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“When a person talks too much, they learn little”¹: An Approach to Gender Contrast and Inclusive Language in English and Spanish

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¹ Hines, D. (1938). *Lodging for a Night*.

ABSTRACT

Grammatical gender is classified as an innate category of language that organises the way human beings communicate. This paper analyses the category of gender in English and Spanish from a contrastive perspective in order to observe differences and similarities. As a result of these contrasts, it has been observed that Spanish favours more gender discrimination due to its linguistic configuration, whilst English fosters a greater inclusivity. Complementary to this aspect, special attention has been devoted to inclusive language, a category within gender that has been of growing interest over the past years. In this way, an in-depth analysis of real language samples from two different fields has been carried out in order to observe the actual application of inclusive language. Thus, documents belonging to Spanish and English universities have been selected together with a series of governmental writings in order to analyse the presence of inclusive language. The aspects observed, far from illustrating the new vision of inclusive language, display a controversial attitude. In this way, documents with a wider scope follow a stronger adherence to inclusive rules; however, documents that are exclusive to a particular group ignore these guidelines. All in all, the present project contributes to illustrate the important role of grammatical gender in language and the importance of the development and implementation of inclusive language. Furthermore, this exposition could undoubtedly stimulate interest in further research on the subject.

KEYWORDS: grammatical gender, inclusive language, singular they, university, government, sexism.

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1. Introduction

Grammatical gender is an innate category which reflects the society to which the language refers. How to structure this linguistic complex has been the subject of discussion for many years as it conditions the grammatical structure of a language, and it may introduce discriminatory biases. With the emergence of different conceptions of gender and sex, the permanence of this debate in the language has been dilated to the present day. The main aim of this paper is to present a comparative-contrastive gender study between English and Spanish in order to determine their levels of language inclusivity. In this way, it must be noted that the organisation of grammatical gender is different in each language: whereas Spanish language contains morphemes which express grammatical gender, in English they are inexistent. Besides, this different organisation impacts on the categorisation of the language's gender provoking different kinds of nouns according to their gender. As a result of the gendered structuring of language, there is an emergence of differences that conceal discriminatory overtones. Thus, in response to these gender discrepancies, inclusive language emerges with the aim of creating linguistic equality. Governmental institutions play a very important role in the dissemination of this ideas and in change; however, universities must also be taken into account in the expansion of inclusive language throughout young citizens.

In this connection, the intention of this project will be to show the contrast between Spanish and English in order to know their sexist nuances and the inclusive solutions provided. To serve this purpose the work will be structured along three different axes each of them corresponding to the three core sections of this project. Firstly, the category of grammatical gender will be deeply examined and, subsequently, an analysis

of grammatical gender will be conducted in Spanish and in English. The language cases observed will be compared in order to discern the existing differences and similarities in grammatical gender between the two languages. Thirdly, the rules of inclusive language provided by these two languages will be investigated. In order to observe their application, a more practical approach will be adopted by introducing a series of real examples from English and Spanish universities and institutions.

2. Grammatical gender in English and Spanish

Throughout this first section, the most relevant aspects of grammatical gender in English and Spanish will be shown from a comparative-contrastive point of view. It is necessary to note that I have focused on animate beings and that I have made a distinction between *grammatical gender* and *gender*. While the first term refers to the grammatical concept, the second term refers to the sex of the person referred to. Thus, in order to distinguish the category *gender*, the label *sex*² has been added after the concept to avoid confusion. Having clarified these concepts, it should be noted that this section will be structured in three parts: firstly, the different types of grammatical gender according to the languages are presented and they are followed by a contrastive analysis of the gender of English and Spanish. Thirdly, the linguistic sexism present in the two languages is explained, as well as the solution guidelines offered by inclusive language.

According to Stahlberg et al. (2007), the organisation of gender is different in each language. On the one hand, German or French are devised as languages in which gender

² It has been added although I am aware of the differences between sex and non-grammatical gender, and it has been avoided in cases where there is no likelihood of confusion.

is conceived as a grammatical category. These languages usually reflect gender (sex) when referring to human beings and in the development of texts and expressions. On the other hand, Turkish and Finnish serve as examples of languages in which gender is of minor relevance. According to these two extremes, the construction of gender in the grammatical structure of languages can be divided into three different types: grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages, and genderless languages. These divisions, far from being isolated, form a continuum in which the languages can be situated somewhere in between.

