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FREE

SEXISM IN THE SPANISH LANGUAGE

A Hispanic female is raised to be basically dependent on a male. Her ultimate goal is to seek adult status through marriage

This article will examine examples of culturally and grammatically sanctioned sexism in the Spanish language, not only to stress the symbolic reinforcement of stereotypes but also to lead the way to a more objective understanding of sex differences. It will illustrate how pervasively linguistic sexism plagues Spanish in some grammatical aspects and in myriad lexical items, reflecting and perpetuating the secondary role of women in traditional Hispanic society.

For centuries, many highly prestigious professions excluded women. Thus there is a problem in finding appropriate feminine designations. For example, Spanish has no female version for "el primer ministro (masculine)," prime minister, and the Spanish speaker is forced to say, "la primer ministro (feminine)," prime minister, rather than "la primera ministra."

This solution merely replaces the article, which is then used with the still masculine

name of the professions. Other examples in common use are "el/la bombero," fire fighter, "el/la médica," doctor, "el/la modelo," model, "el/la piloto," pilot, "el/la plomero," plumber, and "el/la soldado," soldier. Some traditionally male professions not ending in -o also use this device: "el/la gerente," manager, "el/la juez," judge. The practice of calling female professionals by masculine forms exclusively makes them exceptions and provides linguistic confirmation that some professions and occupations are still largely restricted to males.

Another interesting aspect of the generic use of masculine forms is found in names of professions. In the past, the feminine form of certain professions was used to refer to the wife of the man who had that position, i.e., "la médica," the wife of the doctor; "la almiranta," the wife of the admiral; "la zapatera," the wife of the shoemaker. Even nowadays, "la pastora," referring to the wife of the pastor, is commonly heard.

In recent years, notable advance has been made in revising names of professions and occupations to include feminine forms, a positive result of women's struggle for equality. There are laws against discrimination in employment advertisements (not always enforced, unfortunately). One such law, Puerto Rico Law 100, requires newspapers to solicit both sexes, and one sees jobs presented thusly: "supervisor(a)," "supervisor," "vendedor(a)," salesperson, "conductor(a)," driver, or even "secretaria(o)," secretary, "enfermera(o)," nurse.



In many cases, the -a feminine ending has simply replaced the -o masculine ending. We now find "el decano/la decana," dean, "el catedrático/la catedrática," profesor, "el maestro/la maestra," teacher. Feminine endings are now acceptable in the following professions: "arqueóloga," archeologist, "arquitecta," architect, "veterinaria," veterinarian, "odontóloga," odontologist, "contadora," accountant, "récтора," rector, "abogada," attorney.

In some instances there is grammatical ambiguity. One should note that -o/-a endings are associated with the genders, but are not infallible guides. One still has to know what the word means as, for example, "la mano (feminine)," hand, or "el poeta (male)," poet. In addition, there are feminine gender words that refer to either a male or female: "la persona," person, "la gente," people.

Many names of professions end in -ista, which can be used with either el or la ("el/la lingüista," linguist, "el/la violinista," violinist, "el/la oficinista," office worker, etc.). However, even here the masculine gender predominates as a generic, and, like los hermanos and el italiano, is ambiguous. "Los periodistas" can mean male journalists only, or any numerical combination of male and female

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journalists; "el periodista" can mean a specific male journalist, or a nonspecific male or female journalist.

Interestingly, the changes mentioned above go in only one direction. Some typical female occupations still do not have masculine forms. There is "ama de casa," housewife but no "amo de casa." There is "prostituta," prostitute but "prostituto" exist only as the past participle of the verb "prostituir," to prostitute.

Sexism in Lexical Usage

We have seen how the Spanish language appears to ignore women through masculine forms prevailing over feminine forms. Grammatical rules are applied to produce that effect. In sexist lexical usage, semantic associations carry the message of male dominance and power. As in English, there is in Spanish a disproportionate emphasis on women's physical appearance, a system of address referring to women as property, and a concept of women as worthless.

