

## Research article

# Side effects of gender-fair language: How feminine job titles influence the evaluation of female applicants

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### Abstract

In many languages, feminization has been used as a strategy to make language more gender-fair, because masculine terms, even in a generic function, exhibit a male bias. Up to date, little is known about possible side effects of this language use, for example, in personnel selection. In three studies, conducted in Polish, we analyzed how a female applicant was evaluated in a recruitment process, depending on whether she was introduced with a feminine or masculine job title. To avoid influences from existing occupations and terms, we used fictitious job titles in Studies 1 and 2: *diarolożka* (feminine) and *diarolog* (masculine). In Study 3, we referred to existing occupations that varied in gender stereotypicality. In all studies, female applicants with a feminine job title were evaluated less favorably than both a male applicant (Study 1) and a female applicant with a masculine job title (Studies 1, 2, and 3). This effect was independent of the gender stereotypicality of the occupation (Study 3). Participants' political attitudes, however, moderated the effect: Conservatives devaluated female applicants with a feminine title more than liberals (Studies 2 and 3). Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

During the past decades, many countries have attempted to develop and implement gender-fair language, that is, an equal or symmetric linguistic treatment of women and men (cf. the contributions in Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001, 2002, 2003). Two principle strategies can be used to make a language gender-fair: neutralization and feminization. Which of the two is given priority mostly depends on the structure of the respective language (Hellinger, 1990: 119ff). In languages with few gender-differentiating forms, such as English, there is a tendency toward neutralization. Differentiations of the type *author* versus *authoress*, for example, are abandoned in favor of a neutral use of the suffixless form (*author*). Feminization implies that feminine forms of human nouns are used more frequently and systematically to make female referents visible. This strategy is deployed (although usually in combination with neutralization) in grammatical gender languages, which are prevalent in Europe, for example, in French, German, and Spanish. As human nouns and the words they grammatically agree with are usually masculine or feminine and as gender suffixes are quite frequent, the principle of neutralization cannot be given priority in these languages. As a consequence, novel feminine job titles such as German *Kauffrau* (fem.) “female management assistant” or *Ingenieurin* (fem.) “female engineer” have been introduced to designate female job holders, and masculine generics such as *Leser* (masc.pl) “readers” are

replaced by splitting as in *Leserinnen* (fem.pl) und *Leser* (masc.pl) “female and male readers” (for feminization in German: cf. Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003, p. 166f; for Spanish: Nissen, 2002; for French: Burr, 2003).

Up until now, an increasing body of empirical research has documented that linguistic feminization can indeed be conducive to gender-fairness (see also the overview in Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007): Compared with masculine forms, feminizing was found to increase the number of women mentioned as favorite exemplars of person categories in a German study; in another experiment, more female politicians were suggested as possible candidates for chancellorship in Germany when feminine forms occurred in the question (Stahlberg, Sczesny, & Braun, 2005). In an investigation on English, French, and German (Gabriel, Gygas, Sarrasin, Garnham, & Oakhill, 2008), the proportions of females in person categories were estimated higher when human nouns (mainly job titles) were given both in the masculine and feminine forms rather than the masculine only (for a similar pattern of results in Polish, see Bojarska, 2011).

The masculine bias inherent in masculine generics has also been found to contribute to the perpetuation of gender disparities and to discrimination processes (Ng, 2007; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). In a professional context, for instance, women responded to gender-exclusive language more negatively than men: When

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confronted with the generic pronoun *he* in a mock job interview, women felt significantly more negative emotions, less motivation, and intention to aspire for the job than women presented with gender-fair forms (i.e., word pairs such as *he or she* or gender-neutral expressions such as *one* or *employee*, Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

On the whole, feminine forms seem to strengthen female associations, to increase the cognitive inclusion of women, to facilitate the recall of female exemplars of a category, and to strengthen the sense of professional belonging among female job applicants. However, another question of importance has never been raised: Is the impact of a feminized language always entirely positive (in the sense of gender-fairness and equal opportunities) or can it have unwanted side effects? This question is the topic of the present research.

### Why Using Feminine Titles may be Harmful for Women

The very suffixes used to derive feminine job titles constitute a potential source for negative side effects of feminization, for it is known that feminine suffixes sometimes carry negative connotations. An example is the Italian feminine suffix *-essa*, which is often described as somewhat derogatory (e.g., Marcato & Thüne, 2002). Correspondingly, a study showed that a woman referred to as *professoressa* “female professor” was rated as less persuasive than both a man and a woman designated with the masculine form *professore* (Mucchi-Faina, 2005). In a recent study by Merkel, Maass, and Frommelt (2012), feminine job titles with *-essa* were associated with lower status than masculine terms referring to a female job holder. In German, the (originally French) suffix *-euse* or *-öse* evokes sexual or frivolous associations, for example, in the feminine terms *Masseuse* “(female) masseur” and *Frisöse* “(female) hair dresser”. Slavic languages in particular are known to possess feminine job titles that are associated with lesser status, with rural speech, or with the meaning “wife of . . .” rather than “female job holder” (for Russian: cf. Doleschal & Schmid, 2001; for Serbian: Hentschel, 2003; for Polish: Koniuszaniec & Blaszkowa, 2003). In addition, the Polish suffix *-ka* not only derives feminine occupational terms (such as feminine *lekar-ka* “female doctor” from masculine *lekarz* “doctor”) but sometimes also words for inanimate objects such as *dylomat-ka* “briefcase” from masculine *dylomata* “diplomat”, which limits its usability in feminization.

