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# **Sexist language in English and Spanish: a contrastive analysis and gender-inclusive alternatives**

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**Abstract:** this paper aims to provide a linguistically contrastive analysis between Spanish and English's gender configuration. The extent to which grammatical gender is affected by sexist social conventions, traditions, patterns and stigmas will also be evaluated. Gender will be conceived as a two-folded notion: on the one hand, a grammatical category, and on the other hand a social construct that has traditionally condemned women, not only by means of socially-excluding practices but also through the use of certain sexist linguistic strategies and formulas. Throughout the course of this research paper, instances of actual sexist linguistic usage in English and Spanish will be explained and exemplified. Solutions to these issues will also be suggested, from both a linguistic and social justice perspective, in an attempt to contribute to the construction of a feminist civilization that advocates for female rights, the deconstruction of masculinities and the widespread punishment of sexist linguistic practices.

**Key words:** gender morphology, gender in English, gender in Spanish, sexism in language, non-sexist language.

**Resumen:** el presente proyecto de investigación tiene como objetivo principal proporcionar un análisis lingüístico contrastivo entre el español y el inglés en términos de género gramatical. Se evaluará, además, la influencia de las convenciones, tradiciones, patrones y estigmas sexistas en el género gramatical. En todo caso, el género se tratará como una noción de doble vertiente: por un lado, como una categoría gramatical, y por otro como un constructo social que tradicionalmente ha condenado a las mujeres como colectivo, no sólo a través de prácticas socialmente excluyentes sino también mediante el uso de ciertas estrategias y fórmulas lingüísticamente sexistas. En el curso de este proyecto, se explicarán y ejemplificarán usos reales y vigentes de lenguaje sexista, tanto en inglés como en español. Asimismo, se sugerirán soluciones a dichos problemas, desde perspectivas lingüísticas y de justicia social, con el propósito de contribuir a la construcción de una sociedad feminista que luche por los derechos de las mujeres, la deconstrucción de la masculinidad y la penalización generalizada de prácticas lingüísticas sexistas.

**Palabras clave:** morfología de género, género en inglés, género en español, sexismo en el lenguaje, lenguaje no sexista.

## 1. Introduction

Language is a human construct established as a product of the transgenerational need to communicate with other individuals to accomplish a specific task or simply share ideas and express emotions. When it comes to verbal language, it is commonly believed that language change is a process that only took place in the past, which helped shape what contemporary individuals may call language nowadays. Nevertheless, “language evolution, including grammatical evolution, is certainly not something that happened in the past, it is ongoing today” (Steels, 2011). A good example of this is the way in which the use of inclusive language is positively emerging, especially in those languages that count on an international status and are spoken by hundreds of millions of users, such as English and Spanish. This evolution towards inclusion is related to social progress, which makes the connection between language and society rather explicit. By means of the use of the previously mentioned inclusive language, speakers, especially those belonging to marginalised communities such as LGBTQ+ individuals and women in general, challenge the discrimination and stereotypes against their personas that are actually transmitted by the socially-acceptable or standard use of the language (Sczesny, Formanowicz & Moser, 2016). This means that, whenever a language is being learnt either as a native or foreign language, the speaker subconsciously incorporates certain clichés, stereotypes or prejudices which are highly present in the target culture and normally uphold male cisheteronormativity (Pesce & Etchezahar, 2019), damaging the integrity of those whose personas are considered noncanonical. Over the course of the years, many linguistic solutions have been provided by language experts or users in an attempt to adapt the linguistic needs to the ongoing socio-political needs. Examples of this phenomenon are the attempt to include a new gender in the Spanish language, which includes the eradication of generic masculine in the language or the widespread use of gender-neutral words in English. Some critics claim that the only way to get rid of the intrinsic stereotypes languages are packed with is through the elimination of the androcentric structures that reign languages (Calero, 2002). Nonetheless, it is vital to bear in mind that this change or elimination usually takes place following or adapting the morphological patterns of each language. Therefore, in this research paper, inclusive language and its morphological evolution in both English and Spanish will be contrastively analysed, paying particular attention to both languages’ grammatical features. Furthermore, linguistic alternatives to fight sexist linguistic practices will be provided.

## **2. Morphological differences between English and Spanish: a focus on the gender notion**

When dealing with the notion of gender in linguistic discussions, most people will normally associate this concept with the grammatical subcategory that allows language users to construct appropriate sentences in which the different elements match each other based on a set of common features. In other words, gender “determines agreement with and selection of other words or grammatical forms” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1999). This means that in Romance languages such as Spanish, for instance, masculine or feminine nouns will be either pre-modified or postmodified by their respective adjectival counterparts, and this commonly extends to other grammatical elements, such as determiners. Although gender, as a grammatical term, has the same function and purpose in both English and Spanish, in the sense that it helps speakers to identify linguistic relations within a given context, it is manifested in opposite ways as a result of the existent morphological differences between these two languages. English is chiefly characterised by a weak gender system that does not rely on sexual features that define the living beings associated with the premodifier or with determiners.

In spite of these grammatical contrasts, there is a phenomenon that occurs in both languages equally. In the vast majority of cases, the notion of grammatical gender clashes with the concept of gender identity, resulting in the widespread verbal manifestation of detrimental images of female or LGBTQ+ individuals who find themselves exploring the deepest part of their identities. Many critics claim that women are still excluded from and underrepresented in the linguistic system, especially in the case of the Spanish language (Cabeza Pereiro & Rodríguez Barcia, 2018). The several attempts to find a solution for this problem have alarmed many scholars with a rather prescriptive vision of the use of grammar. In October 2021, the *Real Academia Española de la Lengua* (RAE), the highest authority dealing with the study of Spanish grammar and establishment of its principles, patterns and rules, posted a tweet in which inclusive language was demonised and characterised as a set of strategies employed to avoid the use of the generic masculine form, which apparently has no sexist implications. In this respect, grammar is perceived as a set of fixed conventions that should not be moulded at the speakers’ will. Linguists such as Calero (2002) challenge this prescriptive approach and states that no other linguistic debate has arisen stronger controversy as inclusive language has done lately. Nonetheless, before providing an insight into what could be done to give a voice to those

communities that are left apart by the predominant use of the language, it is important to understand how gender works in English and Spanish.

## **2.1. Gender morphology in the English language**

Gender morphology and its existence in English is still a frequent subject of debate among grammarians. In fact, grammarians such as Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002) stated some years ago that it does not constitute “an important grammatical category in English”. They claim that gender is rather associated with semantic behaviour in the language and constantly subjected to language change and evolution. Considering it is restricted to possessive and personal pronouns and that some remains are found in specific nouns, many linguists consider that there is not enough evidence to verify the existing status of gender in this Romanised Germanic language. This belief leads them “to argue about whether English has a gender system or not” (Audring, 2016). Most of the time, the lack of a solid gender system in English makes it hard to identify agreement between words belonging to different categories within a common context. Though narrow and questioned by grammarians, Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002) established four main classes in which gender phenomena can be classified based on the entities they refer to:

- **Masculine:** nouns and pronouns used by speakers to refer to male individuals or animals with biological features associated with the male sex. Examples of this are pronouns like ‘he’, ‘him’ and ‘his’ and nouns such as ‘boy’, ‘uncle’ or ‘salesman’.
- **Feminine:** nouns and pronouns language users make use of when including female individuals or animals in their utterances. Within this category, pronouns like ‘she’ and ‘her’ and nouns like ‘woman’, ‘mistress’ and ‘mother’ can be found.
- **Personal gender:** this category does not make explicit reference to a specific set of individuals or creatures. It rather focuses on addressing individuals in general independently of their sex and gender, and is commonly employed to refer to more than one of them. This class includes nouns such as ‘people’, ‘pupils’ or ‘citizens’.
- **Neuter gender:** in this class, these grammarians include nouns and pronouns utilised in everyday language to talk about inanimate identities and abstract concepts, including those nouns that designate emotions, sensations or beliefs. Instances of this category are ‘sadness’, ‘worship’ or ‘involvement’.

It should be noted that, given the blurriness of the gender system in the English language, drawing boundaries among the different gender classes can be confusing even for native speakers on some occasions. Curiously enough, gender is perhaps the grammatical / semantic feature that is most subjected to sociolinguistic phenomena. From a statistical standpoint, “gender has consistently been found to be an important influence on variation: statistical analysis reveals gender-linked patterns for sociolinguistic variables in many or most speech communities” (Cameron, 2006). This means that despite being considered a semantic feature, its usage in present-day English is highly dependent on language users’ linguistic behaviour, which involves culturally-instilled socio-political perceptions and ideals. Sometimes, using the few grammatical devices the English language has to offer in order to establish distinctions between individuals’ sexual or gender identity leads to controversy. For now, a focus on those devices will be provided, in an attempt to describe the lexical-grammatical properties of the gender manifestations in English. According to Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002), current English-speakers distinguish between male and female entities by means of four major specification processes, when necessary:

- Speakers make use of nouns that are totally opposite in form to distinguish between male and female individuals. Cameron (2006) has referred to gender as “an attribute of persons”, which leads to the conclusion that those nouns that refer, categorise, address and name people are clearly gender-marked. The most notorious instance of this gender-differentiation device is the terminology used to refer to family relations. In this case, individuals get a different name based on their gender in spite of having the same relationship with a common or given individual, as in the pairs: *aunt-uncle*, *grandmother-grandfather*, *nephew-niece*. Another common case is encountered in the use of titles, as their form and even phonology vary depending on the gender of the person that is being addressed at the moment of the utterance: *Mr – Mrs / Miss / Ms*. What is more, the use of titles has traditionally implied some degree of sexism that is still seen as part of the norm in English-speaking nations nowadays. Further expansion on this matter will be provided in following sections.

