

Gender-fair language (GFL) in the academic writing of pre-service teachers of Spanish

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The article analyses the use of GFL in a corpus of 187 academic texts created by pre-service teachers. It reveals how participants reached a balance between the recommendations of GFL guides and the standard normative grammar included in the school curriculum. The study shows that although future teachers are aware of GFL and sensitive to discrimination, they used a combination of the generic masculine with GFL recommendations when deemed necessary. This has great pedagogical potential for the Spanish classroom, together with the potential to transform language and society.

Keywords: Gender-Fair Language, academic writing, teacher training, sexist language

Introduction

Sexist language has been defined as ‘words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between women and men or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender’ (Parks and Robertson 1998, 455). Research has shown that not using gender-fair language (GFL) fosters women’s invisibility and lack of role recognition, and thus GFL is a powerful tool when fighting discrimination as it forces social change through language use (Gabriel, Gygas and Kuhn 2018; Koeser, Kuhn and Sczesny 2015; Stout and Dasgupta 2011). There is a growing body of literature that recognizes successes resulting from the implementation of GFL policies (Bengoechea 2011; Lomotey 2015; Nissen 2013; Winter and Pauwels 2006a). However, these policies must still overcome several obstacles (Lomotey 2018; Maldonado García 2015; Nissen 2002). The use of GFL

is generally a personal decision that is effortful, and which can be enhanced through the reading of texts with gender-fair forms modelling this aspect of communication (Koeser and Sczesny 2014; Sczesny, Moser and Wood 2015).

In the case of Spanish, the democratization of GFL forms has been impaired by the Spanish Royal Academy of the Spanish Language (RAE) and the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language (ASALE). These institutions exert an enormous influence over the approximately 600 million people who speak Spanish as a first or second language. From these institutions' perspective, lexical or morphological forms suggested as alternatives to sexist language are unnecessary and redundant (Real Academia Española 2009). This rejection has contributed to the RAE being branded a patriarchal institution composed of men who oppose gender-fair language alternatives due to ideological bias rather than on objective linguistic grounds (Peris Vidal 2013, 189).

One of the main tools in fighting sexist language is the production of GFL guides (Guerrero Salazar 2007). In Spain, GFL guides have been produced by the public authorities, and universities, as institutions based on egalitarian principles, advocate their implementation. Consequently, GFL-form recommendations have recently been published for use in higher education (Guerrero Salazar 2013). As a result of those actions, the data on the use of GFL in universities and its influence on students and lectures shows a positive trend in some societies and for some languages (Garnham et al. 2012; Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012). From a longitudinal perspective, an increase in the use of GFL has been reported (Nissen 2013), and there are positive results on the acceptance of some GFL forms among university students, such as the use of @ to refer to both sexes or, in the Spanish case, a preference for epicene nouns (Bengoechea and Simón 2014). For English-, German- and French-speakers, research carried out by Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax (2012) establishes that students with a negative attitude

towards women experience greater difficulties in recognising sexist language and adopt a more hostile position towards GFL.

Despite these advances, several studies indicate that there is still a need to raise awareness of GFL among university students. Patev et al. (2019) studied the connection between everyday GFL and the factors that may impede use of it; results showed that speakers found it easier to use every day GFL if their exposure to it was greater. The study also concluded that potential barriers impeding use of GFL, for example, the fact that it is difficult to use, and it lacks clear norms or tradition within certain speakers' communities, have their origin in prejudice towards gender equality. Noteworthy reasons given by students for not using GFL are the principle of economy of language and respect for the rules set down by the RAE (Jiménez Rodrigo, Román Onsalo and Traverso Cortés 2011). Another oft-repeated reason is that GFL allegedly impairs comprehensibility, even though recent studies show that GFL does not have a negative influence on readability (Friedrich and Heise 2019).

Gender Fair Language Strategies

Like other grammatical gender languages, Spanish tends to use the masculine form as the generic form; a morphological procedure that uses the masculine option to refer to a group regardless of its gender composition. This is considered to be one of the main challenges for GFL, as the RAE's grammar rules considers the masculine form to be a non-marked neutral and reject every possible alternative which explicitly refers to the presence of women (Real Academia Española 2009, 88).