Even when free of derogatory connotations, feminine suffixes may work against women in subtle ways. First of all, in some languages, many feminine forms are novel and therefore may be less accepted than the familiar masculine forms (Zajonc, 2001). Thus, in studies examining the reasons for opposing gender-fair language, participants mentioned linguistic tradition and the historical legitimacy of the masculine forms (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1998). Moreover, feminine forms emphasize referential gender and may thus evoke gender-stereotypical associations. Studies have shown that introducing group labels activates the contents of group stereotypes (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; Devine, 1989). By emphasizing referential gender, feminine forms could prompt perceivers to view women through the lenses of gender prescriptions and proscriptions (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2011): Women should be

caring for others, but not dominating or striving for a career. Accordingly, women could be evaluated as more communal and less agentic when labeled with a feminine rather than masculine form. We do not know of any pertinent research, but there is evidence that masculine forms evoke higher ratings of masculinity (i.e., agentic qualities) than gender-neutral forms in English (McConnell & Fazio, 1996). In the respective study, participants judged persons described with either a masculine or neutral form (*chairman* versus *chair* or *chairperson*). Targets designated as *chairman* were evaluated as more agentic regardless of their sex than those designated with a neutral form. Another piece of evidence can be found in the study of Italian feminine suffixes mentioned earlier (Merkel et al., 2012). Here, women in a high-status profession were rated as warmer when they were designated with a traditional feminine job title, that is, they were perceived as closer to the stereotype, than when referred to with a masculine term. Paradoxically, then, women could benefit from the use of masculine job titles (associated with the masculine traits), just as women wearing a masculine scent or with a masculine appearance are considered more positively for leadership positions than women without such masculine traits (Sczesny & Kühnen, 2004; Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2002). Women using a feminine job title, on the other hand, could be devalued. This would be in line with findings of other investigations, where women were seen as less desirable employees when their resumes contained cues connected to femininity (being mothers or future mothers; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Hebl, King, Glick, Singletary, & Kazama, 2007). Emphasizing referential gender through explicitly feminine forms can enhance role incongruity, a phenomenon that has been described, for example, by Eagly and Karau (2002): High status and career are associated with maleness (Glick, Wilk, & Perreault, 1995); therefore, women are perceived as less competent and are less likely to be hired for such positions (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). The highlighting of femaleness in the context of a specialized, high-status employment could add to the perceived incongruity between the role and hypothetical attributes of the female applicant; this effect may not occur, however, for low-status professions that are traditionally perceived as more suitable for women.

### The Role of Sociopolitical Beliefs in Responses Toward Feminized Forms

Feminization as the main strategy of gender-fair language entails introducing novel feminine forms for occupations and professional functions, forms that either did not exist or were uncommon before. These new linguistic forms are harbingers of new social arrangements regarding gender and economic relations. Therefore, the feminized forms, and especially individuals using these labels, may be devalued by persons holding traditional views of societal order. It may be hypothesized that individuals who oppose changes in traditional social structure, especially changes in the existing social hierarchy, perceive feminized occupational terms more negatively than persons who support social change and/or feminism. In line with this idea, Parks and Robertson (2005) found that attitudes toward sexist/nonsexist language were mediated by attitudes toward women as measured by the neosexism scale. Consequently, a worldview that supports the social *status*

*quo* may result in less positive attitudes toward women using gender-fair linguistic forms.

A general support of the sociopolitical *status quo* and a preference for traditional economic and social arrangements constitute the core of conservative beliefs (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003); this includes especially the preservation of traditional gender arrangements (Hoyt, 2012; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). As conservatism is based on opposition to social change and on a preference for social hierarchy (Jost et al., 2003), conservatives can be expected to oppose linguistic forms that signal changes in the social hierarchy and in social and economic relations. Openness to social change, on the other hand, should result in a more positive attitude toward occupational terms that highlight the presence of women in traditionally masculine domains and also toward women who use these terms.

In addition, as conservatives tend to show significantly lower levels of openness to novelty than do liberals (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008), they may also tend to dislike novel compared with traditional language forms. Niven and Zilber (2000), for example, found that conservatives used novel, politically correct designations for African-Americans less frequently than do liberals. To summarize, conservatives can be expected to prefer the traditional masculine job titles over relatively new feminized forms in reference to women professionals. They can also be expected to evaluate women using these forms more negatively than liberals do.

