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SOME ASPECTS OF LINGUISTIC SEXISM IN SPANISH

1. Introduction

The primary purpose of this article is to create an awareness of the existence of linguistic sexism in the Spanish language. It does not pretend to be the ultimate word on androcentrism in Spanish, but rather a modest invitation to join in the discussion, investigation and interpretation in new creative efforts. The examples provided do not exhaust the range of intricacies of customary linguistic sexism in Spanish, but merely suggest the most common instances. Undoubtedly, some aspects of this exposition will be questioned and debated. Indeed, it is my intent to stimulate reflection and progress in the use of more inclusive, less discriminatory, non-sexist Spanish.

Since the sixties, a world-wide reawakening of women and men has occurred with regard to their roles in society. A growing number of feminists and sociolinguists has become newly aware of the power of language and how it has both contributed to and reflected women's subordinate position in society. They argue that any language which is sexist and insinuates an inferior position for women should be modified.

On the opposite side are those who feel that it is petty and ridiculous to worry about language. They affirm that they believe in equality and justice for all but believe that we should not "tamper with language". They insist that changing the language will not improve woman's condition in society anyhow since what one says does not matter.

However, what one says does matter. In 1922, the noted anthropologist and linguist, Edward Sapir, stated:

Language is a guide to "social reality"... It powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection... the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (1966:68/69)

Language can convey both symptoms and causes of the cultural malady of sexism. It is up to those who do believe in the power of language to make sure that it also functions as cure.

Linguistic sexism refers to the way language is used to reflect and maintain male dominance over women. It is not instinctive, but socially learned and socially patterned. As Bosmajian (1974:338) states, "The power of language to affect identity has been used repeatedly to define and dehumanize individuals or groups of individuals into submission."

Thorne and Henley (1975:5) state that "interest in the different
relations of the sexes to their language dates back at least to 1664, the year of the publication of a report which cites different women's and men's forms in the speech of the Carib people." Later studies concentrated primarily on women's and men's speech, not on linguistic sexism. Indeed, the little that was published about linguistic sex differences in English often made it seem to be a curiosity or amusement hardly worth serious study (cf. Thorne & Henley 1975:6).

An extensive and expanding bibliography now exists in the area of linguistic sexism; however, most of the research has been conducted in English on English. Not surprisingly, interest in the topic has emerged recently in other languages such as French, German and Spanish, where it is seen as a significant issue and a fruitful field of investigation.

The phenomenon of linguistic sexism in English has been examined from a feminist perspective in numerous disciplines: psychology, religion, literature, education, sociology, history, economy, biology and philosophy. The greatest efforts to eradicate sexist language have been exerted in the areas of education and religion.

By contrast, the literature for Spanish is still sparse. In Madrid, García Meseguer (1978) published Lenguaje y discriminación sexual, a pioneering work which studies linguistic sexism in Spanish dictionaries. At the University of Washington in Seattle, Suárez (1975) wrote her M.A. thesis on some aspects of sexism in Spanish. Other writers on this subject include Escobar and Hampares.

In Puerto Rico, some effort has been made to study and correct sexism in language and society. In 1978, the Comisión de Derechos Civiles de Puerto Rico published La igualdad de derechos y oportunidades de la mujer puerto-riqueña, an initial attempt to combat social sexism and establish equality. The study provides important evidence and valid recommendations.

A government-sponsored agency, the Comisión para el Mejoramiento de los Derechos de las Mujeres, has also made efforts to eliminate sexism. Its endeavors are not aimed solely at legal equality for women but at something more difficult, namely, to alter traditional attitudes toward women as inferior, incapable, dependent and submissive. With this latter objective in mind, in 1976 the agency published a series of books, Cuadernos sobre la mujer, which provide a critical analysis of women's roles in Puerto Rico as portrayed in the content, language and illustrations of children's elementary school Spanish readers. Another more recent publication, ¿Qué hacer? is a teacher's guide for classroom activities based on readers. The aim of the activities book is to counteract the limited and stereotyped image of women presented in the readers. A third publication in 1978 of Módulos (nine units) aims to raise consciousness regarding sexism in the Language and behavior of Puerto Rican society.

In 1979, the island's Department of Education published Machismo y educación en Puerto Rico by Isabel Picó, an excellent attempt to create awareness in classrooms.

In the following, two types of sexist usage in Spanish will be examined: grammatical and lexical. Both types reflect the social inequality between men and women in traditional Hispanic societies.