

COMPARING SEXIST EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH: (DE)-CONSTRUCTING SEXISM THROUGH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Literature, folklore, dictionaries and grammars have used and explained language manifestations to conform to the idea that male should be the standard of humanity (Spender 1980). Against this historical background, feminists during the 1970s and later politically correct advocates of the 1990s started battling against sexism in language, providing solutions, in the form of guidelines, booklets, glossaries, etc (Key 1975, Maggio 1987, 1991, McMinn 1991).

The present article explores the value assumption: “male equals positive and normal, female equals negative and abnormal” (Lakoff 1975, 2001) and, by paying attention to semantic biased deviations, gives a historical account of male and female counterparts. The corpus will be drawn from monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, dictionaries of idiomatic expressions, slang and proverbs to offer a diachronic study of sexist language mainly in English and in Spanish. Synonyms for certain terms

Resumen

La literatura, el folclore, los diccionarios y las gramáticas han utilizado y explicado las manifestaciones lingüísticas de modo que se adapten a la idea de que lo masculino debe ser el criterio universal (Spender 1980). Frente a estos antecedentes históricos, las feministas durante los años 70 y, posteriormente, los defensores de lo políticamente correcto de los 90, comenzaron una batalla contra el sexismo en el lenguaje, proporcionando soluciones en forma de pautas, folletos, glosarios, etc (Key 1975, Maggio 1987, 1991, McMinn 1991).

El presente artículo explora la afirmación: “male equals positive and normal, female equals negative and abnormal” (Lakoff 1975, 2001) y, al prestar atención a desviaciones semánticamente parciales, proporcionar una visión histórica de equivalentes masculinos y femeninos. El corpus se construirá a partir de diccionarios monolingües y bilingües, diccionarios de expresiones idiomáticas, argot y proverbios para ofrecer un estudio diacrónico del lenguaje sexista, principalmente en inglés y español. Los

will be drawn from Web pages and to measure the currency of some of the examples three on-line corpora will be used. The sociocultural framework of these terms and expressions will be studied to see to what extent they have moulded both societies and what effects they have in women's lives today.

Key Words: Gender, Sexism, Stereotyping, Humour.

sinónimos de algunas palabras se extraerán de páginas web y, para medir la actualidad de algunos de los ejemplos, se utilizarán tres corpus en línea. Se analizará también el marco sociocultural de estos términos y expresiones para ver hasta qué punto han moldeado ambas sociedades y qué efectos tienen actualmente en la vida de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Género, Sexismo, Estereotipos, Humor.

INTRODUCTION

When feminist studies during the 1970s began addressing questions of gender, sexist attitudes and gender stereotyping emerged as their two principal concerns (Rudman & Phelan 2007:20-21). Much empirical research showed that when we communicate gender, the same assumptions and the same sociological constructs were reproduced in almost all languages. Man's experiences were seen as the norm and females experiences as the anti-norm (Schulz 1975). The Women's Movement fought against this androcentrism, denouncing that it had been ruling the world for too long. Feminists argued that language was, then, a tool men (and by extension society) used to reproduce sexist patterns of behaviour (Penfield 1987, Cameron 1990).

One of the first androgyny theorists, Sandra Bem, argued that the differences between men and women were the result of variations in their socialization experiences (Worell 2001:442). Socialization has followed men's rules and that is the reason why society has been constructed through an androcentric lens. Through that biased lens social typing and stereotyping have reduced women's space, and women's actions. According to Talbot, social typing involves classifying people "in terms of the social positions they inhabit, their group membership, personality traits, and so on" (Talbot 2003:471). This article will discuss how dictionaries offer a negative social typing of women when selecting examples to illustrate definitions. As regards stereotyping, Talbot states that it "reduces and simplifies" individuals, trapping them into rigid categories. She adds that both practices help maintain "the social and symbolic order" and at the same time mark a dividing line between what is

normal and acceptable and what is abnormal and unacceptable (Talbot 2003:471). In our study synonyms for male and female sexual organs and the use of figurative speech to describe both genders will show how language has stereotyped women and diminished their role in society.

Negative stereotypes have been commonly directed at subordinate groups (Oskamp 2000:47) (Oskamp & Schultz 2005:423), and among them, women have occupied a place of honour. One example of how female stereotyping functions can be seen through a study Hall (1995) conducted on sex-line workers. Hall observed that those women that portrayed themselves on the phone as being submissive and sexually accommodating were the ones that earned the most money. In this scenario, women become victims of the stereotypes that a patriarchal society has constructed about them. Balagangadhara's thesis on the nature of social stereotypes in inter-individual relations postulates that these stereotypes are part of our "cognitive map" as they are capable of transforming actions, expressions, or preferences into stable and constant properties (2011:9). Other accounts of stereotype formation show that, rather than resulting from cognitive biases, "stereotypes may form to reflect *actual* observed differences between groups" (McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears 2002:70). Certain traits are assigned to one specific gender and that results in the formation of specific stereotypes associated to each gender. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss the intrinsic nature of stereotypes, or how they are formed. Our main aim is to examine how language plays a fundamental role in both transmitting the ideological positioning of patriarchy and cementing a consensus attitude towards the truth value of the female stereotype.

This present article will evidence how English and Spanish reproduce sexist pattern of behaviour and will explore the repercussions of sexism in women's lives. Firstly, we will begin by looking at the examples employed to illustrate the entries 'man' and 'woman' in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1984), *The Penguin English Dictionary* (2003, second edition) and the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española* (2001, 22nd edition). Our hypothesis is that, even today, dictionaries show an imbalance between both terms. Secondly, we will proceed to give an account of sexism in the discourse about women at a lexical level. We shall analyse, following García Meseguer (1977, 1994), nine instances of apparent duals in English and four instances in Spanish. To show how an androcentric discourse has tinted language throughout history, we shall employ a diachronic analysis. In order to do so, we will consult *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1961, 1982), *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (1935) and the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española* (2001). From here, we shall move onto an area where the semantic derogation of women is blatant: that of women's

and men's genitalia. Twelve terms for female genitalia and eleven for male genitalia in English will be discussed. In Spanish we will select four, and thirteen respectively. Furthermore, seven expressions for sexual intercourse in English will be compared with ten expressions in Spanish. Following this, we will include two sections on figurative speech. The first one shall deal with instances of food imagery and the second with examples of animal imagery. A total of twelve metaphoric expressions in English and six in Spanish related to food will be considered. As regards animal metaphors, three pairs of apparent duals in English and six in Spanish will be studied. The last section will be devoted to the representation of women in old sayings. Although, most of the examples will be taken from English (seven proverbs) and Spanish (nine proverbs), we will also offer similar examples from other languages. The corpus, in all these cases, will be selected from different Web pages (forums and on-line dictionaries of synonyms) and from the more relevant literature on the topic.

