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ABSTRACT

        A study examined Norwegian preschool children's
associations of gender with specific words. Children (92 girls, 77
boys) were provided with stimulus words and directed toward the use
of a pronoun, either "he" or "she," in relation to each stimulus
word. Stimulus words were categorized as easy (familiar) words,
expressions about ways of talking, school-related words or
expressions, expressions of power or dominance, and words in common
use. Responses were categorized as gender-neutral (even distribution
of "he" and "she" responses and 25% "both" or "don't know" responses)
or statistically significant. The results indicated that both boys
and girls tended to assign positive qualities to their own sex and
negative qualities to the opposite sex. This tendency was more marked
among girls. Sex stereotypes appeared most marked among the oldest
children. School-related words did not show significant age
differences in gender association. The list of stimulus words and
expressions presented to the children is appended. (MSE)

Tove Bull: ·

WORDS AND GENDER

Word association tests have sometimes been used to show how language reflects the prevailing sex-roles, and how language may itself be sexist. The present paper gives an account of the results of a somewhat special and unorthodox word association test.

In 1983 I carried out an experiment in nursery schools located all over Northern Norway. Students at the teachers' training college in Tromsø interviewed 169 Norwegian nursery school children from four to seven, 92 girls and 77 boys. I was the responsible leader of this project. The children were asked to respond to certain stimulus words or expressions by saying he or she. (The stimulus words (or expressions) are enclosed on p.8.) Thus the children were not allowed to associate freely. Their associations were controlled and directed towards the pronouns he or she. My hypothesis when I decided to go through with this experiment, was that the results might suggest how certain words or expressions tend to have either the connotation [+female] or the connotation [+male]. This is of course not very interesting as far as words referring to males and females or male or female activities are concerned. But it is interesting to find out if words without any particular referent in the external world have such connotations, for instance abstract nouns and words belonging to parts of speech other than nouns, particularly grammatical words and function words. Nevertheless one should consider my experiment with a certain amount of scepticism, first and foremost for methodological reasons.

Linguistics signs are defined structurally by having an expression side and a content side. It is to be expected that results from word association tests can teach us something about the content of a sign, i.e. the link between the referent in the external world and the linguistic sign. The phenomenon *word association* is concerned with connotations, not denotations, that is: It is concerned with what one could call co-meaning. This means that my little experiment is an investigation into a certain part of the connotative content of certain words and expressions in Norwegian. Connotations are as closely linked to entities in the external world as are denotations. Thus this is a semantic experiment. It is tempting to call it a socio- or psychosemantic experiment.

As I have already mentioned, nursery school children were interviewed in their nursery schools. The whole group of children may be divided into the following subgroups according to sex and age:

4 - 5 years:	30	11 boys, 19 girls
5 - 6 years:	52	26 boys, 26 girls
6 - 7 years:	87	40 boys, 47 girls

The interviewers were all students, studying to become nursery school teachers, and the interviews were conducted during one of their periods of practice in nursery schools. I instructed the students to keep strictly to the formula in the questionnaire. They were supposed to tell the

children to answer either <u>he</u> or <u>she</u> to the stimulus words, and nothing else. However, if a child insisted on another answer, there was room in the questionnaire for "both" or "no answer", which is considered identical with the answer "I don't know".

The idea behind this experiment is taken from a corresponding Swedish investigation by Jan Einarsson, who for several years was attached to the Swedish project "Språk och kön i skolan" (Language and sex in schools). The results of Einarsson's project were published in 1981, *Bekönade ord i förskolan*, Språk och kön i skolan 7, Lunds universitet, Institutionen för ämnesmetodik och ämnesteori, Avdelingen för svenska. My investigation is to be considered as more or less a copy of his. Almost all my testwords are identical with Einarsson's. I have tried to carry out my experiment as closely as possible to his to be able to compare my results with those arrived at by him.

One of the factors Einarsson inquired into was the correlation between the answers in the questionnaire and social classes. This factor I have not considered. I have examined the answers from the children only with reference to age and sex.

<u>The words and expressions.</u>

As one can see from the list of words enclosed, some of the stimulus words are what one could call "easy" words, such as *doll, gun, lipstick* and *lorry*. One reason for choosing such words was to get the children to feel that the task was an easy one. For the same reason and of course in order to get the children to understand what to do, they were first, before the interview started, asked to apply <u>he</u> or <u>she</u> to ordinary and well-known first names of boys and girls. Another reason for including such "easy" words was to make it possible to control the results afterwards. The children's responses to these words could be taken as an indicator as to what extent a child had an unusual attitude towards it. As it turned out, one or two of the six year old children seemed to take pleasure in answering quite contrary to what one would expect, that is: quite contrary to the dominating tendency and to the prevailing sex roles. This was more or less systematic, and probably a way of making fun of the interview and the whole project. However, this has had little or no influence on the overall results.