Cameron (2006) also insisted on the fact that personal names have undergone a gendering transformation over the course of the years. Although proper nouns do

not count on any morphological marker or on most occasions no male or female counterpart can be associated to them, the identification of a personal noun as either masculine or feminine comes from the existence of prominent social traditions and expectations that hold great strength among the members that constitute the speech community. In this way, when a name such as *Becky* comes up in any conversation, the listener will associate it to a female being whereas they will identify a person called *Tom* as a male individual.

- Derivational morphology is a frequently-used gender-differentiating device by language users too. On the one hand, most of the time when the suffixes *-er* and *-or* are attached at the end of nouns, male beings are denoted. On the other hand, words ending in the suffix *-ess* chiefly refer to female individuals. Examples of this are the following pairs: *actor-actress*, *priest-priestess*, *master-mistress*. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that most nouns ending in *-er* are gender neutral. In other words, they do not specify the gender or sex of the person being referred and therefore can be used for both male and female language users. This is evident in words like *singer*, *teacher* or *farmer*.
- Another linguistic method English speakers make use of in order to differentiate between masculine and feminine entities is by means of noun premodification. In other words, when language users utilise a gender-neutral word in English and they wish to make the gender of the person they are speaking about explicit, it is possible for them to signalise the gender through the usage of words such as *male*, *female*, *man* and *woman* as premodifiers of a given noun. Instances of this are *male nurse*, *female restaurateur*, *man friend* and *woman doctor*.

Flexible English grammar often allows speakers to use the word *lady* to designate female beings in the same way the previously-mentioned words do. Nevertheless, this word raises controversy and many speakers prefer not to use it to avoid misunderstandings and remain neutral. The reason behind the preference of *female* or *woman* over *lady* as premodifiers is the certainly sexist and class-conscious connotation it has acquired. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022), the word *lady* “was used initially as a form of address for a woman who had run of a household or who had charge over servants, and late



(*sic*) came to refer to a woman who held a high rank”. Therefore, it can be inferred that not all women can be classified as ladies in current-day society, most of them are not represented by this term since they do not hold such a high socioeconomic status that could make them feel comfortable and identified with this term. Despite this linguistic dispute, the word *lady* can still be used as a premodifier in words such as *lady clerk* or *lady author*.

- The fourth major process Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002) developed in their *Student Grammar of Spoken English* is somehow similar to the previous one. These linguists state that the words *man* and *woman* can be attached at the end of certain words and become gender-differentiating suffixes. Although there are gender-neutral alternatives that are gradually being frequently-used in current-day English, words such as *policeman* - *policewoman*, *juryman* - *jurywoman* and *sportsman* - *sportswoman* are still widely accepted by both speakers and grammarians. It should also be noted that these words count on a plural inflection when referring to a group comprised by either men or women, depending on the word used.

In some contexts, language users may wish to refer to gender-mixed groups, which means that the use of the suffixes *-man* and *-woman* would be incorrect, due to the fact that they would not represent the totality of the group constituents. For this reason, the use of the word *people* as a suffix would be preferred in this case, since it actually involves each one of the members of a given group despite the gender they identify with. Examples of this are *spokespeople* (as a gender-neutral alternative of both *spokesman* and *spokeswoman*) and *salespeople* (as a gender-neutral alternative of both *salesman* and *saleswoman*).

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, remains of grammatical gender in the English language are to be found in personal and possessive pronouns as well. This means that, whenever a specific context or situation requires speakers to distinguish between male, female or non-binary individuals, attention must be paid to the pronoun to be used in order to follow grammatical dictations and avoid potentially tense situations with others. Having said that, it must be noted that gender plays a pivotal role in third

person singular (mostly) and personal and possessive pronouns. So, when referring to those who identify themselves as men, the personal pronoun *he* must be used, as well as its corresponding object, possessive and reflexive pronominal counterparts and determiners (*him, his* and *himself*). The same rule applies to the feminine personal pronoun *she* and its corresponding counterparts *herself, hers* and *her*, which are used for both the object, possessive and reflexive pronominal reference, but in this case, it must be used when addressing or referring to female individuals.

<b>Pronoun / Determiner</b>	<b>Use</b>	<b>Example</b>
He, him, his, himself	Reference to male individuals and their belongings (both physical and abstract).	<i>I told you about <b>him</b>. <b>He</b> must be here since <b>his</b> car is parked in front of the entrance.</i>
She, her, hers, herself	Reference to female individuals and their belongings (both physical and abstract)	<i><b>She</b> is a great woman to deal with. <b>Her</b> attitude is quite promising but from my point of view, there are many aspects we must teach <b>her</b>.</i>

Figure 1: Chart exemplifying the use of gendered third person singular pronouns in English.

Notwithstanding this mechanical use of these personal pronouns and determiners, the third person plural personal pronoun *they* has become certainly controversial, especially throughout the course of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Traditionally, this plural pronoun has been used to make reference to gender-mixed groups, which is an advantage compared to other languages such as Spanish, in which the generic masculine form is quite controversial in most Spanish-speaking countries. This pronoun can also be utilised when the gender of the person being referred to remains unknown, especially with neutral indefinite pronouns such as *everybody* and *somebody*. Carter and McCarthy (2006) agreed on the fact that these pronouns must agree in number and gender with their antecedent but this rule is normally disregarded by speakers in colloquial contexts. Instead, they use plural pronouns and verbs with these two pronouns and others that are similar to them. However, due to the gender liberation movements that keep on arising nowadays,

speakers who believe that they do not fit in the male-female binary seek for ways to be represented in their mother tongue. In the case of English, the most widely accepted form is the use of the pronoun *they* and their object, possessive and reflexive pronominal counterparts, *them*, *theirs* and *themselves*.

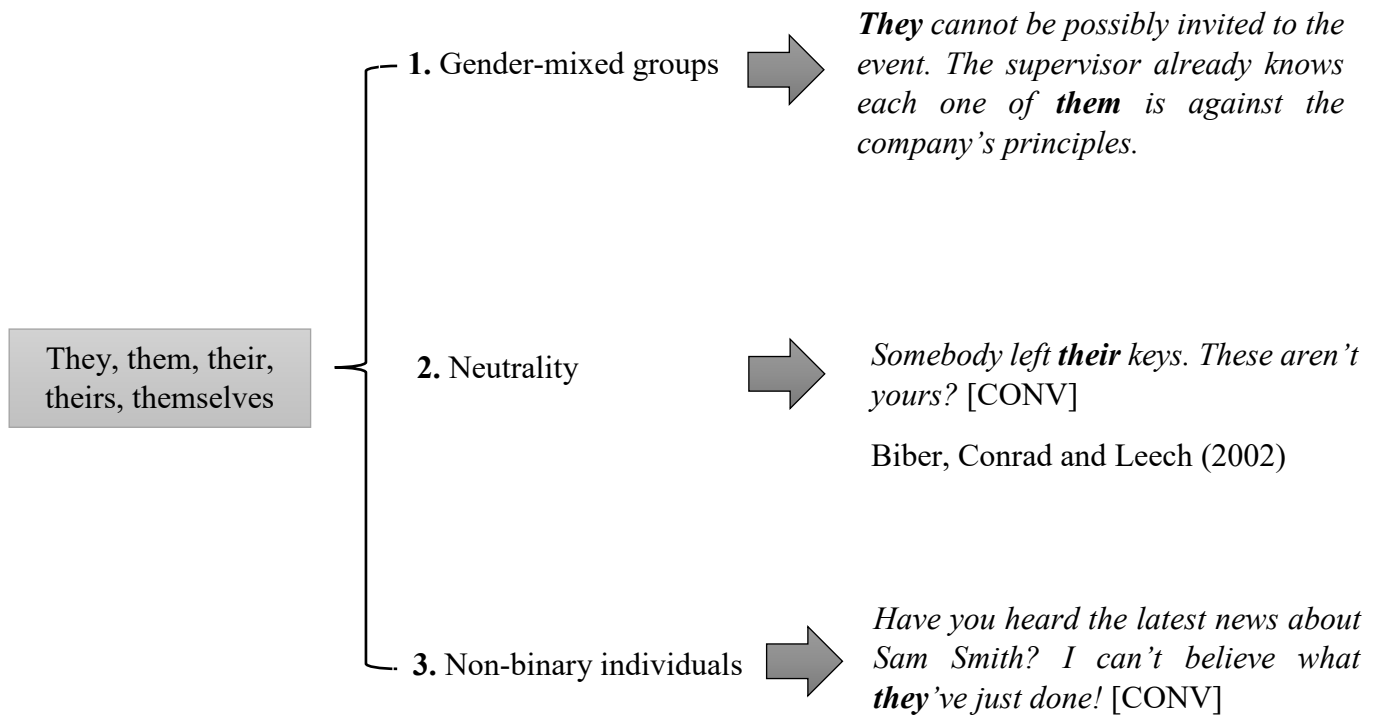


Figure 2: Figure exemplifying the different gendered uses of the third person plural pronoun *they* and its corresponding object and possessive forms in English.

There are other instances that demonstrate what peculiar extremes the English gender system can reach. Going back to the contributions made by Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002), the use of the personal pronoun *it* is grammatically correct when referring to what they call “borderline beings”. Within this new concept, entities such as babies and animals can be found. However, this use is restricted to the speaker’s lack of knowledge regarding the gender of the living being. Although grammarians’ dictations state that the use of the pronoun *it* is preferred whenever the speaker talks about an animal, most English language users allude to animals by means of the use of the gendered third person personal pronouns *he* and *she*. Some researchers find a justification for this use of

pronouns and support the idea that “personal involvement or a close relationship with the animal seems to be the most relevant factor in pronoun choice” (Teterina, 2012).

