

Stereotypical Language Use in Describing People

Karakter Belirlemede Basmakalıp Özelliklerin Dili

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Özet

Bu alıřma kadın ve erkeklerin betimleme bağlamında kullandıkları ve yanlış bir dil tutumuna neden olan kalıpsal anlam içerikli tekdüze (stereotype) sözcüklerle, bu sözcüklerin kullanımında cinsiyet (gender) faktörünün etkilerine, ve bu bağlamda üretilen tekdüze dilin biçimsel yapısına odaklandı. 20 erkek ve 20 kız, toplam 40 üniversite öğrencisinin katılımıyla iki aşamada gerçekleştirilen çalışmanın ilk aşamasında deneklere kadın ve erkeğin farklı sosyal konumlarda görüntülediği 4 resim gösterildi ve kendilerinden her bir resmi Semin ve Fiedler'in (1988) Dilsel Sınıflama Modeline (Linguistic Category Model) göre 5 farklı anlatım düzleminde betimleyen seçeneklerden birini tercih etmeleri, ikinci aşamada ise deneklerden aynı resimleri doğaçlama olarak betimlemeleri istendi. Laboratuvar ortamında ses kaydı yapılan anlatımlar Semin ve Fiedler'in Dilsel Sınıflama Modeline göre çözümlendi. Sonuçlar deneklerin hem yönlendirilen (birinci aşama) hem de doğaçlama (ikinci aşama) olarak gerçekleşen betimlemelerde resimleri gösterge ve gönderge bağlamında algılayarak nesnel bir dil yanlılığı içinde olduklarını ve bu bağlamda kullanılan tekdüzelendirme dilinin biçimsel yapısının dar anlamlı sıfat ve sıfat işlevli sözcüklerden oluştuğunu ortaya koydu.

Stereotypical Language, Stereotyping, Biased Language Use/Tekdüze Dil, Tekdüzelendirme, Yanlı Dil Kullanımı

1. Introduction

The present study is concerned with the relationship between stereotypical concepts in describing people and the structure of the language used in this context. The word stereotype itself comes from the conjunction of the two Greek words, stereos meaning solid and typos meaning the mark of a blow, or more generally, a model. Stereotype, thus, refers to solid models. As Miller (1982) points out such a term is likely to give rise to at least two connotations: rigidity and duplication or sameness. When applied to people, then, stereotypes are used to refer to rigid, repetitive often rhythmic behaviour patterns (Schroeder 1970 in Miller 1982). However, the most familiar use of the term refers to characteristics that we apply to others on the basis of their national, ethnic and gender groups.

Stereotypes were firstly described by Lippmann in 1922 as pictures related to people and events (in Hinton 2000:8). Since then the concept of stereotype has been defined by many researchers investigating this area. Here are some examples of definitions of stereotype:

"... a fixed impression which conforms very little to the facts. It pretends to represent and results from our defining first and observing second" (Katz & Braly 1935 in Hinton 2000).

"Whether favourable or unfavourable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify our conduct in relation to that category" (Allport 1954 in Hinton).

"...stereotypes are mental signs shared by some categories of institutions, events and large masses of human beings" (Stallybrass 1977 in Tajfel & Forgas 2000).

"...stereotypes as social representations, ideas about causation that are social in origin, concern social outcomes, and are shared by many individuals"

(Hewstone & Jaspars 1984).

" a highly organized social category that have properties of cognitive schemata" (Stangor 2000).

It is a commonly shared point of view that stereotypes are the inevitable results of the socially or individually created categories (Hinton 2000:20; Tajfel & Forgas 2000:58), which provide a pragmatic aid in perceiving and understanding people and social settings where communicational interaction occurs between people. This approach emphasizes the social common aspect of stereotypes, and provides evidence to the abstract structures of stereotypes that have defining attributions related to events and people (Stangor & Schaller 2000:68). Since stereotypes are abstract structural concepts, they are representative examples of prejudiced language attitudes as well (Stallybrass 1977 in Tajfel & Forgas 2000:57).

