 4 items, e.g., considerate, α = .71) rated on 5-point scales (1 = *low intensity*; 5 = *high intensity*). Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all the examined variables.

[Insert Table 1]

As manipulation checks, we asked about participants' native language and whether they correctly remembered the applicant's gender. Moreover, to test whether using feminine job titles for women is indeed common practice in German we asked participants how likely it is that a woman would designate herself with the job title provided in the respective experimental condition (1 = *very*

unlikely; 7 = *very likely*). Participants also estimated the status of the profession on a 7-point scale (1 = *low status*; 7 = *high status*) to test whether status ascriptions depend on language form[3]. Finally, we asked participants about their gender, age, education, political views, and their experiences with job recruitment. We report here all the conditions and variables measured.

Results

To test Hypothesis 1 on the effect of a feminine vs. a masculine language form on hireability, we conducted a t-test. In line with H1, this test revealed that female applicants using feminine job titles were perceived as more hireable than female applicants using masculine forms to designate themselves. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the examined variables separated by language form and the *t*-tests with effect sizes (Cohen's *d*).

[Insert Table 2]

To examine Hypothesis 2 about the underlying mechanisms of this language effect on hireability, we conducted a mediation analysis. As potential mediators we examined the ascriptions of linguistic competence, general competence, assertiveness, morality, and warmth. We applied Hayes macro (2012) with bootstrapping (with 5,000 resamples) to compute 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. The model explained 40% of the variation in hireability, R^2 = .40; F (6,324) = 35.54; $p < .001$. In line with H2, linguistic competence and general competence both significantly mediated the effect of language form on hireability (point estimator linguistic competence = 0.14; bootstrapped *LCI* = 0.06; *UCI* = 0.24; point estimator general competence = 0.10; bootstrapped *LCI* = 0.01; *UCI* = 0.22), while the other three variables did not mediate the language form effect - for the model see Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1]

Discussion

This study expands past research that has highlighted positive effects of gender-fair language use (Vervecken & Hannover, 2012) by documenting that women adhering to the current linguistic standard (i.e., using feminine job titles in German) are more likely to be hired than women using outdated masculine language forms. This study is the first to demonstrate that women's use of masculine job titles can be detrimental for their potential employment opportunities. Furthermore, this study offers first explanations for this language effect, revealing that lower ascriptions of linguistic and general competence in reaction to women's use of masculine job titles contribute to unfavorable hiring decisions. Importantly, the results also indicate that women designating themselves with masculine job titles are not perceived as less hirable because of their assertiveness, warmth, and morality, but specifically because of the devaluation of their competence.

It must be noted that the evidence provided by this study is limited to the context of a hiring situation, a rather formalized context, indicating that language reforms have been successful in this context. The language form of the job title might be less relevant in other contexts that do not require the evaluation of the speaker, for instance, when women are using masculine job titles to designate themselves in everyday conversations at work. Thus, other contexts in which job titles are used need to be investigated in future research. Furthermore, this research is based on data from the specific cultural context of Switzerland using a sample of university students. Future research therefore needs to examine the impact of job titles in other cultures and among decision makers in organizations.

The present results suggest a successful language reform towards greater linguistic equality for women and men in Switzerland. Considering the normative aspect of language change, our results also emphasize the important role of authorities who support the implementation of gender-fair language, through creating regulations, directives, and guidelines for fairer language standards. Institutional support can contribute to a faster and more thorough implementation of gender equality. Importantly social norms not only affect people who agree with their content but also affect those who show a strong adherence to social norms (Górska et al., 2022). That is, official regulations

implemented by authorities likely facilitate the standard of gender-fair language not only among those who agree with those language reforms.

Finally, the present findings suggest that negative effects of women's self-designation with feminine job titles (as found in Polish, Formanowicz et al., 2013) are reversed when feminine forms became the norm in a language community. The present study thus provides indirect evidence for a successful language reform in German and stands in line with other studies showing that new language forms, when well established, are accepted, translate into new standards, and have positive consequences for women (Formanowicz et. al., 2015; Vervecken & Hannover, 2012).

Notes

1. https://berufenet.arbeitsagentur.de/berufenet/faces/index;BERUFENETJSESSIONID=r8yP8WvbAJTWgP5xFjn3Aln6I1bKfYTPEsQ3iGQvEs-iyGEZq-9X!312017375?path=null/sucheAZ&let=A
2. This suggests that the masculine title was misremembered as referring to a male person (for similar effects of masculine generics on memory see Ng, 1990).
3. We conducted two *t*-tests to assess the probability of language use and ascription of job status. Results showed that feminine job titles were evaluated as more probable for women than masculine job titles, t (329) = 9.81, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.10$.

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ORCID iD

Magdalena Formanowicz 0000-0001-5859-7100

Lea Hodel 0000-0002-1586-5176

Sabine Sczesny 0000-0002-1666-1263

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Examined Variables.

	M	*SD*	*LC*	*AC*	*AA*	*CW*	*CM*
Hireability	5.09	1.22	.37***	.53***	.24***	.23***	.48***
Linguistic Competence (LC)	5.80	1.19		.29***	.20***	.02	.18***
Competence (AC)	3.96	0.67			.60***	.13*	.51***
Assertiveness (AA)	3.83	0.67				-.15**	.16**
Warmth (CW)	3.08	0.74					.68***
Morality (CM)	3.52	0.60					

Note. *** $p <= .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of the Examined Variables Separated by Language Form, and t-Tests.