Grammatical gender languages, such as Spanish, «are characterized by [the fact that] their nouns, which are always assigned a feminine or masculine (or sometimes neuter) gender» (Caswell & Prewitt-Freilino, 2012, p. 269). Within this type of gender, animate nouns have a correlation between grammatical gender and gender (sex); however, inanimate nouns lack this association. Thus, nouns such as *árbol* or *pelota* do not express gender (sex) information, whereas *profesora* and *empleado* indicate the gender (sex) of the person they refer to. Dependent forms such as articles, adjectives and pronouns contain grammatical gender markers that agree in gender with the nouns they accompany.

On the other hand, natural gender languages, such as English, express gender through the use of pronouns due to the inexistence of grammatical gender in nouns. Most animate nouns can refer to both male and females as in this type of languages there is no grammatical marking of gender³. Besides, personal pronouns and their different variants

³ There are exceptions as certain nouns which contain gender (sex) information in their lexical meaning (e.g., *girl* and *boy*) can be found.

reflect the gender (sex) of the human being to which they are linked. In natural gender languages expressions referring to gender are much easier to avoid and scarcely existent. In contrast, genderless languages show absence of gender distinction in the noun system and lack of sex-differentiated personal pronouns. In this way, nouns, pronouns, and their derivative forms can be used for both male and female.

In Spanish, the category of gender is defined as a grammatical property of nouns and some pronouns. It affects agreement with determiners, quantifiers (sometimes assimilated to them) and adjectives or participles, and it can be divided into masculine or feminine. With many nouns designating animate beings, grammatical gender distinguishes the gender (sex) of the referent. In the rest of the cases, *i.e.*, unanimated beings, the grammatical gender of nouns is an inherent grammatical property which is unconnected with gender (sex) (RAE, 2010).

In contrast to Spanish, English has been labelled as genderless due to the fact that gender is slightly grammaticalized. The reference to gender in English is based on the pronominal system agreement (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). As Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) highlight, English barely distinguishes between genders. However, when gender distinction occurs, there is a close connection between the category of gender (sex) and grammatical gender «as natural sex distinctions determine English gender distinctions» (p. 88). Likewise, Biber (1999) specifies that grammatical gender, as a category, is not considered to be significant in English and is linked to the gender (sex) of the referent. In this way, it can be ascertained that nouns in English have neither masculine nor feminine grammatical gender. On the contrary, there is a reference to male or female people or animals (Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

Furthermore, in Spanish gender tends to be manifested in explicit formal marks which have been interpreted as gender morphemes, that is, segments to which the morphological information relating to gender corresponds. However, there are other nouns in which the ending has no content and, therefore, it is problematic to identify it as a morpheme (RAE, 2010). As Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) indicate, English, unlike Spanish, does not tend to use specific suffixes to mark gender, nor does it make distinctions in the article. However, gender-sensitive pronouns can be found, as was stated before, since the reference to gender in English is based on the pronominal system agreement. In this way, from the point of view of Carter & McCarthy (2006), grammatical gender in English can be restricted to pronouns and possessive determiners.

In order to understand what has been discussed so far, it is important to point out several contrastive examples of grammatical gender between English and Spanish. Firstly, these two sentences will be taken as an example: *el/un profesor no ha asistido a la reunión* and *la/una profesora no ha asistido a la reunión*. In the first case, we can observe a masculine noun (*profesor*) which is accompanied by a determiner (*el/un*) with which it agrees in gender and number. On the other hand, in the second case, it can be observed a feminine noun (*profesora*) to which a gender morpheme (*-a*) is added and which, in the same way as in the previous case, agrees in gender and number with the preceding determiner (*la/una*). If these sentences are translated into English, the result is *the/a teacher did not attend the meeting* for both masculine and feminine gender. In English, in contrast to Spanish, gender is neither shown in the noun nor in the determiner attached. Thus, gender could be inferred from a subsequent pronominal reference. For instance, in the sentence *the teacher did not attend the meeting. He had to present the*

annual assessment the reader understands that the grammatical gender of the teacher is masculine.