Women as Sex Objects

In Spanish, women are called endearing physically based nick- names such as "gorda" or "gordita," fatty; "flaca" or "flaquita," skinny; "vieja" or "viejita," old one. Yet while "la gorda Rivera," fatso Rivera, is an insulting way of addressing Ms. Rivera, "el gordo Véllez (m)" has an affectionate connotation. Some terms are intended as insults or compliments to women when used by men. As in English, these words are associated with food and refer to the effect that a woman has on the man, as for example: "bombón," candy; "dulce," sugar; "sabrosa," tasty; "salada" (also applied to men), "salerosa," salty; "sosa," flat.

Spanish makes it clear that being a woman means mainly being a member of a sex, rather than a human being. The asymmetrical use of "hacerse mujer" to become a woman, and "hacerse hombre" to become a man, can serve as an example. The former alludes to physical development, the first menstruation or motherhood; the latter is used on the occasion of some social achievement as a graduation or first job.

Another example of basic inequity is the distinct meaning changes which some words undergo depending on the sex of the person to whom they refer. These words have sexual connotations when applied to women:

1. "un patrono (m)," an employer, protector,
- "una madrota (f)," matron (in vulgar language, a madame or a person who promotes illicit sexual relationships).
2. "un reo (m)," a criminal
- "la rea (f)," a impoverished prostitute
3. "un perdido (m)," a drunkard, gambler, thief;

"una perdida (f)," a woman lost in illicit sexual relations

4. "un doncel (m)," a young nobleman

"una doncella (f)," a female-virgin, maiden

While men can enjoy sexual freedom, women are expected to marry as virgins, to be faithful in marriage and to fulfill their sex needs within the limits of marriage. Some Spanish words convey moral judgments that have general meanings when applied to males, but sexual implications when they refer to females. Examples:

1. "un cualquiera (m)," an anybody, a Mr. Nobody;

"una cualquiera (f)," a hussy

2. "inocente (m)," innocent, not guilty;

"inocente (f)," a virgin

3. "honesto (m)," sincere or honest;

"honesta (f)," a woman who does not have illicit sexual relations

The concept of virginity is extremely important in the traditional Hispanic culture. In fact, it is almost a virginity cult. The term, "estar señorita," to be a virgin, does not have a masculine counterpart, as virginity is not applicable to men. In the sentence, "René es virgen or René es señorita," one can immediately understand that René is a woman. To traditional Hispanics only a female can lose her virginity (ser deshonrada), or lose her shame or virginity (perder la virginidad). The expressions "la caída," the fall, "dar un mal paso," take a false step, "meter la pata," a vulgar form; literally put your foot in all refer to females.

In Spanish, a man is insulted via a woman as in: "hijo de puta," son of a bitch, or "la puta que te parió," the whore that bore you. These insults cast doubt on the moral, i.e. the sexual integrity of one's mother. Interestingly, since a man can not be, "deshonrado," in the sense of losing his shame, it is through a woman that he is deshonrado or shamed.

Male homosexuals are vulgarly referred to with insults having the feminine ending -a as in: "loca," crazy, "mariposa," butterfly. Other derogatory names are derived from the name María which in the Roman Catholic culture, is the most feminine of names: "marica," faggot; "maricón," queer; "mariquita," fairy. In the last example, the diminutive ending -ita implies childish qualities. On the other hand, lesbians are ridiculed for their desire to be like men through words derived from "macho," male. They can be called "marimacho," man-like, "machúa,"

literally, like a man or "machorra," the latter word reflects the woman's inability to reproduce and is related to the stereotype of women as reproductive.

A newly coined Spanish word is "puta" refers to a woman who knows what she wants from life and takes risks to get it, also mean a female who possesses equivalent of male toughness and aggressiveness. Yet within the Hispanic culture a brave woman is a contradictory concept because to say a woman is courageous, recourse must be taken to masculine attributes.

In Spanish there are lexical gaps illustrating its sexist nature. There are no versions of "puta" or "prostituta," "mujerzuela," a pejorative diminutive of "mujer," "mujer de la vida" or "mujer calle," euphemisms for prostitute.