### **2.1.1. Gender morphology in Old English**

Still, when compared to Spanish, the English gender system is clearly brief and vague. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, gender morphology in English is quite narrow and it is limited to a few determiners, some pronouns and a restricted range of nouns. According to Teschner and Evans (2007), the concept of gender splits into two subcategories: natural and arbitrary gender. The first one makes reference to the intrinsic sexual characteristics of the living beings involved in language users’ utterances at a point in time whereas the second one is the mere association of a specific gender to a noun for grammatical reasons, without taking into consideration any biological feature. In modern-day English, it is only the notion of natural gender that is present in the actual use of the language. Arbitrary gender is present in Old English and in many other languages spoken in nowadays’ society, such as Spanish, for which further analysis will be provided in following sections. Nonetheless, these succinct gender patterns are actually a phenomenon that occurred in the last stages of English language evolution. This means that complex gender morphology was a present linguistic reality in previous periods but underwent a process of gender loss or decline “due to a general decay of inflectional endings and declensional classes” (Hogg & Denison, 2006).

Old English had a complex gender morphology network that classified nouns, pronouns and adjectives in three different categories: masculine, feminine and neuter. At the same time, these were influenced by the existence of the so-called declensions or declensional cases, similar to those found in languages such as Latin or Russian. Butterfield (2015) has defined declension as “the variation of the form of a noun, pronoun, or adjective, by which its grammatical case, number, and gender are identified”. This means that depending on the function they perform in a given sentence, their form changes in order to be adapted to the grammatical circumstances of the context itself and make it easier for the listener or reader to identify those words that function together and complement each other. This phenomenon is also known as grammatical concord and can actually make the comprehension or learning process of a language considerably harder, especially for modern-day English speakers, whose mother tongue shows a tendency or

preference towards gender neutrality and it is prominent in multiple societies where linguistic neutrality has been present long before it became a reality in many other allegedly socially-advanced nations, despite the controversy it may still arise (Sarrasin, Gabriel & Gygax, 2012).

Old English’s convoluted gender morphology started to dematerialise during the Middle English period in an attempt to avoid confusions, misunderstandings and complexities. It was throughout the course of this linguistic stage when the English language began to detach itself from this constant grammatical support gender morphology relied on. Baugh and Cable (2002) maintain that “the inflections of these gender-distinguishing words were reduced to a single ending for the adjective, and the fixed forms of *the, this, that, these, and those* for the demonstratives”, which demonstrates that the English tendency towards gender simplicity was a process that started centuries ago and was indirectly supported by its own language users. Taking the demonstrative *this* as an example, the abandonment of complicated gender forms in order to make language more neutral and representative can be perceived in Figure 3.

<i>Þes</i> ‘this’				
Singular				Plural
	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine	All genders
Nominative	þes	þis	þēos	þās
Accusative	þisne	þis	þās	þās
Genitive	þisses	þisses	þisse, þisre	þissa, þisra
Dative	þissum	þissum	þisse	þissum
Instrumental	þȳs	þȳs		

Figure 3: Chart illustrating the multiple case forms of the pronoun *Þes* in Old English (Mitchell & Robinson, 1964).

## 2.2. Gender morphology in Spanish

The Spanish language leans on a detailed, well-structured and exhaustive gender morphology system that differs from the one found in English in several aspects. The

main point of divergence is their respective closeness to biological sex. The remains of gender in English are chiefly connected to the notion of human sexual biology, connecting words directly with male and female beings based on the gender they identify with. Notwithstanding the existence of this phenomenon in Spanish, this language goes beyond and attributes gender suffixes to all nouns referring to inanimate objects or abstract concepts, which means that sometimes, gender, as a purely grammatical feature, is “semantically motivated but unrelated to biological sex” (Bassetti, 2014). Thus, gender arbitrariness is also highly present in Spanish linguistics and co-exists harmonically with the multiple manifestations of natural gender in the language.

Most of the time, both native speakers and learners associate Spanish gender formation with a fixed set of morphemes for each grammatical gender. For this reason and in order to shed light on the complexities behind this grammatical aspect in this language, the Real Academia Española de la Lengua (2010) reinforced the idea that it is simply most of the time that gender is manifested in some formal markers, which are usually interpreted as gender morphemes. This means that exceptions to the norm actually exist and are commonly disregarded by some language users. The most frequent case is the association of nouns ending in the vowel *-o* with masculine gender and those ending in *-a* with feminine gender. Nonetheless, linguists such as Zuluaga Jaramillo (2016) highlight that there is a wide range of nouns ending in other vowels, such as *-e* or *-i*, which are out of the canonical grammatical rule and fit in either the masculine or feminine gender category appropriately. In fact, these raise language teaching and learning difficulties, especially for those learners who seek mechanical rules or structures that make the learning process less challenging. In an attempt to synthesise the matter and provide simplified explanations or descriptions about it, Kattán-Ibarra and Pountain (1997) classify gender-marking morphemes in groups according to the gender they are commonly associated with:

- Without making explicit reference to concrete morphemes, it is important to highlight that those nouns that design biologically-masculine entities get masculine grammatical morphemes or modifiers and the same applies for biologically female beings. In this way, *mujer* [woman], for instance, is modified by adjectives with feminine morphemes as it refers to an actual woman.

- Generally, words ending in *-o*, *-or*, *-aje*, *-men* and *-gen* are masculine. However, as mentioned before, exceptions do not constitute a marginalised class, as words such as *moto* [motorbike], *mano* [hand] or *imagen* [image] are feminine in spite of ending in gender morphemes that are usually related to masculine grammatical gender.
- In the same way these previously mentioned morphemes are normally associated with masculine words, there are some morphemes which most of the time correspond with feminine nouns. That is the case of *-a*, *-ad*, *-ed*, *-ud*, *-ión*, *-umbre*, and *-ie*. Nevertheless, words such as *trauma* [trauma] or *tema* [topic] are actually masculine.

Although it can be assumed that nouns are either masculine or feminine, there is in fact a class of nouns that can be either of them, which leads to variations of meaning (Kattán-Ibarra & Pountain, 1997). Since these words reject any kind of gender inflection (Rodríguez Díez, 2005), they are characterised as being invariable or unchanging. Whenever these words are premodified by a determiner, the lexical meaning instantly changes, which therefore makes words more or less appropriate in a given communicative exchange depending on the context.

Noun	Gender	Definition according to the specific gender
<i>Cura</i>	Masculine	Priest in a Catholic church.
	Feminine	Cure or remedy to fight a given disease or injury.
<i>Pendiente</i>	Masculine	Piece of jewellery that is usually worn in the ear.
	Feminine	Sloppy area of land.
	Masculine	Cosmic shiny object that flies around the sun and can be seen in the sky from a great distance.

<i>Cometa</i>	Feminine	Frame tied in a string or rope that can be flown by a human being whenever it is windy.
<i>Corte</i>	Masculine	Injure provoked by a sharp utensil.
	Feminine	Group of people that constitute the King or Queen's family (Royal Family) or usually accompany them.

Figure 4: Chart giving examples of invariable nouns in Spanish and their respective meaning based on their contextual gender.

Another important category is comprised by the so-called epicene nouns. According to Tapia-Arizmendi and Romani (2012), the idiosyncrasy behind this noun category is the fact that in spite of referring to animate entities, they adopt the properties of an intrinsic grammatical gender (either masculine or feminine) to refer to both male and female beings. What is more, they present neither formal nor syntactic variations. On the one hand, within the feminine nouns belonging to this group of words, *persona* [person], *rata* [rat] and *cría* [baby / offspring] can be found. On the other hand, *personaje* [character], *águila* [eagle] and *tiburón* [shark] are considered intrinsically masculine. As can be seen, many of them correspond with nominal designations of animals. Since no feminine form exists in the language, the only possible solution to clarify the gender of a given animal is to postmodify these nouns using the words *macho* [male] and *hembra* [female], as in *la perdiz macho / la perdiz hembra* [male partridge / female partridge].

What makes Spanish gender morphology considerably more difficult to tackle is the fact that it is not simply restricted to nouns. In other words, adjectives, determiners and pronouns premodifying or postmodifying them must establish a relation of grammatical concord with the noun(s) they are modifying. This is normally achieved by means of the adoption of the correct gender morphemes or the selection of the right lexical form, especially when it comes to pronouns and determiners. From a syntactic point of view, the relation of gender concord between nouns and their modifiers can also be defined as the reiteration of inflectional morphemes throughout a given sentence (Romero & Morón Usandivaras, 2022). Furthermore, it contributes to the establishment of an internal relation between different word classes, based on the existent grammatical gender



and noun equality between the noun and its modifiers (Gili i Gaya, 1943). Hence, the continuous repetition of the gender morpheme provides the reader or listener with the necessary information so as to match ideas or concepts within a common context. The following graphic illustrates how this phenomenon is actually manifested in the Spanish language:

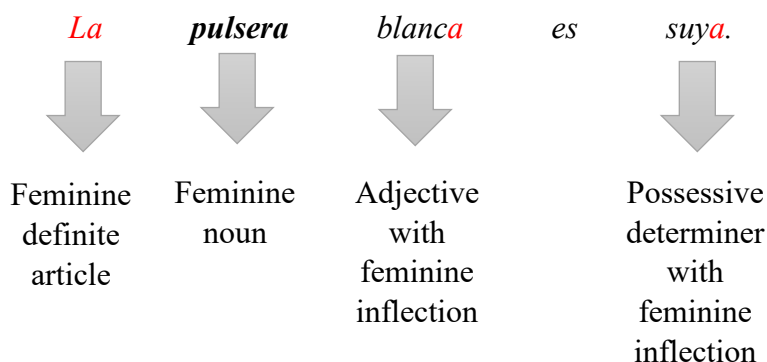


Figure 5: Graphic illustrating gender concord in Spanish.