Stangor (2000:1), like Stallybrass, draws attention towards the link between stereotypes and prejudice, and defines stereotypes as beliefs related to human groups, stereotyping as the application of the stereotypes previously created about a specific group and prejudice as the negative feeling or attitude towards the members of that specific group. According to Stangor (2000:1), stereotypes and prejudice have emerged as a result of categorizing human groups socially, and in such an activity an individual is classified and categorized according to his or her physical properties such as gender, age, skin colour, or to his or her spiritual or social properties such as alcoholic, sympathetic, a worker etc. rather than his or her characteristic features specific to him or her. Rendering anyone, thus, socially to such categories leads us to perform a biased language use in the communication process affecting our social conscious, perception and language behaviour (Hinton 2000:95; Stangor 2000:2; Hamilton 1992:104; Maass & Arcuri 1992:131).

In the light of the above explanation, we assume that people, due to the influence of their stereotypic thoughts and perceptions, exhibit a positively or negatively biased language behaviour in describing other people. Our purpose is, then, to investigate the linguistic representation of this biased language attitude in speakers' spontaneous verbal productions in descriptive contexts. The questions that we have raised to ask in the context of this study are whether gender is influ-

ential upon biased language behaviour, what the function of language is in this system and how the relationship between language and stereotypes can be conceptualized in this framework.

2. Stereotypes and Language Use

The cultural interpretation of the relationship between stereotypes and language use emphasizes that stereotypes survive through learning and continue potentially changing via language use and culture (Troike-Saville 1990:194; Downes 1998:362). In this process language plays the function of a mechanism through which individuals are categorized into groups under specific social labels and stereotypic concepts are shared with the other members of the society (Staggor & Schaller 2000:68). The Whorfian hypothesis, which claims that the structure of a language influences its speakers' thought processes and their observations of the world, also provides some support to the assumption that social labelling and categorizing exert a great power on stereotypic thought processes via language (Wardhough 1986:212). However, it is the paradox that while the language attitude is unbiased in categorizing people, it is very often biased in developing stereotypic concepts for categorized groups as it guides the perceiver's language production in the communication process through an activated stereotype by a stimulus (Stangor & Schaller 2000:69).

The relationship between stereotypes and language use is actually less studied. In Maass and Arcuri's (1992:129 - 143) study of biased language use in intergroup settings, the members of the groups described their own members' favourable and other group members' unfavourable behaviour in abstract linguistic terms. On the other hand, they described their own members' unfavourable and other group members' favourable behaviour in concrete linguistic terms. This is called by Maass and Arcuri (1992:141) the linguistic intergroup bias, in which abstract language use reflects stereotype-consistent thought whereas concrete language use reflect stereotype-inconsistent thought.

Another study conducted by Hamilton et al. (1992:103 - 129) is focused on the effects of stereotypic thoughts in describing certain ethnic groups, and the results of this study have revealed that subjects were sensitive to social norms and were defensive about appearing prejudiced, and hence they rated the black target people in a socially desirable manner in meaningfully narrow concrete linguistic

terms; on the other hand they rated the young black in meaningfully broad abstract linguistic terms, which indicates the power of stereotypic thought on language production.

3. The Linguistic Category Model

Within the frame of the relationship between stereotypic concepts and language production, the present study attempts to explain the structure of stereotypical language through Semin and Fiedler's (1988) Linguistic Category Model (LCM hereafter); which distinguishes four levels of abstraction in language behaviour:

1. Descriptive action verbs. These refer to concrete, single and observable episodes such as to call or to touch.

2. Interpretive action verbs. These describe a general class of behaviours such as to help, to cheat.

3. State verbs. These describe a psychological state such as to hate or to desire, and refer to a specific object.

4. Adjectives. These describe highly abstract dispositions or characteristics of a person such as aggressive or creative, thereby generalizing across specific behavioural events, across situations, and across objects.

For instance a position where A and B quarrelled can be interpreted in four different levels of abstraction in the following way. In the first level it can be encoded that A hits B, in the second level A hurts B, in the third level A hates B, and in the fourth level A is aggressive. As becomes evident from this example, descriptions of different levels of abstraction carry different meanings. Maass and Arcuri state (1992:130) that an abstract statement such as "A is aggressive" implies great stability over time, supporting that the person will behave in the same way in the future in different situations with other people.

4. Experimental Procedure

4.1. Subjects and Materials

A total of 40 subjects, 20 boys and 20 girls, drawn from the population of the departments of Turkish and English languages and literatures, participated in the study voluntarily. Their median age was 19.

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The materials used in the study were four pictures of women and men, which were supposed to invoke different social images in the perception of the subjects, thereby activating stereotypically furnished descriptions of the target people. The man in the first picture and the woman in the second picture were socially inferior to the man in the third picture and the woman in the fourth picture, who occupied socially higher status. The purpose of using different pictures during the experiments was to observe the effect of the pictures as visual signs on the subjects' perception, and to observe whether the concept of gender would be influential in activating stereotypical descriptions.