HOW DO WE LABEL OURSELVES?

Traditionally, it has been language that has been responsible for codifying most of the stereotypes which reinforce sexism and reaffirm male supremacy. Sociolinguists and feminists have demonstrated that language has served to keep women in their place (Lakoff 2003), because men have created language to diminish women and to exert power and dominance over them (Spender 1980). According to Mills (1995) dictionary makers tend to be predominately middle-aged and middle-class males, and it is their conscious and unconscious attitudes towards female gender that reinforce sexist stereotyping. This male dominance can also be seen in the Real Academia de la Lengua Española. Of the 46 members (at the moment there are 43 because three members have died recently and there are three vacancies) there are only five women. Inés Fernández Iglesias aged 50 entered the academy in 2008, and is its youngest member. Although dictionaries should be mainly descriptive, their definitions turn prescriptive, providing the "correct" meaning of a word (Mills 1995:123). One of the most common stereotypes found in dictionaries is that of 'woman' as a sexual being, versus generic 'man.' Pauwels affirms that in the definitions for the word 'woman' her biological features are stressed, either in terms of "her reproductive capacity, or her capacity to engage in sexual activity" (1998:25). In the 2001 edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* issued by the

Real Academia de la Lengua Española, (*DRAE*, from here on) under the heading ‘mujer’, the third entry says: “mujer que tiene cualidades consideradas femeninas por excelencia. ¡Esa sí que es una mujer!” (*DRAE* 2001:1551). Under the heading ‘hombre,’ the fifth entry says: “Individuo que tiene las cualidades consideradas varoniles por excelencia, como el valor y la firmeza. ¡Ese sí que es un hombre!” (2001:1223). Lledó Cunill argues that although both examples are modelled the same, the naming of two ‘supposedly’ male features gives a biased meaning to the term:

[...] sí se sabe en los hombres que las cualidades varoniles por excelencia –o simplemente el manido estereotipo– son el valor y la firmeza; quedan en el aire, sin embargo, cuáles deben de ser en las mujeres (y el ejemplo no nos aclara nada). (2004:160)

This attitude is not confined to Spanish, and a cursory glance at the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* reveals a similar mechanism at work. In the 1984 edition, of the two entries for ‘woman’, entry number four says: “(a female person with) female nature or qualities, such as caring for weak creatures, personal attractiveness, and interests in people” (1984:1266). Entry number seven under ‘man’ states: “a male person with courage, firmness, etc.” (1984:660). The *Penguin English Dictionary* (2003, revised edition) offers more neutral definitions when referring to ‘man’: “an adult human male,” “a male sexual partner” and, in the general sense, “the human race” (2003:844). However, while ‘woman’ is also defined as “an adult human being”, the following definitions stray into the anecdotal and stereotype. One definition reads: “A woman is like a teabag –only in hot water do you realize how strong she is– Nancy Reagan”. And for the adjective ‘womanly’ the definition gives “gentleness and grace” as the typical qualities associated to women and part of the “distinctively feminine nature” (2003:1620). As these examples prove, modern day dictionaries are not mere neutral linguistic tools of a descriptive nature; they serve to reinforce prescribed female stereotypes, despite the continual attempts made by feminist writers to remove sexism from society.²²

²² In Spain there is a committee, called NOMBRA –acronym for No Omitas Mujeres. Busca Representaciones Adecuadas –, that advises about language policies related to gender and sexism. It was founded in 1994 and its members are philologists, historians, journalists, etc. Since its inception, it has published several works on language and gender (Calero Fernández 1999:155). In 1998 some of its members published a study about sexist examples in the 1992 edition of the *DRAE*. Their recommendations seem not to have any effect because in the following edition, that of 2001, almost all the sexist examples were again employed. After the last edition was issued, they published another lengthy study comparing both. These are some of the conclusions they reached: the number of entries related to women’s physical appearance outnumbers hugely that of men’s. Women’s youth is valued positively whereas, old age contains negative elements. Entries to describe young women are trivial and associated with light heartedness, whereas those referring to mature women always contain pejorative terms. Women are criticised for their

Other examples of gender stereotyping can be found in the sentences used to define certain words in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*. Kaye (1989b) found that, although the dictionary's editors made certain attempts to avoid sexist stereotyping through the use of the pronouns 'they' or 'them,' these gestures of gender neutrality were abandoned when specific semantic fields, such as that of romance, were analysed. Women became the object of all the examples provided, and were thus essentialised inasmuch as they were identified with possessing these innate qualities. Furthermore, there was a higher ratio of negative portrayals of women as compared to men in many semantically loaded fields, such as those referring to drugs and alcohol. As Kaye points out: "Even the illustration of an innocent word such as 'flop' seems singularly different for the two sexes: 'He flopped down on the bed and read for a while,' (Man the intellectual!). 'She flopped into an armchair with a drink'" (1989b:194).

For Lledó Cunill the examples employed to clarify the meaning of a term are very useful to understand a society. Dictionaries not only give us linguistic data, but also reflect the ideology, the cultural paradigms, the prejudices, etc. of that society (2004:24). And, indeed, after reading Lledó Cunill's, et al. analysis of the *DRAE* we can conclude that the Spanish society is sexist when representing women. More than half of the examples provide to describe women are negative, while positive attributes highlight stereotypical features such as charm, elegance or attractiveness (2004:46). This fact highlights how certain clichés and myths about the traditional role of women are still engrained in the collective mind.²³

physical appearance. The great amount of synonyms for female body parts reflects the male imagery obsessed with the woman's body ready to be looked at and touched (Lledó Cunill 2004:226).

