

# Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning

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Volume 9

Article 1

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March 2012

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### Recommended Citation

Dever, Aileen (2012) "Sexism in Teaching Spanish: Linguistic Discrimination is Sometimes Unconscious," *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 9 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/kjectl/vol9/iss1/1>

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**Sexism in Teaching Spanish: Linguistic Discrimination is Sometimes Unconscious**

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**Abstract**

The Spanish language is becoming more flexible in creating feminine forms for occupational names that correspond with the already existing masculine terms. However, there has been some resistance among Spaniards with regard to using feminine forms like *física* to refer to a physicist who is a woman. Similarly, there have been objections to *química* (chemist, chemistry), *música* (musician, music), and others because, some say, such terms are ambiguous and confusing with regard to the professions. Do words and the way they are used significantly affect their meaning? The author discusses this question by highlighting linguistic discrimination in Spanish that is sometimes unconscious. However, such usage negatively affects perceptions about women and their role in society. Increasing the awareness of students about the pervasive nature of sexism in language would help to promote equitable treatment of the sexes in both oral and written communication. The author gives examples of sexism in the use of language, and explains specific ways in which society uses language at the most basic level to relegate women to an inferior status. Lastly, the author suggests ways in which professors of Spanish (and English) can address sex-bias in language communication while still remaining faithful to fundamental language structures.

Keywords: Sexism, Teaching, Spanish Language, Linguistic Discrimination.

**Introduction**

There has been some resistance among Spaniards with regard to using feminine forms like *física* to refer to a physicist who is a woman. Similarly, there have been objections to *química* (chemist, chemistry), *música* (musician, music), and others because, some say, such terms are ambiguous and confusing with regard to the professions. The discussion is structured using the following headings: Syntax and meaning, linguistic challenges, and pedagogical suggestions. In addition, the author discussed issues such as “female speak,” and “dictionaries that define.” Instructors should alert their students about the pervasive nature of sexism in language, and help promote equitable treatment of the sexes in both oral and written communication.

**Syntax and Meaning**

Syntactical and lexical usage in Spanish, and English, reflect sexism in

society. Historically, women have not had the same opportunities as men to shape language because they have not had equal access to public arenas as do philosophers, orators, writers, linguists, or professors. During the Age of Reason, people began to realize that social inequities were not the result of a natural, divine order, but rather the product of ideas that were subject to criticism and change. Indeed, sex-bias is endemic in many languages. Linguistic discrimination is perpetrated from one generation to another and would not change until perspectives in society change.

Over the past two decades, feminists in Spain and elsewhere in the Spanish-speaking world have brought attention to how the structure of Spanish (as well as other Romance languages) erases females and continues to support a patriarchal paradigm in which females are linguistically subordinate to males (Calero Vaquera & Lliteras Poncel, 2003). Professors who teach Spanish language in this country may find themselves struggling against the use of

masculine generics as they strive for feminine visibility. This paper discusses how professors can address sex-bias yet still remain faithful to the basic structure of Spanish (and English).

### Linguistic Challenges

As professors of Spanish know, the masculine plural form refers to both males and females: *los padres/parents, los niños/children (boys and girls)*. Furthermore, even if there are fifty women in a room and just one man, the grammatical rules of Spanish dictate the use of the masculine plural pronoun *ellos/they* to refer to the group in the third person making linguistically evident who the important *one* is. Women graduating from universities that were formerly all male have been expected silently to accept being called *alumni*, the plural of the masculine-gender *alumnus*. For hundreds of years, English and Spanish grammarians have prescribed the generic use of *hombre /man*. Yet the masculine generic has been conveniently ignored more than once in the past when the objective was to exclude women. For instance, Costa Rica repeatedly denied the vote to women that the 1871 Constitution ostensibly guaranteed because politicians refused to accept that the masculine generic *ciudadanos/citizens* also encompassed women. It was not until the 1940s that women in Costa Rica could vote.

### Pedagogical Suggestions to Address Sexism

Grammarians have also prescribed the use of the pronoun *he/él* with a singular antecedent of unstated gender who could be either female or male as well as the generic use of *man/hombre*. However, non-sexist options to *man/hombre* and *he/él* abound. Instead of *man/hombre*, there is *humanity/humanidad, human/humano, human being/ser humano, human*

*species/género humano, people/gente, and person/persona*.