In addition to these "easy" words, the test-words form four different groups:
1. Words and expressions about ways of talking: *talk loudly, swearword, talk nicely.*
2. Words and expressions that have something to do with school and situations at school: *sit silently at school, do arithmetics* (or *calculate*), *help the teacher at school, wait for one's turn.* As the informants in the test were preschool children, it may perhaps seem strange that we asked about such "school-words". We did it because we were interested in finding out if the answers from the children could tell us anything about their expectations to life at school or anything about what notions they had about different roles of school behaviour expected from boys and girls.
3. Words expressing power or dominance or the opposite: *over/above, small, decide.*
4. Words or expressions in common use: *make noise, dirty, inside, whimper, meeting/meet, fight,*

sing, like/love babies, tease, be nice, whistle.

Of course the borderline between these groups of words are not as sharp as I pretend they are. Neither do I know if the informants interpreted all the words according to the intended content or meaning. For instance the Norwegian word *kart* (map) may also mean unripe fruit or berry; whether the children interpreted the stimulus word in the first way or the second, I don't know.

The results.*

In this section I'll first present and discuss the results of the test for the whole group of children together; then I'll look at the differences between children of different sexes and of different ages.

The background of and the approach to my statistical calculations are as follows: To find out if any of the answers he, she, both or don't know were statistically significant for any of the groups of children, I had to figure out what the distribution of responses to a complete or ideal sex- or gender-neutral word would be like. The next question to answer was this: Are there responses to any words which differ from the distribution of responses to a neutral word? A neutral word should exhibit an even distribution of the answers he and she. But the alternatives both and don't know make the calculating approach more complicated. The easiest way out of the problem was of course not to take these answers into consideration at all. Answers like both and don't know are likely to indicate that the informants have difficulties in choosing between she and he, because they probably look upon the stimulus word as rather neutral as far as the dichotomy female/male is concerned. That is why it would be misleading not to take them into consideration. So the problem is: How high should an appropriate percentage of the answers both and don't know to a neutral word be? The word in the test with most evenly distributed answers is *over/above*: 37,9% answered she to this stimulus word, 35,5% answered he, 2,4% both and 24,3% don't know.

Based on the argumentation I've outlined, the statistical calculations were made in accordance with the following "rules":

1. A gender- or sex-neutral response has about 25% both or don't know responses. In addition the responses he and she are approximately evenly distributed.
2. More than 25% both or don't know would give even higher significance. This means that 25% is a reasonable basis for calculating statistical significance.

The results are enclosed at the end of the paper, tables 1 to 7, p.9-10. The last part of the paper will be a comment on these statistics.

"Easy words" (table 1)

As expected all the so-called "easy" words exhibit answers which are significantly sex- or gender-marked in accordance with the prevailing sex roles. For all the words $p<0.01$ (or even lower, my calculations not going further than to the 1%-level). These results correspond to the results of the Swedish investigation by Jan Einarsson virtually in all details (cp. Einarsson 1981:19).

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Words about talking (table 2)

The results are the same for this group as for the previous one. *Talk loudly* and *swearword* are "he-words", *talk nicely* is a "she-word", just as is the case with the corresponding Swedish words in Einarsson's investigation (cp. Einarsson 1981:20-26).

"Schoolwords" (table 3)

Map and *do arithmitics* are significant "he-words", $p<0.01$. For the expression *sit silently at school* $p<0.02$. As for the distribution of responses to the other expressions in this group, there is no statistical significance.

It is rather hard to see why pre-school children consider *map* and *do arithmitics* "he-words", unless it is because they attach activities where maps and calculations are involved to male or masculine lives. These small children have scarcely had any experience from such activities themselves. If pre-school children think that girls *sit silently at school*, while boys *do arithmetics* and work with *maps*, this attitude might predict what kind of career boys and girls will make as pupils or students in schools.

Words about power/powerlessness (table 4)

The only word which exhibit a significant distribution of responses is *decide*. It is a he-word ($p<0.01$). This probably means that pre-school children think that men are the ones that make decisions in the world. And right they are! Still this may seem an unexpected result. In the world of pre-school children women are much more present than men. In everyday interaction they are the ones to make decisions concerning children. That is why I would have expected more she-answers. But maybe even small children discover that it is men who make the important and fatal decisions. The decisions women make concerning their children may be looked upon as service and care, and not as expressions of power and strength.

With regard to this group of words there are certain differences between my results and Einarsson's. He found that the word *over/above* especially by the boys was considered a he-word (Einarsson 1981:5,26), while this is the most "neutral" of all the words in my results.