²³ The asymmetry is evident in these cases. For the diminutive suffix: '-zuelo', '-zuela', the *DRAE* (2001:2249) offers the example 'mujerzuela' as a synonym for prostitute. The example in the masculine form is 'escritorzuelo' (hack writer), the suffix adds a negative nuance to the term, yet, this term refers to a profession with positive connotations. When referring to the male gender the negative load of the suffix is thus minimised (Lledó Cunill 2004:37).

SEMANTIC DEROGATION: APPARENT DUALS

The asymmetry between men and women in the world is transferred to language, generating a process of semantic derogation towards women (Schulz 1975). Throughout history, many words coined to designate women have suffered a semantic disparagement. The evidence is appalling when compared with their male counterparts. An almost endless list of male/female terms in which the value assumption: “male equals positive, female equals negative” (Lakoff 1975) operates can be produced: ‘lord’/‘lady’, ‘sir’/‘madam’, ‘courtier’/‘courtesan’, ‘host’/‘hostess’, ‘master’/‘mistress’, ‘governor’ / ‘governess’, ‘king’/‘queen’, ‘wizard’/‘witch’, ‘bachelor’/ ‘spinster’, etc. Some of these pairs find their equivalents in Spanish, for instance: ‘cortesano’ / ‘cortesana’, ‘maestro’/‘maestra’, ‘gobernante’/‘gobernanta’, ‘solterón’ / ‘solterona’. García Meseguer calls these pairs apparent duals, as they do not mean the same when applied to a male or a female (1977:121). For some of them, however, the asymmetry was not always evident but has been the result of a historical debasement for the female term. For the purpose of this study we have selected nine examples in English and four in Spanish and we propose a diachronic study of these pairs to show how prejudices against women have been cemented through these asymmetrical pairs and how language, and specifically the manipulation of specific semantic fields, is at the service of an essentialising ideology.

When looking at the pair ‘lord’/‘lady’, we are told that ‘lady’ is used generally to refer to any woman, but it is not possible to use ‘lord’ for adult male strangers. ‘Lord’ is a “man of rank or high position” (*The Penguin English Dictionary* 2003:824) (*PED*, from now on); it can also be used to refer to Jesus Christ, endowing the term with supernatural features. On the other hand, ‘lady’, which can mean ‘a woman of refinement or superior position’ (*PED* 2003:782), forms part of compounds like ‘dinner lady’ or ‘cleaning lady’ which indicate a semantic deterioration of the term (Mills 1995:111). Within the discourse of social typing, the origin of both terms attests to the dividing roles of both sexes. ‘Lady’ in Old English meant “the kneader of bread” whereas ‘lord’ meant the “keeper of bread” (*PED* 2003:782), the breadwinners of today. As with ‘lord’, ‘sir’ is used as a form of respect, whereas ‘madam’ could be applied to the owner of a brothel. In such a place we can find ‘courtesans’ (synonym for a prostitute from the seventeenth century onwards). Likewise entry number seven for ‘cortesana’ in the *DRAE* reads: “Mujer de costumbres libres” (2001:670). ‘Courtier’ or ‘cortesano’ on the contrary, have not been devalued; as it is not ‘host’, whereas the female term ‘hostess’ is another synonym for prostitute.

This use, however, did not enter the language until the 1970s (*Oxford English Dictionary Supplement II* 1982:162).

In the pair ‘master’/‘mistress’, the word ‘master’ is associated to expertise in any field; moreover, the collocation ‘old master’ reinforces that idea. Its female counterpart contains very different nuances, as, for instance, calling someone an ‘old mistress’ has more to do with insulting than praising. The word ‘mistress’ in its origins was the woman controlling a household, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, from now on) shows in its first entry and quotes an example from 1426. However, the term was soon employed by men to refer to “a woman who has command over a man’s heart [...] a sweetheart, lady love” and it acquired negative connotations as the quotation from John Lydgate attests: “called in my cuntre a fals traitouresse [...] of newe defamed and namyd a maistresse,” that it is to say “a woman who illicitly occupies the place of a wife” (*OED VI* 1961:540), these negative connotations are still present today. In Spanish the pair ‘maestro’/‘maestra’ functions similarly. ‘Maestro’ could be either a schoolteacher or an expert, whereas ‘maestra’ is only a schoolmistress. In the *DRAE*, entry number 8 for ‘maestro’ says: “Hombre que tenía el grado mayor en filosofía, conferido por una universidad,” and for the entry ‘maestro de obras’ it says: “Hombre que, sin titulación, dirige el trabajo de albañiles, peones, etc., en una obra” (2001:1416). Therefore, with or without qualifications, being a ‘master’ is linked to masculinity.

In the pair: ‘governor’/‘governess’, the latter is only a woman in charge of the teaching and supervision of children, whereas the male counterpart refers to a ruler of a country. In Spanish ‘gobernanta’ is either a woman in charge of the cleaning duties in a hotel, or a woman in charge of the administration of a household (*DRAE* 2001:1141). There is no correspondence with its male counterpart. For the pair ‘king’/‘queen’, we can find an ironic implication in the word ‘queen’ that it is not present in ‘king’. At the beginning of the twentieth century the term ‘queen’ acquired a new meaning: “a male homosexual, esp. the effeminate partner in a homosexual relationship” (*OED Supplement III* 1982:969). In Spanish we could translate this word for ‘reinona’ which, although is not included in the 2001 edition of the *DRAE*, is frequently used today in the mass-media.²⁴ Probably, one of the clearest examples of apparent

²⁴ Navarro (2005) offers a glossary of compounds formed with the term ‘queen’ and for ‘prissy queen’ she gives the translation ‘reinona’: “El equivalente más exacto en español es “reinona”, es decir, un gay altanero y muy orgulloso de su condición. Por lo general una reinona suele tener tendencia a ser marientera, es decir, a vestirse de mujer”. Rodríguez González in his *Diccionario Gay-lésbico* distinguishes between ‘reina’, word to refer to a homosexual who bases his attractiveness in affected gestures and looks (2008:393), while ‘reinona’ enjoys three separate entries, namely: ‘drag queen’, ‘old homosexual exerting power’, and ‘woman with distinguished looks’ (395).

duals is represented by the pair ‘wizard’/‘witch’, where ‘wizard’ undergoes a clear semantic amelioration. One of the meanings of ‘wizard’ refers to a philosopher or a wise man, the term ‘witch’, however, has suffered throughout history a pejoration. If we go to the *OED*’s definition for ‘witch’ we find: “woman supposed to have dealings with the devil” (1961:206). For Johnson, when people use this term to insult women they are not aware that ‘witch’ “originally referred to highly respected wise-women healers and midwives who for centuries were the main providers of health care” (2005:78). Using the word as an insult contributes to an ongoing cultural degradation of women and their historical role of women as healers (79). In Spanish, interestingly enough, the word ‘brujo’ derives from the feminine and not the other way round, which is the grammatical norm. We are allowed to ignore completely that in Spanish we form the feminine from the masculine form. It seems that being a woman could be a negative attribute ‘per se’, and henceforth the feminine word is here the “norm.”