Another way women are subordinated is their often being considered rather than children than adults. The word "nena (f)" girl, typifies this attitude. It is used by men to refer to a grown woman as well as a child. Their goal is to be deliberately and disrespectfully of her personhood, as when they hassle women on the street or sexual propositions or "piropos," compliments. A woman may be called "muñeca, preciosa, graciosa," all of which can imply that she is cute and behaves accordingly. However, females would seldom address men as "muñeco" or "precioso" except in intimacy. Women are also said to be "caprichosas," fickle, capricious as a child.

Further evidence of how women are considered puerile and not taken seriously is the ease with which they are addressed by their first names. In traditional Hispanic countries this is significant because first names are less frequently used. In a business situation men will be addressed by their last names, as Rivera or Pérez while, female co-workers will be called by their first names, as Carmen or Elena or even Carmencita, even the diminutive forms. Some men even address women just "linda" or "nena" making reference to physical appearance.

Diminutives are frequently used to address male and female children, but once the child is an adult this custom usually ceases. Yet with females it never ceases with females. It is more common to hear an adult woman even in advanced years to hear "Doña (a term of respect) Juantita" to hear "Don Jorgito" for an adult man, possibly reflecting a woman's continual and economic dependence on a man and supposedly child-like characteristics.

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Women as Property

A woman in the traditional Hispanic culture achieves her social identity and status through her father's or husband's position. She is expected to marry and early hopefully to fulfill the rigid sex role assigned to her: that of sexual partner and species reproducer, "esposa madre" wife and mother. No matter what a woman does professionally in traditional Hispanic culture, she is first of all a wife or mother who has "taken up" politics or banking or whatever. A man is defined in terms of what he does in the world, a woman in terms of her sexuality, that is, in terms of one particular aspect of her relationship to men: her dependency. Examples of this are encountered in the usual forms of address:

Señorita is the polite form for an unmarried woman or young lady.

This word also represents the ideal of femininity and of course, virginity.

Señorito (the masculine diminutive of Señor which is used in Spain but not in Puerto Rico) indicates a son of a prestigious family and does not have any connotation regarding marital status.

Señora is used to address a married woman or a woman who is old enough to be married.

Señor is used for both single and married men; reflecting the social irrelevance of a man's marital status.

Sex roles taught to girls and boys differ in traditional Hispanic culture. Boys are urged to become unspecified adults: "hombres," men. They are admonished "Pórtate como un macho como un hombre" Behave as a male is expected to behave, implying, be brave, dominant, tough, unsentimental. They are also often reproved with: "Los hombres no lloran" Men don't cry or, "No llores como una nena" (or mujer) Don't cry like a girl (or woman). On the other hand, little girls are constantly reminded, "Pórtate como una señorita" Behave as a young lady, implying, be polite, submissive, do not assert yourself. Girls are not told "Pórtate como una mujer." Behave as a woman, as that has strong sexual implications. Curiously, a little boy is never told to behave as a "señorito," but as, "un hombrecito" little man. The boy is said to be, "el hombrecito de la casa," the little man of the house, while the

girl is "la muñequita de la casa," the little doll of the house.

A Hispanic female is raised to be basically dependent on a male. Her ultimate goal is to seek adult status through marriage. She is said to be casadera, eligible for marriage, and urged to get a husband, pescar un marido (literally "to fish for a husband"). If she remains unmarried, say after age twenty five or thirty, it is said of her, "Se quedó para vestir santos," literally meaning 'she was left to dress religious images;' thus, indicating she will have religious rather than domestic duties. If unmarried, she is disparagingly called "solterona" (spinster) or even worse "jamona" (a ham), which seems to imply that since she was not chosen by a man, she will be useless and just hang around like a smoked ham. The male version, "solterón" (bachelor) indicates simply an older unmarried man who chose not to marry. Much more offensive is the expression, "Lo que le hace falta es un macho" (What she needs is a man) which is said of a high-strung or irritable woman.