There are also many alternatives available instead of using generic *he* that are consistent with good speaking and writing. The easiest way to avoid generic *he* in English is to make a sentence plural. Using collective generics or abstract terms in Spanish such as *el personal médico/medical personnel* similarly avoids the masculine generic *los médicos/doctors*. In cases in which it is impossible to avoid using the masculine generic due to the syntactical structure of Spanish, professors can repeat the feminine form as well as in *los alumnos y las alumnas/the students* or *las niñas y los niños aprenden/the girls and boys learn* and not just *los niños aprenden* with preference given to the masculine structure. Some Spanish linguists even recommend eliminating the article altogether: “*(Las) Profesionales de la enseñanza se reúnen en Madrid...*” (*Education professionals are meeting in Madrid*) and to substitute *cada/each* for *el/the* as in “*Cada docente deberá presentarse...*” (*Each teacher should present her/himself*) instead of *el docente/the teacher* thereby avoiding the generic use of the masculine form (Calero Vaquero & Lliteras Poncel, 2003, p. 45).

As with nouns, masculine plural subject pronouns such as *nosotros, vosotros, ellos /we, you plural informal, they* refer both to males and females but professors can make an effort to include the feminine counterpart in oral drills and model conjugations. Likewise, when eliciting third-person singular verb conjugations, professors can say, for instance, *ella, él – habla/she, he speaks* even placing the feminine first once in a while. Indeed, in model conjugations in textbooks published in the United States, the masculine subject pronoun, for no apparent linguistic reason, invariably comes first, thereby perpetuating an implicit hierarchy. The word order is

always *él, ella, usted/he, she, you singular formal* and *ellos, ellas, ustedes/ they (males and/or males and females), they (only females), you plural formal*. If the feminine *nosotras/we* or *vosotras/you plural informal* even is represented in a model textbook conjugation, they often get relegated to parenthetical status (Resnick, Giuliano, & Golding, 2002, pg. 10).

### Perceptions and Practices

In Catholic Spain, the concept that God created Adam first and Eve as an afterthought from Adam's rib permeated that culture and others in Latin America, lending credence to the idea that females should occupy an inferior, or secondary, place with regard to men in society. Although most religions of the world, including Christianity and Judaism, affirm that God has no gender, the use of *He* and *Father* has reinforced male cognitive imagery supporting masculine patriarchal models in society and language. While espousing patriarchal values, however, the Genesis authors also suggest that God transcends common notions of gender: He creates *both* males and females "in his image" (Gen. 1:27). According to some commentators, this passage implies that the Creator is androgynous, encompassing both masculine and feminine qualities in the divine nature. It also reminds us that the Deity belongs to the numinous – a category of supernatural power that transcends the material limits of mortal life. Infinitely mysterious and ultimately unknowable, God by definition represents forces beyond human ability to emulate or comprehend. Although given anthropomorphic traits, the biblical Deity embodies a mode of existence profoundly different from that of humanity.

Given the historical fact that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament were written by and for members of a thoroughly

patriarchal society, today's readers may view the anthropomorphic and gender-biased portraits of the Deity as culture-bound. While respecting the integrity of the ancient texts in which God is invariably "he" – and the simple linguistic fact that the Hebrew language has no word for "it" – many contemporary believers, in both synagogue and church, acknowledge that the ineffable Being whom biblical authors seek to communicate cannot be contained in finite human categories, including those of gender. (Harris, 2007, pg. 80)

In the Bible, both in English and Spanish, *man* and *mankind* typically appear as generic terms (Harris, 2007). Some might argue that the masculine generic is not discriminatory because it encompasses both genders, but this is hardly true. As Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1980) point out: "If the word *man* were not so emotionally charged and politically useful, its ambiguity would have led long ago to its disuse in any but the limited sense it immediately brings to mind." (p. 3)

The masculine generic both in English and Spanish is an assumed generic because it cannot do what it purports to do, which is truly to include the female. The statement *Man is mortal* is true. So is *John is mortal because he is a man*. However, it is not accurate to say that *María is mortal because she is a man*. However, *María is mortal because she is a human being* is correct because 'human being' is a true generic that would work equally well for the statement with John.

The generic use of *man* in both English and Spanish forces women to continually make an extra mental step to determine whether they are truly included in a reference or not. Not surprisingly, when males utter, read, or hear the word *man*, they see themselves represented while females typically do not (Spender, 1980, p. 153). People do not interpret the generic use of

*man* or the pronoun *he* as gender neutral in any language because they come to understand that the representative of the species is male as they have the tendency to see the referent as male (Schwartz, 1995, p. 3). Those asked to draw a picture based on stories written in the masculine generic most often depict males (Christler & Howard, 1993, p. 340).

The author conducted informal polls among students and colleagues raised both in the United States and Spain and found that females only employ *man*, *he*, and *him* as generics because in school their teachers taught this as essential to correct grammatical usage. Many language teachers of both genders continue to view the use of generic *he* as elemental to proper English and Spanish, defending it based on tradition and graceful style. Yet as author Montserrat Moreno notes, “*La niña debe aprender su identidad sociolingüística para renunciar inmediatamente a ella. Permanecerá toda su vida frente a una ambigüedad de expresión a la que terminará habituándose, con el sentimiento de que ocupa un lugar provisional en el idioma*” [*Girls must learn their sociolinguistic identity only to renounce it immediately. All of their lives girls will confront an ambiguity of expression to which they become accustomed, yet always feeling that they occupy a provisional place in language*] (Calero Vaquera & Lliteras Poncel, 2003, p. 40).