Another pair where the negative connotations are associated with the female term is ‘bachelor’/‘spinster’. The word ‘spinster’ originated in the seventeenth century when the term was employed to refer to an unmarried woman. Being married was seen as something very desirable for women; not marrying, then, devalued women’s status. Spinsters, therefore, were seen as “rejected and undesirable” (Romaine 1999:92). The term has continued gathering other pejorative nuances along history and Romaine adds that it is through collocations that the word has been enriched with negative associations. The author cites adjectives such as: gossipy, dried-up, repressed, eccentric, etc. which have become attached to the otherwise semantically empty word ‘spinster’ which should mean no more and no less than: ‘a woman who has lost her husband.’ On the contrary, the majority of collocations for ‘bachelor’ are mostly “descriptive or positive” (Romaine 1999:93).²⁵ In Spanish, the pair ‘solterón’/‘solterona’ behaves similarly; the collocation ‘solterón de oro’, which refers to a middle-aged single man who is craved by women, contrasts greatly with some adjectives or expressions linked to his female counterpart: ‘amargada’, ‘reprimida’, ‘quedarse para vestir santos.’²⁶

²⁵ In the online *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, which totals more than 400 million words, drawn from spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts; we can find many negative collocations next to the word ‘spinster’, such as ‘aging’, ‘elderly’, ‘old’, ‘lonely’, ‘wiry’, ‘dried-up’, ‘lovelorn’, ‘bitter’, ‘fastidious’ or ‘uptight’. ‘Bachelor’, on the contrary is tinted with collocations as ‘ideal’, ‘best’, ‘most/highly eligible’, ‘handsome’, ‘nice’, ‘hottest’, or ‘one-night’. It also goes with the noun ‘party’, as a synonym for ‘stag party.’

²⁶ In the *Corpus on-line del Español (CdE)* collected by Mark Davies with more than 100.000 terms extracted from literary works and printed press and covering a period of eight centuries, the word ‘solterona’ appears 52 times, and most of the adjectives paired to the term are negative:

So far, we have established that, within the linguistic order, a clear semantic rule operates whereby, within a symmetric pair, the word applied to males is semantically marked as positive while the female one is marked negative. For Pauwels this asymmetrical attitude towards the linguistically neutral term spreads out into other word pairs that are not lexically marked for the sex (1998:51). The author provides examples such as: ‘He is a secretary’ and /‘she is a secretary’, ‘he is a professional’ versus ‘she is a professional’, ‘he is a tramp’ and ‘she is a tramp’. In the last two examples the sexual overtones are clear when the term is addressed to women. In Spanish the sentence ‘ella es una profesional’ produces the same effect as in English, equating ‘woman’ with a ‘prostitute’. As regards the first example, the term ‘secretaria’ can be a source of humorous jokes, most of which have sexual connotations. Other examples of semantic asymmetry are reflected in the expressions ‘hacerse mujer’, which only implies a physical development versus ‘hacerse hombre’ which means to acquire social achievement. ‘Un cualquiera’, a mister nobody, is not as semantically deviant as ‘una cualquiera’, meaning a prostitute. In ‘mujer de vida alegre’ (literally translated as women leading a carefree, happy life), the fact that a woman is free from social conventions in relation to sex is seen as something negative. On the contrary, ‘hombre de vida alegre’ lacks any pejoration. The imbalance is again manifest when comparing the adjective ‘perdido’ with their feminine form ‘perdida’, as we assist to a demeaning of the female counterpart. Women are thus stigmatised if their sexual behaviour does not conform to society.

García Meseguer uses the examples ‘verdulero’ versus ‘verdulera’, ‘individuo’ versus ‘individua’ or ‘celestino’ versus ‘celestina’ (1994:30) to highlight how language purports patriarchy. For Johnson, “what is culturally valued is associated with masculinity and maleness, and what it is devalued is associated with femininity and femaleness” (2005:89). This is clearly reflected in expressions that make use of male genitalia. In Spanish the slang expression: ‘ser cojonudo’ is highly positive, whereas ‘ser un coñazo’ is only employed in negative contexts. In English, using ‘fucking’ with positive adjectives like ‘great’ intensifies the positive meaning. Similar expressions such as: ‘having balls’ and its equivalent in Spanish ‘tenerlos bien puestos’ all reinforce the notion that courage is essentially masculine. The equivalent expressions to refer to a woman who is brave, i.e. ‘having ovaries’ (in Spanish ‘tener ovarios’ or ‘mujer ovárica’) is seldom heard and not fully accepted. Cowardice, on the

‘vieja’, ‘acartonada’, ‘encanijada’, ‘histérica’. For ‘solterón’ with an occurrence of 68 times only two adjectives are used: ‘empedernido’ and ‘impenitente’. Likewise, in the online corpus issued by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, *CREA*, we can find adjectives such as: ‘fea’, ‘loca’, ‘frustrada’, ‘estúpida’, or ‘marchita’ reinforce the negative prejudices associated to this term.

contrary, is associated with being female and words such as ‘sissy’, ‘pussy’ and ‘girl’ or in Spanish ‘gallina’ bear this stereotype out.

WOMEN, MEN AND “THEIR SEX”

Vocabulary specifically related to sex is where the stereotypic image of women as objects comes into its own. As Schulz assures: “A rich vocabulary on a given subject reflects an area of concern of the society whose language is being studied” (1975:64), and she has recorded 1,000 terms and phrases describing women in sexually derogatory terms. Most of the terms for women related to sexual activity are either insults intended to degrade them, or they focus on the sexual act from a male perspective. In the words of Pauwels: “The language and discourse of sex and sexual activity is said to be a clear testimony to the fact that it is men who have the power to name and define language” (1998:55).