## Overview of the Present Research and Hypotheses

The main aim of our empirical studies was to investigate the effects of feminine versus masculine job titles on the evaluation of female applicants. Another point of interest was which factors moderate these effects. Three studies were conducted in Poland to answer these questions.

In a grammatical gender language such as Polish, grammatically feminine forms highlight the femaleness of a referent and may thus activate the contents of feminine stereotypes. Moreover, many feminine forms are novel and may therefore sound awkward to a majority of language users. Therefore, we expected that the evaluation of a female applicant described with a feminine job title would be less favorable than the evaluation of a male applicant (Study 1) and also less favorable than that of a female applicant referred to with a masculine job title (Studies 1 and 2; Hypothesis 1). To eliminate the influence of associations connected with specific occupations as well as differential frequencies of exposure to masculine versus feminine nouns, we used a fictitious occupation to describe the applicant, namely *diarolog* (masc.) or *diarolożka* (fem.), in Study 1.

To enhance the generalizability of our findings, we investigated the effects of masculine and feminine terms for existing professions in Study 3, by using a similar approach. Here, we took the gender stereotypicality of the professions into account. As argued earlier, feminine forms may be perceived as emphasizing the femininity of a female applicant. If so, the role incongruity effect should work against the female applicant in the context of high-status positions, which are associated with masculine traits (Glick et al., 1995). For a low-status job, however, no such effect should emerge, because women have traditionally occupied such positions and the gender status quo

is not questioned. Thus, if the rejection of feminine forms is caused by their undermining the existing gender arrangements, this effect should be restricted to masculine professions (Hypothesis 2a); if the rejection is triggered by the novelty of the feminine job titles, however, it should occur irrespective of the gender stereotypicality of professions (Hypothesis 2b).

Moreover, we assumed that participants' political attitudes moderate the effects of feminine versus masculine job titles on the evaluation of applicants. On the basis of findings that conservatives are less eager to support politically correct language (Niven & Zilber, 2000) and are interested in preserving the *status quo* (Jost et al., 2008), we hypothesized that conservatives would be more likely to devalue applicants referred to with a feminine title than liberals (Studies 2 and 3; Hypothesis 3).

It is important to note that all of the studies focused on the labeling of women (feminine vs. masculine form). We did not include the theoretically conceivable counterpart, that is, the labeling of men either in the masculine or in the feminine, for the following reasons: The starting point of our investigation was the observation that a linguistic asymmetry obtains in many grammatical gender languages (such as German, French, and Polish). In these languages, women can be described with either masculine or feminine job titles, whereas the use of masculine job titles is the rule for men. In English as well, it would be odd to use a female-marked phrase, such as *policewoman John Smith*, to refer to a male person. There are some rare cases where men may be referred to with a feminine job title, though: For 13 of the 2591 professions included in the recent Polish Census (2011) job titles exist only in the feminine form (Dubisz, 2008) for example, *przedszkolanka* "nursery teacher," and thus can be considered as linguistically excluding men. However, we decided against testing the effects of such feminine forms in reference to male persons because they are extremely infrequent and variation between feminine and masculine forms is not a pervasive and regular phenomenon, as it is in reference to women. Varying masculine and feminine job titles in reference to men in our experiments would have resulted in forms that are far removed from everyday usage and might have caused considerable irritation.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Participants and Design*

In this experiment, 51 students of the Warsaw School of Social Psychology and Humanities and 45 employees in a Human Resources Department participated voluntarily (64 women, 23 men, 9 did not indicate their sex; *mean age*: 34.15 years, *SD* = 9.76 years). Participants completed the questionnaire individually in the course room or in their office. One participant was excluded from the final sample because he or she questioned the existence of the profession *diarolog*. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.



The experiment was a 3 (linguistic form: feminine job title used for a woman vs. masculine job title used for a woman vs. masculine job title used for a man)  $\times$  2 (participant sex: female vs. male) factorial between-subjects design with evaluation of the applicant as the dependent variable.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study allegedly investigating impression formation based on limited information, a situation that is common in everyday life. They were asked to evaluate an applicant for a prestigious expert position. The instruction read as follows:

Imagine that you are recruiting personnel for an important position. You are to evaluate a person whose CV is very good, but there are several candidates with similar qualifications. Among various materials that you received as a recruiting agent there is an article from the daily press in which the applicant is giving an expert commentary. Read the materials carefully and form an impression of this person.

The newspaper article was meant to validate the cover story (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009) and to prevent doubts about the existence of the fictitious profession. It included the following expert statement by the applicant:

Diarolog M. Wozniak said that in legal terms (in accordance with the Law on Forests of 1991), a forest is a compact area of at least 0.10 acres, covered with forest vegetation (forest crops)—trees and shrubs and undergrowth—the latter may be temporarily lacking. In a legal sense, the forest area includes also the land of forest management, and other forestry purposes: buildings and structures, electric lines, forest roads, land under power lines, nurseries, timber storage, and also areas used as recreational areas and touristic sites ....