In terms of gender division, in Spanish, nouns are defined as sex-differentiable, common, and epicene. Nouns in which gender allows differentiation of the gender (sex) of the designated beings show several possibilities. In the first case, many nouns add a suffix to the root, such as *duque/duquesa* or *poeta/poetisa*. Furthermore, some sex-differentiable nouns are classified as heteronyms. Thus, this type of nouns use different radicals, such as *toro/vaca*, *yerno/muera* or *caballo/yegua*. On the other hand, common nouns in gender do not change in form; however, their gender is reflected in the determiners or adjectives that accompany them: *el/un artista*, *la/una artista*; *el/un profesional*, *la/una profesional*; *el/un testigo*, *la/una testigo*. In the last case, epicene nouns refer to living beings of either gender (sex) by means of a single grammatical gender, masculine or feminine: *el/un personaje* and *la/una víctima* (RAE, 2010).

Despite the fact that the distribution explained above is not present in English, a number of contrastive similarities can be established. In the manner of sex-differentiable nouns, suffixes can be added to some nouns in English to show the difference in grammatical gender. For instance, the pairs *actor/actress* or *prince/princess* can be found. Likewise, heteronyms can be observed in some areas of vocabulary such as parentage names: *brother/sister*, *mother/father*, *aunt/uncle*, etc. With regard to the latter two cases, common nouns in gender and epicene nouns are difficult to find in English. Common nouns in terms of gender are not noticed as in English determiners and adjectives do not reflect the gender of the noun they accompany. For example, only the two forms *the/an artist* can be used to refer to both grammatical genders as opposed to the four forms of

Spanish (*el/un/la/una artista*). The same applies to epicene nouns. As the gender of the noun is not reflected in the determiner that accompanies it, the noun can refer to either masculine or feminine gender (*the/a character*) as opposed to its single grammatical gender in Spanish (*el/un personaje*). Therefore, these last two groups which are distinguished in Spanish are included in English along with the rest of the nouns in terms of their gender differentiation.

In the previous paragraphs, it has been observed that Spanish tends to specify grammatical gender whereas English treats it in a more ambiguous or imprecise way. In Spanish, the masculine is the unmarked gender, and the feminine is the marked gender. Masculine nouns refer to people and animals of masculine gender (sex); however, they also designate the whole species without making distinction of gender (sex), whether in the singular or plural. For instance, in *un trabajador debe cumplir con sus deberes, pero también conocer sus derechos* or *los estudiantes españoles aumentan la incorporación al mercado laboral*, there is a reference to both women and men. However, although these examples are recognized as generic masculine, extra-linguistic or contextual reasons may imply that only men are being mentioned (RAE, 2010).

As opposed to the Spanish generic masculine, ambiguity plays an important role in the grammatical gender of English. The sentences presented above, if translated into English, do not have the sexist connotation present in Spanish. For instance, in the example *Spanish students increase the incorporation into the labour market* the reader does not infer the gender (sex) of the students. As mentioned above, the noun itself does not reflect gender connotations. The problem arises when a pronominal reference is needed to refer to the gender of the noun and the antecedent lacks information pertaining

to gender. For instance, taking into consideration the sentences *a worker must fulfil his duties, but also know his rights* and *a worker must fulfil her duties, but also know her rights* it can be noted that the noun *worker* is non-specific. In this way, the pronoun has to carry a connotation of person which is not observed in the antecedent (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 487).

3. Inclusive language in English and Spanish

The aforementioned situations, both in English and Spanish, show linguistic scenarios in which the gender (sex) distinction is ignored. Gender is not expressed since the speaker prefers to generalize without specifying the gender of the noun referred to. In these cases, for the purpose of referring to the male and female gender equally, inclusive language is used. This aspect is defined as type of «language that avoids the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people, esp. gender-specific words» (Collins Dictionary, 2023). Therefore, inclusive language serves the purpose of eliminating discrimination against women in the language and promoting equality among humanity.

3.1. Spanish inclusive language guidelines

Based on the precepts set out by UN Women⁴, in Spanish it is recommended to use gender-neutral expressions such as those constituted by neuter nouns and neuter pronouns, and the avoidance of gender stereotyped expressions. As far as neutral nouns are concerned, a singular and collective noun is used to refer to a whole category or group

⁴ UN Women (n.d.). *Gender-inclusive language guidelines (English)*. UN.