Decide is a he-word in the Swedish experiment mainly because of the answers from the boys, not so much because of the answers from the total group of children (Einarsson 1981:28-30). At this point there is a slight difference between the two investigations.

General words (table 5)

The rather astonishing result for this group of words is that the distribution is statistically significant as to all the words except for *meet/meeting*. For the word *whistle* $p<0.04$, for *inside* $p<0.05$, for the rest $p<0.01$. It is not always possible to compare these results with Einarsson's, because my stimulus words differ somewhat from his. As may be seen from table 5 *make noise, dirty, fight, tease and whistle are he-words; inside, whimper, sing, like/love babies* and *be nice* are

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she-words.

Sex-differences

To some of the stimulus words boys and girls do not respond in the same way. I have found significant differences between the sexes as to the reactions to the words *meet/meeting* and *whistle*. To these words boys tend to respond by he, but not girls. Unlike the girls, the boys consider *whimper* a she-word, and the difference between the sexes is significant. In the same manner the girls consider *make a noise* and *tease* he-words to a greater extent than do boys. *Sit silently at school, lipstick, sing, help the teacher at school, talk nicely* and *be nice* are to them she-words, but not to the same extent to the boys.

From this we may conclude: Both boys and girls tend to assign what seems to be positive qualities to their own sex and what seems to be negative qualities to the opposite sex. This tendency is stronger among the girls than among the boys. It is tempting to speculate upon the causes of this. I'll refrain from doing it however, and just mention that answers forming such a pattern, can probably contribute to the discussion on how sex identity is developed in a child.

Age-differences

The data show that the stereotypical sexist attitude is most distinct and marked among the oldest children. Such stereotypes develop as the child grows up.The words exhibiting statistically significant age differences are: *doll, map, over/above, small, decide* and *like/love babies*. It is interesting that the words *over/above* and *inside* are more sex- og gender- marked among the 6 - 7 year old children than among the youngest ones. On the other hand it may seem strange that the "school-words" do not show the same tendencies.

Conclusion

A possible sourse of error should be briefly mentioned before any conclusion is drawn. This possibility has to do with the connection between sex and grammatical gender.. The three Indfo-European genders masculine, feminine and neuter are distinguised in almost all varieties of Norwegian. Furthermore: Gender may in Norwegian be regarded as a quality attributed to each noun determining the choice among alternative forms of accompanying articles, adjectives and pronouns of reference. This means that Norwegian has different articles and pronouns for each of the three genders; the pronoun han (he) and ho (she) referring to masculine and feminine nouns respectively. Even if this system of pronominal reference is not obligatory in all Norwegian dialects, at least this is the basis of the system of reference in the Northern dialects, which were the mother tongues of most of the children. Because of this system of refererence one might expect that children in nursery schools in North Norway would respond according to grammatical gender, not including any thoughts of biological sex in their associations. There are seven nouns on the Norwegian test-list, one feminine (*doll*), two masculine (*lipstick* and *lorry*) and four neuter (*map, gun, meeting* and *swearword*). The neuter ones present no problem in this connection. In the

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responses, *doll* is considered a she-word, thus confirming that the results may be influenced by this source of error. The same occurs in the case of *lorry*, which is a he-word with masculine gender. (In some "Trønder-dialects" *lorry* (lastebil) may be a feminine noun, but not in any North Norwegian dialects.) But as to the word *lipstick* there is no correspondence between grammatical gender and the responses whatsoever. This indicates that grammatical gender is not as dominating as biological sex in forming these sexual stereotypes.

In this paper I have tried to compare my results with those of a corresponding Swedish project. As already mentioned the results are strikingly similar. The small discrepancies that are found should be looked upon as mere trifles.

Summing up the results, they show that from the age of four, at least, children respond to questions about words or expressions and gender in accordance with the sexual stereotypes in the society in which the children are bred. Furthermore: These tendencies become gradually stronger as time goes on, towards the age of seven.

This is of course just what one might expect. From early childhood boys and girls interact with one another and with other persons in different ways. This is easily observed in children's game-playing. Psychological and sociologial research confirms such observations (for instance Berentzen 1980). At the same time as children aquire their mother tongue, and more or less through the same process, they are being socialized into the prevailing sex-roles in their society. That is why an investigation such as the one which Jan Einarsson has designed, should be of linguistic interest, in particular to linguists interested in speech development.

Children learn their mother tongue through interacting with other human beings, the link between the content side and the expressions side of the linguistic sign thus being established through this kind of interaction. At the same time as the child gradually acquires the notion of a word or what a word denotes in accordance with conventions in society, she also acquires the connotations, i.e. all co-meanings a word may have. These connotations are of course established in accordance with certain conventions, thus signifying a lot about the society in which they are connotations.