The layout of the article resembled that of a well-known daily newspaper in Poland. The materials documented identical expertise and commitment in the fields of biology and forestry for all applicants, the only difference between conditions being the linguistic form of the job title.

The fictitious profession *diarologia* had been pretested in a small student sample ( $N=15$ ); none of the participants questioned the existence of the profession. Masculine and feminine forms were created in accordance with existing terms and job titles such as *psychologia-psycholog/psycholożka* (psychology-psychologist masc./fem.) or *socjologia-socjolog/socjolożka* (sociology-sociologist masc./fem.). To manipulate the linguistic form, the newspaper article referred to the expert with an initial and the surname; the applicant's sex could be inferred either from the job title or from the verb form (in Polish, verbs are differentiated for gender in the past tense). Thus, the initial sentence "Diarolog M. Woźniak said . . ." was either *Diarolog M. Woźniak powiedział* (masculine verb form indicating a man) or *Diarolog M. Woźniak powiedziała* (feminine verb form indicating a woman), or, with the feminine job title, *Diarolożka M. Woźniak powiedziała* (feminine verb form indicating a woman).

### Dependent Variables

After perusing the materials, participants were asked whether they were willing to hire the applicant and whether this person would succeed in the expert position. The answers to both questions could vary from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The two items were combined into an evaluation scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ), which served as the dependent variable. High scores on this scale indicated favorable evaluations.

As a manipulation check, we measured the gender typicality of the profession by asking participants to estimate the percentage of women working in this profession (0 to 100%; e.g., Gygax, Gabriel, Sarasin, Oakhill, & Garnham, 2008). None of the participants were able to guess the hypotheses. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

In order to check whether the fictitious profession *diarologia* was indeed perceived as male typed, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance with linguistic form as the between-subjects factor and estimated percentage of women in this profession as the dependent variable. The percentage of women working in the field *diarologia* was estimated similarly across linguistic conditions,  $F(2, 86) < .70$ ,  $p = .509$  (male applicant: 25.8%; female applicant with masculine job title: 19.9%; female applicant with feminine job title: 22.3%), which confirms that participants assumed *diarologia* to be a predominantly male domain.

### Evaluation of Applicant

We conducted an analysis of variance with linguistic form and participant sex as between-subjects factors and the rating on the evaluation scale as the dependent variable. Participant sex was included in the analysis because it can be an important factor in the evaluation of women and men in professional roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and because it has been found to moderate reactions to linguistic forms (Braun, Sczesny, & Stahlberg, 2005; Stahlberg et al., 2007). The analysis showed a significant effect of participant sex,  $F(1, 81) = 4.78$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , with women evaluating the applicants more favorably ( $M = 3.33$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ ) than do men ( $M = 2.85$ ;  $SD = 0.74$ ). More importantly, the effect of linguistic form reached significance,  $F(2, 81) = 5.02$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . As predicted in Hypothesis 1, planned contrasts revealed that the female applicant with the feminine job title ( $M = 2.75$ ;  $SD = 0.73$ ) was evaluated less favorably than both the female applicant with the masculine job title ( $M = 3.43$ ;  $SD = 0.73$ ;  $t(81) = 2.30$ ,  $p = .024$ ,  $d = .51$ ) and the male applicant ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ;  $t(81) = 3.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .77$ ).

## STUDY 2

Study 1 provided first evidence that using a feminine job title can have negative effects for female applicants. The aims of Study 2

were (i) to replicate this side effect of feminization (see Hypothesis 1) and (ii) to test whether the impact of the linguistic form also depends on participants' political views (see Hypothesis 3).

## Method

### Participants and Design

For this experiment, 193 participants (98 women, 95 men, mean age: 34.85 years,  $SD=12.58$  years) were recruited during a train journey in Poland. This recruiting strategy allowed us to diversify the sample in terms of political attitudes. Participants used a 7-point scale to identify their attitude: 1% classified themselves as very conservative, 10.9% as conservative, and 20.2% as moderately conservative. Neither conservative nor liberal were 9.3%. Moderately liberal were 35.2%, liberal 19.7%, and very liberal 3.6%. Again, participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. The experiment was a 2 (linguistic form: woman with feminine job title vs. woman with masculine job title)  $\times$  2 (participant sex: female vs. male).

### Materials and Procedure

Prior to filling out the questionnaires, participants were asked to solve a word puzzle with 10 words hidden in a letter box.<sup>1</sup> This procedure was introduced as a strategy of equalizing conditions outside the laboratory. Study 2 followed the same procedure as Study 1, except that there was no male applicant. We now provided only the CV and omitted the newspaper article, because the fictitious profession *diarolog* had raised very little suspicion among participants in Study 1. The introduction read as follows:

Please imagine that you are recruiting an employee for the successful laboratory for the analysis of biological and ecological environment in Warsaw. More than a dozen persons are already working in the laboratory, but due to new contracts further employees are needed. Working in the lab requires accomplishing tasks in small work groups. The suitable applicant for this position should therefore be both professionally qualified and socially skilled. Please read the resume and cover letter of one of the applicants.