4.2. Method

The study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase each picture was described with five statements (Appendix 1) prepared in accordance with the four levels of abstraction in Semin and Fiedler's LCM (cf. 3): (1) a descriptive action statement (DAS), (2) an interpretive action statement (IAC), (3) a state descriptive statement (SDS), and two statements that contain adjectives (AS) indicating a positive sense (4), and a negative (5). An example of each category related to the first picture is shown here:

- DAS 1. The man is walking with two bunches of flowers in his hand.
- IAC 2. The man may probably be going to visit someone at the hospital.
- SDS 3. The man seems to be regretful.
- AS 4. The man is very modern.
- 5. The man is arrogant.

4.2.1. The First Phase

In the first phase of the study the subjects were presented with four pictures, and were asked to choose the statement which they thought described the

picture appropriately. The girls chose AS for the man in the first picture and for the woman in the second picture, DAS for the man in the third picture, and SDS for the woman in the fourth picture. The boys chose DAS for the man in the first picture, AS for the woman in the second picture, and SDS and AS for the man in the third and the woman in the fourth picture (Table 1).

Subjects	Picture1	Picture2	Picture 3	Picture 4
Girls	AS 5	AS 4=5	DAS 1	SS 3
Boys	IAS 2	AS 4=5	SS = AS 3=5	SS=AS 3=4

Table 1. The subjects' preferences from the multiple choices.

4.2.2. The Second Phase

In the second phase of the study the subjects were asked to generate descriptive stories about the people in the same pictures, which were shown to them in the first phase. The reason for this was the assumption that the subjects would create stereotypical concepts more freely in the context of spontaneous language use. The tape recorded descriptive stories were later transcribed into conventional orthography, and their analysis was made according to Semin and Fiedler's LCM. Table 2, where the verbal productions of the subjects are presented, shows that the girls are more productive than the boys both in general and in the context of each picture.

Subjects	Picture1	Picture2	Picture 3	Picture 4	Total
Girls	770	738	646	658	2812
Boys	536	554	528	491	2209

Table 2. The boys' and the girls' verbal productions in spontaneous descriptions

In general 13.71 % of the verbal production by the girls is made of DAS, 23.14 % of IAS, 28.86 % of SDS, and 17.4 % of AS. 13.24 % of the verbal production by the boys is composed of DAS, 19.85 % of IAS, 25.37 % of SDS, and 26.86 % of AS (Table 3).

	DAS	IAS	SS	AS
Girls	13.71	23.14	28.80	17.40
Boys	13.24	19.85	25.37	26.86

Table 3. The percentage of the verbal productions of the boys and the girls according to the LCM.

Tables 4 and 5 display the numerical distributions of AS, which is the most abstract level of language production. The words (adjectives, nouns and noun phrases used as adjectives in the free spontaneous descriptions) forming the most abstract level have been classified according to their positive and negative senses in order to observe the gender effect upon the subjects' stereotypical language use.

Adjectives	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4
Positive	3	1	6	13
Negative	18	10	6	1

Table 4. The numerical distributions of the adjectives used by the girls in respect of their positive and negative senses.

According to the results of table 4, the girls display a negatively biased language behaviour towards the man in the first picture and the woman in the second picture by using more negative adjectives. On the other hand, they display a positively biased language behaviour with greater number of positive adjectives in the description of the woman in the fourth picture, and a balanced language behaviour towards the man in the third picture with an equal number of positive and negative adjectives.

Adjectives	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4
Positive	11	3	18	11
Negative	14	13	11	4

Table 5. The numerical distributions of the adjectives used by the boys in respect of their positive and negative senses.

According to the results of table 5, the boys, like the girls, display a positive bias in the description of the woman in the fourth picture while they are presenting negatively biased language behaviour in the description of the man in the first and third pictures and the woman in the second picture.