In this example, the head of the noun phrase is *pulsera* [bracelet], whose grammatical gender influences the gender inflection of the modifiers and the subject complement. This is the reason why, in order for the speaker to be able to identify the relationship of grammatical concord between the different elements constituting the utterance maintain with the given noun, they must change in one of two ways. The first of these is the change in their form as a whole; this is the case of the definite article *la*, which is one of the forms the English article ‘the’ [fem] can have in Spanish. Secondly, speakers will simply attach feminine morphemes at the end of the word that allows it, based on their grammatical and semantic nature; this is the case of the adjective phrase *blanca*, which means ‘white’ [fem] and the possessive pronoun *suya*, which is the Spanish equivalent of ‘hers’ [fem].

Nonetheless, the problem comes with the morphological form to use when referring to gender-mixed groups. Kattán-Ibarra and Pountain (1997) stated that “the masculine plural is used if the group refers to or involves one or more masculine nouns”. This means that even when a feminine noun is part of the subject, the modifiers will adopt the plural masculine form since it is the only device the Spanish language can make use of to refer to both genders at the same time. For instance, given the subject *Juan y María*, if the speaker wished to explicitly mention a feature that both of them share, they would

have to do it by means of the masculine form of an adjective phrase performing the function of a subject complement, as in: *Juan y María son introvertidos* [Juan and María are introverted]. However, this does not apply to those adjectives which maintain the same form despite the gender of the noun they modify, such as *cobarde* [coward] or *increíble* [incredible]. Besides the generic masculine in adjectives, there are many other instances in which the plural masculine form of a given term is utilised in the language to designate groups constituted by both male and female beings. That is the case of *alumnos* [students] or *ciudadanos* [citizens]. Taking the first word as an example, in an academic context, it would be grammatically correct for a speaker to refer to a group of students comprised by men and women using the word *alumnos*. Still, there is a huge controversy revolving around this matter in modern-day Spanish society.

Despite the fact that Spanish is unarguably an extremely gendered language based on a two-folded binary system used to mark it morphologically, there are some neuter gender remains as a result of the evolution from Iberian vulgar Latin towards modern-day Spanish. However, this category is not as vast as its masculine or feminine counterparts, as “semblances of the neuter gender have remained in the system of demonstratives” (Papadopoulos, 2019). Thus, it could be said that it is tightly restricted to specific word classes and nouns which are actually not a part of that limitation. Besides demonstratives, possessives and relatives, the neuter definite article *lo* and some personal pronouns are also included within this classification. What is more, it is vital to bear in mind that “neuter elements refer to propositions, facts or general ideas expressible as sentences, never to specific nouns” (Kattán-Ibarra & Pountain, 1997). A good example of this use is: *Eso que dices no es real* [What you say is not real].

### **3. Language as a representation of socially-instilled misogyny: is language actually sexist?**

In order to provide an answer to the question posed it is important to understand the difference between Saussure’s semiotic terms sign, signified and signifier. Professionals of the linguistic field have been scrutinising this theory for decades and many of them have reached a common conclusion while others have come up with innovative perceptions about the core idea. Notwithstanding the vast number of different semiotic interpretations that co-exist, most of the linguists that have started arguments on this matter agree on the fact that the main function of the linguistic sign is “to carry and

to communicate meaning about a reality outside itself” (Susen, 2018). This means that no word is purely and exclusively encapsulated within the linguistic sphere, on the contrary, it is rather extrapolated to the social context most of the time. Depending on the circumstances in which the word is uttered by a language user, it may acquire connotations that lie outside the lexical domain and move around a socially-constructed linguistic environment.

As a matter of fact, the extrapolation of apparently purely lexical items to social contexts is utterly related to the notions of signifier and signified. These concepts, defined by Hussy (1998) as “material actuality” and “social actuality” respectively, play a relevant role in the development of mental images and associations of a given concept. In other words, whenever a speaker of any language hears a specific word, an image accompanied by an idea that determines social behaviour and reaction towards the embodiment of the concept itself comes with it. For instance, when the word ‘woman’ is articulated by a given language user, the addressee’s brain automatically generates a series of ideas related to what being a woman is and visual mental images that help to illustrate their perception of the context. These “mental constructs”, as Susen (2018) calls them, are in fact deeply influenced by the social circumstances speakers are surrounded by. Hence, language becomes a product of social alienation and power-based structures’ ruling desire.

Language and discourse are deeply influenced by power. It is through the use of language that dominant socio-political classes become generally accepted and made hegemonic by those who do not hold a privileged position. In this way, ruling institutions and structures gradually implement social distinctions that have consequences in the use of language. As Simpson and Mayr (2010) defined it, “institutional discourse is therefore characterised by asymmetrical speaking rights and obligations”. Freedom of speech has traditionally been considered a privilege determined by a hierarchical social system in which citizens may ascend or not depending on their wealth, occupation, dynasty and even gender. Hence, in a misogynist civilisation that has historically been utterly governed by cis-heterosexual white men, it is no surprise that language and discourse have suffered the influence of these non-equal practices, in an attempt to expand their dominion over marginalised classes and oppress them by imposing their ideals. Although the situation is a much better one nowadays, gender equality is still far from happening. Lakoff (1975) made clear that social and linguistic change go hand in hand and thus “social change must precede lexical change”. In short, for society to undergo a positively

notorious metamorphosis, language use and its implications must promote equal values and must be utilised to safeguard all citizens' integrity and welfare, despite their gender, sexual orientation or ethnical group.

Many could claim that language is simply a product of the human need to communicate and therefore social standards do not interfere. However, it has been proved throughout the years that human beings shape language use based on a set of common experiences and standpoints. Holmes (2004) discussed this issue and talked about the way in which terms such as 'woman' or 'mistress' have acquired demeaning sexual connotations that are in fact far away from their honourable sociolinguistic roots. Another frequently-used living proof of sexist language is the existent choice between Mrs., Miss and Ms to indicate the civil status of any woman. Something similar happens with the Spanish word *señorita* [young lady], which also makes reference to a young woman's legal status and sometimes may imply a certain degree of sexualisation depending on the context. What this demonstrates is that marital status as well as other politically and socially-tainted aspects influence the social construction of female gender through language (Pauwels, 1987, 1998; Chiles, 2003). This example, among many others, reinforces the idea that "women's inferior social identity is constructed [...] through the semantic distinctions encoded in the lexicon and grammar of the language" (Holmes, 2004).

Cabeza Pereiro and Rodríguez Barcia (2018) have claimed that women representation in the language is still subjected to three main ongoing processes: male dependence, nullification in relation to male dominant figures and stereotyped identity construction. Sexism in language is responsible for the wide spread of stereotypes, which are in fact exaggerated and subsequently recognised by an important part of the population who believe them to be true (Lakoff, 1975). The persistent reliability stereotypes irradiate is a product of specific traditions societies cannot run away from yet since their presence in civilisation still holds enough power to keep the population's thought as homogenous as possible. It clearly has consequences in language learning and acquisition processes. From an early age, any language subject who is constantly exposed to a specific language (be it either English or Spanish, in this case), conventions, standards and stereotypes from the culture in which the language is spoken are indirectly incorporated (Pesce & Etchezahar, 2019). In the case of sexist language, these inherently-instilled discourses and practices reflect male supremacy over women (Campagnoli,

2014). This is still present in Spanish society, in which the word *zorra* ['bitch' or 'slut', but also 'female fox'] is chiefly used to make reference to women who live their sexual life freely, normally not having sexual intercourse with a single love partner. Nevertheless, it has acquired such negative connotations that this word is frequently employed to undermine women's value for given aspects and damage their reputation. Curiously enough, when a man follows the same path of liberty, he is frequently praised and perceived as an ideal to reach. Holmes (2004) reached the conclusion that "women are constructed as inferior, second-class human beings through the categories and associations of specific English words available to name women as a group". The only plausible method to eradicate this type of linguistic behaviour is to modify social structures completely, but that still remains a utopia.

The way the language is used by speakers also determines their social privilege. Language usage is indirectly employed as a mechanism to establish a dichotomy between male and female beings and promote standards of masculinity and femininity among these. In this case, sexism in language is not detrimental for women only, but also for men, who struggle to reach "a powerful ideal of masculinity that is not always or completely experienced by individual men" (Kiesling, 2004). As a social group, men are undoubtedly more privileged and powerful than women, and this is manifested in their respective socially-assimilated linguistic behaviour. The use of courtesy and politeness linguistic formulas, good and correct grammar and interest in a wide range of topics are usually coded feminine (Livia, 2004). If a woman made use of swear words in her regular speech, talked loudly and employed typically masculine lexical items, she would be said to be "too masculine for a 'lady'" (Lakoff, 1975). In this case, the question "what is being a lady or a woman?" may come up, but it is hardly possible to give it an answer without making use of tremendously sexist stereotypes. Something similar occurs the other way around. During his speech, if a man showed himself especially vulnerable, employed strictly-correct grammar and paid special attention to the use of politeness in his speech, he would be considered feminine and even his sexuality would come into question (Lakoff, 1975). Livia (2004) has stated that for men to prove their masculinity by means of their speech, they "are required to know how to swear, tell dirty jokes and speak familiarly of the workings of their car engine". Gendered language usage barriers demonstrate that both men and women with no position of power are simply prisoners of

a system whose ultimate purpose is to segregate them into genders and attribute fake canonical ideals based on gendered utopic perceptions.