### Dependent Variables

In addition to the two questions regarding the evaluation of the applicant that had already been asked in Study 1, we included three other questions (e.g., Hoyt, 2012; Madera et al., 2009) to measure the evaluation of applicants more comprehensively: "Will the person be a good team member?" "... a successful worker?" and "... a competent worker?" The answers to all questions varied from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). To

<sup>1</sup>Three types of word puzzles were used: One contained 10 neutral words such as "sun," "green," and "letter". The other two shared four neutral words and included either six words referring either to agency (e.g., "work," "active," and "ambition") or communion ("together," "helpful," and "care"). This variable, however, had no influence on the remaining factors and was dismissed from further considerations.

determine the structure of the data, we performed a principal component analysis on the dependent variable set by using parallel analysis and minimum average partial (O'Connor, 2000; Velicer, 1976; Velicer, Eaton, & Fava, 2000). This analysis yielded a single-factor solution accounting for 57.8% of the variance. Thus, we computed an evaluation scale on the basis of the answers to the five questions ( $\alpha = .82$ ). None of the participants were able to guess the hypotheses. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

According to Hypothesis 3, we expected political attitudes to moderate the impact of feminine versus masculine job titles on the evaluation of female applicants. We conducted a regression analysis to test this hypothesis (Hayes, 2012). The linguistic form (coded  $-.5$  for masculine,  $.5$  for feminine form) as a focal predictor, political attitudes of participants as a moderator, and their interaction term were regressed on the evaluation composite measure. The moderator was mean centered prior to analysis; thus, negative values represented more liberal, positive values, more conservative attitudes. As in Study 1, participant sex was entered into the analysis (coded  $-.5$  for male,  $.5$  for female participants).

The final model was significant,  $R^2 = .125$ ,  $F(4, 188) = 6.72$ ,  $p < .001$ , and improved by including an interaction term  $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1, 188) = 6.28$ ,  $p = .013$ . As in Study 1, sex of participant and linguistic form of the job title contributed significantly to the evaluation, when other factors were controlled for: Female participants evaluated the applicant more favorably than male ones,  $b = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t(188) = 3.22$ ,  $p = .0015$ . Presenting the applicant with a masculine form evoked higher ratings than using a feminine form,  $b = -.38$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $t(188) = -3.22$ ,  $p = .0015$ .

As predicted, effects of the grammatical form on applicant evaluation also depended on the political attitude of participants,  $b = -0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $t(188) = -2.51$ ,  $p = .013$ . The conditional effect of grammatical label, calculated for 1  $SD$  below the mean of political attitudes (Aiken & West, 1991), revealed that more liberal participants did not differentiate between an applicant with a masculine job title and the one with a feminine title,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p = .88$ . Conservative participants (1  $SD$  above the mean of political attitudes), however, showed a significant effect,  $b = -0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t(188) = -3.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . As illustrated in Figure 1, more conservative participants devaluated the applicant with a feminine job title compared with the one with the masculine title.

## STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 provide consistent evidence that Polish feminine forms can decrease the perceived suitability of women for high-status positions. But the fact that this was tested for a fictitious profession only limits the generalizability of these results. Therefore, we referred to real professions with different gender stereotypicality in Study 3. To investigate possible mechanisms associated with conservative/liberal ideology in more detail, we included

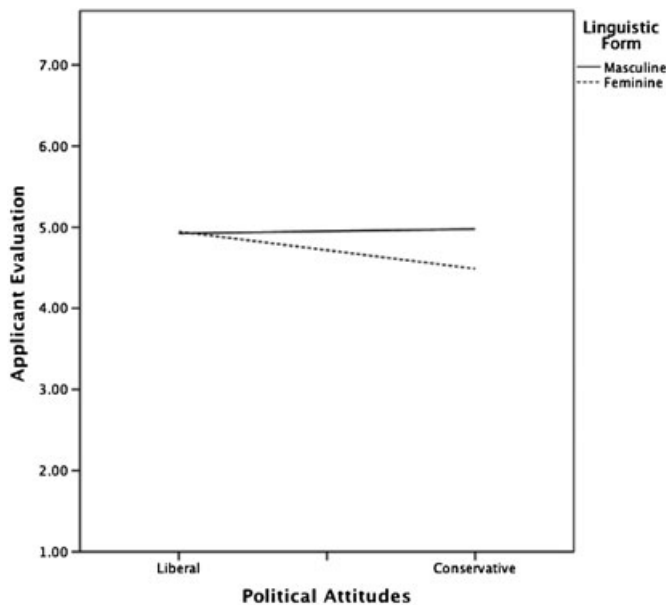


Figure 1. Study 2. Interaction of political attitudes and linguistic forms on applicant evaluation. Estimated  $\pm 1$  *SD* from mean of political attitudes

neosexism (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995) and support of feminism as potential moderators of the reactions to feminine job titles.

