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# The Presence of Gender Issues in Spanish Dictionaries

Ana Costa Pérez  
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid  
Acosta.hum@uc3m.es

## Abstract

Dictionaries are ideological creations as they are but a reflection of society itself. A dictionary sets a standard for language; makes an authority, a cultural product, and builds a lexical *encyclopaedia* and a social reference. This analysis is built upon the idea of an undeniable overlap between ideology and dictionary and the role of the latter as a mechanism to transmit the limited sights of everything around us; talking is a world-defining act by individuals who forces themselves to adapt to a code which is seemingly open and closed at the same time; a code imposed by the society to which they belong and which will be enforced on future generations. Therefore, the present work will highlight the catalogue of definitions that challenge the descriptive neutrality of current lexicographical work, turned into dictionaries which should mirror an equal society, without discrimination.

This requires defining the concept from different scopes: linguistic, anthropological, sociolinguistic, philosophical or cognitive. We aim at showing how grammar, with its two (and even up to three) *genera*, provides us with the perfect field to focus on sexes, at both biological and social senses, on Nature and Culture, without favouring the existence of two different sexes nor any individual powers and decisions. The *Academia* notes that the Spanish language foresees the possibility to refer to mixed groups through the grammatical masculine gender, possibility in which there is no discriminatory intent, but the application of the linguistic law based in the expressive economy. Only when the opposition of the sexes is a relevant factor in the context, the Academy considers necessary the explicit presence of both genders

**Keywords:** Dictionaries; Gender; Ideology

## 1 Preliminary Issues

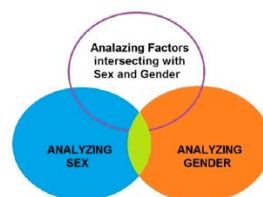
Gender is linguistically reserved for words in which sex evidences a sexed condition of human beings. But if such a distinction is so shockingly clear, why does it continue to emerge almost cyclically? why the same arguments about this pair of concepts in specialized areas such as grammar or lexicography?

Taking a diachronic perspective, we can check how talking about gender from a feminist perspective, rather than a more objective one, sets a more objective scope, that of women-centered movements.

The objective, as such, arises when we try to return gender to unmarked meanings, free from criticism, politics or claims.

When defining one or several related categories based on what has been historically common to them, it is essential to analyze the gaps where they cease to be common. For example, categorically man or woman can not conceive based on specific characteristics, but the problem is that some concepts contain a complex network of variables that unravel some concepts of our language, such as gender, mother, sex, marriage, education, fatherhood, female, manhood, religion or science. Though taking the form of descriptive definitions, they are actually conditioned acts. This is due to an attempt to isolate, to “numb” the emotional charge that for years has been lodged in certain socially marked terms.

That is why a big part of what has been traditionally charged to both man and woman have depended on an intervened meaning. Therefore, we have chosen a descriptive approach based on the analysis of the definitions provided by the academic dictionary related to various *nuclea* of meaning: the major professions, body differences, adjectives related to personality or maternity / paternity will be the main ones. Through comparative analysis (masculine and feminine terms will be opposed), we will try to highlight the ideology underlying the definitions of the Spanish Academy dictionary. ( Figure1)



**Figure 1: Analyzing Gender.**

## 2 Methodology

For the last 20 years, treating languages by meanings of databases (linguistic *corpora*) has turned into a challenge that has been imposed to all the linguists and lexicographers. The structure of information in IT bases presents big advantages. The constant number of systems of meaning (semantic fields) allows describing the lexical elements in an unified and coherent way. Thus, it is guaranteed, for all the lexical units of a certain type, a common methodological response. The comparisons among related terms are possible and objectivable and we can proceed to controls which guarantee coherence, regularity and uniformity.

*Corpus* linguistics stands as a method for carrying out linguistic analyses. As it can be used for researching many kinds of linguistic questions and, as it has been shown to have the potential to yield

highly interesting and new insights about language and relationships between men and women, it has become one of the most widespread methods of linguistic research in the last years.

In order to elaborate complete and systematic definitions, I hereby make a proposal to establish a standard of definition for every category included in meaning systems (1 to 6). Then, we will decide the characteristics that must appear in the concept definitions belonging to the systems that I specify in the appendix. At present, different strategies or methods of definition coexist, and then the lexicographer chooses, yet never openly opting for a single one, combining different methods.

For these definitions we have to bear in mind the following:

- (1) Context: general information of the word in question in relation to its frequency of use.
- (2) Situation: how people deal with, define or perceive the term. This point is based on the topics the study is based upon.
- (3) Perspectives: possible ways of defining a term (end)
- (4) I process (try): it (he, she) sequences of semes, flow of information, changes of meaning in the time.
- (5) Activities and events: difficulties to find definitions related the obsolescence or frequency of the different meanings.
- (6) Strategies: ways of managing information.
- (7) Relations and social structure: ideology presents in the standards of definitions.

After extracting the terms from the CREA (Sincronic Spanish Database) and CORDE (Diacronic Spanish Database) databases, we have proceeded to arrange the results from the definitions of the dictionaries. They are generally accessible *corpora*, accessible to everyone *via* Spanish Academy Web (<http://www.rae.es>).

Coming across the definitions and contexts, we will be able to observe the features describing men and women

The definitions which dictionaries offer about correlative terms (in masculine and feminine) do not coincide at informative levels, thus offering a diverse kind of *seme* in every case.