One of the main differences between hegemonic masculine and feminine speech is the way in which authority is exercised. Most of the time, it is men who try to take control of the flow of the conversation through regular interruptions and overlaps, especially when communicating with women. Coates (1986) defined overlaps as “instances of slight over-anticipation by the next speaker: instead of beginning to speak immediately following current speakers’ turn, next speaker begins to speak at the very end of current speakers’ turn, overlapping the last word”. So, taking into consideration that these devices are mostly used by men in mixed-sex conversational exchanges and it is the other speaker who normally lowers their voice, “the speaker who falls silent is usually a woman” (Coates, 1986). Thus, male beings again prove their superiority by patronising women and placing themselves in an upper position in the patriarchal social hierarchy. Hence, women’s knowledge and capabilities are left in the background. In addition, they are provided with no opportunity to share their beliefs freely as most white cis-heterosexual men do, due to the fact that their ideas are often thought to be shallow, trivial and even a product of unenlightening education. A study conducted by Zimmerman and West (1975) makes evident that women are more likely to interrupt other women. However, most men choose not to challenge other men’s authority. Perhaps, this phenomenon comes from the traditionally spread belief that women are considered inferior and thoroughly dependent on masculine figures to perform certain kinds of actions. Women are expected to remain silent and act in a submissive way, whereas men, who have traditionally been given complete social control, defend their voice and masculinity by means of verbal and physical violent acts of aggression.

There is a certain degree of femininity revolving around discourse patterns that “[structure] how women speak and how they are supposed to speak” (Lakoff, 1975). Considering contemporary capitalistic society has imposed idealistic patterns regarding how individuals must speak according to their gender, it is no surprise that men feel that their socially-inflicted masculinity is at stake whenever their speech features match with those that have traditionally been considered feminine. As a matter of fact, it is masculinity that places white male cis-heterosexual individuals in a higher position in the social hierarchy, providing them with more systematic privileges than any average woman might count on from the very moment she is born. Therefore, gender cannot be

considered in isolation in either grammatical or cognitive studies, as something exclusively linguistic or strictly psychological. Both aspects must merge and be contemplated as a combination of “performances and bodies as part of an organised, patterned gender Discourse” (Kiesling, 2004).

What is more striking is the fact that many critics claim that social sexism cannot be eradicated through the correct use of a widely representative language (Díaz Hormigo, 2007). From this standpoint, language remains insignificant when compared to the seriousness of the ongoing gender issues. In this sense, language is regarded as a weak tool to get rid of gendered conventions, patterns and traditions present in contemporary society. However, other linguists such as Cabeza Pereiro and Rodríguez Barcia (2018) bring a glimmer of hope to this discussion and insist on looking for the origin of the discursive and social construction of what is understood as feminine. According to these authors, finding the linguistic roots may provide a solution to explain what has brought to both sexes to place men and women in specific gendered places, situations and discourses. Words that have sexist connotations or linguistic structures that do not include women, such as generic masculine terms, “have negative effects of individuals’ beliefs in women’s ability to perform a job, and have a negative impact on women’s own feelings of pride, importance and power” (Ehrlich, 2004). Thus, changing exclusive language structures for inclusive ones, which actually take female presence into consideration, could mean the beginning of the metamorphosis of the present social male-dominated structures into inclusive ones.

Language is not sexist in its nature, since it originated in order to attain the correct and successful establishment of (non-)verbal conversational exchanges between individuals in spite of their gender. The way in which human beings use it, however, is inherently sexist, mainly because it frequently implies undermining female individuals as well as the supremacy and superiority of male individuals. Men and their obsession with the hegemonic masculine ideal have led humanity to shape verbal language in a way in which biological men are seen as the centre of the multiple ideas, conceptions, viewpoints and beliefs transmitted through the use of language. Thus, it could be said that male beings have actually designed a language usage system that positions men as ideals to reach. Spender (1980) claims that “it has been the dominant group – in this case males – who have created the world, invented the categories, constructed sexism and its justification and developed a language trap which is in their interest”. So, men are responsible for the

creation of a gendered vision of the world that is still inherited from previous to the newest generations. Furthermore, this is present in both Spanish and English grammar, where certain linguistic devices, structures and lexical items denote negative images and preconceptions of marginalised or vulnerable communities, in this case, women. Litosseliti (2006) listed and classified some of these in groups in which gender bias becomes explicit:

- **Sex specification:** it is common in gendered words. For instance, ‘actress’ as the female counterpart of ‘actor’. The same happens in Spanish between *actriz* [actress] and *actor* [actor].
- **Gratuitous modifiers:** these modifiers “draw attention to sex as difference” (Simpson & Mayr, 2010). The main purpose of gratuitous modifiers is to make gender difference more noticeable, by highlighting the gender of the performer of a given action that is socially attributed to a specific gender. Examples of this are ‘woman lawyer’ or ‘lady driver’. Something similar, though not exactly the same, occurs in Spanish, when the expression *fútbol femenino* [female football] is used.
- **Lexical gaps and under-lexicalisation:** they are frequent in “complementary sets of gendered terms” (Simpson & Mayr, 2010). However, terms for women usually have sexual connotations that the male counterparts do not count on. Another case in which these phenomena openly occur in language is in terms with sexual connotations that are only attributed to a specific gender, such as the Spanish word *maricón* (when used as a synonym for ‘coward’ when referring to a man), or ‘fishwife’.
- **Semantic derogation:** this phenomenon has been explained in previous paragraphs. It occurs when words or terms used to refer to or describe women gradually acquire a negative connotation over the course of time. They normally imply sexual connotations, as in ‘madam’ or *señorita* [young lady].



- **Asymmetrically gendered language items:** language items are considered asymmetrical when no male counterpart exists that denotes or divulges exactly the same idea. This is the case of the use of ‘Mrs’ and ‘Ms’ to describe a woman’s marital status. As mentioned before, no masculine form exists to mention either a married or single man exclusively.
- **Connotations of language items:** these normally take for granted hegemonic gendered behaviour, attitudes and preferences for male and female beings based on their biological sex and according to traditionally-transmitted unattainable ideals. For instance, while the term ‘girl’ is the neutral form to refer to grown-up female teenagers, the word ‘weathergirl’ has now become offensive and even implies “a lack of maturity in the subject” (Simpson & Mayr, 2010), normally based on a socially feminine behaviour. Something similar takes place in the Spanish language between the terms *señora* [lady’, used to talk about elderly women in most cases] and *señora de la limpieza* [cleaning lady]. In fact, no male form exists for this last concept, proving that language items encapsulate socially-spread ideologies and preconceptions of beings based on their gender.

### 3.1. Normalised sexist discourse in everyday life

In spite of the rise of awareness regarding the ongoing feminist struggle, speakers of any language still reproduce sexist discourses verbally when manifesting their ideas in public. What is more surprising is the fact that this may occur both consciously and unconsciously, since there are many sayings, beliefs and linguistic expressions that have traditionally been understood as neutral. Nevertheless, these denigrate women’s identities and classify them as second-class citizens. As a consequence of their dominion of language, “individuals construct changeable, flexible identities by drawing on linguistic and other semiotic resources that they associate with social categories defined by roles or personas” (Bean & Johnstone, 2004). Thus, language acts as a tool to disseminate misconceptions regarding women and their capabilities, creating fake standardised profiles that diminish their power and increase their submissiveness to the patriarchal system.

One of the most common instances in which this becomes apparent is in the frequent use of sexist humour. For Woodzicka and Ford (2010), sexist humour is chiefly comprised by gendered sexist stereotypes, beliefs, notions, attitudes and reactions. Nonetheless, humour may be positive depending on the circumstances in which its undertones are being exploited. Sometimes, it can be utilised in order to contribute to pleasure, seduction and even social cohesion. Kanyemba and Naidu (2022) claimed that “what makes it sexist is the power dynamics of a particular context including the ridicule, mockery and sarcasm implied by the joke”. In other words, it is the purpose of the joke itself, normally played by a male individual, what actually determines whether it is negative or positive for women’s reputation and social welfare. Sexist humour spread conceptions of women in which they are described as submissive beings whose ultimate purpose is to make men’s desire come true. The female ideal this humour constructs is essentially a domesticised woman who must remain silent and agree with whatever her husband says. So, it is clear that the prominence of these stereotypes in contemporary society influences the way women speak and behave and how men believe they should do so. Kanyemba and Naidu (2022) have already put emphasis on this idea, as they have stated that “the marginality and powerlessness of women implied by sexist humour is reflected in both the ways women are expected to behave and the ways in which they are spoken of”. Mallett, Ford and Woodzicka (2016) reflect upon this matter and reaches the conclusion that male individuals’ ideas and conceptions regarding the ongoing sexist crisis are influenced by a humoristic preconception that leads them to believe that the situation is not as serious as women say it is. This establishes an objectified perception of women in which their personas, as well as their achievements, are despised. The following chart provides examples of stereotypical sentences and sayings that are still pretty common in both Spanish and English:

Sexist stereotypical sentences and sayings in Spanish	Sexist stereotypical sentences and sayings in English
1. <i>Los hombres no lloran</i> [boys / men do not cry].	1. Man up!
2. <i>Mujer tenía que ser</i> [this is not surprising, it’s a woman’s doing].	2. Grow a pair!
3. <i>Pórtate como un hombre</i> [behave like a man would do].	3. She was asking for it.

<p>4. <i>La mujer y la sardina, ¡a la cocina!</i> [women and sardines belong in the kitchen].</p>	<p>4. Fight like a girl.</p>
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Figure 6: Chart giving examples of some sexist stereotypical sayings in both Spanish and English.