## Method

### Participants and Design

This experiment was conducted on the Internet. Participants were recruited through announcements in various Web forums. Again, participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. In total, 170 persons accessed the Web page, 29 of them broke off before seeing any content, and 20 did not finish the experiment. Thus, the final analysis included 121 participants (71 women, 50 men, *mean age*: 38.2 years, *SD* = 15.23 years). Participants used a 7-point scale to identify their political attitudes: 0.8% classified themselves as very conservative, 0.8% as conservative, and 6.6% as moderately conservative. Neither conservative nor liberal were 19%. Moderately liberal were 26.4%; liberal, 26.4%; and very liberal, 19.8%. In terms of political attitudes, the sample was thus less diverse than the sample in Study 2.

The experiment was based on a 2 (linguistic form: woman with feminine job title vs. woman with masculine job title)  $\times$  2 (participant sex: female vs. male)  $\times$  2 (gender stereotypicality of profession: feminine vs. masculine) factorial between-subjects design with evaluation of applicant as the dependent variable.

### Materials and Procedure

In Study 3, real professions were mentioned instead of a fictitious one (Studies 1 and 2). Professions were selected on the basis of two criteria: First, we used only professions that shared the feminine suffix with *diarolog/diarolożka*. Second, professions were chosen according to the typology in Gygax et al. (2008). Applying these criteria, we selected two professions on

the basis of a large pretest of occupational terms. In this pretest, participants ( $N = 70$ ) evaluated the stereotypicality of 70 professions. Stereotypicality was assessed via the estimated percentage of women in the respective profession. The feminine profession chosen was beautician (*kosmetolog/kosmetolożka*;  $M = 86.76\%$ ;  $SD = 22.36$ ), the masculine profession was nanotechnologist (*nanotechnolog/nanotechnolożka*;  $M = 16.93\%$ ;  $SD = 20.90$ ;  $t(43) = 10.59$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.23$ ). This classification was supported by the recent Polish Census Data (2012): All employees listed on the Census List as cosmetologists ( $N = 57$ ) were women, whereas all nanotechnologists ( $N = 20$ ) were men.

The procedures used in Study 3 were similar to those in Studies 1 and 2. This time, however, we varied the gender stereotypicality of professions in addition to the grammatical form. For the sake of comparability, we provided standardized instructions and motivational letters, which varied only in the critical words, as shown in the subsequent texts (no CV was provided). The introduction read as follows:

Please imagine that you are recruiting an employee for the successful *beauty parlor/nanotechnology laboratory*, which is well-established in the field of *cosmetology/science*. More than a dozen persons are already working in the company, but due to new contracts further employees are needed. You are looking for a person with adequate competences (specific education, courses, training) and social skills at the level required for the job. The suitable applicant for this position should therefore be both professionally qualified and socially skilled. Several persons applied following your announcement of the vacancy. Three applicants with very similar competences were chosen for the final screening. Please read the cover letter of one of these applicants and try to form a picture of this person in your mind.

After reading the instruction, participants were presented with the cover letter of a fictitious candidate. Cover letters differed only in the grammatical form of the occupational term (masculine *-og* or feminine *-ożka*) and the domain they referred to (cosmetology, nanotechnology). The cover letter was as follows:

I am a *cosmetologist/nanotechnologist* by education and with passion. Working in this profession is not only rewarding, but also poses many new challenges. I would be much honored to work for your company and would appreciate this opportunity for further development. I am convinced that I possess all the qualifications needed to fill the position of *cosmetologist/nanotechnologist* in your company.

I am a determined and ambitious person. I commit myself fully to the projects and tasks I am assigned. I am well-organized and responsible. I am not afraid of new challenges, which I regard as a source of motivation.

I am also very active, which is demonstrated by the fact that after finishing college I have been involved in volunteer activities for organizations aiming to popularize *beauty/science*. I organized a *modern manicure stand for the Cosmetic Trade Fair in Warsaw* a *new technology stand for the Science Day in Warsaw*. Volunteer work in this area, combined with my profession of *cosmetologist/nanotechnologist*, thus continually improves my professional and organizational abilities.



I believe that my previous experience and qualifications make me a suitable candidate for working in your company.

### Dependent Variables

We used the same evaluation scale as in Study 2, with one additional item: "Will this person be a good coworker?" This item was added to balance the number of items referring to communality, agency, and hiring decision. The answers to all questions varied from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Again, data yielded a one-factor solution accounting for 67.8% of the variance. Therefore, we computed an evaluation scale on the basis of the answers to the six questions ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

As a moderator variable, we assessed participants' political attitudes (one item), as in Study 2. In addition, we asked their opinions on factors influencing women's position in the job market. For this purpose, we provided six items from the Neosexism Scale (Tougas et al., 1995). For example, "Discrimination against women in the labor force is still a problem in Poland." Moreover, participants were asked to what extent they supported feminism (scales ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*). To reduce the data, a principal component analysis was performed on all the variables. This analysis yielded a single-factor solution accounting for 40.6% of the variance. After recoding some items, we constructed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) that captured participants' political attitudes, including gender aspects.