of people. For instance, instead of referring to *los profesores* or *el hombre*, it is advised to use *el profesorado* or *la humanidad*. A similar case applies to the names of functions and administrations. Thus, it is recommended to use *la dirección* or *la delegación* in place of *los directores* or *los delegados*. Within neutral nouns, the use of epicene names is noteworthy. As explained above, this type of nouns refers to living beings of any gender (sex) by means of a single grammatical gender, masculine or feminine. In this case, the strategy contemplates alternating the order of the feminine and masculine articles accompanying the epicene noun (*la/el activista* or *las/los miembros*) or simply eliminating them. In the case of pronouns, the use of indefinite pronouns such as *nadie* or relative pronouns such as *quien* is preferred in order to avoid sexist language. For instance, a structure in line with inclusive language would include *quienes trabajan en el campo* instead of *los agricultores* or *nadie aprobó el examen* instead of *los estudiantes no aprobaron el examen*. Furthermore, it is recommended to avoid the use of expressions containing gender stereotypes, *i.e.*, to eliminate expressions such as *los pilotos y las azafatas*, *los médicos y las enfermeras* or *las mujeres de la limpieza*. Likewise, the term *hombre* should be avoided to designate both women and men. Instead of this, words such as *humanidad* or *seres humanos* can be used.

In addition to the foregoing, inclusive language in Spanish recommends sentence restructuring, the combination of masculine and feminine pairs and the use of slashes. This tendency advocates sentence restructuring when the generic masculine is involved. For instance, the sentence *los jóvenes y los inmigrantes son los más afectados por el desempleo nacional* could be replaced by *la juventud y la inmigración son quienes más sufren el desempleo nacional*. Furthermore, the use of feminine and masculine pairs consists in the retention of both the feminine and masculine forms, using both nouns and

articles. In this case, it is recommended to alternate the order of the feminine and masculine articles to give equal precedence to both. Thus, instead of using *los afectados* or *los trabajadores* it is preferred to use *los afectados, mujeres y hombres* or *los trabajadores y las trabajadoras*. Typographical change is also recurrent in inclusive language. Slashes (e.g., *autor/a* or *director/a*) are used when space is limited or when it is difficult to find neutral terms. However, this practice is not recommended as it is detrimental to the readability of Spanish.

Vocabulary is one of the most important aspects to take into consideration in choosing inclusive language. Awareness of the sexual orientation and gender of the person addressed should be taken into account regardless of their gender (sex) at birth. Likewise, the information transmitted must be devoid of traditional gender roles or stereotypes attributed to men or women. For instance, instead of *los participantes y sus esposas* is preferred *los participantes y sus parejas*. Furthermore, it is essential to avoid expressions with negative connotations. The noun *chicas* in *quedó con algunas chicas para cenar* infantilises adult women. Thus, the option *quedó con algunas colegas para cenar* is more appropriate.

3.2. English inclusive language guidelines

In English as explained above, linguistic inclusivity is much less complex. It is recommended to use gender-neutral expressions, that is, to avoid specific masculine forms when referring to both grammatical genders. For instance, instead of using *men/mankind, policeman* or *congressman* it is preferred to choose *humanity, police officer* or *legislator*. In the same way as in Spanish, the generic masculine causes linguistic

problems of discrimination. Thus, inclusive language recommends a sentence modification following several precepts. For instance, it is advisable to omit the masculine reference word in sentences such as *each teacher must send one of his students to the conference*. Instead of characterising the word *teacher* as a generic masculine, it is preferred to use *each teacher must send one student to the conference*. Another way to avoid gender bias is to use plural forms for both nouns and reference words. In this way, the sentence *politicians must represent their supporters* presents more inclusiveness than *a politician must represent his supporters*. In addition, inclusive language recommends the use of singular *they* in reference to singular nouns. Despite the criticism received by the earliest prescriptive grammars, this strategy «has gained greater acceptance in other styles as the use of purportedly sex-neutral he has declined» (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 493). However, it has not been fully accepted, and it should be used with cautiousness. This tendency enables the transformation of sentences such as *each worker must present his identification* into more inclusive options such as *each worker must present their identification*. Likewise, the passive voice focuses attention on the object and shifts the subject to the background. In this way, in the restructuring of the example *the student must submit his project before the end of the assessment* in *the project must be submitted before the end of the assessment* any gender bias is abandoned. However, the passive voice should be used sparingly.