This phenomenon, typical of grammatical gender languages, is one of the main obstacles to making women visible through language. Studies of English, French and German associate the use of the generic masculine with negative attitudes towards women (Parks and Robertson 2004; Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012; Swim, Mallett and Stangor

2004). Along the same lines, research has confirmed the link between the grammatical gender of occupations and their social perception (Budziszewska, Hansen, and Bilewicz 2014; Formanowicz et al. 2013; Gabriel et al. 2008; Horvath et al. 2016). Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser affirm that:

When masculine forms are used it is women who are seen as less prototypical category exemplars, it is women who feel less adequate or are less preferred as job candidates, and it is women who profit from GFL (2016, 7-8).

Various studies have confirmed that the use of forms alternative to the generic masculine, such as pair forms (*inventores e inventoras*) or collective names (*estudiantado*), strengthens an egalitarian representation of women (Chatard et al. 2005; Gabriel 2008; Gabriel, Gygax and Kuhn 2018). For example, although having been associated with male representation, the use of collective names has been shown to favour a gender-fair interpretation of the term (Irmén and Roßberg 2004). However, Gabriel, Gygax and Kuhn (2018, 851) note that ‘neutralization efforts might result in contributing to reducing the visibility of gender biases but not in correcting or mitigating them’. Notwithstanding this last remark, we believe that, as an alternative to the use of the generic masculine, pair forms and collective nouns can also be considered the most frequent mechanisms used to make women visible or, at least, avoid sexism,

Briz Gómez (2011) offers a taxonomy of alternatives to the use of the generic masculine selected according to the following criteria: “norma grammatical, coherencia textual, contexto situacional y ámbitos o genéricos discursivos” (Briz 2011, 21). For the purposes of this study, these mechanisms have been divided into two groups (Table 1). The first group includes those normative mechanisms whose use is expressly accepted, such as the slash (Real Academia Española 2010, 426) and the use of pairs forms when there is ambiguity or linguistic sexism (Real Academia Española 2009, 87), together with mechanisms that the academic sources do not consider to be incorrect. The second group

comprises those mechanisms which have clearly been flagged as incorrect by the academic sources, for example, the use of the at symbol (Real Academia Española 2017) or the use of the double article (Real Academia Española 2009; 2017). The second group also covers those uses in which the generic masculine is sufficiently clear so as include individuals from one and the other sex (Real Academia Española 2009, 87) following Briz's recommendations (2011, 41-44). The latter, which do not adhere to the grammatical standard, are accordingly rejected by educated speakers.

[table 1 to appear about here]

According the RAE, the use of slashes indicates the existence of two or more possible options (Real Academia Española 2017); whereas using pair forms, even if could be considered an avoidable circumlocution (Real Academia Española 2009), is not explicitly marked as incorrect.

Gender Fair Language and Education

This dichotomy is especially relevant for primary education teachers. As linguistic models for their students, they cannot ignore the standard norm, but they must not forget that school is an important sphere in the fight against sexist language and, consequently, the discriminatory attitudes it represents. Winter and Pauwels define the role of GFL education as '[...] not a mere external agent of implementation but central to the raising of awareness or provoking an "Initiating Trajectory"' (2016b, 171). Thus, a teacher's day-to-day work is paramount in achieving GFL. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers transmit and raise awareness of the principles of respect and equality through use of GFL in the classroom, and specifically, by using the GFL alternatives already employed by educated speakers

Research has proved that gender differences and the conceptualization of the characteristics attributed to each sex appear between 18 and 24 months, and gender

stereotypes are consolidated at the age of three (Lévy et al. 2016; Martin and Ruble 2010). Thus, boys' and girls' perception of the roles of men and women, particularly the way of naming and describing those roles, is already established before children start primary education and that perception is reinforced by their everyday experience. Given the importance of primary education, many studies have been conducted on the exposure of children and teenagers to GFL at school. These studies conclude that the use of GFL helps to make women visible (Chatard, Guimond, and Martinot 2005; Liben, Bigler and Krogh 2002; Vervecken et al. 2015). A study on how gender-fair job descriptions impact children's perceptions and interest regarding traditionally male occupations was developed by Vervecken, Hannover and Wolter (2013). Children who were asked the question 'who can succeed in this occupation?' using a pair form (for example, *inventores e inventoras*) presented a higher degree of gender equality than those who were asked the same question using the generic masculine. Another study showed that when asked about famous people doing certain occupations, more examples of women were given when pair forms were used than in cases where the same questions were asked using the generic masculine (Vervecken and Hannover 2015).