As a manipulation check, we finally asked participants whether they perceived the respective profession as typically masculine (1) or feminine (7).

## Results

### Manipulation Check

To find out whether the professions were regarded as feminine or masculine as intended, we conducted an analysis of variance with stereotypicality of professions, linguistic form, and participant sex as between-subjects factors and the rating on the femininity–masculinity scale as the dependent variable. Stereotypicality of professions differed significantly,  $F(1, 111) = 97.89$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .47$ . In accord with our expectation, cosmetology was considered a feminine profession, as documented in its ratings, which differed significantly from the midpoint of the scale ( $M = 5.58$ ;  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $t(56) = 11.72$ ;  $p < .001$   $d = 3.13$ ). However, nanotechnology was considered neither masculine nor feminine, as indicated by a non-significant difference from the midpoint 4 ( $M = 4.02$ ;  $SD = 0.56$ ;  $t(61) = .23$   $p = .821$ ). A possible explanation might be that after answering many questions on women's situation in the job market, participants may have viewed this masculine field as less masculine.

### Evaluation of Applicant

We conducted a regression analysis to test the predicted moderation (Hayes, 2012) of political attitudes. We regressed the linguistic form (coded  $-.5$  for masculine,  $.5$  for feminine form) as a focal predictor, gender stereotypicality of profession as a moderator (coded  $-.5$  for nanotechnology,  $.5$  for cosmetology), mean-centered political attitudes (negative values represented

more liberal, positive values, more conservative attitudes), and their interaction term on the evaluation measure. As in previous studies, participant sex was entered into the analysis (coded  $-.5$  for male,  $.5$  for female participants) as a covariate.

The final model was significant,  $R^2 = .17$ ,  $F(8, 112) = 2.84$ ,  $p = .007$ . Presenting the applicant with a feminine form evoked lower ratings than using a masculine form,  $b = -.37$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $t(112) = -2.45$ ,  $p = .02$ . Political attitudes marginally influenced evaluations  $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t(112) = -1.77$ ,  $p = .08$ , indicating that more liberal participants evaluated the applicant more favorably. The interaction term including grammatical form and political attitudes was significant  $b = -.43$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $t(112) = -2.58$ ,  $p = .01$ . As in Study 2, conditional effects of grammatical label were estimated for 1 *SD* below and above the mean of political attitudes. As illustrated in Figure 2, liberal participants did not respond differently to the linguistic forms  $b = 0.003$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $p = .98$ , whereas conservative participants evaluated an applicant more positively when he or she was referred to in the masculine  $b = -0.72$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $t(112) = -3.32$ ,  $p = .001$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Earlier research on the effects of linguistic forms has concentrated on positive consequences of gender-fair language. For example, substituting masculine generics with gender-fair forms was found to facilitate recall of female category exemplars (Stahlberg et al., 2001) or to help avoid the social exclusion caused by masculine generics in a job context (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). In contrast, our research documents that making women more visible and cognitively present through feminization can also have negative side effects: In line with our assumptions, the three studies presented earlier show that emphasizing femaleness with a feminine form may lower the evaluation of women in a professional context. Compared with women described with a masculine job title

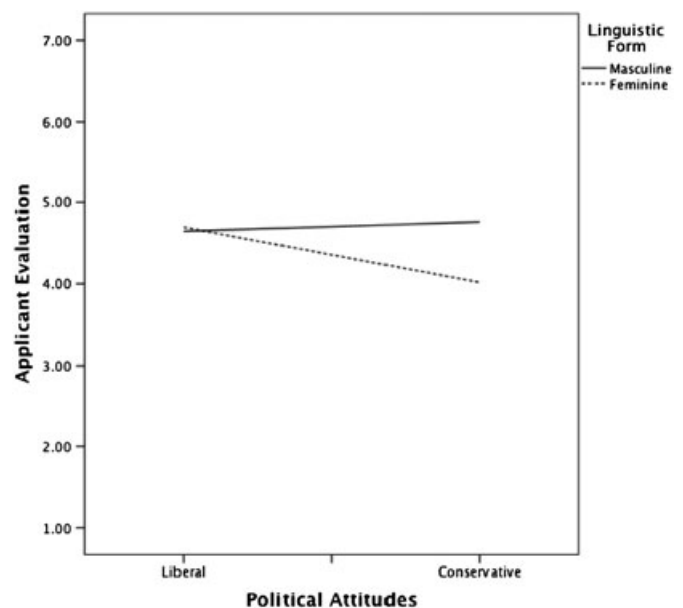


Figure 2. Study 3. Interaction of political attitudes and linguistic forms on applicant evaluation. Estimated  $\pm 1$  *SD* from mean of political views

(Studies 1, 2, and 3) and compared with men (Study 1), women designated with a feminine form received less favorable evaluations. In this context of employment and professional competence, linguistic feminization clearly turned into a disadvantage for women. Of the three studies presented in this article, one was a semi-laboratory experiment (Study 1), one a field experiment (Study 2), and one an Internet-based survey (Study 3). As all yielded similar results, the described effect appears quite stable. Our findings are in line with other studies that found that persons designated with gender-neutral forms were perceived as less agentic (McConnell & Fazio, 1996) and women labeled in the feminine as less persuasive (Mucchi-Faina, 2005) and having less status (Merkel et al., 2012) than when traditional masculine forms were used.