As was the case in Spanish, it is sometimes preferred to maintain both grammatical genders. This practice can be carried out by using the pronouns *he or she* as in *every citizen must vote. He or she can change the future of the city*. However, this practice is not entirely advisable as it negatively transforms the language by making it stylistically heavy. These pronouns can be alternated when the gender of the antecedent is unknown

or consists of a group. For example, this is the case of the sentence *every child deserves a proper life, whoever he is and wherever she lives*. The use of slashes to include the feminine and masculine form is also noted in English. For instance, *a student should prepare before the examination period. He/she must study 2 hours a day*. Despite its inclusive effectiveness, this practice should not be abused as it hampers readability.

Vocabulary also plays a key role in English in developing inclusive language. In the same way as in Spanish, sexual orientation should be taken into account and traditional gender roles should be avoided. With regard to occupations, it is important to delete the use of generic masculine professions. In the case of gender-specific occupational terms, they should be replaced by a gender-neutral form and gender references such as *male* and *female* should be avoided. In relation to the lexicon, although outside its scope, are the titles. In this case, inclusive language recommends the use of courtesy titles instead of titles referring to the marital status. For instance, instead of using *Miss* or *Mrs* it is preferable to use *Ms*.

Throughout this section it has been possible to observe the different types of grammatical gender that exist. In addition, the in-depth analysis of English and Spanish has enabled to discover the different treatment given to this grammatical aspect. Despite the ambiguity of English, both languages have been proven to exhibit gender discrimination. However, inclusive language and its guidelines for avoiding gender bias have shown that linguistic equality is possible.

3.2.1. Singular *they*

The significance of singular *they* in the development of inclusive language makes it necessary to pay additional attention to it. As Breccia (2021) posits, the presence of this grammatical structure dates back to the Middle English period and it was found in classical texts such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Ancrene Wisse* due to the loss of grammatical gender in the thirteenth century. Before this time, the use of generic masculine was preferred because of the gender roles of the time associated with men and women. The presence of singular *they* remained across the Modern English period with authors such as Shakespeare and in the works of Austen and Byron during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Despite its success, the use of singular *they* is put in the spotlight by the prescriptivist school by the end of the eighteenth century in order to support the economy of expression (Zuber & Reed, 1993). After the invention of the printing press, this movement tried to establish a linguistic standardisation by eliminating dialectal features from the language in order to bring it closer to the standard (Paterson, 2014). Latin and its rules were followed as the only model of correctness. In this way, singular *they* was discarded for breaking the rule of concordance and the prescriptivist tendency advocated the use of the pronoun *he* in its place. This change of choice and elimination of singular *they* was socially motivated as it was associated with the leading role of man. The use of the pronoun *he* was extended until the advent of the feminist movement in the 1970s and its questioning of male dominance. The search for equality between men and women and the incorporation of women into leading roles led to the decline of the pronoun *he* in favour of alternatives such as singular *they* or the structure *he or she* (Breccia, 2021).

Nowadays, singular *they* is usually employed after an indefinite antecedent and it contrasts with other options such as generic *he* and *he or she* (Zuber & Reed, 1993).

However, this grammatical structure can be also used with a definite antecedent. This innovative use shows that «the fact of specifying the gender of the referent is optional for some people» (Andión, 2020, p. 7) and «it serves to highlight that [...] there is no specific real-world referent for the antecedent» (Paterson, 2014, cited in Andión, 2020, p. 7). Furthermore, it must be noted that singular *they* is also used as a non-binary pronoun. In this way, people who do not identify with any of the sexed pronouns are represented in this neutral structure.

The controversy surrounding this phenomenon continues to current times. On the one hand, the use of generic *he* is considered correct when the gender of the person to whom the information refers is unknown, and the use of *they* is believed to be incorrect as it implies a plural antecedent (Paterson, 2014). In this way, some scholars assume that «word meanings are flexible, and the pronoun ‘he’ represents a sex-indefinite antecedent without excluding women or adding new meaning» (Mackay, 1980, cited in Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021, p. 66). Besides, grammarians manifest that the use of *they* leads to confusion and ambiguity due to the fact that the same form is used to express singular and plural number. However, it must be noted that the pronoun *you*, which originally was formed by *thou* and *thee*, was simplified into a single representative form of singular and plural number (Andión, 2020).