Gender stereotypes and the use of GFL in textbooks have also been widely studied: Mills and Mustapha (2015) provided a general overview; Bengoechea and Simón (2010), Bernabé-Villodre and Martínez-Bello (2018), and Manassero and Vázquez, (2002) studied the Spanish case; Gouvias and Alexopoulos (2018), and Kostas (2019), the Greek; Lee and Collins (2009), among others, studied the English language; and Moser and Hannover (2014), the German. These authors claim that there is still a long way to go in terms of gender equality and they agree on the importance of choosing non-sexist resources which use GFL, while highlighting the role of teachers in that choice.

According to Sczesny et al. (2016), textbook authors should receive training in and be aware of GFL policies.

Teachers are, therefore, essential in the dissemination of GFL as they are speakers who have the sometimes-conflicting obligations of following the standard norm and using GFL (Pauwels and Winter 2006; Valiente 2002). The educational system plays a key role in the success of any linguistic reform (various orthographic reforms should be noted) and teachers are generally groundbreakers in the dissemination and incorporation of such reforms (Winter and Pauwels 2006b). These authors advocate the efficiency of ‘the role-model framework’, a linguistic planning microstructure in which a speaker, the teacher, individually tries to follow the GFL model and acts as an agent of change in their ‘community of practice’. This is a different strategy from the so-called ‘top-down’ conditions such as the dissemination of GFL guides or legislative reforms to promote them. However, male educators are more likely to follow rather than adopt that leading position (Pauwels and Winter 2006).

In some cases, teachers reject GFL. For example, Kuhn and Gabriel (2014) observed that lecturers avoided the use of GFL in higher-level academic texts despite having other variables which encouraged it. Another example is the study with primary-, secondary- and university-level teachers by Pauwels and Winter (2006). It established that younger teachers are less aware of grammatical correctness and that they acquire GFL naturally, most likely because they used it more frequently and, consequently, found it easier to employ.

Research questions

Although extensive research has been carried out on GFL, no single study exists regarding the results of GFL policies on the writing practices of future Primary education teachers. The main objective of this study is to explore academic texts produced by

undergraduate students in their final year in order to identify and classify GFL alternatives accepted by the students as part of their usual practice in written texts. It also attempts to determine which linguistic uses can be incorporated into textbooks and teaching practice in the Spanish language classroom, seeking to promote GFL as a part of the standard normative grammar.

The following questions are central to this research:

- (1) What are the GFL mechanisms used by final-year students of Degree in Primary School Teaching in their academic texts as alternatives to the systematic use of the generic masculine?
- (2) Are alternatives which do not correspond to the standard norm used in the academic texts of Degree in Primary School Teaching students in their final year?
- (3) Is there a correlation between the author's sex and GFL use?

Method

Sample

Corpus linguistics analyses a vast number of computerized texts offering a real representation of the trends of use of one or more language varieties (McEnery and Wilson 1996). It has been a valuable tool for the study of the representation of women in language, particularly in English (Baker 2014). Research confirmed that certain languages do not use GFL and create a sexist and stereotyped image of women. For example, Kjellmert (1986) offered a detailed study of the role of women in written corpora, and Baker (2013) and Pearce (2008) analysed women's representation in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the trends that led to linguistic change towards GFL, confirming a decrease in the frequency in the presence of male terms from a diachronic

perspective. Other research compares GFL use in corpora from different linguistic communities (Romaine 2001) or the use of the term *girl* in a written corpus (Sigley and Holmes, 2002), with very interesting insights into how gender is socially constructed. In all the studies reviewed here, “it is undoubtedly the case that corpus-based research offers a valuable window on the usage trends to which language consumers are exposed” (Sigley and Holmes 2002, 154).

The corpus used in this work, named FDD-Edu, contains 187 FDD (Final Degree Dissertations) from final-year students of the Degree in Primary School Teaching at 16 Spanish universities. The Degree in Primary School Teaching trains future teachers of Spanish to work at a basic and compulsory level. Annex I sets out the list of universities included in the study. For data protection reasons, no other demographic data regarding the participants was available.

The FDD-Edu corpus is composed of two sub-corpora according to the gender of the author: FDD-M (male authors) and FDD-F (female authors). FDD selection was made following two criteria: (i) time range of the FDD (2014-2017); and (ii) being available in an institutional open-access repository with quality criteria. The length of each FDD is 10,000-22,000 words. Front pages, index, bibliography, and references to the names of real people have been deleted. The number of tokens for sub-corpora is presented in table 2.