The aim of this project is to analyze the definitions that refer to terms related to women and men in different semantics systems and them to arrange when recounted to men and to analyze possible faults so much to macrostructure as well as microstructure level. We pretend to give a fully readable account of how dictionaries represent women and men.

The result of this study goes towards a standard of definition for the concepts included in the systems listed in the appendix.

### 3 Discussion

Gender, as we have seen, is globally understood as the set of beliefs, prescriptions and attributions that are socially constructed taking sexual difference as a base. This social construction works sometimes as a kind of cultural “filter”, one through which reality is interpreted, due to that tendency of every society to define what is proper for women and what is proper for men, and above this cultural framework, setting out the obligations of each sex.

From childhood we perceive representations of what is proper to each sex through language, and the materiality of culture (objects, images, etc.). It has been that children between two and three years old, know how to refer to themselves in feminine or masculine, but do not necessarily have a clear notion of the actual biological differences.

Today, the notion of ideology, born linked to *bourgeois* society in which a set of values and ideals, driven by political and social pluralism, led to today’s modern society. Social representations are symbolic constructions that give powers to the objective and subjective behavior of people. The social environment is more than a territory, a symbolic space defined by the imagination, and decisive in the construction of each person self-image, consciousness is inhabited by social discourse. Lucien Goldmann states in this regard that

“The overall vision of human relations between man and the universe implies, this type of collective consciousness, the possibility, and often the actual presence of an ideal man and this leads us to differentiate the type of collective consciousness that we call ideology, called view of the world “(Goldman, 1969: 210).

**Sociolinguistics:** Although the behavioral differences between men and women are explained in a general way as a product of sex (vocal cords, tonal range), gender has been linked to the position in society and the complex network of relationships that are developed within it.

**Anthropological:** The word gender attempts to rebuild each and every one of the areas of significance that have been superimposed for decades, unraveling the network of relationships and social interactions that are constructed from the symbolic division into sexes. In the psychological field, we also emphasize the neither natural nor spontaneous character of the categories male and female,

**Linguistic:** We aim at showing how grammar, with its two (and even up to 3) genera, provides us with the perfect field to focus on sexes, at both biological and social senses, on Nature and Culture, without favoring the existence of two different sexes nor any individual powers and decisions. The Academy notes that the Spanish language foresees the possibility to refer to mixed groups through the grammatical masculine gender, possibility in which there is no discriminatory intent, but the application of the linguistic law based in the expressive economy. Only when the opposition of the sexes is a relevant factor in the context, the Academy considers necessary the explicit presence of both genders.

## 4 Conclusion

Human beings symbolize a basic material, which is identical in every society: bodily difference, specifically sex. Although apparently biology shows that human beings are in both sexes, more combinations arise from the five physiological areas. Of these five areas depends on what, in general terms and in a very simplistic way, has been called the "biological sex" of a person: genes, hormones, gonads, internal reproductive organs and external reproductive organs (genitals).

Although the multitude of cultural representations of biological facts is very large and has varying degrees of complexity, sexual difference has some basic persistence and is the source of our image of the world, as opposed to some other. The body is the first uncontrollable evidence of human difference. The culture marks human beings with gender and gender marks perception of everything else: social, political, religious and quotidian.

The dictionary is an ideological creation. It reflects the society and the dominant ideology. As indisputable authority, as a cultural tool, the dictionary acts as a fixing element and intends to the conservation, not only of language but also the attitudes and ideology behind it.

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## **Appendix**

Corpora: List of Words used in the research (Spanish Language).

### System 1: Women social respect

Distinguished: dama, damisela, dona, dueña, gran señora, madama, madamisela, madona, maestra, matrona, ricadueña, ricahembra, señora, señorita, señora principal, señorita.

Esteem: mujercilla, mujeruca, mujerzuela, mujeruca, pingo, prójima

### System 2: Women relationships

Lawful: dama, barragana, cara mitad, conyuge, consorte, costilla, esposa, desposada, media naranja, mujer, mujer velada, mujer de bendición, oponente, pareja, señora.

Unlawful: barragan, coima, combleza, compañera, concubina, daifa, entretenida, manceba, pretendida

### System 3: Women appearance

Seme +beuty: Beldad, belleza, bombón, gachí, gachona, hembra, hembra de bandera, hermosura, monumento, preciosidad, sílfide, venus.

Seme stocky: buena moza, moza, mujerona, real moza

Seme masculinity : machota, machirulo, marimacho, marota, varona, varonesa, virago.

### System 4: Women procreation

seme sterile: horra, mañera, machorra

seme fertile: descinta, embarazada, empuñada, encinta, gestante, gravida, madre, malparida, multipara, mulipara, parida, paridera, paridora, parturienta, parturiente, preñada, primeraza, primípara, puépera, recién parida.

### System 5: Women sexuality

seme virginity: doncella, doncellueca, escosa, entera, poncela, prematura, virgen

seme homosexuality: bollera, fricadora, lesbiana, tortillera, tribada

seme "sexual desires": cachonda, salida, ninfómana.

Seme "sex trade": prostituta, andorra, ave nocturna, bagasa, baldonada, bacanera, burraca, buscona...

### System 6: Women personality

Seme "dishonest" corralera, escaldada, facilona, farota, galante, mujer fatal, piruja, tigresa, tragona, vampiresa, ventanera,

Seme "gossip": alcahueta, celestina, comadre, lagarta, pécora, tercera, trotaconventos, víbora.

Seme "bad temper": arpía, mujerota, sargenta, sargentona

Seme "boastful": bachillera, coqueta, lechugina, marisabidilla, petimetra.