	Masculine Forms		Feminine Forms		t-test (*df*=329)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*d*
Hireability	4.92	1.19	5.20	1.23	2.06*	0.23
Linguistic Competence	5.45	1.33	6.05	1.03	4.61***	0.52
AC: Competence	3.87	0.67	4.02	0.67	1.98*	0.22
AA: Assertiveness	3.81	0.71	3.85	0.65	0.42	0.05
CW: Warmth	3.03	0.77	3.11	0.72	1.04	0.12
CM: Morality	3.50	0.58	3.54	0.61	0.68	0.08

Note. *** p < .001. ** p <.01. * p <.05. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = t-test; *d* = Cohen's *d*. For each of the considered variables we conducted also a 2 Language Form (feminine vs. masculine) x 4 Profession (Carpenter, Draftsperson, Physics, Chemical Engineer) analysis of variance. While in some cases we recorded a theoretically irrelevant main effect of profession, which indicated that some professions were evaluated differently than the others, in none of the conducted analyses did we observed a significant interaction of the language form and the profession.

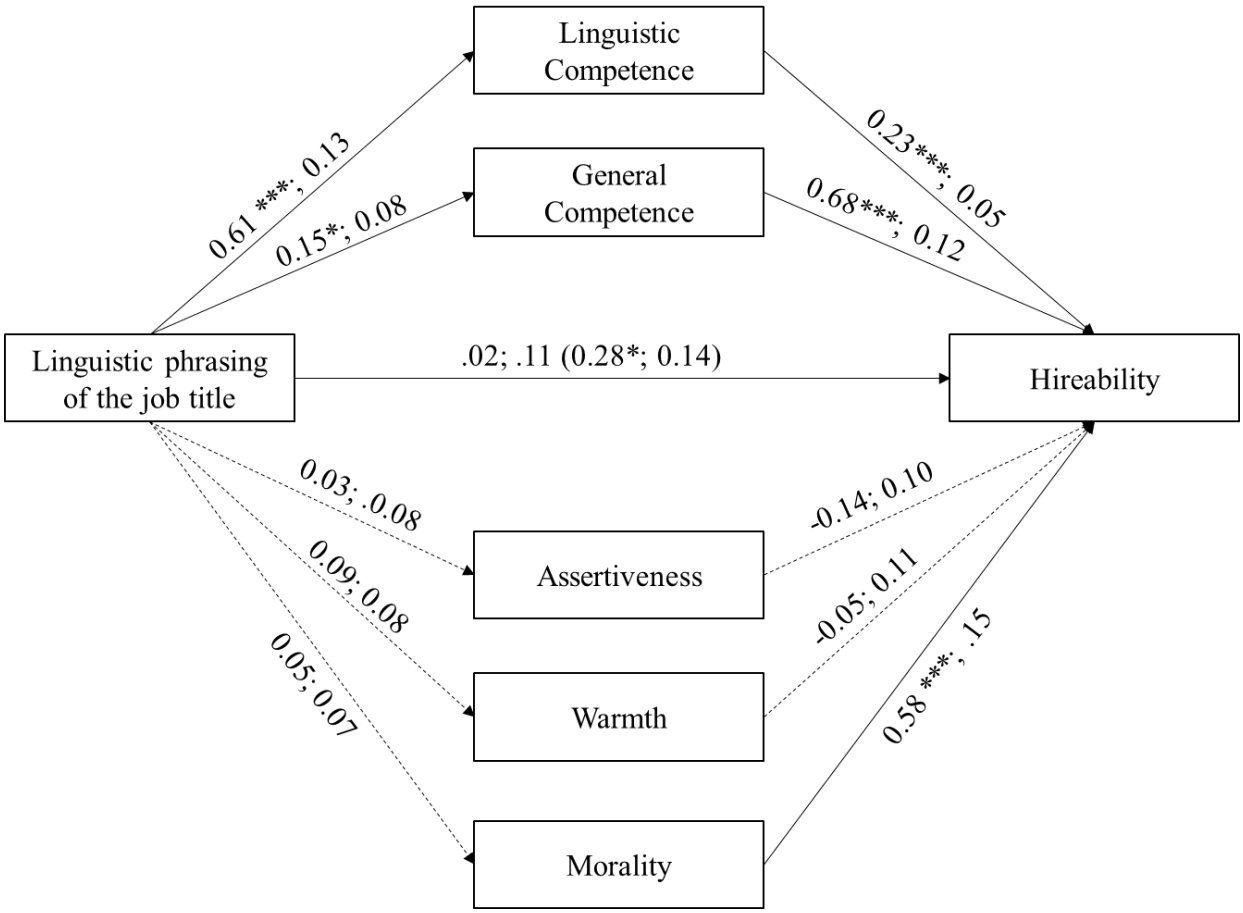

Figure 1. Mediation-model of linguistic phrasing of the job title on hireability

Note. Mediation-model showing the effect of language form on applicant's hireability as mediated by linguistic competence and general competence. The mediation over assertiveness, warmth, and morality was not significant. The language form was coded 0 for masculine job title and 1 for feminine job title. Coefficients are followed by the standard errors, coefficients in parentheses represent parameter estimates for the regression model containing only language form as predictor variable. Asterisks indicate significant paths (*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$).

Author Biographies

Magdalena Formanowicz is an associate professor at the Center for Research on Social Relations, SWPS University in Warsaw. Her research focuses on social cognition and language. She is also interested in dehumanization and agency.

Lea Hodel is a researcher in the field of social psychology at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Her research focuses on culture and language in relation to gender equality.

Sabine Sczesny is a professor of social psychology at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Her research focuses on various causes and consequences of stereotypes and prejudice.