[table 2 to appear about here]

The analysis is corpus driven (Tognini-Bonelli 2001), since the only source of items has been the corpus itself, not any previous hypothesis or prior list or keywords. The words have been chosen from the corpus frequent list, extracted using AntCon

Software tools (Anthony 2019). Fifteen words were selected applying two criteria. Firstly, their representativity according to the achieved higher normalized frequency, which is the existence of a token per established number of words. Secondly, a linguistic criterion, being the formation of the male or female form using morphological mechanisms (Table 3). Special attention was paid to words referring to occupations, positions or social roles.

[table 3 to appear about here]

Procedure

Studied words were selected using the normative procedures included in Table 1 and examined according to the dimensions of Table 4. Reflecting the descriptions or recommendations in GFL guides (Guerrero Salazar 2007), three main dimensions were established: graphic mechanisms (use of slash), grammar mechanisms (pair forms), and lexical mechanisms (collective nouns).

[table 4 to appear about here]

The following analysis techniques were applied (Carroll & Kowitz 1994):

- (1) Key Words in Context (KWIC) concordances, for identifying marked and non-marked uses of the generic masculine. This analysis allowed the elimination of those uses of the masculine form that referred to a male entity only, and consequently, permitted limitation to those forms that specifically used GFL, as they were referring to male and female entities.
- (2) Frequency counts, for analyzing the use of sexist language versus GFL: frequency of use, the GFL mechanisms most often applied, the treatment of occupations and the influence of the sex variable.

- (3) Comparative corpus analysis, for comparing the GFL mechanism used in FDD-M and FDD-F sub corpora.

Results and Discussion

GFL mechanisms as alternatives to the systematic use of the generic masculine

Table 5 presents the results obtained from the analysis of the GFL mechanisms used by university students in their academic texts.

[table 5 to appear about here]

Results indicate that GFL is used in the FDD-Prim corpora with a frequency of 23.4%. This percentage reveals a high degree of awareness of non-sexist language when it is taken into consideration that the RAE recommends that these procedures should not be used at all: ‘...they are unnecessary when the use of the non-marked [generic masculine] form is explicit enough to cover individuals of both sexes’ (Real Academia Española 2009, 88). Indeed, the RAE gives the following example: ‘*Los alumnos de esta clase (en lugar de los alumnos y las alumnas) se examinarán el jueves*’ (Students [generic masculine] (instead of students [masculine form] and students [feminine form]) in this class will take the exam on Thursday).

Results show the proportion of use of the various GFL alternatives in academic texts. With the simultaneous aims of using GFL and following the standard norms in their academic texts, these future teachers of Spanish endorse both the GFL international guidelines (American Psychological Association 2019) and those specifically created for Spanish (Montolío 2014; Núñez Cortés 2016; Rodríguez and Rivera 2013).

Alternatives to the standard norm used in academic texts

The results of the individual analysis of the frequency of use of GFL mechanisms (Table 6) revealed that collective nouns were used most frequently (FN: 21.0287).

[table 6 to appear about here]

In terms of language economy, this procedure seems more suitable than the use of pair forms, which could be uncomfortable to read and inappropriate for academic language. This finding is also reported by Nissen (2013), and by Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax, (2012), who concluded that the use of pair forms was generalized in less formal contexts, whereas collective nouns are better suited for those contexts seeking objectivity, such as academia. These results are consistent with those of previous studies which prove a clear correlation between the difficulty of the use of alternative non-sexist forms (for example, pair forms) and a lower use of GFL in specific contexts such as family relationships or friendships (Patev et al. 2019; Jiménez Rodrigo, Román Onsalo and Traverso Cortés 2011). Another important finding was that university students avoided the use of non-normative mechanisms when using GFL (@ and the use of both the masculine and feminine forms of the article).

Sex and GFL use

As shown in Table 5, women's usage of GFL mechanisms is higher (FDD-F: 102.56 – 24.9% vs. FDD-M: 96.12 – 21.4%). These results are in line with previous studies which flag women as the driving force behind linguistic advances (Nissen 2013; Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012).

However, women made more extensive use of collective nouns (FDD-F, FN: 25.5598 vs. FDD-M, FN: 17.0609) whereas in the male sub-corpora morphological procedures (slash and pair forms) were more frequent (Table 6). These data are coherent with previous studies (Pauwels and Winter 2006, Winter and Pauwels 2006b).

