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The Editor's Column

Grammatical Sexism in Spanish

by Daniel Eisenberg

In recent years a women's movement has been born within Hispanism. Increasing attention is paid to the role of women in Hispanic literature and culture; the field now has a journal, *Letras Femininas*; we find discussion of such previously unheard-of topics as *chicana* literature. Since the end of the Franco regime a decade ago, women have achieved significant legal victories in Spain. (I am unaware that a significant women's movement exists in any other Spanish-speaking country.)

In the United States, the women's movement has been accompanied by considerable attention to language as an expression and tool of oppression.¹ There are now many aids to assist one in removing sexism from one's writing.² Considering this, I have been expecting for years that attention would be given to the grammatical sexism inherent in the Spanish language. To my knowledge, although there has been some incidental comment in discussions [p. 189] devoted primarily to lexical sexism,³ it has never received any specific

¹ As early as 1975, there was published a 100-page annotated bibliography on women and language: *Language and Sex: Differences and Dominance*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Rowley, Mass.: Newberry House, 1975), pp. 204–305.

² Such as Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers* (New York: Lippincott, 1980). A bibliography of other such guides is provided by Francine Frank and Frank Anshen. *Language and the Sexes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 115–19. A computer program, Grammatik, will scan text files and point out sexist terms, sometimes suggesting revisions.

³ Delia Esther Suardiaz, *Sexism in the Spanish Language*, published M.A. thesis, 1973, Univ. of Washington Studies in Linguistics and Language Learning, 11 (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1973); Á. García Meseguer,

attention. Not a single article or dissertation. The longest discussion of avoidance of sexist language in Spanish is an article on how Puerto Rico complies with US federal laws on the topic.⁴ Spanish grammatical sexism is a non-topic.⁵ And this is surprising, since Spanish is, of the major world languages, that in which the masculine most dominates, linguistically, the feminine.⁶ Even if Spanish culture is not that in which the masculine most dominates [p. 191] the feminine—something I have not the knowledge to determine—some link between the language and

Lenguaje y discriminación sexual (Madrid: Cuadernos para el Diálogo, 1977; reprinted Barcelona: Montesinos, 1984 [reprint not seen]). I have taken several examples from Suardiaz's first chapter, but others, though surprising, could not be accommodated; she points out, for example, that a man, in Spanish, can refer to his wife as "la familia" ("la familia me espera en el coche"), but a woman cannot so designate her husband. Suardiaz concludes with a critical discussion of the bias in the Spanish language against homosexuality.

⁴ Rose Nash, "Verbs, Gender, and Civil Rights: Puerto Rican Spanish Responds to the Law," *Word*, 33 (1982), 81–95. (I would like to thank Tom Lathrop for this reference.) García Meseguer, pp. 244–45 and 251, has some brief recommendations.

⁵ There has also been no study, parallel to Robin Lakoff's classic "Language and Women's Place" (*Language in Society*, 2 [1973], 45–79; reprinted with a further essay in *Language and Women's Place* [New York: Harper and Row, 1975]) of the link between women's role in society and their use of language. Thorne and Henley cite Susan Hardin, "Women and Words in a Spanish Village," in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); Francine W. Frank, in the bibliography accompanying her "El género gramatical y los cambios sociales," *Español Actual*, No. 43 (1985), 27–50, has nothing more recent.

⁶ Of course Spanish has close competition from other Romance languages, reflecting the sexism of Latin. Gender is an important characteristic of the entire Indo-European language family, although according to Muhammad Hasan Ibrahim its origin is accidental (*Grammatical Gender: Its Origin and Development* [The Hague: Mouton, 1973]). Basque and Hungarian, in contrast, have no noun genders at all.