Words for women’s genitalia are mostly perceived as receptacles. The terms emphasize the passive role women adopt in sexual intercourse (Utton 1992:564). Examples such as: ‘box’ (‘jelly-’, ‘tool’), ‘hole’ (‘cheese-’, ‘glory-’, ‘slam-’, ‘stimey’), ‘honeypot’, ‘muff’ bear this out. Women, it seems, only exist as holes, and pots full of nice things for men. The Spanish words such as ‘cueva (cálida)’, ‘gruta’, ‘túnel’ or ‘concha’ all allude to a place for men to hide.²⁷ Mills points out that in English there are not acceptable terms “to bridge the gap between the formal words for female genitalia associated with medicine and science, like ‘vagina’ and ‘vulva’, and the most colloquial, glossed in dictionaries as ‘taboo’ and ‘offensive’” and she illustrates it with the word ‘cunt’ (Mills 1995:104).²⁸ The author compares the terms used to refer to male and female genitalia, and she finds that while public references to male genitalia are socially acceptable and are employed without stigma, the same is not true of female genitalia. Whilst men can speak openly about their ‘private parts’,

²⁷ <http://diccionario.reverso.net/ingles-sinonimos/vagina>, <http://www.taringa.net/posts/humor/8710327/>

http://es.toluna.com/polls/126513/%C2%BFQu%C3%A9_sinonimos_de_%22co%C3%B1o%22_conoces%3F.

²⁸ *The Penguin English Dictionary* defines ‘cunt’ as a taboo term and in the second entry it reads “an abusive term for a person one dislikes” (2003:338).

women are denied this same liberty without causing offence.²⁹ Braun and Kitzinger (2001) carried out two studies on slang terms for male and female genitalia. In Study One, they found that more slang terms for males were produced, with men generating more terms. For the authors this “may reflect men's purported greater ease in talking about genitalia and sexual issues” (2001:154). In Study Two, they found that genital slang referred to women was more euphemistic and imprecise and frequently terms were connected with receptacles, disgust, hair or money. For them, this imprecision prevents women from communicating about what and where they feel and they concluded that women's genitalia is still viewed in a more deprecating way (Braun and Kitzinger 2001:156).

When looking at male genitalia, Romaine (1999) divides the metaphors men use to refer to their penises in two broad categories. In the first group are those that have to do with the idea that male erections and orgasms are uncontrollable. In this group we find terms in which penetration is associated with tools, or with wild animals. For instance: ‘drill’, ‘chopper’, ‘hose’, ‘pipe’, ‘snake’. In the second group we find terms related to war metaphors and mythic names. For example: ‘sword’, ‘gun’, ‘meatspear’, ‘beef bayonet’, ‘prick’, ‘King Kong’. For Romaine these words are “derived from a male view of sex as conquest and sport, the expression of sexual desire as violence, and an image of masculinity founded on dominance over women” (1999:245). In Spanish terms like: ‘Black&Decker’, ‘cachiporra’, ‘cipote’, ‘destornillador’, ‘herramienta’, ‘instrumento’, ‘manubrio’, ‘pistola’, ‘porra’, ‘rompebragas’, ‘taladro’, ‘trabuco’, ‘verga’, etc. also strengthen the idea of sexual intercourse as painful penetration.³⁰

Verbs used to describe sexual intercourse are often connected with the idea of hurting. The pejorative word ‘to screw’, for example, originally meant to scratch, to scarify. From the different hypothesis for the origin of the term ‘to fuck’, two are linked to aggressive behaviour. It may come from the German ‘ficken’, which means ‘to strike’; or it may come from Latin ‘futuo’.³¹ The etymology is very obscure, the original meaning may come from Greek ‘φύτω’, ‘to plant’, but it could also mean ‘to beat’, or ‘to hit’ (Adams

²⁹ For García Meseguer these are cases of lexical gaps (1994:35).

³⁰ See: <http://www.sinonimos.org/pene>, <http://es.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wikcionario:pene/Tesauro>, <http://www.taringa.net/comunidades/albureando-y-matando-al-chango/766738/Sinonimos-de-Pene.html> and <http://www.diccionariodesinonimos.es/pilila/>.

³¹ Adams points out that the compounds of ‘futuo’ found in Catullo all meant ‘exhaust’, referring to either a person or a body part. The term appeared frequently in Pompeian graffiti written probably by prostitutes “praising the sexual capacities of their clients.” It is also found in male boasts to indicate men's virility (Adams 1990:119-120).

1990:118). Other aggressive phrases are ‘to get into someone’, ‘to nail’, ‘to cut a slice of the joint’ and in Afro-American English ‘to rip her guts down’. In Spanish, we have similar images: ‘cepillársela’, ‘hincársela’, ‘montarla’, ‘pasarla por la piedra,’ ‘pisarla,’ ‘pincharla,’ ‘beneficiársela.’ As regards the term ‘follar,’ although the word comes from Latin ‘follis’ (bellows), one of the old meanings of the verb was ‘to fell’ and ‘to destroy’ (*DRAE* 2001:1073). The verb ‘joder’ has its roots in ‘futuere,’ which, as we have seen, originally meant ‘to plant’ or ‘to beat.’ From the idea of planting, we have, probably, the phrase “echar un polvo”, which clearly indicates the passive role of women in the sexual act. In Spanish, as well as in English, the verbs ‘follar’, ‘joder’, and ‘to fuck’ can also be employed figuratively to mean: ‘to harm’ or ‘to annoy someone’, ‘to spoil’ or ‘to ruin something’. This semantic derogation was present already in Latin ‘futuō’. In all these expressions women are the recipients of men’s actions. As Morant, Peñarroya and Tornal put it “Parece como si las mujeres se limitaran a estar presentes”, the man is the protagonist, and the woman is a silent presence (1998:104).

