

Research Article

Why the bride wears white: Grounding gender with brightness

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Received 6 March 2013; received in revised form 3 August 2013; accepted 7 September 2013

Available online 21 September 2013

Abstract

Two studies examine the grounding of gender by the alignment of the female–male with the bipolar dimension of light–dark (most likely due to sexual dimorphism in skin pigmentation). We hypothesized and showed that in a speeded classification task male names are processed faster when they are presented in a black typeface (Exp. 1) or a dark color (Exp. 2) than when they are presented in white or a light color, with the opposite pattern for female names. The applied relevance of these findings is investigated in study 3 where lightness and darkness of consumables are revealed to drive gender specific preferences for foods and drinks, with the lighter consumables being female and darker ones being male preferences. Study 4 shows that gender preferences for consumer goods are uniformly driven by whether the good is in black or white, the former being male and the latter being female preference. The implications of these findings are discussed for theory formation in relation to the grounding of abstract concepts and in terms of how to design targeted marketing of products.

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Keywords: Grounding abstract concepts; Gender preferences; Metaphors; Embodied cognition; Situated cognition

Introduction

Imagine a waiter bringing a cappuccino and an espresso dutifully to a couple sitting at a table. Without being told who ordered what, she serves the woman with the cappuccino and the man with the espresso. The waiter will probably reach this conclusion and execute it without giving it much thought. But this example is only the tip of the iceberg. Take another example. Coca Cola Light came in white cans and bottles. It simply did not sale well among the coveted young male population. Borrowing an idea from their Australian division they introduced *Coke Zero* in black¹. The brand took off

within six months, after marketing and packaging were completed.

As we shall argue and show, there is a pervasive association between gender and brightness, with bright marking female and dark marking male, but for reasons other than a metaphoric association. The aim of this research is not merely to reveal this special association between brightness and gender, along with the implications this association invites. It is also to show that different contexts in which sensory-structurings are activated determine not only the meaning that sensory grounding acquires but also necessitates different conceptual explanations of the grounding process, relying on the same sensory dimension. One meaning of the sensory opposition between brightness and darkness can be found in the well-documented context of evil and good, or positive and negative, as used in popular culture (e.g., *Star Wars*), remonstrated in religion (e.g., Bible, Buddhist writings, Upanishad), and examined in psychological research (e.g., Meier, Robinson, & Clore, 2004; Meier, Hauser, Robinson, Friesen, & Schjeldahl, 2007; Sherman & Clore, 2009).

☆ We would like to express our appreciation to the reviewers who gave most helpful advice to revise, in particular, the theoretical section of this paper. We would also like to thank Leonel Garica Marques for his statistical advice.

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¹ See: www.ajc.com/news/business/coke-zero-becomes-a-hero-for-coca-cola-co/nQkHh/.

However, as we shall argue and show, in the context of gender, the association with bright and dark is orthogonal to valence, or affect. Moreover, we shall *argue* that gender is not metaphorically associated with the dimension of light–dark but that there are ‘natural’ reasons for the association. Thus, light vs. dark as a polar opposition functions as a sensory structuring device to ground valence in one context (good vs. bad). In another context that is orthogonal to valence, it functions as a sensory structuring device to ground gender (male vs. female) and is probably based on evolutionarily adaptive and universal differences in skin color between males and females (cf. Jablonski, 2004; Jablonski & Chaplin, 2000, 2002).

We start with a brief overview of the valence context where the implications of the polarity shared by the valence and brightness dimensions have been examined (e.g., Banerjee, Chatterjee, & Sinha, 2012; Meier et al., 2004; Meier et al., 2007; Sherman & Clore, 2009). Then, we turn to the current focus, namely the association between gender and brightness arguing that it is likely to derive from sexual dimorphism in skin brightness. Subsequently, we furnish an overview of the research consisting of 4 experiments that investigate not only the sensory grounding of gender, namely bright with female and dark with male (Exp.’s 1–2), but also the marketing implications (Exp.’s 3–4), namely how they influence decisions across a range of choice dilemmas.