The reasons for calling Spanish the most sexist language are: 1) its masculine plural rule, discussed further below ("it is only few languages that can use the plural masculine in the same way as... Spanish *los padres*"; Otto Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* [New York: Norton, 1965], pp. 232–33); 2) Spanish's unique feminine (i.e., subordinate) first and second person plural subject pronouns (García Meseguer, p. 199); and 3) according to a lecture by Anne Tukey, author of "Kinship Terminology in the Romance Languages," Diss. Michigan, 1962 (*DA*, 23 [1962], 1014–15), Spanish leads the Romance languages in using derivatives of male kinship terms for female relatives, i.e., Spanish "tío"/"tía," French "oncle"/"tante"; Spanish "hermano"/"hermana," French "frère"/"soeur," Italian "fratello"/"sorella." For confirmation of the "leadership," in this sense, of Spanish, see García Meseguer, p. 211.

the culture is undeniable. It says something that it is Spanish which has contributed to English the term *macho*, and later machismo.⁷

We first need to identify the ways in which the masculine is superior to the feminine in Spanish. The most obvious is the rule, taught to every beginning student of Spanish, that the masculine plural is used for any group with a male element, regardless of proportion: “mis hijos son cuatro: un varón y tres hembras.” The masculine plural is also used for a male-female pair: “mis padres,” “los Reyes Católicos,” “los señores Pérez.” These are part of a larger phenomenon: one uses the masculine unless there is reason to use the feminine; the masculine form is the default. The masculine is assumed to include reference to the feminine in such words as the pronominal *uno*; it is also used as the generic or undifferentiated plural: “los españoles son simpáticos.” “Los hombres” is used to mean ‘people’ (although, in a curious contrast, “los toros” does not mean ‘cattle,’ nor “los gallos” ‘poultry’). “El que” is assumed to include feminine referents, “la que” is not; one cannot say, in Spanish “el o la que.” It is the masculine definite article, never the feminine, which is used to nominalize an infinitive (“el amar es dulce”).

Another type of masculine dominance is the “unmarked” nature of masculine forms. The masculine is the basic or standard form, the feminine a derivation from it: “inglés”/“inglesa”; “profesor”/“profesora.” Even though the evolutionary processes were different, pronouns follow the same pattern, with the male pronoun being shorter and easier to use: “él” is shorter than “ella,” “aquél” than “aquella.” The masculine third person subject pronoun “él” resembles the definite article “el,” but “ella” is a syllable longer than “la.”

Reinforcing the dominance of the masculine gender is the neuter’s resemblance to it. “Esto,” “eso,” “aquello,” “lo,” and “ello” have [p. 192] the *-o* ending associated with the masculine. In the case of adjectives, the neuter and masculine coincide: “no sabemos lo que nos espera, pero será bueno,” “es necesario que...”

There are some less important ways, not often noted, in which the masculine triumphs over the feminine in Spanish. A few may be more social than linguistic, such as the derogatory use of the feminine definite article, but not the masculine, with a proper name: “la Maruja,” “la Pepa.” While the *-o* masculine ending is changed to *-a* to form feminine

⁷ Frank and Anshen, p. 35, point out that *macho* in English is dated from 1928, and *machismo* from 1947. A colorful recent example of popular lexical innovation is the coining of the term *machisma*, used to designate “traits in a woman that... are at the masculine end of every psychological masculine/feminine scale” (Grace, Lichtenstein, *Machisma: Women and Daring* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1981], p. 18).

nouns referring to sexed living things (“perro”/“perra,” “hermano”/“hermana”), it is sexist that the same is not permitted, or only reluctantly permitted, with terms for the names of professions: “la primer ministro,” “la abogado,” “la médico,” and “la catédrico” (Suardiaz, p. 14).

Embedded in the structure of the language, however, are the contractions “al” and “del,” which exist only in the masculine, and the apocope of masculine forms, shortening “bueno” to “buen” and “alguno” to “algún,” but not affecting “buena” or “alguna.” In Spain, the masculine direct object pronoun has four forms (“lo”/“le,” “los”/“les”), the feminine only two. Finally, of nouns ending in *-o*, only a small number are feminine, while of words ending in *-a*, a much larger proportion are masculine. Before feminine nouns beginning with stressed *a-* (“agua,” “alma”), the masculine article is used.