FOOD IMAGERY: WOMEN AS EDIBLES

Debasement is evident in those words that describe women in terms other than human (Falco 1973:293). Here we may include the plethora of vocabulary and phrases related to the imagery of food: ‘cheesecake’, ‘cherry’, ‘honey’, ‘peaches and cream’, ‘sugar’ (‘sugar and spice’), ‘sweetie’ (pie), ‘tart’. Looking at the etymological origins of the word ‘tart’ will help us to evince that social typing has always nullified women. ‘Tart’ is a loanword from French which was introduced in the fifteenth century meaning a ‘small pie’ or ‘pastry’. In the mid-nineteenth century, it started to be applied to a young woman as a term of endearment. From there it passed on to designate ‘a woman of immoral character’. The *OED* provides quotations from some newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century to illustrate the meaning: “*Daily News*, 5th Feb, 1894. Some of the women described themselves as ‘Tarts’, and said that they got their living in the best way they could” (*OED XI* 1961:499), and this semantic degradation is thus maintained today. Entry number three of the *PED* states that the noun could be used informally with two possible meanings. One is ‘a female prostitute’, the other ‘a girl or woman who is or appears to be, e.g. by the clothes she wears, sexually promiscuous’. However, after the definition and in brackets it says: ‘[prob short for SWEETHEART].’ (2003:1441). As this entry

shows, today, the word is ambivalent because it can be employed both as a term of endearment and as an insult. Food imagery is also employed to designate women's genitalia, which turns women or some of her parts into edibles. In a study about nicknames³² and stereotypes it was found that fathers gave their daughters nicknames related to either animals or to food: 'pet', 'midget', 'bum', 'honey' (-bun), 'sweetie', 'candy', 'cherry' (-pie) (Phillips 1990:286). The underlying idea drawn from these words is that women are good to eat, i.e. they are available for consumption (Mills 1995:116). These words together with others, such as 'dear', 'babe', 'doll', etc., function as terms of endearment between intimates but when they are employed by strangers the function changes. They are associated to condescendence, irritation or subordination (Romaine 1999:129). On the contrary, terms of endearments for men have not degenerated into insults, and Schulz (1975) provides examples such as 'boy', 'fellow', 'lad' or 'puppy' all of which have not undergone pejoration.

In language, men symbolically consume women. Spanish terms of endearment such as: 'bombón' ('bomboncito'), 'estar de vicio', 'estar buena', 'estar maciza', 'estar para chuparse los dedos', or 'estar para comérsela' bear this out.³³ Women are at the disposal of men for them to enjoy and taste. Women can reverse this appropriation, but run the risk of being socially marked as vulgar.

ANIMAL IMAGERY

Another area of semantic deprecation is reflected through animal imagery. A general linguistic classification of animals is determined by our relationship with them, and can be divided into proximity, domesticity, competition for resources and suitability for human food. This relationship with animals (often

³² In English, maybe, one of the few examples of a male nickname that has suffered a semantic pejoration is 'Jack'. Today it appears in more than a hundred words and phrases with negative connotations. Its bad reputation dates from the Middle Ages. Burridge gives a long list with examples that range from meaning ill-mannered person ('Jack Adams', 'Jack Strop'), to expressions for things that are inferior ('jack rabbit', 'jack flags') and euphemistic uses for bodily function and secretions ('jack off', 'I've got jack') (Burridge 2004:100-101).

³³ López García and Morant (1991) devote a chapter to the nature of compliments and they propose a classification in their book *Gramática Femenina*.

related with masculinity) crosses over into those analogies that sexist language uses where men's "domestication, dominance, property status, sexual access and the thrill of the hunt" are applied to women (Whaley & Antonelli, 1983:220). As we saw with several male and female pairs, animal pairs also display a sexist load, and the terms are again used derogatorily to describe women, their behaviour or their appearance. In the pair 'bull'/'cow' we can think of no reason why the term 'cow' is endowed with negative features, considering that in nature they are simply generic opposites. Adams and Donovan suggest that it has to do with the "exploitation of the cow for her milk". The idea stems from the image of an animal always kept pregnant, so it is permanently fat, and is also confined to a stall. As a consequence passiveness and dullness are two traits that become associated to the animal (1995:13). In Spanish, the same assumption is present in the expression: '¿A qué hora encierras/recoges a tu novia?' which shows how the boyfriend 'herds' his property to safety, thus treating his girlfriend like cattle. Very different are the associations for the word 'bull', which denote strength and stoutness; an implication also present in the Spanish word 'toro'. The phrase 'está hecho un toro' to mean that a man is very healthy, underlines the positive value of the male term. In the pair 'dog'/'bitch', the female is a pet "gone wrong" which has become a wild animal, has "usurped the master's control, and (has) taken over his territory" (Whaley & Antonelli 1983:225). The male counterpart 'dog' does not share any of the negative connotations for men, except when it is applied to a woman where, again, it debases women by meaning 'unattractive.'

Another classic example of semantic derogation is 'fox'/'vixen'. A woman termed a 'vixen' is seen as malicious as "she threatens a man's self-esteem and sense of security, intruding into his perceived domain" (Adams & Donovan 1995:15). For the authors, the derogation comes from the days when poultry was kept in yards, and the vixen tried to steal chickens or other fowl to feed its offspring. It was a predator which "often crossed human-drawn boundaries" (15). On the contrary, in 'fox' there is a hint of admiration for brains and cunning. When the vixen turns into a prey then a very different image is conjured up, as the collocation 'foxy lady' suggests. This is seen in one of the entries for 'foxy' in the *PED*, which reads: "said of a woman: physically attractive" (*PED* 2003:556). Whaley and Antonelli compare the British fox hunt with the pursuit of this "foxy woman", where the main purpose of the hunt is that of "sport (leisure) and symbolized status", intended not to put "meat on the table, but the display of conspicuous leisure". Here, the fox analogy is saying that a woman is a sex object worth possessing (1983:225). Fernández Fontecha and Jiménez Catalá carry out a contrastive-cognitive analysis of these two pairs, 'bull'/'cow' and 'fox'/'vixen' in English and Spanish and conclude that in both languages a semantic imbalance is found with regard to the most widely used metaphors where these terms appear (2003:792). Women are more negatively

depicted in general in both languages and they point out that this is the case because both societies are constructed under a patriarchal system where “men are clearly considered higher-order beings than women” (Fernández Fontecha & Jiménez Catalá 2003:794).

