



## LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN CULTURAL CONCEPTUALIZATION THROUGH ASSOCIATIVE SEMANTIC FIELDS

**Tojiboyev Botir Rahimjonovich**

PhD, Head of the Department of Uzbek Language and Literature,  
University of Tashkent for Applied Sciences  
Gavhar Str. 1, Tashkent 100149, Uzbekistan  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15743891>

### ARTICLE INFO

Qabul qilindi: 15-Iyun 2025 yil  
Ma'qullandi: 20-Iyun 2025 yil  
Nashr qilindi: 26-Iyun 2025 yil

### KEY WORDS

Gender linguistics, associative semantics, cultural conceptualization, cognitive salience, semantic fields, prototype structures, mental lexicon, gendered language, psycholinguistics, cross-cultural semantics

### ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates how gender influences the formation of cultural conceptualizations in language, with a specific focus on associative semantic fields. Drawing on insights from cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and gender studies, it explores how male and female speakers differ in their semantic associations with key cultural concepts, and how these differences reflect underlying gendered worldviews. The study engages theoretical models such as the associative-semantic network theory, prototype theory, and the cultural conceptualization framework to show that lexical meaning is not only cognitively structured but also socially and culturally conditioned by gender identity.*

*Empirical findings across Russian, English, and Uzbek linguistics have demonstrated that associative responses to culturally loaded words (e.g., "home," "work," "power," "freedom") often differ between genders in both content and affective valence. These differences reflect broader patterns of embodied experience, cultural salience, and social role cognition. Through an integrative analysis of experimental and theoretical studies, the paper argues that gender-specific associative semantics provide a window into culturally constructed modes of thought.*

*The broader implication is that lexical meaning cannot be fully understood without considering the gendered nature of semantic memory, conceptual structure, and cultural narrative. Language, in this view, is not a neutral medium but a mirror of social cognition shaped by gendered perception.*

### Introduction

The intersection of language, culture, and gender is a central concern in contemporary linguistic anthropology and cognitive

semantics. As language both reflects and shapes human experience, it encodes the distinctions and categories that speakers use to interpret their social and conceptual worlds. One of the most revealing dimensions of this interpretive process is the structure of associative semantic fields—the mental networks that organize meaning through culturally and personally salient associations. These fields, while often shared within linguistic communities, exhibit notable variation along the axis of gender, revealing how men and women may differently conceptualize the same referent due to diverging experiences, social roles, and cultural expectations.

Gender-based variation in language has been studied from multiple perspectives: sociolinguistics has documented lexical choices and pragmatic styles; cognitive linguistics has examined embodied schemas; and cultural linguistics has investigated the role of worldview in meaning construction. However, few studies integrate these perspectives in the specific domain of gendered associative semantics—that is, how concepts become semantically activated in gender-specific patterns. For instance, when prompted with the word *home*, female speakers may associate warmth, safety, or motherhood, whereas male speakers may evoke rest, provision, or privacy. These associations are not arbitrary but culturally learned, ideologically reinforced, and cognitively entrenched.

This paper argues that examining gendered differences in associative semantic fields offers a powerful lens into cultural conceptualization—how communities structure meaning, emotion, and social value. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of experimental data and conceptual theory, we will explore how the lexical expression of culture is filtered through gendered cognition, and how such filtering reinforces broader cultural narratives about identity, space, emotion, and responsibility. Rather than treating language as a uniform vehicle of meaning, this study positions it as a gendered system of encoded experience—where variation is not noise, but insight.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand how gender influences associative semantic fields, this study integrates perspectives from associative semantics, cultural linguistics, and gendered cognitive modeling. Each field contributes a necessary layer to grasp how meaning is culturally encoded and cognitively organized.

Associative semantics studies how words are mentally linked based on perceived conceptual proximity, experiential salience, and emotional valence. This field was empirically grounded by large-scale projects such as the University of South Florida Word Association Norms, which demonstrated that speakers consistently associate certain words with particular responses, revealing the structure of the mental lexicon as a web of related nodes rather than isolated entries.<sup>1</sup> These associations are not only based on logical or taxonomic relations, but often reflect culturally ingrained narratives—especially when concepts are affectively or socially loaded (e.g., *mother*, *power*, *freedom*).