All of this, then, adds up to substantial dominance by the masculine. A logical question is how the sexes could, at least in theory, be placed on equal grammatical footing.

Removing sexism from Spanish is perhaps not such a difficult project, in theory, as might be thought. Its possessive “su” avoids, for example, the “third person possessive” problem of English; in Spanish one need not concern oneself with saying “his and her” every time an impersonal possessive is wanted (“if everyone would take his or her seat...”), nor be concerned about the order of the two elements. As Spanish permits the omission of subject pronouns, it allows the related “he/she” problem, in some instances, to be avoided altogether.⁸ In Spanish, in contrast with the English “man” [p. 193] and “woman,” “male” and “female,” “hombre” and “mujer” are equal in length, as are “varón” and “hembra.” Because Spanish seldom forms words by agglutination, one is spared the problem of sexist compound words (“mankind,” “doorman,” “brotherhood”), whose modification produces awkward or seemingly unacceptable substitutes (“chairperson,” “gunperson,” “freshperson,” “personkind”). Most important, as Spanish flexions are suffixal (“primo”/“prima” rather than French “cousin”/“cousine,” with change of the “i” signaled by the now-silent “e”), it is relatively easy to tinker with them, and efficiently strike a massive blow for sexual equality with a small number of conceptually modest changes. Precisely because Spanish is so overtly sexist, it is readily susceptible to reform.

The most important move towards linguistic sexual equality in Spanish would be to expand its currently vestigial neuter to all parts of

⁸ See Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), p. 32; and K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 66.

speech with gender markers, nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. The neuter would be used when it was undesirable, unnecessary, or impossible to designate a gender; it, rather than the masculine, would be the default. “Is there a professor of mathematics at X University?” would use the neuter, as the sex of the professor is unknown and irrelevant; the neuter plural would serve for groups of mixed gender, akin to the English “children” or “siblings.”

The first step in this direction would be to exchange the neuter article and pronouns with masculine ones, making “el,” “él,” “éste,” “ése,” and “aquél” neuter gender articles and pronouns, and the corresponding neuter forms, masculine. (Of course, there would be neuter demonstrative adjectives as well as pronouns, “éste” pronoun and “este” adjective.) Thus the sentence “El que quiere acompañarme, que venga” would be gender-neutral, as would “el querer” and other nominalized infinitives. “Lo” and “la,” “ello” and “ella,” “ésto” and “ésta” would be male-female pairs, more logical than such current ones as “él” and “ella.” As it would be quicker to use nongender-marked forms, there would be a bias in favor of their use, rather than the present bias in favor of the shorter masculine forms. Similarly, apocoped adjectives, now masculine, would become neuter (“buen,” “un,” etc.). “El buen estudiante” would designate a good student of either sex, “la estudiante buena” a good female student, and “lo estudiante bueno” a good male student.

In what other instances would the neuter be used? While [p. 194] philosophically it would seem sensible and beneficial to restrict noun gender to sexed animals, I cannot see, given the Spanish flexional system, how the gender could be removed from nouns ending in *-o* or *-a*. There are many pairs of words distinguished only by gender ending, “libro”/“libra,” “caso”/“casa,” and so on. The Spanish system can even have a certain charm, as in “naranjo”/“naranja.” The system could be rationalized, though, by 1) creating masculine forms in *-o* in those cases in which the *-a* ending is presently used for both genders: “pianisto” ‘a male pianist,’ “astronauto” ‘a male astronaut’ etc., 2) using the *-a* ending in place of *-o* for female professionals, “ministra,” “ingeniera,” “abogada,” etc.,⁹ and 3) making gender correspond absolutely with the ending, i.e. “lo mano” ‘the hand,’ “lo curo” ‘the priest,’ “lo papo” ‘the pope,’ “la día” ‘the day.’