The negative effects of sexism in language become more prominent when a relevant authority is behind the oral or written reproduction of sexist discourses. It is commonly known that many of these come from politicians who try to subvert Female MPs political efforts and achievements. However, even grammar or linguistic authorities accept and promote sexist terminology that actually result detrimental for the proper construction of 21<sup>st</sup> century female integrity and identity. The Spanish RAE, the highest grammar authority that stands for the defence of Spanish language correctness, defines the expression *sexo débil* [weaker sex] as the set of human beings constituted by all women (Real Academia Española, (2021). It is true that this institution simply acts as a mirror of what Spanish speakers usually avail themselves of when utilising the language, but recognising these language uses on worldwide-accessible portals is giving these discourses the power to shape and distort an entire nation’s vision on female communities.

The media also play an important role, where, if used properly, they could be really helpful to eradicate the alarming sexist discourse situation that is becoming gradually more prominent despite the many regulations, laws and campaigns that governmental authorities keep on implementing. Months ago, the Panamanian newspaper *La Prensa* posted a piece of news on their website about the Argentinian singer and songwriter Tini’s love life (Torres Trómpiz, 2022). However, what is most striking is not the fact that they made her personal life an easy way to get economic benefit from, but the headline of the item of news itself. The directors of this influential newspaper dared to publish a piece of news with the following headline, despite the rapid increase of verbal and physical aggressions to women: *Tini, la ex novia de Sebastián Yatra, le declara su amor a este jugador del Mundial* [Tini, Sebastián Yatra’s ex, declares her love to this World Cup’s player]. Not only does this have a strong influence over citizens’ cosmovision, but it also contributes to the reinforcement of the patriarchal belief that women are subjected to male entities. As He and Zhang (2018) have manifested, “the dominant position of male language reflects the main position of men in the society, and

the accessory position of female language is the reflection of subordinate position of women”. By subordinating a successful woman’s achievements to a male figure and reducing her acknowledgement to her emotional life, fake conceptions of femininity support and strengthen male dominance.

#### **4. Possible linguistic solutions to eradicate sexist language use in English and Spanish**

As stated above, linguistic change must be accompanied by a prominent and notorious socio-political structural transformation. Language plays an important role when shaping an entire society’s cosmovision and in the spread of ideas and creation of conceptions regarding a specific community. However, since a drastic change in the social, political and economic systems is not likely to happen, solutions can be applied on an individual level. In most democratic societies, citizens have enough power and influence to implement a concrete linguistic habit. That is the case of the Spanish word *croqueta* [croquette], pronounced wrongly by many native speakers of Spanish as \*/kokréta/ instead of /krokéta/. In English, something similar happens when youngsters mispronounce the brand H&M. Many of them aspirate the initial /h/ sound, as if it were the initial sound of a whole word rather the letter itself. So, they end up articulating the following sequence of sounds /'heitʃən 'ɛm/.

It is still hard and perhaps challenging for linguistic authorities and institutions to acknowledge language evolution, which implies a transformation not only in the morphological features of languages, but also in the semantic properties of the different lexical items. Vasallo (2021) has claimed that there is an overriding and latent patriarchal, capitalist, racist and snobbish socio-political structure behind the imposition of language correctness over the users’ needs. In other words, forcing speakers to make use of obsolete structures that do not match with their human and speech needs proves that power and authority are essential components to control and keep influence over a whole population’s linguistic practices. Hence, the power to eradicate sexist terminology and speech lies in individual speakers, who should attempt to use the correct lexical items when referring to female individuals. In this way, female beings’ integrity is not disregarded and thus, their identities can be empowered, after receiving a traditional

capitalistic misogynistic treatment from governmental authorities and politically-influenced societies.

#### **4.1. Common solutions for both English and Spanish sexist use of the language**

Despite belonging to different linguistic families or groups, in both Spanish and English common sexist linguistic practices and structures can be commonly encountered in colloquial and even formal speech nowadays. From a purely linguistic standpoint, this similarity lies in the fact that both languages find their origins in the same root: the Indo-European language. According to Violi (1987), Proto Indo-European simply distinguished between animate and inanimate gender at first. However, over the course of its evolution, the gender notion in this language came to differentiate between masculine and feminine beings, making use of specific morphology to establish a noticeable gender dichotomy. Considering Indo-European is somehow the root of most languages spoken in the European continent, this morphological change was inherited by these languages, and proof of this is the fact that all of them count on a gender morphology system to some extent.

##### **4.1.1. Eradication of generic masculine forms**

One of the main linguistic issues that is considered quite controversial currently is the use of generic masculine forms to refer to both male and female individuals. As a matter of fact, utilising the generic masculine to address a gender-mixed group of individuals or simply to make reference to human beings in general “possesses a male bias” (Gastil, 1990). Some linguists claim that the existence of this linguistic feature is simply a grammatical phenomenon with no correlation with any social context. Nevertheless, others believe that the spread use of generic masculine has to do with the higher and more notorious presence of men in every single field of public life in comparison with women, who tend to be left apart or be even absent in many contexts (Márquez Guerrero, 2016). So, using and promoting generic masculine to refer to male beings as well as female beings is a way to contribute to female demotion in the androcentric social hierarchy and “actively encourage its perpetuation” (Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986).

Trying to find plausible and realistic solutions for this issue is devastatingly hard, not only from the grammatical or morphological point of view but also from the speakers' perspective. Violi (1987) states that this gendered differentiation is found in most languages, which can make the task considerably arduous. An ideal change must contemplate the morphological configuration of the target language, not to make it hard or misleading for speakers to use and spread it. In addition, it has to pursue inclusion and fight against institutional and prescriptive traditionalism. The Spanish RAE defended (and still does) the use of generic masculine in this Romance language, for the reason that it has always been like this in the language. However, languages must be perceived as mere mirrors of social issues and needs. This means that these have to be reflected in linguistic phenomena and evolve to make language a tool to promote equality and justice, not a weapon to segregate human communities and establish detrimental and unreachable masculinities.

On the one hand, English grammatical and morphological features are flexible enough to get rid of generic masculine words and forms without extra efforts on the part of the speaker. However, in spite of how gender-neutral the English language may seem to be, it still retains generic masculine structures within its lexical-semantic configuration. The only positive side regarding this issue is that those structures are gradually falling into disuse. This could be regarded as one of the major effects of the rise of gender awareness in English-speaking countries. In the specific case of the United Kingdom, it "had closed 78% of its gender gap, ranking 22nd out of 146 countries" (Waitzman, 2023). This means that gender awareness has risen among UK citizens and more individuals are progressively approving gender-inclusive practices, which also involves non-sexist language use. Even the British authorities promote this non-sexist linguistic exercise, by means of its usage in its campaigns and by devoting a specific page to it on their official websites. What is more, the authorities could be indirectly challenging the mass media, which have traditionally been dominated by men who have controlled what the language consumers read and listen to (Silveira, 1980). This often implies female degradation and marginalisation, which minimises the value of their personas and capacities. As a matter of fact, the use of non-sexist language by Governmental Institutions gives citizens a glimmer of hope in a long-awaited inclusive and heartening future where citizens are considered as equals in spite of their gender, ethnicity or sexual preferences. Although an impressive progress has been made over the course of the recent years, the rigorous

establishment of a steady gender-inclusive society demands both individual and institutional efforts that are still far from being made universally.

The use of the pronoun *he* and the noun *man* as generic terms means a serious obstacle in the path towards the eradication of sexist language. These words have historically been utilised to make reference to both male and female identities in concepts in which linguistic economy is sought. However, most women claim they are being asymmetrically represented in those discourses, as their identities are not explicitly manifested in these speech practices. As Silveira stated back in 1980, “it becomes difficult for us [women] to identify with the people being talked about”. Moreover, masculine-gendered words are normally employed to strengthen male-biased discourses as well as utopic masculinities. Thus, other terms that encompass all human beings in spite of their gender should substitute generic-masculine words and gain prominence against these. In fact, a study conducted by Gabriel and Mellenberger (2004) proves that generic masculine terms are normally misinterpreted as male-exclusive. Not surprisingly, this assumption is mostly made by cis-heterosexual men, who in general regulate language institutions as well as individual linguistic practices. From a radical standpoint, authors like Silveira (1980) support the absolute “suppression of male imagery” caused by uttering generic-masculine terms such as *man* or the pronoun *he*. What this chiefly implies is the imposition of terms that empower female identities exclusively in discourse, such as the use of the word *fem* as generic. Nonetheless, if equal recognition in speech is set as the main objective, the most suitable solution to fight masculine generics is the promotion of words that actually contemplate the inclusion of all genders. So, whenever a speaker tries to allude to gender-mixed groups, they can make use of the *he/she* doublet. Nonetheless, it presents two major problems: firstly, gender is not strictly restricted to masculine and female beings. There has been a substantial rise of individuals identifying as non-binary, which has to be understood as “an umbrella term for any gender (or lack of gender) that would not be adequately represented by an either/or choice between ‘man’ or ‘woman’” (Titman, 2014). In other words, non-binary beings embody a defiant reaction towards gender binaries. They conceive gender binaries as a repression of human nature and understand gender as a socio-political construct imposed to suppress female identities and position masculine figures in a higher position than women in the socially-established hierarchy. So, when using the *he/she* doublet either in oral or in written contexts, it would be necessary to include the pronoun *they* as a sign of respect for non-binary individuals.

Secondly, and as a consequence of the previously mentioned issue, mentioning the three genders individually would make speech repetitive and exhausting for the person who has to articulate it. Thus, the pronoun *they* can be used as a generic alternative, thanks to the neutrality this pronoun presents. Other gender-neutral words that can be used are *people*, *individuals*, *human beings*, *humanity* and many others, depending on the context.