The term ‘hen party’ associates women with stupidity, fussiness and domesticity. Kaye provides a list of negative expressions associated with the term ‘hen’. She begins as a ‘chick’, who “all too soon begins to go to ‘hen-parties’, to ‘hen-peck’ her husband, to ‘cackle’ and ‘cluck’, and ends up an ‘old biddy’”³⁴ (Kaye 1989a:187). The expression is clearly a counterpoint for ‘stag party’ which underlies the idea of men as noble, strong and wild (Mills 1995:114). Again, we come across a metaphorical ‘last hunting’ gathering before the wedding. Indeed, there exists a large array of terms of endearment drawn from animals, often used in the diminutive form, which reinforce this idea of the man as a ‘hunter’ of women, enhancing the idea of women as inferior. For instance: ‘bird’, ‘bunny’, ‘chick’ or ‘duck’ (‘ducky’). Moreover, the animal analogies that men use when they refer to women as pets (such as ‘pussy’ or ‘kitty’) imply that a woman has to be domesticated. It seems Spanish is not that productive in this field, with ‘periquita’, being the only example that springs to our minds. Indeed most of these terms of endearment are doubled-edged words offering a distorted and very negative image of women.

The Spanish pairs ‘conejo’/‘coneja’; ‘lagarto’/‘lagarta’; ‘lobo’/‘loba’; ‘pájaro’/‘pájara’; ‘perro’/‘perra’; ‘zorro’/‘zorra’ all evidence the pervasive derogation towards women. Women are either seen as reproductive machines: ‘coneja’, as prostitutes: ‘perra’, ‘zorra’, or as shrewd creatures: ‘lagarta’ (‘lagartona’), ‘pájara’, ‘loba’. According to Londoño, the word ‘lupa’ in Latin acquired the meaning of prostitute when the Roman shepherds stayed away with their herds for long periods of time in the summer and were followed by women. Then, a system of bartering was established, i.e. a sheep in exchange for sexual intercourse. When coming back the shepherds blamed wolves for the loss of sheep. Londoño concludes: “La práctica se extendió hasta convertirse en una tradición bucólica, un hábito pastoril, un secreto a voces, y los propietarios de los rebaños se acostumbraron a incluir entre los gastos del pastoreo la pérdida de una o dos ovejas” (Londoño 2004). This derogation of the term has passed over into Spanish, and the word ‘loba’ refers to a woman devouring a man, i.e. a man-eater, exactly as a wolf does with a lamb.

The Spanish expression ‘ligera de cascos’, which compares a woman to a mare, it is only applied to women and has a negative connotation. Here, again,

³⁴ Romaine indicates that ‘biddy’ was employed in colonial America to refer ‘to an Irish maidservant, and a gossiping woman’ (1999:94).

women's sexual behaviour is judged negatively. However, an ambivalent attitude as regards the sexual role men want women to play is evident when we compare this expression with 'es una buena jaca'. The latter is clearly alluding to women's ability to satisfy the sexual desires of men. But in 'ligera de cascos' women's sexual behaviour is reproached. For Adams and Donovan: "Applying images of denigrated nonhuman species to women labels women inferior and available for abuse; attaching images of the aggrandized human species to men designates them superior and entitled to exploit" (1995:11).

OLD SAYINGS

Another area of language where sexism can be found is that of proverbs, set-phrases and other formulaic expressions. Considered a form of ancient knowledge, they are seen by many as axioms of incontestable truth: "they embody the concentrated experience of the race, and the man who orders his life according to their teaching cannot go far wrong" (*Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 1935:viii. *OEDP*, from now on). They are a source of stereotyping and misogyny, and have passed orally from generation to generation, rooting themselves in the collective mind. Literary texts, mostly from the English Renaissance period, employed these proverbs once and again within their discourse. The continual circulation of these sayings throughout the ages has transformed them into absolute truths, and these truths regulate human behaviour as they penalize or reward individuals according to the moral standards of society as dictated by male patriarchy (Calero Fernández 1999:126). Balagangadhara argues that old or wise sayings are a Western construction that has entered the Asian languages during colonization. For him Indian sayings such as "do not trust a crying man or a laughing woman" are not social stereotypes, but explicit instructions for action, mnemonic devices that help people to remember stories about human beings (2011:16-17). Whether these expressions are a way of looking at groups stereotypically in the West, or are parts of stories that help us to take decisions in the East, most of the axioms related to women have sprung from androcentric societies and depict women very negatively.

Examples of these universal truths are proverbs that define women's talk as trivial, unimportant or harmful. The Japanese proverb: "A woman's tongue three inches long can kill a man six feet high" (Pauwels 1998:65) speaks for

itself. There exists a plethora of similar and derogatory attitudes embedded in proverbs globally which are worth considering here so as to ascertain the degree of maliciousness directed towards women: “Never listen to a woman’s words” (Chinese); “At the window’s door there is much gossip” (Chinese) (Kaye 1989a:190); “A woman’s tongue is the last thing about her that dies” (English) (*OEDP* 1935:32); “Bad words make a woman worse”; “A woman’s tongue is the last thing about her that dies”; “Silence is a fine jewel for a woman, but it is little worn” (English) (Apperson 1929:32, 571, 704); “Secreto a mujer confiado, en la calle lo has echado” (Spanish) (Calero Fernández 1999:185). This historical attitude encoded within popular sayings is reflected particularly in the English language which contains an enormous variety of highly pejorative words for vocal, particularly verbally aggressive women. For Talbot the profusion of such words speaks for itself: “scold, gossip, nag, termagant, virago, harpy, harridan, dragon,³⁵ battleaxe, (castrating) bitch, fishwife, magpie, jay, parrot and poll” (2003:469). Something similar occurs in Spanish where words such as ‘arpía’, ‘comadrear’, ‘marimandona’ or ‘marisabidilla’ do not have a semantically equivalent term, and therefore there is a lexical gap in this field.