Another interesting result is the way in which nouns referring to occupation were used. The study examined their expression with the generic masculine and also using GFL mechanisms (Table 7).

[table 7 to appear about here]

Contrary to expectations, lower use of GFL was found when referring to the names of occupations. In some cases, the presence of the GFL form was incidental (*director, educador, tutor*) or even non-existent (*investigador*). This revealed a patriarchal and biased image of occupations in the education sphere. Regarding the author's sex, two interesting findings were the cases of the terms '*profesor*' and '*maestro*'. Female authors showed a greater preference for GFL in the case of '*profesor*' (*MasGen*: 14% - *Gender-Fair*: 86%), with a significantly higher percentage than of male authors (*MasGen*: 52.7% - *Gender-Fair*: 47.3%). However, when using the term '*maestro*', women's use of GFL was significantly lower (*MasGen*: 95.1% - *Gender-Fair*: 4,9%) and very similar to the usage made by men (*MasGen*: 94,1% - *Gender-Fair*: 5,9%). Results revealed that participants established a differentiated criterion for prestigious occupations, attributing the higher rank to the male form.

Conclusions

Regarding the GFL mechanisms as alternatives to the systematic use of the generic masculine, future teachers of Spanish writing their final degree projects combine use of the generic masculine and GFL mechanisms in order to make women visible in those constructions where they deem it necessary. They maintain a balance between recommendations included in GFL guides and respect for academic conventions. They do not share the assumption that designating women using the generic masculine always entails sexist use of language, nor do they share the criteria of the RAE and the ASELE which state that GFL mechanisms are always redundant and unnecessary.

Concerning the alternatives to the standard norm used in academic texts, the studied texts show a great deal of awareness regarding linguistic sexism, which is a feature of the standard Spanish typical in academic texts. Results indicate that future

teachers of Spanish opt for more economical strategies as opposed to other graphic, morphological or semantic GFL mechanisms that could be perceived as repetitive or contrary to the standard. The preference for collective nouns in which gender is not linked to sex is a representative example when compared with other alternatives, such as pair forms, which confer women greater visibility. These findings are consistent with studies developed for the English, French and German languages (Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012; Gabriel et al. 2008; Horvath et al. 2016).

Coming second to the use of collective names, the most frequently employed mechanisms are pair forms and slashes, which have a similar presence, although they are some distance from the use of collective names. There is a residual presence of those mechanisms that have been flagged as incorrect by the academy, such as the use of the at symbol or the double article.

Surprisingly, participants do not perceive the use of the generic masculine to be sexist in the case of occupations and prestigious positions, as they do not apply GFL procedures. In the case of texts written by women, there is the exception of the term *profesor*. This outcome is contrary to that of Irmen and Roßber (2004), and of Gabriel, Gygax and Kuhn (2018), and places participants within the standard written norms for the Spanish language, which consider that the use of the generic masculine ‘must not be seen as a discriminatory form at all, but as the application of the linguistic law of the economy of expression’ (Real Academia Española 2017). This result may be explained by the fact that these cases are demarcated by semantic connotations established by the speakers which have not been included in the scope of this work and which should be examined using a different methodology.

From the gender comparison perspective, the study shows that female authors present a more extensive use of GFL mechanisms, which is in line with the results of

previous studies (Nissen 2013; Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012). A striking observation which arises from these results is that female authors prefer collective nouns as opposed to alternative mechanisms, such as the use of slash or pair forms, which give women higher visibility. This is consistent with the data obtained for studies in other languages (Pauwels and Winter 2006, Winter and Pauwels 2006b).

Our analysis does not provide enough data to corroborate previous studies which state that non-inclusive language use of the names of occupations adds to women's lack of visibility as prototypical examples to occupy such positions (Budziszewska, Hansen, and Bilewicz 2014; Formanowicz et al. 2013; Gabriel et al. 2008; Horvath et al. 2016; Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser 2016) A further study could assess the main reasons why female and male authors present different practices.

This study has relevant implications for feminist language planning, specifically in the identification of mechanisms to enhance the use of GFL and its adoption in the educative context. One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that these mechanisms have the advantage of being already included in the Spanish academic norm used by educated speakers in academic texts. Therefore, the application of GFL mechanisms which are also part of the curriculum they need to cover as Spanish teachers should be emphasized. The identified mechanisms have an enormous pedagogical and transformative potential for language, as well as for society, because they are already preferred by a very relevant group: young, educated women who play a paramount role in the education of children and teenagers.

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