How a woman is addressed in Spanish reveals that a Hispanic woman is someone's property before and after marriage and even after becoming a widow. As an unmarried woman she is called "la hija de Ramón" (Ramón's daughter property of Ramón) or "la hija del carpintero" (the carpenter's daughter). Usually reference will be made to her father's work, not her mother's, even if her mother has a profession. A son can also be called el hijo de Ramón, but he will probably not be thought of as property. Furthermore, called after adulthood a man is not usually addressed in this way. In English speaking countries, of course, males or females are sometimes also identified as Tom's son,

Joe's daughter, the barber's son, or the secretary's daughter.

A married woman will be called Señora María Rivera de López. Rivera is her maiden name, de López signifies "property of López," her husband's surname. If she becomes a widow, she is Señora María Rivera viuda de (widow of) López. Even after her husband is dead she is referred to as his property! A widower, on the contrary, is never referred to as viudo de, except perhaps in conversation, but he is certainly not considered to have been his wife's property. His primary identification will be in terms of his own name or occupation. Incidentally, viuda is abbreviated vda. which has no masculine counterpart since viudo is not a title.

At other times a married woman may be anonymous, as when she is referred to as la señora de Juan López, "Juan López wife" (literally lady) or la señora del doctor, "the doctor's wife." She is identified in terms of his name or of his profession or occupation. A less polite form would be la mujer de Juan Juan's woman or la mujer del doctor, "the doctor's woman." A married woman is also anonymous when a married couple is addressed formally in writing: Señor Juan Ríos y Señora Juan Ríos and wife.

In a more humorous or informal manner, a man may refer to his wife as "mi costilla or costillita," my rib or my little rib (again, belonging to him) or "mi cara mitad," my better half, expressions which are considered jokingly as endearing terms. Other ways in which a husband refers to his wife are "mi esposa," my wife, or the more degrading, "mi mujer," my woman (possession); "la vieja" the old woman (possibly implying "used" woman); or "mi

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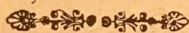
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SEXISM ...

señora," my mistress, my lady. Sometimes he may also refer to her as "la madre de mis hijos," the mother of my children, thus calling attention to her sexual role. The wife can refer to her husband as "mi esposo or marido," my husband, but she will not call him "mi hombre," my man, as this has a vulgar negative connotation.

A more neutral but quite formal term "el cónyuge (m) or la cónyuge (f)," spouse exists, but this form is not commonly used. Perhaps, it will become more popular in the future as men and women become more aware of how language can limit and demean them as individuals.

Hoijer states that, "When a group undergoes rapid change in its non linguistic culture, linguistic change may similarly increase in tempo." Spanish-speaking countries, like English-speaking countries are undergoing crucial social changes, and a reassessment of the customary social roles of women and men has slowly but surely been taking place in many cultures. We may, therefore, anticipate linguistic change as well in the use of more inclusive, non-sexist lexemes and grammatical structures due to the social pressures on the Spanish language. Efforts to eliminate sexism in language will help to make this richer society a reality.



MULES' DAY

When you find out that in Mexico they celebrate Mules' Day, you instantly conjure up a mental picture of one of those four-footed hybrids attending a banquet in its honor and getting ready to huff, puff and snort out the candles on, perhaps, an alfalfa cake.

That misconception is immediately put to rest when the imaginative neophyte is told that Mules' Day is not intended as a tribute to the animal species but, pardon the expression, human mules, who are as much a hybrid breed as the former, albeit with only two feet.

If things are starting to sound complicated, then I must point out that here in Mexico the "mule" concept is no longer confined to a zoological meaning. It has become an epithet synonymous with malice, spite, rancor and, finally, a person who always gets his own way and nearly always to somebody else's detriment.

Nobody knows exactly why this beast—the product of a mismatched romance between horse and donkey—has acquired such a reputation. Perhaps the causes lie in its mongrel origin, that it is, to quote a common expression, "neither fish nor fowl," although a lot of the

BEYOND THE CITY

Attractions are listed according to their direction from Oaxaca.

MONTE ALBAN: 10km (6mi) west, on an artificially flattened mountaintop. One of the most important archaeological sites in Mexico. Large ceremonial plaza surrounded by the ruins of religious and public buildings. Small museum, cafeteria, shops. Tues-Sun 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

SANTA MARIA ATZOMPA: (or Atzompa) about 8km (4mi) northwest, a short distance off Hwy. 190. The village produces a green-glazed pottery and unglazed pottery figures.