Contrary to this male-biased pronoun use, it must be highlighted that the popularity of singular *they* has increased in spoken language (Conrod, 2019, cited in Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021). Although it is not accepted by all grammarians, many scholars recognise this alternative as appropriate even though it is a new phenomenon in academic writing (LaScotte, 2021). Thus, this particle is considered a notably

grammatical structure adequate for inclusive language (Bradley et al., 2019) and preferred than *he or she* as it is «clumsy, pedantic or unnecessary» (Bodine, 1975, p. 133).

However, it is significant to point out that the actual use of singular *they* overcomes the existing disagreement. In the words of Breccia (2021), the presence of this grammatical structure in formal and informal spoken English greatly outweighs the use of the generic masculine (Matossian, 1997, Newman, 1997, Pauwels, 2001). In this way, in the case of informal conversation, it has been demonstrated that the use of the more sexist option instead of the gender-inclusive one can lead to a breakdown in communication. Besides, this aspect is also applicable to formal contexts. Thus, the presence of singular *they* can be observed in political speeches. For example, President Barack Obama stated that «[n]o American should ever live under a cloud of suspicion just because of what they look like» without specific reference to the gender of the Americans (Pinker, 2014, cited in Breccia, 2021).

The preference for singular *they* is also found in written English. This grammatical structure can be commonly observed in newspapers as «*they* is clearly the preferred epicene pronoun with indefinite quantified antecedents» (Balhorn, 2019, p. 410). For instance, «[p]olice issue pictures in hunt for suspect who exposed themselves to girls aged 15 and 16 on train. [...] British Transport Police have been criticised after refusing to say the gender of a person who exposed their genitals to two teenagers» (*The Daily Mail*, 27/10/2022) or «Person Accidentally Shoots Themselves Outside Stoughton Target» (*The Daily Voice*, 08/02/2022) are examples of the use of singular *they* in the press. However, the use of this structure is frequent in other types of writing. For instance, it can be found in legal discourse («[e]ach guarantor is liable for all the obligations under this guarantee

and indemnity both separately on their own and jointly with any one or more other persons named as "Guarantor"») and advertising texts («[w]e are looking for a young man or woman in their mid-twenties to join our Salary Administration Department») (Eagleson, 1994, cited in Breccia).

The increasing use of singular *they* is also due to its official recognition. Some style manuals such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA) recognise the use of singular *they* to refer to an indeterminate antecedent. In this way, it is defined by the APA as «a generic third person singular pronoun in English» (APA, 2020, cited in Breccia, 2021) which is recommended by the MLA «to avoid making or enabling assumptions about gender» (MLA Style, 2020, cited in Breccia, 2021).

Furthermore, the creation of the pronoun *themselves* is directly related to singular *they*. The controversial use of this reflexive pronoun dates back to the Middle Ages as «themselves was used for the plural from at least 1382 (and possibly for close to 200 years before that), and for the singular from around 1450» (Merriam Webster). Although as a result of simplification the pronoun *themselves* eventually became the preferred pronoun by the norm, the form *themselves* did not disappear completely. At current times, this pronoun can be observed in two different scenarios: on the one hand, it is used in newspapers and, on the other hand, it is the pronoun of choice for people whose pronoun of reference is *they*. Thus, «Person Accidentally Shoots Themselves Outside Stoughton Target» (*The Daily Voice*, 21/05/2023) and «A person set themselves on fire in front of the U.S. Supreme Court» (*NBC News*, 23/04/2022) are some of the examples observed in press. Furthermore, «[a]n individual's gender is their own perception of themselves as male,

female or a number of other gender identities» (*The Ithacan*, 24/01/2023) and «[i]n contrast, an "independent contractor" is a worker who is, "as a matter of economic reality, in business for themself."» (*Mondaq*, 30/01/2023) present individuals whose gender is unspecified.

Furthermore, it must be highlighted that the implication of singular *they* in English language teaching provides insight into the significance of the grammatical construct in the language. While learning a language «children are born without a fully formed paradigm but do have the innate ability to acquire one» (Paterson, 2014, p. 23). Once acquired, a language system is difficult to alter; however, this grammatical pattern can be modified during the first stages of language acquisition. In this way, «if we teach singular *they* to children, they are going to learn it with ease, thus contributing to change the previous generation's paradigm» (Paterson, 2014, p. 24).