Besides the use of the pronoun *they* as a solution to include all members in a gender-mixed group or the use of impersonal or passive constructions, one of the main alternatives the English language has to offer in order to prevent the use of masculine generics is the so-called gender neutralisation. This phenomenon is defined as the process by which “gender-marked terms are replaced by gender-indefinite nouns” (Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser, 2016). An illustrative example of this is the substitution of the suffix *-man* by means of the suffix *-person* or *-people* in words designating occupations, e.g. *spokesperson* instead of *spokesman*. Other lexical items can be employed instead in order to attain gender neutrality, e.g. *firefighter* instead of *fireman*. Another source of controversy is, as mentioned in previous sections, the use of titles. The following lines specify the main sexist linguistic phenomena in English, as stated by the European Parliament (2018). In addition, they give more detailed alternatives to prevent male-bias from growing and create safe spaces in which everyone is welcome, included and represented:

- **Avoid the generic use of ‘man’ and its derivatives:** Humanity (for mankind), staff (for manpower), an English person (for Englishman) / the English or English people (for Englishmen), synthetic or artificial (for man-made), political leaders (for statesmen).
- **Rephrasing and use of the *he or she* doublet and generic *he/his*:** In order to avoid gender bias, rephrasing is sometimes necessary in order not to make speech repetitive through the constant use of the *he or she* doublet. Other alternatives are: use of plural forms, “students must submit their essays tomorrow”, passive constructions, “essays must be submitted tomorrow” and pronoun omission and/or substitution “students must submit the essays tomorrow”.
- **Generic use of *they/them*:** as mentioned before, these pronouns can be employed in order to designate male, female and non-binary individuals equally. It



contributes to linguistic economy as it contributes to the avoidance of repetition in speech. Compare: “any student who completes his or her homework on time will be rewarded” and “any student who completes their homework on time will be rewarded”.

- **Titles:** speakers should attempt to avoid the use of titles such as *Miss* and *Mrs* in order not to take part in the chauvinistic linguistic net present in the latent sexism in these female titles. As an alternative, language users can simply employ *Ms*, which remains more neutral about women’s marital status and does not narrow the value of their personas to an institutional attachment to a male figure.
- **Use of gender-neutral job titles:** there are some titles that do not need any kind of alternative since they are neutral by nature, such as *nurse*, *teacher*, *editor*, *ambassador*, *administrator*, *flight attendant*, *engineer*, *mayor* or *professor*. Thus, they are intrinsically gender-inclusive and no alternative is contemplated since male, female and non-binary beings should feel represented and identified with these terms. Notwithstanding the prominent neutrality in the English language, there are some others that can actually be modified and substituted by others. Examples of this are: *police officer* instead of *policeman* or *policewoman*, *head teacher* instead of *headmaster* or *headmistress* and *business person / executive* instead of *businessman* or *businesswoman*. There are other job titles whose generic term is masculine, which means that women are not utterly represented when used. Thus, terms such as *author* and *actor* that count on a feminine counterpart, though less used, should be substituted and utilised as a gender-inclusive alternative. These are *authoress* and *actress* respectively.

On the other hand, gender-inclusive alternatives in Spanish are considerably less likely to become accepted and firmly established in Spanish grammar. There exist two chief reasons behind this statement: first and foremost, the Spanish morphological system is not as flexible as the English one, especially considering the fact that it is based on gender binarism, which predetermines any entity’s grammatical gender. Secondly, a prescriptive tendency is pretty much present among Spanish language linguistic institutions and scholars. Many of them, including the frequently-mentioned RAE,

overtly manifest their full disapproval for generic masculine eradication movements. From a prescriptive point of view, these are unnecessary and constitute a violation to the arbitrary morphological gender conventions and patterns contemplated in the Spanish Grammar (Real Academia Española de la Lengua, 2006). However, if grammatical gender were purely arbitrary, it would not be used to classify sexed beings, including humans. Hence, language reflects extralinguistic concepts or entities that constitute a relevant part of language users' material experience by means of grammatical gender. For this reason, language and its structures cannot be characterised as neutral and purely arbitrary, as many of the realities expressed through it are determined and influenced by external contexts that speakers are exposed to (Rodríguez Ponce, 2022).

On the contrary, other scholars have adopted opposite approaches, characterised by the perception of language as evolutionary and adjustable to the demands of the prevailing social circumstances. For instance, Jiménez Rodrigo, Román Onsaló and Traverso Cortés (2011) state that language should be used to pave the way towards the achievement of gender equality, given its power to shape social realities beyond the linguistic realm. One of the central issues regarding generic masculine in Spanish is the fact that, as stated in previous sections, it is used to make reference to gender-mixed congregations of people. However, over the last few years, many generic masculine abolitionist movements and campaigns among Spanish-speaking citizens and researchers have emerged. Along with the misrepresentation masculine generics involve, supporters of these movements also claim that utilising the masculine gender as generic entails the evocation of patriarchal and idealistic conceptions of masculinity not all individuals feel identified with. A study conducted by Perissinotto in 1983 already proved how a vast number of speakers associate masculine generic terms to features historically and socially attributed to hegemonic male figures. When participants were asked to interpret the sentence *El hombre mata para comer* [The man kills in order to eat / Man kills in order to eat], most of them interpreted the term *hombre* [man] as referring to men in general. As a consequence, they established a direct relation between this noun and traditionally-transmitted male imagery, which presents men as strong, fierce, masculine and untameable.

An important factor to bear in mind is that generic masculine does not affect all nouns in Spanish (Aliaga Jiménez, 2018). When referring to human beings, the generic masculine rule does not apply for nouns with no sexual distinction, e.g. *ciudadanía*

[citizens], *víctima* [victim], *población* [population]. In fact, these reduce the repetitiveness that the constant repetition of determiners would provoke in discourse. For instance, it is preferred to say *el alumnado* [the students], which is an all-inclusive generic masculine rather than *los y las alumnas* [the students], which can be perceived as redundant in speech. Furthermore, general words can modify some masculine generic nouns to conform an inclusive alternative. This becomes explicit when words such as *grupo de* [group of] and *comunidad de* [community of] premodify some nouns, e.g. *Grupo de artistas* [group of artists] instead of *los artistas* [the artists], which may only evoke male imagery. Bengoechea (2003) provided many alternatives to generic masculine that avoid redundancy and repetitiveness in discourse too. Examples of these are:

<b>Masculine generic form</b>	<b>Suggested inclusive alternative</b>
Los médicos / enfermeros Los y las médicos/as / enfermeros/as	El personal sanitario
Los mayores	Las personas mayores
Los aficionados al baloncesto Los y las aficionados/as al baloncesto	La comunidad de aficionados al baloncesto
Amigos Amigos y amigas	Amistades
Los habitantes de Gernika Los y las habitantes de Gernika	La población de Gernika

Figure 7: Chart providing gender-neutral alternatives for masculine generic forms in Spanish.

In order to tackle the imposition and prominence of those generic masculine nouns that actually deprive women and non-binary individuals of linguistic representation, many alternatives have been suggested. The multiple solutions provided can be displayed on a gradient scale based on their degree of radicality. Rodríguez Ponce (2022) affirms that one of the ways to prevent linguistically sexist practices is the promotion and establishment of mechanisms that allow speakers to refer and give visibility to those individuals that take part and are alluded in discourse, taking into account a generic masculine ambiguous character. From this standpoint, generic masculine use has been influenced by speakers themselves, who are considered

responsible for the contemporary association between generic masculine and traditional patriarchy. Márquez Guerrero (2013) openly supports this perception and states that the ideal solution would be to move forward to an androgynous linguistic status in which no gender specification is strictly required.

Nevertheless, this solution remains in a rather idealistic dimension, since it would be not possible to eradicate Spanish masculine generic without modifying some morphosyntactic features currently present in the language. Another problem it presents is the fact that it could also be perceived as a patriarchal strategy to obstruct the way towards female liberation (Aliaga Jiménez & Burgos, 2002), as it does not entirely entail the inclusion of female beings from a social point of view. Social aspects, as mentioned on multiple occasions, interfere in language development as they materialise a community's views on specific matters and groups. An example of this deficient alternative would be the use of masculine generic pronouns when background knowledge is provided. Apparently, it does not lead to confusion but it still does not give women the recognition they have been struggling to be granted. As an example, if a speaker makes use of the third person masculine generic plural pronoun *ellos* [they] to refer to *Victor y María* [Victor and Maria] in the sentence *Ellos son hermanos* [they are siblings], any speaker that is not fully familiar with the context being talked about would think of male figures rather than gender-mixed entities. Still, this remains the most neutral option if no morphological transformation is pursued. It must be highlighted that these constructions in Spanish do not constitute a major source of controversy, since they are tremendously specific, both syntactically and semantically (Rodríguez Ponce, 2022).

