

Processing gender while processing names: An investigation of gender neutral versus gender specific forenames in Punjabi

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Gender-neutral linguistic forms are emerging as one of the key alternatives for traditionally gendered forms to promote fairer mental and social representation of all genders. However, it remains a topic of ongoing investigation as to how these are cognitively processed compared to gender-specific ones [1]. Additionally, whether they really eliminate a gender-specific inference in human animate nouns is questionable, as research on the same is yet to reach a consensus [2]. To shed further light on these questions, we aimed to investigate how gender-neutral forenames are processed compared to gender-specific ones in Punjabi, a language, that has an extensive agreement system with a stable and long-standing tradition of gender-neutral person forenames. Secondly, we examined whether this under-specification or probable ambiguity of gender in neutral names will lead to a male-biased inference. To this end, we designed two experiments. First, a non-cumulative self-paced reading (SPR) experiment (n=60; mean age = 23.35, 36 male) wherein we manipulated the perceived gender of the forenames (neutral, male, female) at NP and the gender agreement of the verb (masculine, feminine) in intransitive constructions, resulting in six critical conditions of the form Adverb-NP-VP-Aux (see Table1). The results and discussion mainly pertain to this study. Second, an ongoing event-related brain potentials (ERP) experiment, for which we did a preliminary analysis of data from 15 participants collected so far. In the SPR experiment, we found a main effect of NounType at the NP such that gender neutral names were processed much faster compared to gendered names. At the verb, the reading time for both masculine and feminine verbal agreement were comparable. These findings are tentatively corroborated by the preliminary analysis of the ERP data. Taken together, these results suggest gender-neutral Punjabi forenames are under-specified for gender instead of ambiguous, and there is no evidence in our data to suggest a male biased inference. The result differs from previous studies and requires further research for a clear answer. Speculatively, the strongly established socio-cultural knowledge that neutral names can be used for both males and females, have made under-specification of gender in forenames a prominent feature in Punjabi. Therefore, it appears that neutral forenames are processed just as person names without comprehenders necessarily ascribing gender to it. The higher frequency and exposure of neutral forenames in the language can account for their faster reading [3,4,5].

References

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Punjabi is a western Indo-Aryan language with SOV default word order and two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine.

Table 1. Sample Stimuli used in the experiment

Condition	Example sentences			
Neutral_Masculine (NM)	ਸ਼ਾਮੀ	ਗੁਰਕੀਰਤ	ਜਾਂਦਾ	ਹੈ।
	Shaami	Gurkeerat	jaanda	hai.
	In evening.Adv. Person Name.3SG.N.NOM go.IPFV.3SG.M Aux.SG.PRS			
	'Gurkeerat goes in the evening.'			
Neutral_Feminine (NF)	ਸ਼ਾਮੀ	ਗੁਰਕੀਰਤ	ਜਾਂਦੀ	ਹੈ।
	Shaami	Gurkeerat	jaandi	hai.
	In evening.Adv. Person Name.3SG.N.NOM go.IPFV.3SG.F Aux.SG.PRS			
	'Gurkeerat goes in the evening.'			
Male_Masculine (MM)	ਸ਼ਾਮੀ	ਯਾਦਵਿੰਦਰ	ਜਾਂਦਾ	ਹੈ।
	Shaami	Yaadwinder	jaanda	hai.
	In evening.Adv. Person Name.3SG.M.NOM go.IPFV.3SG.M Aux.SG.PRS			
	'Yaadwinder goes in the evening.'			
Male_Feminine (MF)	ਸ਼ਾਮੀ	ਯਾਦਵਿੰਦਰ	ਜਾਂਦੀ	ਹੈ।
	Shaami	Yaadwinder	jaandi	hai.
	In evening.Adv. Person Name.3SG.M.NOM go.IPFV.3SG.F Aux.SG.PRS			
	'Yaadwinder goes in the evening.'			
Female_Masculine (FM)	ਸ਼ਾਮੀ	ਗੁਰਲੀਨ	ਜਾਂਦਾ	ਹੈ।
	Shaami	Gurleen	jaanda	hai.
	In evening.Adv. Person Name.3SG.F.NOM go.IPFV.3SG.M Aux.SG.PRS			
	'Gurleen goes in the evening.'			
Female_Feminine (FF)	ਸ਼ਾਮੀ	ਗੁਰਲੀਨ	ਜਾਂਦੀ	ਹੈ।
	Shaami	Gurleen	jaandi	hai.
	In evening.Adv. Person Name.3SG.F.NOM go.IPFV.3SG.F Aux.SG.PRS			
	'Gurleen goes in the evening.'			