Within the educational context, there is a tendency to follow prescriptivism in school teaching. The cause of this educational trend can be traced back to a moment in time when *he* was considered as «'correct', singular *they* as 'inaccurate' and *he or she* as 'awkward'» (Bodine, 1975, p. 139). Despite the evolution of educational models, this prescriptivist vision was retained by scholars arguing that «[i]f the definition of 'they' as exclusively plural is accepted, then 'they' fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of number. Similarly, 'he' fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of gender» (Bodine, 1975, p. 133). Due to this fact, there is a majority use of masculine pronouns as they are considered to be the correct reference model. In this way, students' linguistic awareness is shaped by considering the masculine gender as applicable to all genders (sexes).

In addition to singular *they*, neutrality can be provided by other types of pronouns that are framed under the label of new creation. In this way, the University of Wisconsin presents several solutions: «[z]e/hir/hir [...] is pronounced like “zee” can also be spelled zie or xe, and replaces she/he/they. Hir is pronounced like “here” and replaces her/hers/him/his/they/theirs». Besides, *per/per/pers* are employed as a shortened variant of the word *person* and *it/it/its* are classified as appropriate due to their lack of misgendering although having been recognised as pejorative. However, the university of Wisconsin does not preclude referring to the recipient’s proper name instead of using a specific personal pronoun.

3.3. Inclusive language in Spanish and English institutions

In order to understand the true scope of what has been said so far, it is interesting to analyse the guidelines that the different universities propose to students and future representatives of the working world. In this section, inclusive language guides from three Spanish universities and three English-speaking universities have been analysed. In addition, real practical cases have been taken from university institutional documents in order to prove the application of these inclusive solutions.

3.3.1. Spanish universities

As regards Spanish universities, the University of A Coruña follows the precepts established by the oldest distance learning public university in Spain. Among its recommendations is the use of pronouns and determiners without gender marking and the

use of slashes. For example, instead of «[e]l abajo firmante declara haber realizado la comisión de servicio ordenada» it is preferable to use «[q]uien abajo firma declara haber realizado la comisión de servicio ordenada» and «[e]l/la interesado/a» instead of «[e]l interesado/a» (Universidad Española a Distancia⁵, 2012, p. 7). In this case, the use of @ should be avoided as it is not a linguistic sign and its use is not recommended. Furthermore, this guide proposes an alternation between the masculine and the feminine in such a way that the masculine does not always precede the sentence. In this way, the gender-swapped proposal «[e]n estos centros las tutoras y los tutores actuarán como guías y asesores de las alumnas y los alumnos» is more inclusive (UNED, 2012, p. 10). In addition, according to them it is advisable to eliminate any reference to the subject by introducing impersonal structures. Thus, instead of saying «[e]l solicitante deberá cumplimentar el impreso» it considered is highly desirable to use inclusive options such as «[s]e cumplimentará el impreso», «[c]umplimentar el impreso» or «[i]mpreso para cumplimentar» (UNED, 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, it is suggested to use the word *person* before the sexist or discriminatory expression («persona con discapacidad» or «persona solicitante», UNED, 2012, p. 11) and to introduce female-specific terms to refer to careers, professions, trades and qualifications.

As for the University of Salamanca, the recommendations are similar. In this case, it is preferred the use of real generics is favoured as opposed to male generics and the introduction of abstract nouns for actions or qualities. For example, it is more inclusive to use «[e]l funcionariado» or «[e]l alumnado» instead of «[l]os funcionarios» and «[l]os alumnos» (Universidad de Salamanca⁶, p. 19). Besides, it is also recommended to use «[t]utoría» or «[j]efatura» instead of «tutor» or «jefe» (USAL, p. 19). The generic

⁵ From now on the acronym UNED will be used in future quotations.

⁶ from now on the acronym USAL will be used in future quotations.