As any word search of *hombre/man* in the Complutense (Madrid) library catalog confirms, the generic use of *man* in recent book titles continues to be quite prevalent. The same is true for American textbooks as in Guy Deutscher’s *The Unfolding of Language, an Evolutionary Tour of Mankind’s Greatest Invention* published by Henry Holt in 2005 and on whose front cover a man alone is seen evolving.

Spanish-English glossaries of American Spanish language textbooks generally present only the masculine form of nouns and adjectives as in *abogado, alemán, alumno, bonito, bueno/ attorney, German, student, pretty, good* unless there is a separate word designating the female as in *actriz/actress*. Yet the feminine and not the masculine forms sometimes appear for low-status jobs such as *cajera/cashier* and *criada/servant*, thereby altering the established pattern of the masculine generic. Furthermore, when the third-person singular is used in a model sentence without a subject pronoun, as typically occurs in written and spoken Spanish, the English textbook translation is consistently masculine without any attempt to be more inclusive and translate *she* even occasionally: *Corrió rápido por el camino*. He ran rapidly along the road.

Anonymous proverbs in American textbooks are also consistently translated into the masculine even though by using *Quien* (Whoever) the Spanish actually establishes gender neutrality. Students are often so accustomed to this kind of translation that they do not even notice the inherent sex-bias. For example, the proverb *Quien no se atreve no pasa la mar* is usually translated as “He who does not dare (take chances) does not cross the sea.” It is important for professors to help students to become aware of these linguistic inequities, especially those who are themselves going to be language teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools.

For hundreds of years the literary activity of women has been circumscribed to storytelling, letter writing, and diaries that are typically private genres. Whenever women in the past violated the order of silence by taking up the pen to write poetry or novels, society rebuked them for acting unwomanly. The nineteenth-century Spanish author Rosalía de Castro eloquently

describes the creative impulse deep within her as a persistent, dark shadow, foreboding in its intensity and inspiring both awe and fear: “nin me abandonarás nunca/sombra que sempre me asombras” [*nor will you abandon me ever/shadow that haunts me forever*] (pg. 303). Indeed, Rosalía de Castro’s poetry was so good that people of the time said that her husband must be the true author. Despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, there are those today who willingly support this patently absurd theory.

However, it is critical to guide students to an understanding that classical literature, which may contain sexist language and/or gender stereotypes, cannot and should not be subject to the same linguistic and social content scrutiny as books published today. Literary and historical revisionism is not the objective of those who seek to eliminate sex-bias in language (Lakoff, 2004). Removing sexism is not about changing what was, because that, too, would be a misrepresentation of the truth. Instead, this effort must show what *is*, which includes the acknowledgement through language of the presence of women in society and their contributions in a variety of meaningful ways.

### Occupational Hazards and Name Calling

Although Spanish is proving to be quite flexible in creating feminine forms for occupational names that correspond with the already existing masculine terms, there has been some resistance among Spaniards with regard to using feminine forms like *física* to refer to a physicist who is a woman. Similarly, there have been objections to *química* (chemist, chemistry), *música* (musician, music) and others because, some say, such terms are ambiguous as the professional designation can get confused with the subject itself as referred to as a noun. Eulàlia Lledó, however, has

researched over eighty occupations that in the masculine can get confused with objects or things including: *monedero* (minter, moneybag) and *basurero* (garbage man, refuse heap), yet no one has protested their possible ambiguity that would negate the masculine form and point to the proposal of another name (Calero Vaquera & Lliteras Poncel, 2003, p. 47). However, some traditionalists believe that the feminization of certain titles or professions such as *arquitecta/architect* or *ingeniera/engineer* become negative because they claim that forms ending in *-a/* possess inferior connotations.

Despite such prejudicial assertions, many feminine versions of professions now appear in the *Diccionario de la real academia española* [*Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy*], including *arquitecta* and *ingeniera* as well as others like *abogada/attorney*, *jueza/judge*, and *médica/doctor*. Some Spaniards, though, still prefer *el/la médico/doctor*, which continues to appear in glossaries of American student textbooks in an attempt, perhaps, to make the masculine form a so-called gender-neutral word. Others, though, favor *la médica* for a female doctor, thus creating a new feminine counterpart to the masculine.