NOTE: Here, and at other craft-oriented villages, stop at any home or shop that gives indications that the craft is practiced within, or simply ask the way to artisan's homes.

CHUILAPAN DE GUERRERO: About 14 km (9 mi) southwest on the Zaachila road. Contains what was once the Dominican Monastery of St. James the Apostle, begun in 1555 but never finished. Much of the structure stands roofless. Daily 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Zaachila: 5 km (3 mi) beyond Cuilapan. Zaachila was the Zapotec capital when it fell to the Spanish in 1521. Little of the archaeological zone has been explored, but a palace and two tombs can be visited. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

SAN BARTOLO COYOTEPEC: (or Coyotepec) About 15 km (9 mi) south on Hwy 175. The village is famous for its pottery. Valente Nieto, the son of Dona Rosa, who is credited with the black pottery, still practices the craft and gives demonstrations for visitors Fri. 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

SANTO TOMAS JALIEZA: About 10 km (6 mi) beyond Coyotepec, off Hwy 175. A center for the weaving of cotton belts, sashes, table runners, place mats, and other items. The products are sold from a central location across from the village church.

OCOTLAN DE MORELOS: About 17 km (10 mi) beyond Coyotepec on Hwy 175. Market town and the home of the Aguilar Family, producers of clay figures painted in bright colors.

SANTA MARIA DEL TULE: About 14 km (8 mi) east-southeast of Oaxaca on Hwy 190. Its main attraction is a gigantic Ahuehete, or Mexican Cypress, in front of the village church. **The tree is estimated to be about 2,000 years old.**

blame can be attributed to its annoying habit of kicking out wildly without any warning at the slightest provocation.

To make "muladas" then, means—figuratively speaking of course—to give a swift kick to friends or strangers, at home, in the office or anywhere else. People will shake their heads and tut tut with a grin and even some respect: qué mula! (what a mule!) they will say. And Mules' Day becomes a perfect occasion for someone to send the "mula" a tiny mule made of corn leaves and toothpicks, laden with miniature pots full of paper flowers, that are sold by the thousands on any street.

TLACOCOAHUAYA: About 23 km east-southeast of Oaxaca off Hwy 190. Home of native artists.

TEOTITLAN DEL VALLE: 24 km from Oaxaca. Tlacochahuaya and about 3 km from Teotitlan. Local crafts people produce ponchos and tapestries in traditional and modern designs.

TLACOLULA DE MATAMOROS: About 16 km (10 mi) beyond Lambiyeco. Principal attraction is the 16th century Church of Oaxaca. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

YAGUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE: About 2 km (2 mi) farther along Hwy 190 from Tlacolula. Includes a large ball court and the ruins of several patios. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

SAN PABLO VILLA DE MITLA: About 5 km (3 mi) beyond Yagul. Home of light-weight woolen and cotton goods which are sold in a large market and a church. Center for the production of an intoxicating drink distilled from the maguey-plant.

MITLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE: Remains of a large Zapotec population that had been influenced by the Spanish by the time of the Spanish conquest. Groups of ruins, the most interesting is the Group of the Columns. Group of ruins open daily 8:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.

There are several villages outside Oaxaca which are famous for their crafts. Even if you do not intend to buy anything, going to any of these villages can be a very interesting experience as each village is unique and offers something different to offer.

There are various ways to get to Oaxaca. You can catch a bus at the second station, which is located next to the Abastos. Or, you can take a collectivo (collectivos are also located at the Abastos). A minibus service is located on the sixth block of Armenta y Lopez, goes to Ocotlan, Coyotepec, Miahuatlán and Santo Toma's. On the day of the week there is a market in another of the nearby villages.

Mules' Day always coincides with the Thursday of Corpus Christi and derives possibly from the indigenous custom of loading mules with offerings to take on that day.

This fiesta unique to Oaxaca and several other villages is celebrated by eating sweets filled with milk custard, coconut or chocolate. The streets and markets are crowded with stands selling these sweets as a representation of the body of Christ.