Proverbs are also notorious for either questioning a women’s intelligence, or simply deny them being intelligent: “It is an excellent virtue in a woman to have no talent” (Chinese) (Kaye 1989a:190); “A woman’s hair is long but her sense is short” (Russian) (Pauwels 1998:65); “When an ass climbs a ladder we may find wisdom in women” (English) (*OEDP* 1935:571); “A la mujer el hombre la ha de hacer” (Spanish) (Calero Fernández 1999:187). Women, seen as voluble and wicked, are also held responsible for mischief in men and the biblical echoes of Adam and Eve also get transferred into other popular sayings: “It is only a woman that can make a man become a parody of himself” (French) (Pauwels 1998:65); “Where the devil cannot cause a mischief, there he sends an old woman” (Serbian) (Pauwels 1998:65); “Women’s heart is most malicious”; “Woman is a source of trouble” (Chinese) (Kaye 1989:190); “El judío y la mujer vengativos suelen ser”; “La mujer y la avispa, por el rabo pican” (Spanish) (Calero Fernández 1999:132, 188). Hand in hand with this negative essentialising of women comes proverbs that justify violence against them: “When you see an old man, sit down and take a lesson; when you see an old woman, throw a stone” (Afghan) (Nilsen 1977:28); “A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree, the more they’re beaten the better they be” (*OEDP* 1935:28); “A la mujer y la burra, cada día una zurra”; “La mujer y el asno se enderezan a palos” (Spanish) (Calero Fernández 1999:187). One wonders if much of genre violence

³⁵ The negative connotations for the word dragon-fly date back from medieval times when bestiaries portrayed hideous dragons which were capable of transforming themselves into damsels, like Hipocrates’ daughter (Anderson 2003:473).

that women suffer finds its roots in the aforementioned atavistic attitudes still encoded within the language we use today.³⁶

The power attributed to women is always associated to sex: “One hair of a woman draws more than a team of oxen” (Apperson 1929:471). “Beauty draws more than oxen” (*OEDP* 1935:62). In Spanish we can find similar examples, though they are more explicit and coarse: “Tetas de mujer, tienen mucho poder”; “Tiran más dos tetas que cien carretas” (Brandes 1980:77); “Ata más un pelo de coño que una maroma de barco”; “Más tiran nalgas en lecho, que bueyes en barbecho” (Calero Fernández 1999:185).

While many of these proverbs may not be in current use, we find a successor of these formulaic expressions in the gendered jokes that circulate from time to time via e-mail. This means of communication equates to classical conversation patterns as it is equipped with their load of gossip and jokes. E-mails have replaced lunchroom conversations and this has brought back some not very politically correct attitudes: “employees have become so comfortable with e-mail that they say things they never would write in a memo or utter out loud for fear of being overheard” (*Singletary*, 1997). Some American companies, however, have been sued for sexual harassment and evidence such as e-mail containing sexist jokes was used as evidence.

CHANGING LANGUAGE: HOW TO?

Sexism pervades both in Spanish and English societies via language as the different cases of semantic derogation studied here have demonstrated. Firstly, the examples employed in dictionaries to illustrate the entries ‘man’ and ‘woman’ confirm that women are still pigeonholed and social typing maintains the traditional roles assigned to each gender. Secondly, a diachronic study of

³⁶ The Federación de Mujeres Progresistas has issued a publication entitled: *Palabras que matan* where its author states that the first stages in cases of gender violence start with verbal abuses. This violence is initiated with insults, and pejorative remarks about women’s nature, body and outlook. The aggressor’s main aim is to ridicule his partner. Then, the second phase which precedes the onset of the violent stage is that of verbal aggression concerning the woman’s moral behaviour. The aggressor starts calling her “whore” recurrently, other similar words are: ‘guarra’, ‘golfa’, ‘cerda’, ‘perdida’ or ‘buscona’ (Laviña 2003:20). The main consequence is that women’s self esteem disappears and that is one of the first traits found in all cases of abused women (23).

apparent duals in English and Spanish has proved that the grammatical gender of a word is not a neutral category because the term in the feminine is always negatively loaded. To support this hypothesis instances of lexical gaps and collocations have also been considered. Thirdly, slang and metaphorical language have been studied, namely terms to name male and female genitalia, food imagery and animal imagery. All the examples analysed to refer to women or female body parts figuratively demean them. Fourthly, we have examined formulaic expressions, old-saying and proverbs which originated from that division of traditional roles in these patriarchal societies. These cultural tropes, although not employed in modern times, still linger in the collective mind and have found a most post-modern way of manifesting themselves through on-line discourse.

The examples discussed cover diverse spheres of language. Yet, more terms could be added to compile even longer lists. More parcels of reality could also be analysed and again a biased picture –that where sexism overrules society– would be drawn. For Bauer, et al. “If language constructs our social reality and contributes to the creation of our social identity then the prolificness of such terms is another sad indication of sexism at work in English-speaking societies” (2006:161). In Spanish-speaking societies a semantic derogation of women applies likewise, as the almost literal translations into Spanish of most examples have shown. To combat this sexism, some Spanish institutions like Federación de Mujeres Progresistas or projects like Proyecto Zurekin Sarean are trying to change people’s attitudes regarding sexism.³⁷

The remaining question to be asked in light of our discussion is: can we change society by changing language, or must society change before stereotyping changes? Natasha Walter affirms that the feminist discourse of the seventies postulated that “by attacking cultural manifestations of inequality one could radically change women’s position in society.” While in Western societies overt sexism has diminished, it has been subtly replaced by a more sophisticated covert sexism. In this respect, new feminism strives to first change women’s attitudes in order to change society and not the other way round (Walter 1999:3-4).³⁸ To be sure, the language of politically correctness is only symptomatic of the need to address social stereotyping as regards gender.

³⁷ <http://www.fmujeresprogresistas.org/>, <http://www.zurekinsarean.org/>.

³⁸ Walter, writing about the prosecutions for rape, draws attention to the, sometimes, sexist commentaries of some of the judges. She illustrates it with one example taken from a dialogue between a judge and the defendant in a rape case: “When you went into the bedroom you must have thought it was Christmas and Easter put together when you found her naked in you bed.” (1999:127-128). For Walter this commentary reinforces a male point of view and could influence the jury’s opinion.

Deconstructing the stereotype is not enough. For real change the disappearance of a sexist language that semantically corsets women will only come about when predominant sexist attitudes towards women becomes socially unacceptable.

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How to cite this article:

Fernández Martín, Carmen. "Comparing Sexist Expressions in English and Spanish: (De)-Constructing Sexism through Language." *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 32 (2012): 69-93.

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