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List of stimulus words and expressions in the order in which they were presented to the children:

doll

map (or unripe fruit or berry; the Norwegian words are homonyms)

sit silently at school

calculate/do arithmetics (or rain; these are homophones in the dialect of
most of the children)

gun

over/above

small

make noise

lipstick

dirty

talk loudly

inside

lorry

whimper

meeting/meet (the verb and the noun are homophones in certain forms)

fight (verb)

sing

help the teacher at school

wait for one's turn

swearword

talk nicely

decide

like/love babies

tease

be nice

whistle (verb)

Table 1
"Easy words"

	SHE	HE	BOTH	DON'T KNOW
doll	143 (84,6%)	20 (11,8%)	5 (3,0%)	1 (0,6%)
gun	32 (18,9%)	135 (79,9%)	0	2 (1,2%)
lipstick	155 (91,7%)	11 (6,5%)	0	3 (1,8%)
lorry	22 (13,0%)	146 (86,4%)	0	1 (0,6%)

Table 2
Words about talking

	SHE	HE	BOTH	DON'T KNOW
talk loudly	58 (34,3%)	104 (61,5%)	4 (2,4%)	3 (1,8%)
swearword	29 (17,2%)	134 (79,3%)	3 (1,8%)	3 (1,8%)
talk nicely	128 (75,7%)	32 (18,9%)	5 (3,0%)	4 (2,4%)

Table 3
"Schoolwords"

	SHE	HE	BOTH	DON'T KNOW
map	19 (11,2%)	119 (70,4%)	4 (2,4%)	27 (16,0%)
sit silently at school	95 (56,2%)	58 (34,3%)	7 (4,1%)	9 (5,3%)
do arithmetics	49 (29,0%)	104 (61,5%)	8 (4,7%)	8 (4,7%)
help the teacher at school	93 (55,0%)	65 (38,5%)	4 (2,4%)	7 (4,1 %)
wait foo one'e turn	85 (50,3%)	68 (40,2%)	10 (5,9%)	6 (3,6%)

Table 4
Words about power/powerlessness

	SHE	HE	BOTH	DON'T KNOW
over/above	64 (37,9%)	60 (35,5%)	4 (2,4%)	41 (24,3%)
small	87 (51,5%)	65 (38,5%)	7 (4,1%)	10 (5,9%)
decide	53 (31,4%)	104 (61,5%)	9 (5,3%)	3 (1,9%)

Table 5
General words

	SHE	HE	BOTH	DON'T KNOW
make noise	45 (26,6%)	113 (66,9%)	8 (4,7%)	3 (1,8%)
dirty	32 (18,9%)	128 (75,7%)	7 (4,1%)	2 (1,2%)
inside	91 (53,8%)	58 (34,3%)	8 (4,7%)	12 (7,1%)
whimper	100 (59,2%)	56 (33,1%)	6 (3,6%)	7 (4,1%)
meeting/meet	67 (39,6%)	80 (47,3%)	9 (5,3%)	13 (7,7%)
fight	28 (16,6%)	130 (76,9%)	7 (4,1%)	4 (2,4%)
sing	126 (74,6%)	33 (19,5%)	5 (3,0%)	5 (3,0%)
like/love babies	120 (71,0%)	41 (24,3%)	5 (3,0%)	3 (1,8%)
tease	49 (29,0%)	114 (67,5%)	2 (1,2%)	4 (2,4%)
be nice	123 (72,8%)	40 (23,7%)	4 (2,4%)	2 (1,2%)
whistle	61 (36,1%)	96 (56,8%)	9 (5,3%)	3 (1,8%)

Table 6
HE-words

	THE WHOLE GROUP	BOYS	GIRLS	THE WHOLE GROUP			GIRLS			BOYS		
				4-5	5-6	6-7	4-5	5-6	6-7	4-5	5-6	6-7
map	70,4	66,2	73,9	53,3	69,2	77,0	47,4	80,8	80,9	63,6	57,7	72,5
dirty	75,7	68,8	81,5	66,7	75,0	77,3	52,6	80,8	93,6	90,9	69,2	62,5
swearword	79,3	70,1	87,0	76,7	76,9	81,6	78,9	88,5	89,4	72,7	65,4	72,5
tease	67,5	55,8	77,2	43,3	69,2	74,7	57,9	80,9	83,0	18,2	57,7	75,0
whistle	56,8	61,0	52,2	60,0	50,0	58,8	68,4	38,5	53,2	45,6	61,5	65,0

Table 7
SHE-words

	THE WHOLE GROUP	BOYS	GIRLS	THE WHOLE GROUP			GIRLS			BOYS		
sing	74,6	67,5	80,4	63,3	76,9	77,0	73,7	88,5	78,7	45,6	65,4	75,0

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