More radical alternatives contemplate a drastic change in the morphological configuration of the Spanish language. In other words, this series of solutions imply the creation and/or alteration of some of the morphological characteristics present in the language. Any Spanish speaker would instantly think about the use of the suffix *-e* as a gender-neutral alternative to gender binaries. This proposal is articulated around the employment of the vowel *-e* in order to neutralise adjectives, nouns and pronouns. In fact, as Ramírez-Gelbes and Gelormini-Lezama (2020) have pointed out, it finds its foundations in words that already function like this in the language, such as *cantante* [singer], *estudiante* [student] and *estridente* [strident]. In this way, by means of the deletion of current gender suffixes and its substitution by the gender-neutral suffix *-e*, not only are both male and female beings represented in the language but also non-binary

individuals. Notwithstanding the three-fold representativeness behind these forms, they can also be used to address and refer to non-binary individuals in isolation. This gender-neutral use of these forms becomes clearer when the three genders are explicitly marked in both oral and written discourse. So, if the three genders are to be mentioned in discourse separately so as to avoid misunderstanding and/or confusion, this alternative suggests doing it as *ellos/ellas/elles* [they, in its masculine, feminine and neuter variants in Spanish]. Despite the inclusion this three-fold strategy irradiates, it is strongly politicised in Spanish society. While most left-wing allies and parties find this linguistic alternative pretty useful to fight linguistic sexism, those who support right-wing ideologies and parties tend to condemn its use by means of public humiliation, sarcastic references to other politicians' inclusive language use or simply the open manifestation of their disapproval. The Equality Spanish Minister Irene Montero has been subjected to harsh public and political criticism due to her frequent use of inclusive language (El Independiente, 2021). In most of her meetings, she openly and nonchalantly employs gender-inclusive linguistic structures in her discourse. From her point of view, using masculine generics politicises language and reinforces current prominent androcentric structures. The only linguistic method to entirely give female and non-binary individuals voice and rights is the correct and respectful use of new morphological forms that envisage and guarantee their inclusion. Not all kinds of words suffer this transformation in Spanish, since there are ungendered word classes, which include verbs and adverbs. Nonetheless, nouns, adjectives, pronouns, articles and participles count on gender distinction, which means that their binary nature would be altered. Examples of this process are provided in the following chart:

Type of word	Transformation process		Final result
Noun	<i>Hijo/a</i> [son]	<i>Hijo</i> > * <i>hij-</i> + - <i>e(s)</i>	<i>Hije(s)</i>
Adjective	<i>Guapo/a</i> [handsome/ beautiful]	<i>Guapo</i> > * <i>guap-</i> + - <i>e(s)</i>	<i>Guape(s)</i>
Pronoun	Él / ella [He / she]	<i>Ella</i> > * <i>Ell-</i> + - <i>e(s)</i>	<i>Elle(s)</i>
Article	<i>Lo / la</i> [The]	<i>Lo</i> > * <i>L-</i> + - <i>e(s)</i>	<i>Le(s)</i>

Participle	<i>Impresionado/a</i> [Impressed]	<i>Impresionado &gt;</i> <i>*Impresionad- +</i> <i>-e(s)</i>	<i>Impresionade(s)</i>
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Figure 8: Chart illustrating gender neutralisation in gendered Spanish word classes.

#### 4.1.2. Linguistic transformation from the point of view of social justice

Transforming current morphological configuration into a gender-inclusive set of patterns is not an easy task to accomplish, especially on the speakers' side. On occasions, trying to find a suitable alternative for generic masculine forms is a challenging task to accomplish. Mills (2008) asserts that "a simple replacing of the noun with another seeming non-sexist one is not always possible" and sometimes, "they sound very 'forced'". The most extreme and still inconceivable non-linguistic solution to eradicate sexism in language would imply a radical change of present-day male-biased social structures. Since it is not possible to apply such a drastic change in contemporary society, feminist education and public condemnation seem to be the only options left to at least diminish the negative effects of patriarchy on social organisation and development. In order for feminist, all-inclusive education to be attained, Webb, Allen and Walker (2002) identify six basic principles that must be followed:

**1. Reformation of the relationship between professor and student:** teachers and professors are perceived as role models by their students most of the time, thanks to the adequate demonstration of their cognitive capacities. From this point of view, more responsibilities are given to students, who are free to ask questions and intervene in classroom discussions through coordinated dialogue. Language should act as a channel to convey new ideas and represent all the individuals taking part in the classroom environment, which means that linguistic prescriptiveness supposes an obstacle in the path towards gender equality and inclusion.

**2. Empowerment:** classrooms must be power-shared spaces governed by the principles of democracy. Teachers should encourage students to build own points of view regarding ongoing social issues and incite them to defend their perspective with authority and reassurance. What is more, teachers must acknowledge students' control over their own ideology and grant them enough power to share it freely, always bearing in mind mutual respect and the recognition of diversity as a present-day

reality. This implies the deconstruction of the traditional institutional hierarchy that has placed teachers on top, making them irrevocable and authoritarian figures in the educational sphere.

**3. Building community:** before planning each session, teachers must set the establishment of a broad educational community, which entails the creation of strong bonds between teachers and students. Thus, learning becomes collective and a shared feeling of protectiveness arises among students. They acknowledge all of them are after a common objective: the gradual creation of a feminist social structure powerful enough to tear patriarchy down.

**4. Privileging the individual voice as a way of knowing:** oral and written manifestations of discourse should be promoted as a way for students to recognise the value of their own voice. This allows them to become undeterred advocates of feminism. Depriving students of the right to express their ideas would have serious effects on their confidence to defend their thoughts publicly, as they might have the feeling that their ideology is not as valid and coherent as others’.

**5. Respect for diversity of personal experience:** from a feminist standpoint, personal circumstances ought to be respected, appreciated and understood. This involves empathy and the enhancement of critical thinking. Personal experiences provide multiple standpoints and in fact no aspect of social life is purely objective, as multiple conclusions can be extracted even from small details. Truth becomes diverse, and students are now in charge to construct and defend its value.

**6. Challenging traditional views:** teachers are responsible for deconstructing traditionally-promoted patriarchal visions and practices revolving around social organisation. What is more, they must share and understand the foundations of feminist ideologies in order for students to take part in this net of feminist education.

Although educational institutions have a tremendous impact on the blossoming and infliction of concrete ideologies, capitalistic mass media also influence individuals’ speech habits. Thanks to the contemporary development of democracy, all citizens of most first-world countries are allowed to share their standpoints on any aspect subjected to discussion. This has led to the appearance of biased information portals, which shape

language according to their socio-political views. Another case of frequently-used sexist language is constituted by jokes and sayings, which can be widely imitated and reproduced if uttered by a person who holds high social status. Humour is often characterised by its unintentional nature, which is typically used as an excuse to normalise the chauvinism involved in the joke and become broadly assimilated and accepted by speakers. As Ford (2000) stated, “sexist humor creates an implicit norm of tolerance of sexism in that immediate context”. In other words, misconceptions of femininity can solidify in speakers’ minds and consequently they permit and spread these ideas instead of denouncing them. If linguistic sexism eradication is set as one of the main purposes to attain gender equality in nowadays’ society, it is up to the citizens to take action and reduce influential authoritarian sexist figures’ influence and power. According to García Meseguer (1994), the most effective way to fight linguistic sexism is by means of public condemnation, providing enough proof and analysis before accusing in vain.

Another problematic source of linguistic sexism, and perhaps one of the most difficult ones to handle, is pornography. The adult film industry has been objectifying and patronising female integrity for decades. Women are depicted as male-controlled beings at the disposal of masculine sexual impulses. Most of the time, women are forced to maintain sexual intercourse in these motion pictures, making male supremacy explicit. Female sexual desire is restricted, silenced and subjected to masculine willingness. This vision has serious consequences in the perception and judgement of sexual aggression issues. It often occurs that “women who charge men with sexual abuse are not believed”, due to the fact that “the pornographic view of them is: they want it; they all want it” (MacKinnon, 1987). Therefore, not only are women objectified and hypersexualised, but also treated as innate deceivers. Following this line, it could be said that “pornography is a mechanism that can be wielded to deny women their equal right to free speech, social respect, and personal security, and thus subordinates and silences them” (Shrage, 2021). Female hypersexualisation is reflected in language as well.

Discourses reproduced by women in pornography are often characterised by infantilised lexical items and tone and a very limited lexicon. What is more, nationalities, ethnicities, physical features, occupations and even family relations are fetishized and identified as orgasmic stimuli. Regulating pornographic markets is an extremely difficult task to do, especially due to the fact that it has become incredibly capitalised and its consumption has become a habit for many individuals, especially for cis-heterosexual



men. Considering porn illegalisation is hardly possible due to the huge economic benefit it generates annually, the only remaining solution to put an end to the chauvinistic perceptions it evokes should revolve around “a revision of the obscenity standard or change imposed from directly inside the industry by the continuing unionization” (Mellish, 2018). To put it in other words, constant revision of pornographic material is essential to provide realistic contents and eliminate femininity stereotypes. In addition, adult film production enterprises must safeguard workers’ integrity, making sure their voices are heard and what they are performing does not suppose a violation of their willingness, sexual consent and respectability.

## **5. Conclusion**

Language is not simply constituted by a fixed and homogeneous set of rules and patterns that dictate its functioning. In fact, these linguistic conventions are shaped, dictated and controlled by speakers themselves, whose socio-political perceptions affect semantic and morphological development. In the case of English and Spanish, despite the existent dissimilarities between both morphological configurations, both languages present common morphological, semantic and lexical constructions “where women are sexualised or trivialised in conventional usage and where they are represented as a deviation from a male norm” (Mills, 2008). In order to fight and eradicate these linguistic practices, many solutions have been provided, both from a linguistic and a social justice point of view. Linguistically speaking, women are misrepresented, especially when masculine generics are used to refer to a gender-mixed community or when the traditional use of a given noun, adjective or construction involves a patronising connotation that result detrimental for women’s social and institutional safety and protection. From a social standpoint, the most effective solutions to fight linguistic sexism are, on the one hand, the inclusion of feminist ideologies in the educational curriculum and on the other hand, public denouncement of sexist linguistic practices. What is more, it is important to bear in mind that capitalism also plays an important role in the preachment of misleading conceptions of femininity. Examples of this can be found in mass media and the film industry, especially in pornography, where female workers are forced to hypersexualise their physical and psychological image, as well as their linguistic behaviour. Considering utter ban is an extremely hard task to accomplish and could be regarded as a violation of freedom of speech rights by some supporters of these practices, the only plausible solution

is to impose a thorough internal and external revision of those materials to be published, including the language resources used, in order to safeguard female integrity and diminish the powerful effect of sexist stereotypes in present-day society.

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