Background: light–dark evil–good negative–positive

Departing from Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; also see Gibbs, 2006), research on brightness and valence has been derived from the contention that valence is possible as an *abstract* thought because such a category (good–bad, positive–negative) relies on our capacity for a sensory-based metaphor. The function of the metaphor is to link the abstract category to physical experience and thus structure human thought and shape the way we encode, store, and retrieve information. Thus, by being activated, metaphors provide sensory scaffolds for our thinking about abstract domains like time (e.g., Boroditsky, 2000), justice (e.g., Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011), morality (e.g., Lee & Schwarz, 2011; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006), and in this particular case, affect or valence (e.g., Meier et al., 2004; Meier et al., 2007; Sherman & Clore, 2009).

In this view, cognition and abstract categories such as valence rather than being amodal are inherently body based (e.g., Barsalou, 1999; Gibbs, 2006; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005; Smith & Semin, 2004; Semin & Smith, 2002, 2013; Semin, Garrido, & Farias, *in press*; Semin, Garrido, & Palma, 2012, 2013; Wilson, 2002). This take on abstract categories has led to research examining the relationship between brightness and valence. For instance, Meier et al. (2004) have reported that negative words were evaluated faster and more accurately when presented in a black font rather than a white font, and positive words were evaluated faster and more accurately when presented in a white rather than a black font. They suggest that affective evaluations activate perceptions of stimulus brightness. Meier,

Robinson, Crawford, and Ahlvers (2007) report a series of studies where, *inter alia*, participants had to match the brightness of a word to a set of squares varying in shading. The results revealed a metaphor-consistent bias in their brightness judgments. Thus, much like space that grounds time (e.g., Boroditsky, 2000), political concepts (e.g., Farias, Garrido, & Semin, 2013), valence (cf. Crawford, 2009), or power (e.g., Schubert, 2005) the brightness dimension can be deployed to ground different abstract concepts, and one of these is gender. In short, sensory-structuring is a situated process (Semin & Smith, 2013; Smith & Semin, 2004; Semin, Garrido, & Palma, 2013; Semin et al., 2012, *in press*). In one context light vs. dark can ground valence or good and evil. In another context, this sensory dimension can ground gender. As we shall argue, the way that the light–dark dimension grounds gender is not necessarily based on any obvious metaphorical association but a universal dimorphism in skin color between males and females.

Beyond good and evil and towards male and female

There are a number of cultural traditions that associate female and male and white and black or brightness. White is the color most commonly associated with innocence and virginity. The white virgin is the epitome of purity, grace, and chastity. Black in contrast is culturally often seen as the color of authority and seriousness and notably the symbols of black that have to do with authority and seriousness are predominantly associated with the male gender. These and other related cultural associations with maleness and femaleness are actually likely to be based on the sexual dimorphism in skin pigmentation as a result of natural selection (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2000). As Jablonski (2004, p. 609) argues, the lighter skin pigmentation of females facilitates the maximization of “...cutaneous vitamin D3 production in order to meet the absolutely higher calcium requirements of pregnancy and lactation” (p. 609). Moreover, she argues that “... darker pigmentation may have been the object of natural selection in males because of the importance of maintaining optimal levels of folate in order to safeguard sperm production, a process depending on folate for DNA synthesis” (p.609). Thus, the different accounts that have been advanced for the emergence of this sexual dimorphism such as females being more attractive if they have a lighter pigmentation (Frost, 1988) or the diverse cultural representations about lighter pigmentation or brightness being indicative of virginity, purity and so on may have contributed to the sexual selection process, but are unlikely to be their ultimate cause (cf. Jablonski & Chaplin, 2000). In essence, “human skin color has evolved to be dark enough to prevent sunlight from destroying the nutrient folate but light enough to foster the production of vitamin D” (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2002, p. 76). The significance of the sexual dimorphism in skin pigmentation is complemented by studies on gender recognition from faces. These suggest that an important feature in the gender recognition process is color, with male faces being darker than female faces (e.g., Nestor & Tarr, 2008; Nestor, Vettel, & Tarr, 2008).

These considerations invite a theoretical grounding of the gender-brightness link other than a metaphor driven one. Indeed,

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