Russian linguist N.V. Ufimtseva emphasized that associative fields are deeply shaped by social experience, showing gender-specific associations for the same stimuli in large-scale native-speaker experiments.<sup>2</sup> For example, male and female responses to the word *beauty*

<sup>1</sup> Nelson, Douglas L., Cathy L. McEvoy, and Thomas A. Schreiber. *The University of South Florida Word Association, Rhyme, and Word Fragment Norms*. Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1998, 244 p.

<sup>2</sup> Уфимцева, Наталья В. «Гендерная специфика ассоциативной нормы в русском языке.» *Вопросы языкознания* 1 (2005): 111–119.

(*красота*) differed not just in emotional tone, but in the kinds of related values they evoked (e.g., aesthetic admiration vs. personal self-presentation).

The framework of cultural conceptualization, developed within cultural linguistics by scholars such as Farzad Sharifian, stresses that speakers of a language share not only vocabulary, but deeply entrenched conceptual templates shaped by tradition, ritual, belief, and experience.<sup>3</sup> These templates include metaphors, schemas, and categories that organize how meaning is both produced and understood.

Cultural conceptualizations often emerge in associative responses, particularly in reaction to culturally salient prompts (e.g., *honor, work, family*). In these cases, the associations differ based on cultural histories and values—and are further stratified by gender, since male and female socialization may emphasize divergent schemas for the same term.

Within cognitive linguistics, gender is not treated as merely a social label but as a category of embodied experience. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, meaning emerges from repeated sensorimotor and emotional experience, structured through metaphor and prototype.<sup>4</sup> Because men and women are differently socialized—often encouraged to attend to different domains of life—their conceptual metaphors and prototypes for a given concept may diverge. For instance, the prototype of *leadership* may include strength and autonomy for men, while for women it may include care and coordination, depending on cultural expectations.

Anna Wierzbicka further demonstrated that even the most basic emotion words and value terms differ cross-culturally and are filtered through both cultural and gendered conceptual prisms.<sup>5</sup> Her semantic explication method shows how different social groups—even within one language—build distinct networks of meaning around the same lexeme.

Combining these traditions, the current study posits that:

- Lexical meaning is partly structured by associative networks;
- These networks are culturally embedded and gender-sensitive;
- Differences in gendered association reflect not superficial preference but deeply rooted cognitive-cultural schematization.

This integrated approach allows for an investigation of how meaning emerges not only in words but in the minds of gendered speakers shaped by shared cultural memory.

### **Gender and Cultural Conceptualization**

Associative semantic fields reveal profound insights into how individuals structure their understanding of reality, especially when filtered through gendered cultural lenses. While much of associative semantics rests on cognitive mechanisms shared by all humans—such as proximity, salience, and affective resonance—gender introduces systematic variation in how specific concepts are activated, prioritized, and interpreted. These variations are not superficial but emerge from deep patterns of socialization and conceptual experience embedded in culturally specific ways of being male or female.

Research in Russian psycholinguistics, particularly the large-scale associative norms collected by N.V. Ufimtseva, has shown that male and female respondents produce meaningfully

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<sup>3</sup> Sharifian, Farzad. *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017, 292 p.

<sup>4</sup> Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 242 p.

<sup>5</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. *Semantics, Culture and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 496 p.

distinct associations when prompted with the same stimuli. For instance, in response to the word *freedom*, male participants more frequently evoke abstract or political concepts such as *responsibility*, *choice*, or *independence*, whereas female respondents are more likely to associate *family*, *protection*, or *security*.<sup>6</sup> This divergence suggests that gender is not merely a social label but a structuring principle in how conceptual domains are experienced and semantically mapped.

Such tendencies are mirrored across languages. In Uzbek, the word *oila* (family) tends to elicit affectively rich, relational terms among female speakers—such as *mehr*, *ona*, or *baraka*—which highlight the emotional and moral dimensions of familial roles. Male responses, by contrast, often focus on notions of *majburiyat* (obligation), *mas'uliyat* (responsibility), or *ta'minot* (provision). These differences are consistent with traditional gender role expectations, but they are more than just cultural stereotypes; they reveal how conceptual structures are differentially entrenched in gendered experience and memory.

Cross-linguistic comparisons further confirm this. In English-language studies, the term *success* evokes individual achievement and leadership among male respondents, while female respondents tend to connect it with balance, harmony, or interpersonal recognition.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the concept *beauty* for women is frequently linked to self-care, nature, or harmony, whereas male associations often involve visual perception, judgment, or admiration. These semantic fields are not created in isolation; they reflect the cultural narratives available to each gender group—narratives that are internalized through education, media, and daily linguistic use.