One reason for devaluing applicants with a feminine job title might be the novelty of the respective forms. In Polish, as in many other languages, the use of masculine job titles for women is common and well-established, whereas feminine titles are new and sound awkward. This explanation would account for the main effect of linguistic form occurring across all three studies. Moreover, we did not find a moderating effect of gender stereotypicality, which suggests that feminine labels evoked devaluation regardless of profession. This finding is important, because for the majority of Polish occupational titles, the feminine form is derived from the masculine. We argue throughout this article that the new feminine forms used in reference to women may lower their professional evaluation. The question how people would react to a man labeled with a feminine form remains, however, without answer. Although rare, men can enter a typically feminine profession, for which a masculine label is not available. It could be imagined that a man wishing to be a "nursery teacher" (*przedszkolanka*) faces similar problems as a woman entering the profession of "mechanic" (*mechanik*). Both occupations carry stereotypical associations that are conveyed through language (either only the feminine or the masculine label is available). The linguistic treatment of men and women, however, is not symmetrical. While it is a matter of linguistic tradition to use masculine forms in a generic function (applying to both men and women), the feminine labels refer solely to feminine exemplars. Thus, women using the gender-unfair language (masculine labels) may profit because they sustain the cultural *status quo*. Men, however, using gender-unfair forms (feminine labels) may be devalued because they violate the aforementioned cultural tradition. The only and indirect piece of evidence in support of this speculation is found in the study on English mentioned above (McConnell & Fazio, 1996). In the respective study, participants judged persons described with either a masculine or neutral form (*chairman* versus *chair* or *chairperson*). Targets designated as *chairman* were evaluated as more agentic regardless of their sex than those designated with a neutral form.

In addition to the main effect of the linguistic form, political attitudes proved to be an important moderator for the documented side effects. As our research shows, liberal and conservative individuals within the same society and speech community may react differently to feminine job titles: Conservative participants devalued women introduced with a feminine job title more than liberal subjects did. Conservatives thus were more likely to oppose reformed language, which emphasizes the femaleness of the applicant. Conservatives' rejection of novelty and change (symbolized through language) could be enhanced by the

suspicion that a woman labeling herself with a feminine form might be a feminist, which could be deemed undesirable in a job context (Hitt & Zikmund, 1985). As feminists explicitly challenge the existing social order and draw attention to gender inequalities (Berryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985), they may put off conservatives. To clarify this point, future research should investigate whether women using feminine forms are indeed perceived as feminists and whether this mediates the effect of feminine versus masculine labels on person evaluation.

The differential impact of political attitudes documented in our research may be of particular relevance in societies where different systems of values compete. Once new values (such as equal opportunities, new gender arrangements) have gained broader acceptance, differences of this kind are likely to disappear. It is important to note that differences in attitudes are found not only between different groups in a society but also between different societies. To clarify this point, future research should investigate the effects of feminine human nouns from cross-cultural and cross-linguistic angles.

## CONCLUSION

Feminizing language helps make women more visible and more salient, but apparently, this is not always an advantage. Our studies have shown that the use of feminine job titles can have unwanted side effects. How can we explain the simultaneous occurrence of both advantages and disadvantages of linguistic feminization? The main aim of feminizing (or neutralizing) a language is to avoid the male bias in the interpretation of masculine linguistic forms. This seems to be successful to a certain extent, because the use of feminine forms increases the visibility and cognitive availability of female referents. This effect was reported, above all, in studies where human nouns and pronouns referred to women and men as social groups and participants indicated possible exemplars of a given person category (e.g., Braun et al., 2005; Stahlberg et al., 2001). In contrast to that, the participants of our investigations evaluated individuals. In this paradigm, designating an individual woman with a feminine job title was found to be disadvantageous.

Considering these findings, can feminizing be recommended at all as a strategy of achieving gender-fair language? To answer this question, it is necessary to differentiate between short-term and long-term effects of language change. In Polish, the use of feminine job titles is still comparatively infrequent. Therefore, feminine forms may sound strange, and negative connotations may be prominent. But the more feminine job titles are created, the more frequently and systematically they are used in reference to women, the more normal they will sound and the more neutral the feminine suffixes should become in the long run (see the mere exposure effect in Zajonc, 2001). They may then unfold their positive potential with few traces of side effects. The question is whether it is realistic to expect language users to use feminine forms that are not yet established and to endure negative consequences until these effects fade away. In principle, at least, feminization can be used to make grammatical gender languages gender-fair, but whether this can and will be done may depend on the linguistic and sociopolitical circumstances prevailing in a given speech community at a given time.



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