Gender in Language and Economics: Is the epidemiological approach the road to causality?

by Estefania Santacreu-Vasut and Amir Shoham

The study of culture and economics is plagued by endogeneity problems, making it hard to infer if, and by how much, culture has a causal impact on economic outcomes. These problems arise due to reverse causality concerns (economic conditions may influence cultural attitudes and beliefs) and omitted variable bias (a third unobservable factor, such as history, geography, etc may influence both culture and economic outcomes). Within the economics literature, the epidemiological approach (Fernandez, 2008) has been vastly developed to deal with these challenges. This approach takes its origin in epidemiologists who compare immigrants to natives in order to isolate the contribution of genetic factors from the one of environmental factors. Within economics this implies studying first and second generation migrants to investigate the impact of their culture of origin and disentangle its effect from that of the institutional and political environment.

When studying whether there is a causal impact between language and economic outcomes endogeneity problems arise as well. The fact that certain features of language grammatical structure are considered as very stable (Wichmann and Holman, 2009) means that concerns of reverse causality are less severe. In particular, contemporary changes in the economic conditions may not influence the grammatical rules, or if so, with a time lag. Yet, since languages evolve alongside with genetic, historical and cultural forces, the potential for omitted variable bias is, if anything, even more stringent than in the case of culture.

Since migrants travel not only with their culture but also with their language, we propose to present the potential advantages that arise from applying the epidemiological approach as a way to move forward in understand the causal impact of language. We next present several ways through which we can achieve this, as well as the limitations we face in interpreting the results in a causal fashion. To do so we will follow a general approach and also refer to specific research conducted in the case of gender roles and the presence of gender marking in language among immigrants in the US (Hicks et al. 2015).
REFERENCES