It is worth mentioning to students that in the case of some Spanish nouns referring to occupations, the words have experienced a double evolution as is the case with *la médica*, which formerly meant ‘the wife of the doctor’. Indeed most Spanish names of professions are losing their former meaning of ‘the wife of’ in the feminine form. As Spanish linguists indicate, “Nadie, en efecto, interpreta hoy *la fiscal*, *la jueza*, *la magistrada*, *la alcaldesa*, *la concejala*, etc. como la esposa del individuo que ejerce tales menesteres...” [*No one, in effect, understands today the prosecutor, the judge, the magistrate, the mayor, the town*

*councilor, etc. to mean the wife of those officials]* (Calero Vaquera & Lliteras Poncel, 2003, p. 13).

It is noteworthy, however, that professions or activities traditionally associated with women show greater resistance to maintaining the feminine noun ending in *-a/* with a masculine definite article for men. More typically the term changes to end in *-o/*. For example, *la enfermera/nurse* has become *el enfermero*, and not *el enfermera* as more males join the profession. Indeed, both in Spain and the United States, loss of prestige generally occurs only when males are referred to with female terms (Spender, 1980). It is an insult to call a male a *woman* but it is not an insult – in fact, it is sometimes a compliment – to call a female a *man* because of the positive connotations associated with the word *man*.

### Female Speak

Language reflects how a society thinks and perceives things. The talk of females in Spain and the United States is often labeled as vacuous gossip whereas there are no equivalent derogatory terms linked with male talk. Generally, the words of men are taken more seriously and frequently interpreted in more flattering ways. In addition, in an N.P.R. StoryCorps conversation about identity and transformation, August Faustino describes transitioning physically from being a woman to being a man:

Like certain situations are definitely easier for me. In my job, it's a lot easier for me to delegate things and tasks to employees... I don't feel like I have to do it in, like, a nice way or have to frame things... You know, and I always constantly thought about that before.

This needs to get done and I tell them and they do it. And I'm nice about

it, but that just kind of queues into, like the differences. (Ydstie, 2006)

### Dictionaries that Define

Dictionaries in all languages are very important because people often view them as cultural authorities of meaning and usage. But students need to be aware that not all dictionaries are the same. Some like *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* very obviously make an effort to avoid sexism and stereotypes while *The World Book Dictionary* very pointedly does not. In fact, *The World Book Dictionary* still defines anthropology as “the science of man that deals with his physical characteristics, with the origin and development of races and with the cultures, customs, and beliefs of mankind” (Algeo, 2003, p. 88). The *Diccionario del estudiante of the Real academia española [Student Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy]* defines *antropología [anthropology]* as “*estudio científico del ser humano en sus aspectos biológicos y sociales*” [*scientific study of the human being in his/her biological and social aspects*] but then the illustrative sentence uses generic *hombre [man]*: “*La paleontología y la antropología van arrojando luz sobre el hombre primitivo.*” [*Paleontology and anthropology are shedding light upon primitive man.*] (Seco, 2005, p. 105)

Certainly, definitions or sentences that dictionaries use to illustrate words can reinforce stereotypes about females and males. In a comparative analysis of the definitions of the following words, it becomes clear that in most current dictionaries in Spanish and English, females are not only more negatively depicted than males whose entries tend to be longer and more flattering, but they are also typically associated linguistically with their human failings much more consistently than males: *femenino/feminine* vs. *masculino/masculine*,

*hombre/man vs mujer/woman, niña/girl vs. niño/boy, varonil/manly vs. femenil/womanly.*

In English and Spanish dictionaries not only are there more words for males, but there are also more positive words. Despite the fact that women have been traditionally more monogamous than men, perhaps due to social constraints and inhibitions, there are many more words describing loose women in both languages compared to a fraction of that for men (Spender, 1980). Although there is a word to describe the hatred of women in English and Spanish, *misogynist/misógino* and there is also a term to designate the hatred of humanity, *misanthropist/misántropo*, there is no such specific term in either language to refer to the hatred of men.

### Conclusion

The time has come to liberate language more completely, so that females become both audible and visible. To maintain a linguistic status quo based on tradition or even expediency denies the logical objective of clear and accurate communication.

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Teachers at all levels should help to eliminate androcentric ideas in language that negatively influence the thinking of their students. English and Spanish are semantically rich enough to represent women and men equally.

As an examination of 1950's and 1960's Spanish language textbooks for American students will show, great strides have been made today in representing females in more balanced ways. No longer is there such an emphasis in model sentences, for example, on female physical attributes. In this country, major publishers of educational materials such as McGraw-Hill and Harcourt are making laudatory attempts to use nonsexist, non-stereotypical language in their textbooks. By replacing *man* with *humankind*, men lose nothing and women, finally, become linguistic partners. The author hopes that new students seeing the caption "Mr. and Mrs. Roberto Souza" under a picture in a U.S. textbook for second-language learners will challenge what such a statement implies in terms of identity (Molinsky & Bliss, 2002, p.66). They will, if professors help them to recognize linguistic discrimination.



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