The structure of these associations can also be influenced by broader cultural models. Farzad Sharifian's theory of cultural conceptualizations provides a framework for understanding how shared mental templates—such as those related to motherhood, masculinity, or honor—shape the semantic content of words differently for male and female speakers.<sup>8</sup> When these templates are internalized differently by gender groups, the same word activates distinct cognitive scripts. For example, the Uzbek word *vatan* (homeland) may evoke in men themes of sacrifice, duty, or protection, while in women it may trigger associations of origin, belonging, or emotional attachment.

These patterns point to the reality that language encodes gendered experience through the culturally specific distribution of semantic salience. In other words, the associations that appear spontaneous or intuitive are in fact structured by collective cultural memory—one that differentiates not only between cultures but also between social positions within a culture, including gender.

Moreover, associative semantic variation often aligns with prototypicality within categories. For many concepts—such as *friendship*, *power*, or *home*—men and women evoke different prototype features. In experimental studies, male speakers often emphasize autonomy and hierarchy in describing *power*, while female speakers highlight negotiation, responsibility, or care. These different prototypical features shape not only how the word is understood, but also what it is likely to be associated with in discourse and memory.

<sup>6</sup> Уфимцева, Наталья В. «Гендерная специфика ассоциативной нормы в русском языке.» *Вопросы языкознания* 1 (2005): 111–119.

<sup>7</sup> Janda, Laura A. “Cognitive Linguistics and Gendered Patterns of Association.” *Slovo i tekst* 6 (2005): 141–150.

<sup>8</sup> Sharifian, Farzad. *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017, 292 p.

Such differences are not universal, of course. They depend on the socio-cultural context in which gender is enacted. In more egalitarian or role-flexible cultures, the divergence in associative fields is often smaller. But even in such contexts, latent differences persist, especially around emotionally or morally charged concepts. The field of associative semantics thus provides a subtle yet powerful method for exploring how gendered subjectivity manifests in language—and how language in turn reinforces gendered conceptualizations of the world.

### **Empirical Patterns and Cognitive Models**

The cognitive dimension of gendered associative semantics is best understood by examining the mechanisms of semantic activation, salience hierarchies, and network structures that underlie the formation of meaning. In recent decades, cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics have developed experimental paradigms that reveal consistent gender-based differences in semantic priming, concept recall, and associative network density. These differences offer empirical support to the theoretical claim that men and women, due to divergent socialization and cultural experience, exhibit structurally distinct mental lexicons.

One of the core cognitive principles in associative semantics is salience—the likelihood that a given conceptual feature or association will be cognitively prioritized. In gendered semantic fields, salience is not purely individual but is shaped by shared cultural prototypes and embodied experience. For instance, in word association tasks involving concepts such as *anger*, men are more likely to associate terms that emphasize externalized action (e.g., *fight*, *confrontation*, *explosion*), while women more frequently evoke internal or relational responses (e.g., *hurt*, *crying*, *distance*).<sup>9</sup> These patterns suggest not only affective differences, but also cultural models of emotion that are gender-coded.

Experiments in Russian and English using free association techniques demonstrate that female speakers tend to generate more contextual, relational, and emotionally charged responses, while male participants more frequently produce categorical, action-oriented, or abstract associations.<sup>10</sup> This distinction aligns with findings in prototype theory: while both genders use categorization to structure meaning, the prototypical centers of their categories often differ. For example, the concept *friend* is more likely to center on shared activity or loyalty in male responses, and on emotional support or trust in female responses.<sup>11</sup>

Cognitive linguists such as Ronald Langacker have emphasized that semantic structure is inherently shaped by construal—the way a concept is perspectivized or mentally framed. Gendered construal differences are evident in how speakers highlight particular dimensions of meaning over others. In gendered association tasks, this is reflected in the asymmetry of feature selection. A word like *success* may be construed by men through achievement, hierarchy, or material gain, while women may construe it via balance, well-being, or social harmony. These differences stem not only from social expectations but from cognitive routines reinforced through cultural discourse.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hellinger, Marlis, and Hadumod Bußmann. *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001, 412 p.

<sup>10</sup> Брагина, А.А. «Психолингвистическое исследование гендерных различий ассоциативного словаря.» *Вестник МГУ. Серия 9. Филология* 6 (2011): 38–47.