5. Discussion

5.1. Language Attitude

The results of the first and the second phases reveal that the boys' and the girls' language attitudes do not reflect a gender-based bias, but a sort of bias originating from the semiotic impressions of the pictures that the subjects' perceptions and evaluations are based on. Thus, for instance, being influenced by the social image of the woman in the second picture, they all describe her as an illiterate person, though there is no clear sign indicating that she is illiterate. Similarly, the subjects have tended to display a language attitude affected by the visual effect of the woman in the fourth picture, who reflects a high social status. The outcome of these construal processes is seemingly a negatively dominated language attitude for the first woman, and a positively dominated one for the second woman. On the other hand, the man in the third picture, who apparently seems to belong to a higher class, does not invoke a language attitude in the girls to produce stereotypical concepts in their descriptions. Thus, they remain neutral in this case, but do not refrain from performing negatively biased language behaviour towards the man in the first picture by describing him as 'arrogant'. The boys, on the other hand, describe the man in the third picture unfavourably suggesting that he is arrogant, and the man in the first picture with an interpretive descriptive statement (the man may probably be going to visit someone in the hospital - Appendix 2).

In the second phase of the study, where the subjects were encouraged to produce free spontaneous descriptions of the people in the pictures, the boys' verbal production related to the most abstract level of language production is obviously greater than the girls' (Table 2). Although this may be interpreted as the indication that the boys tend to be more biased in their language use, their biased language attitude does not reflect a gender-based bias. As in the first phase of the study, their language behaviour is negatively biased for the men in the first and the third pictures, and for the woman in the second picture, but positively

biased for the woman in the fourth picture. Similarly the girls have displayed a negative language attitude towards the woman in the second and the man in the first picture, but a positive approach to the woman in the fourth picture while preferring a neutral approach to the man in the third picture. Although the results of the first phase and the second phase confirm each other, it is recognizable that the subjects both prefer the third category of abstraction (SDS) more intensively in the second phase (Table 6). Possibly they wish to be more defensive for appearing biased about the people in the categories to which they themselves do not belong, and hence they have tended to exhibit a positive social manner (Hamilton 1992:111).

Table 6. The results of the first and second phases of the study

Subjects	Picture 1		Picture 2		Picture 3		Picture 4	
	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd
Girls	AS	SS	AS	SS	DAS	DAS=AS	SS	SS
Boys	IAS	SS	AS	SS	SS=AS	SS	SS=AS	SS

The boys' and the girls' language attitudes both in the first and second phases of the study do not reflect a bias in terms of the concept of gender. In other words, the gender identities of the people in the pictures do not seem to be effective on the production of stereotypical concepts, not only in multiple choice descriptions in the first phase, but also in the descriptive stories generated by the subjects in the second phase. Actually the pictures have played an effective role on the subjects' perceptions as schematic structures, thereby activating stereotypical descriptions in accordance with the semiotic and social considerations of the pictures. The subjects' language attitudes can be interpreted in the context of Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955 in Hinton 2000:41), which suggests that experience gained through life guides people in their thought processes related to events and people: hence, as individuals we are continuously in the process of gaining experience and construing our environment. Thus, it seems to be plausible to say that while describing the people in the pictures, the subjects evaluate them through their experiences in connection with the semiotic references of the pictures, and make inferences based on this interpretation. Although their language use seems to be objective in this sense, it can also be thought subjective since they

reflect their emotions through stereotypical concepts that they produce in describing the people in the pictures.

5.2. The Language of Stereotyping

The highest or most abstract level in Semin and Fiedler's Linguistic Category Model is the use of adjectives to encode or characterize behaviour. Certainly the use of adjectives is a more abstract level of comprehension and description than is captured by any of the linguistic category type, as adjectives remove the characterization from a focus on the specific action to a more pervasive property of the described people (Hamilton et al. 1992:118). Providing more abstract information about people, adjectives imply great stability over time, and may bolster existing views of the people who are described (Maass & Arcuri 1992:140). Thus, they contribute to the resistance and maintenance of social stereotypes, and compose the language of stereotype.

The meaning extension of an adjective can also act as a linguistic determinant that shapes the speaker's language attitude to be biased negatively or positively. Hampson, John and Goldberg (1986 in Hamilton et al. 1992:118-119) have studied in a research programme the meaning extensions of trait adjectives, which is determined according to the variety of the contents of their meanings. The trait 'responsible', for instance, encompasses broader range of behaviours than the trait 'punctual', which only refers to a specific domain of behaviour having to do with promptness about time. In their study, John et al. (1991 in Hamilton et al. 1992:119) have shown that perceivers described a liked person by using broad desirable and narrow undesirable traits, whereas for a disliked person the opposite pattern was observed - broad undesirable traits and narrow desirable traits.

