

Against and in favour of Gender Fair Language: What can we learn from empirical research?

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In recent years, the use of non-sexist language has spread in many different contexts. These uses of language aim at achieving a more balanced representation of women and men in language (Pauwels, 2008). In the case of Spanish, the debate has focussed on the use of the *masculine as "generic"* (MG) to speak about mixed-sex groups ("Los alumnos están en huelga" 'The.m students.m are on strike'). *Gender Fair Language* strategies (GFL) include: duplications ("las alumnas y los alumnos" 'the.f students.f and the.m students.m'); using epicene nouns ("personas" 'people.f', "alumnado" 'student.body.m'), and gender-neutral pronouns ("quien solicite" 'whoever applies for'); or the creation of neomorphemes and novel pronouns to avoid gender binarism ("lxs alumnxs"/"l@s alumn@s"/"les alumnes" 'the.n students.n'). In this paper, we (i) examine several arguments against and in favour of these GFL strategies in Spanish, (ii) analyse the theories that underlie those arguments, and exhaustively categorise empirical research on generic uses of masculine expressions, neutral terms, and GFL strategies (in Spanish and other languages) to, finally, (iii) clarify which arguments and theories are actually supported by empirical research.

In order to accomplish our objectives, first we identify three types of theories underlying those arguments in favour of GFL: (A) Neo-Whorfianist theories: natural language influences how some concepts are constructed, which means that speakers of different languages may show cognitive differences (Boroditsky, 2001); (B) invisibility theories: some language uses contribute to women's invisibilization; (C) social change theories: speakers of a language in a given speech community can change society, actively choosing and reproducing some particular language uses and avoiding others. For the first time, we argue that, despite being co-dependent, these approaches are distinct, and we will establish their crucial differences.

Secondly, we will focus on three arguments against GFL strategies in Spanish: [1] the argument of the false matching between social gender and grammatical gender (Escandel-Vidal, 2020): grammatical gender in Spanish has nothing to do with sex or social gender. We will show that Neo-Whorfianist experiments do not refute that the association between grammatical gender and social gender is completely arbitrary. Concretely, empirical evidence supporting Neo-Whorfianist theories suggest that grammatical gender can influence, but not determine, speakers' mental representations (Boroditsky *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, the use of MG terms can affect how people conceptualise the referents of those words and potentially reproduce gender asymmetries with MG. [2] The argument of the false ambiguity of MG: MG are ambiguous and have a clear mixed-sex interpretation in generic contexts (e.g. 'The average student will feel isolated in *his* introductory courses'; "*Todo hombre* tiene derecho de entrar en la república y salir de ella"), and male-specific interpretations of MG require specification in some particular contexts (Mendivil-Giró, 2020). Against this theoretical argument, numerous comprehension tasks have shown that, despite appearing in explicitly gender-neutral contexts, MG tend to be interpreted as referring only to males (Perissinotto, 1983; Lindqvist *et al.* 2019, among many others), thus supporting invisibility theories. The prevailing tendency to interpret MG as male-specific casts serious doubt on the whole notion of generic, which may be useful when talking about self-monitored and guarded speech, but not in speeded or common communication. [3] The argument of economy: the strategy of duplication is exhausting to speakers and hearers, and is against the Principle of Economy of language. We will analyse the basis for this principle (Zipf, 1949; Jespersen, 1949; Xiao, 2008) and claim that, first, GFL texts are not of less quality or harder to understand (Rothmund & Christmann, 2002; Braun *et al.*, 2007) and, second, even if they were, speakers do not always follow this principle, as it is not a law that must be obeyed at all times, but a descriptive rule that is typically followed and discarded when necessary (Álvarez Mellado, 2018).

Finally, based on empirical work from ethnic revival movements, we will claim that language can become a powerful symbol or tool for social change (Giles *et al.*, 1977; Ryan & Giles, 1982). We will

conclude from our analysis that, even if GFL does not warrant gender equality, it can be one (of many) vehicles towards social change, and that further empirical research is still necessary to break the vicious circle of ill-informed discussions about GFL (for example, in Spanish).

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