<sup>11</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 328 p.

<sup>12</sup> Langacker, Ronald W. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*. Vol. 1. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, 554 p.

A particularly rich source of data comes from associative experiments conducted in Uzbek linguistic studies, where culturally significant concepts (e.g., *namus* (honor), *ona* (mother), *mehnat* (labor)) show variation in semantic neighborhood structures by gender. For instance, in response to *mehnat*, male participants frequently list associations tied to duty, economy, or masculinity (e.g., *pul*, *ishchi*, *mas'uliyat*), while female speakers associate the term with domestic care, diligence, or endurance (e.g., *oila*, *sabr*, *uy ishlari*). This illustrates how even shared lexemes possess divergent cognitive salience patterns, depending on the speaker's gendered position within the culture.

From a network-theoretical perspective, associative fields can be mapped as semantic graphs, where nodes represent lexemes and edges represent associative links. Studies show that female association networks tend to be more densely clustered, with higher affective connectivity—meaning that one emotional or experiential concept is often linked to multiple others in a reinforcing web. Male networks, by contrast, often show greater linearity, with fewer branching associations but more thematically stable chains.<sup>13</sup> This has implications for both lexical processing and discourse generation, influencing how speakers navigate meaning in real-time communication.

Furthermore, memory studies indicate that recall and priming effects differ by gender when processing emotionally or culturally loaded lexemes. Female participants show faster and more accurate recall of emotionally resonant terms, especially in culturally familiar contexts, suggesting that their associative fields are shaped by higher emotional granularity and narrative context. Male recall patterns favor hierarchical structuring and category membership, reinforcing the idea that even at the subconscious level, gender affects how language is accessed and structured.

Altogether, these empirical patterns confirm that gender is not an incidental feature of language use but a structural variable in the cognitive construction of meaning. When associative semantics is viewed through the lens of gendered cultural experience, language emerges as a layered system—where meaning is not only shared, but differentiated, positioned, and experienced differently by men and women across cultures.

### Conclusion

The study of associative semantic fields through the lens of gender reveals that language is not merely a transparent conduit for transmitting meaning but a deeply embodied, culturally embedded, and cognitively structured system that reflects the lived experience of its speakers. Gender, far from being a superficial variable in linguistic behavior, plays a profound role in shaping how concepts are structured, interpreted, and retrieved in the mental lexicon.

As demonstrated across linguistic traditions—including English, Russian, and Uzbek—gender-specific associations with culturally salient terms such as *home*, *success*, *freedom*, or *honor* are not arbitrary, but follow consistent patterns tied to social roles, cultural expectations, and cognitive salience hierarchies. Women tend to construct associative networks that emphasize affective, relational, and experiential dimensions of meaning, while men more frequently activate categorical, instrumental, and autonomy-centered conceptual structures.

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson, Douglas L., et al. "Word Association Norms: A Useful Tool for Cognitive Research." *Journal of Psychology* 137, no. 6 (2003): 469–486.

These differences emerge from cultural models of gender, enacted and reinforced through linguistic interaction over time.

Crucially, this phenomenon is not limited to content differences alone but extends to network topology itself: the density, emotional connectivity, and prototypical organization of semantic associations diverge systematically by gender. These findings align with broader cognitive theories such as prototype theory, cultural schema theory, and cognitive construal, reinforcing the idea that lexical meaning is simultaneously shaped by individual cognition, gender identity, and cultural conceptualization.

The implications for linguistic theory are significant. First, the meaning of a lexical unit must be understood as a dynamic construct, not only located in the word itself, but distributed across social, gendered, and cultural cognitive systems. Second, linguistic research must increasingly move toward intersectional approaches, recognizing that categories such as gender, culture, and cognition are not isolated domains but interpenetrate in shaping how language is produced and understood.

Finally, the gendered structure of associative semantic fields opens new avenues for applied linguistics: in language teaching, where awareness of gendered lexical associations may improve curriculum design; in lexicography, where dictionaries might benefit from capturing affective and gendered nuances; and in cross-cultural communication, where semantic mismatches often arise from differing cognitive templates between genders and cultures.

In sum, this study underscores that the semantics of association is not just a map of meanings, but a map of minds—and that to understand how language functions, one must attend to the gendered pathways through which meaning takes shape.

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