In this context of the present study the adjectives or the other parts of speech such as nouns, noun phrases functioning as adjectives in the verbal descriptions of the subjects have been classified according to their negative or positive senses and meaning extensions as broad or narrow (Appendix 1). Table 7 displays the numerical distributions of the adjectives used by the boys and the girls.

Subjects	Negative adjectives		Positive adjectives	
	narrow	broad	narrow	broad
Boys	18	7	11	7
Girls	19	5	12	7

Table 7- The numerical distributions of the adjectives in terms of their meaning extensions.

It has been observed that both the boys and the girls have used more frequently the adjectives whose meaning extensions are narrow. This finding is different from the findings of the previous studies, which people describe outgroup people's favourable features with narrow trait adjectives and their unfavourable features with broad trait adjectives, whereas they describe ingroup people's favourable features with broad trait adjectives and their unfavourable features with narrow trait adjectives (Hamilton et al. 1992; Maass & Arcuri 1992, 1996). This could be interpreted in the way that the subjects describe the people in the pictures in the context of the inferences they have made from the visual images of the pictures, and that they may avoid the weight of the abstract statements in the descriptions of the people with whom they do not have any common points, as such verbal behaviour entails too much commitment and makes the descriptions vulnerable to become disconfirmed and incredible (Semin & Fiedler 1988).

Conclusion

In the present study we have focused on the gender differences in the language attitudes of males and females in their description of people with whom they do not share any common points, and on the language of stereotyping that has been construed with the use of stereotypical traits in the subjects' verbal spontaneous descriptions. The findings of the study have shown that the concept of 'gender', itself, does not lead a language bias in the subjects' descriptions, but the language behaviour of subjects has been affected by the semiotic references of the pictures. The subjects, as a result of their perceptions, have exposed a stereotypical language formed by narrow trait adjectives and other words used as adjectives, which are not as abstract as broad trait adjectives. Thus, in the frame of the present study the structure of the stereotypical language seems to be more concrete rather than abstract, as narrow trait adjectives focus on more specific cases

and encompass fewer meanings than broad trait adjectives. The subjects' behaviour, then, can be interpreted as their willingness to present unbiased language behaviour towards others, and to avoid ascribing abstract utterances to people with whom they do not have any common points.

Appendix 1

Picture 2

- 1. The woman is hanging out the laundry
- 2. The woman is living in poor conditions.
- 3. The woman seems to e very tired.
- 4. The woman is hardworking.
- 5. The woman is illiterate.

Picture 3

- 1. The man is making an explanation to the press.
- 2. The man is explaining an important subject.
- 3. The man is trying o show off.
- 4. The man is an important one.
- 5. The man is conceited.

Picture 4

- 1. The woman is showing some pieces of paper to the girl beside her.
- 2. The woman is explaining something important.
- 3. The woman seems to be happy from what she is explaining.
- 4. The woman is a good one.
- 5. The woman is conceited.

Appendix 2

The girls

Picture 1

Negative/narrow: vagabond, rebellious, homosexual, unconcerned, careless, crazy

Negative/broad: exceptional, interesting, arrogant, snobbish

Picture 2

Negative/Narrow: illiterate, uneducated, poor, peasant, confused

Negative/Broad: typical, wretched

Picture 3

Negative/narrow: dictator,selfish, hard, not sympathetic, impolite, conceited,

Positive/narrow: self-reliant, important, knows what to do, determined

Positive/Broad: serious, competent,

Picture 4

Negative/narrow: conceited

Negative/broad: imposing

Positive/Narrow: educated, self-reliant, cultured, lovely, sensitive, well-cared, affectionate, good

Positive/Broad: modern, contemporary

The Boys

Picture 1

Negative/narrow: aggressive, ignorant, vagabond, tramp, unsympathetic

Negative/broad: exceptional, unusual, dandy

Positive/Narrow: self-reliant

Positive/Broad: exceptional, free, independent

Picture 2

Negative/narrow: illiterate, uneducated, peasant, poor, adversary

Picture 3

Negative/narrow: snobbish, bossy, untrustable, unnatural, conceited, rebellious, pedantic

Positive/Narrow: important, rich, self-confident, self-conscious, knows what to say

Positive/Broad: of great wisdom

Picture 4

Negative/narrow: unsincere, conceited

Positive/Narrow: good, lady, intellectual, likes helping, smiling, good intended

Positive/Broad: modern, affective, different

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