⁹ A conflict exists at present between the feminine names of some professions and the names for females practicing such professions (“la política” ‘the lady politician,’ ‘politics’; “la música” ‘the female musician,’ ‘music’). Such could be eliminated by using the neuter form in *-e* proposed below for the name of the profession: “el músique,” ‘music,’ etc.

However, most nouns not ending in *-o* or *-a* could become neuter: “un papel importante” would then be neuter in noun, adjective, and article, as would “un ciudad grande.”¹⁰ Unmarked masculine forms would become neuter, used for both genders: “el francés” ‘the French person,’ “el presidente” ‘the president (of either gender),’ and—a great advance—“señor” ‘Mr., Mrs., or Ms.,’ ‘sir or madam.’ In those cases in which it was desirable to indicate gender such could be done through the article, “la presidente” ‘the female president,’ “lo francés” ‘the Frenchman.’¹¹

We are still without a neuter or non-sex-marked plural, as well as a general adjectival and nominal neuter singular. Spanish already [p. 195] uses *-e* and *-es* as non-sex-marked endings, in noun plurals (“relojes,” “ciudades”), the singulars of nouns of both genders (“valle,” “clase”), adjectives (“importante(s)”), and in the indirect object pronouns “le” and “les.” It is a logical extension, in fact already proposed by feminists in Spain (García Meseguer, p. 247) to use this ending to create neuter plurals: “mis hijes” is thus ‘my children,’ and “mis hijos,” removing its present ambiguity, ‘my sons.’ “-e” and “-es” would be neuter adjective endings, i.e. “buene” (apocoped form “buen”) and “buenes.” The new neuters “este,” “ese,” and “aquel” would have as plurals “estes,” “eses,” and “aquelles”; “nosotres,” “vosotres,” and “elles” would be neuter subject pronouns; the neuter definite articles would be “el” and “les”; the indefinite articles “une” (apocoped form “un”) and “unes.” As direct object pronouns, “le” and “les” would have a neuter function.

The only remaining problems are those few cases in which male and female pairs are distinguished by more than the *-o* and *-a* endings. One category of these is titles of nobility: “el rey”/“la reina,” in which “los reyes” means both ‘the kings’ and the male-female pair ‘the king and the queen’; “el duque”/“la duquesa,” etc. However, there is no need to reform inherently archaic terms of nobility.

¹⁰ The exceptions would be pairs with varying meaning in masculine and feminine: “el (→ lo) corte”/“la corte,” and words with reference to sexuality: animals such as “buey” and “semental,” terms of nobility (“rey,” “duque”), discussed later, and “padre” and “madre.”

¹¹ For nouns not ending in *-o* or *-a*, I would recommend against the conservation of feminine markers (“presidenta”) and creation of marked masculine forms in *-o*, i.e. “presidento,” “franceso,” “señoro.” A goal is to remove superfluous gender markers, and these are redundant in most cases. (The exception: when no article is used, with the articleless predicate noun [“es francesa”] and with the singular or third person plural unstressed possessive adjective [“mi señora”].) However, the augmentative suffix *-ono* would be required, parallel to *-ona*, for use with nouns ending in *-o*.

The crucial and unique case, in fact, is that of “padre”/“madre.” If one is not to use “mis padres,” how can one say “my parents”? This is the only instance in which no existing term is adequate. I propose, on the model of English and French, assigning this meaning to “mis parientes.”

We now have a Spanish from which inherent sexism has been removed. The language has also been made simpler and more logical, and these changes have been accomplished without creation of new words or endings. No doubt “el profesor buene,” “aquello poeto,” and “la francés” would sound “strange” at first, but “la diputado” (Frank, p. 45), “la mano,” and “aquellos artistas” to my ears sound even stranger.

There is enormous resistance to linguistic change, which resistance is seemingly neurological in origin. There is similar resistance to the societal changes which such far-reaching linguistic changes would cause. The preceding is not presented with the [p. 196] expectation that it will be taken seriously, but it is at worst a harmless utopian speculation, and at best might call attention to a problem and provoke debate.