masculine can be replaced by periphrases such as «personas licenciadas» or accompanied by explanatory appositions such as «tanto mujeres como hombres» or «de uno u otro sexo» (USAL, p. 20). The University of Salamanca suggests the omission of the determinant and the use of determiners without gender marking. For instance, «profesionales» can be used as an alternative to «los profesionales» and «a cada recurrente» is preferred instead of «a todos los recurrentes» (USAL, p. 21). As pointed out by the University of A Coruña, linguistic inclusivity can also be achieved through the use of structures with *se* such «cuando se solicite» in place of «cuando el usuario solicite» (USAL, p. 21). In addition, this university's guide recommends substituting passive constructions to avoid concordance («[d]erecho a una evaluación» instead of «[d]erecho a ser evaluado», USAL, p. 22) and replacing the quantifier *todos* for *cualquier* («[c]ualquier estudiante» instead of «[t]odos los estudiantes», USAL, p. 22). Furthermore, the recurrence of subject deletion and the use of non-personal forms of the verb should not be forgotten. For instance, «[d]eberá aportar su documentación» and «[e]s necesario prestar más atención» are more inclusive alternatives than «[e]l doctorando deberá aportar su documentación» and «[e]s necesario que el usuario preste más atención» (USAL, p. 22). Lastly, the University of Salamanca considers the introduction of slashes and the employment of pronouns. Thus, the guidelines encourage the use of «[e]/la representante» instead of «[e]l representante» and «[q]uien juzge será quien determine» in place of «[s]erá el Juez el que determine» (USAL, p. 22-23).

Furthermore, the University Complutense of Madrid offers a wide range of interesting inclusive solutions. They recommend referring to women as «las mujeres» and not as «la mujer» as there is no single model of women (Universidad Complutense de

Madrid⁷, p. 6). Besides, the guidelines suggest not to use the masculine in a generic sense to refer to mixed groups and introducing the inclusive feminine when there are more women than men. In addition, the University promotes the utilisation of the feminine in positions, professions, occupations, titles and ranks when referred to women and the introduction of inclusive terms such as «profesorado» or «estudiantado» (UCM, p. 6). These guidelines also suggest using «quien», «quienes», «persona» or «personas» instead of the determiners «el», «los», «aquel», «aquellos», «todos», employing «alguien», «algunas personas», «un grupo de», «multitud de» instead of the indefinite pronouns «uno», «todos», «algunos», «varios» or «muchos» and introducing the invariable determiners «cada» or «cualquier» (UCM, p. 6-7). With regard to the sentence, they recommend deleting the article «los», using impersonal sentences such as «se puede cancelar la matrícula» instead of «los alumnos pueden cancelar la matricula», omitting the subject («habrá un debate» instead of «los participantes mantendrán un debate») and employing the second person singular «tú» or «usted» (UCM, p. 7-8). Besides, they advise introducing the infinitive or the gerund of the verb («es necesario entregar la documentación» instead of «es necesario que los alumnos entreguen la documentación») and making use of invariable adjectives (UCM, p. 8). As far as the academic environment is concerned, the University Complutense of Madrid suggests some specific basic recommendations. Thus, they recommend using terms such as «profesorado» or «personal docente», «alumnado» or «estudiantado» and «personal investigador» or «personas beneficiarias/usuarias», among other examples (UCM, p. 9). Besides, they propose avoiding slashes in forms: instead of «Sr./Sra.» it is preferable to use «Nombre y Apellido» and «Grado en» is a better solution than «Graduado/a en». When necessary,

⁷ From now on the acronym UCM will be used in future quotations.

splitting of articles («los y las becarias»), partial splitting («las alumnas y alumnos») and full splitting («la Vicedecana/el Vicedecano») should be used (UCM, p. 9).

To understand whether these recommendations are actually implemented, it is necessary to take real examples from the institutions. In the documents of the University of A Coruña, it can be observed a use of feminine plural nouns such as «personas candidatas adjudicatarias» or «no podrán obtener la condición de beneficiario aquellas personas» (UDC, 2023b, p. 1). In addition, the use of slashes to mark the masculine and feminine gender is recurrent: «se publicará la lista definitiva de adjudicatarios/as, suplentes y excluidos/as» (UDC, 2023b, p. 1), «[m]ovilidad para doctorandos/as» (UDC, 2023a), «los requisitos generales para ser admitido/a» (UDC, 2023a), «[e]l/la estudiante que pretenda realizar la movilidad durante el grado, debe estar matriculado/a en un curso superior a primero en el momento de iniciar la estancia» (UDC, 2023a) or «[l]os/las estudiantes con nacionalidades extranjera» (UDC, 2023a). Furthermore, there are also examples of collective nouns such as *estudiantado* in the sentence «[e]l objetivo de esta convocatoria es seleccionar al estudiantado de la UDC» (UDC, 2023a) and the absence of the article to mark gender as in «[s]e prioriza la asignación de la lista de espera a estudiantes» (UDC, 2023b, p. 3). In addition, the generic masculine is also used: «[n]o hay candidatos para prácticas. Pasa a candidato por estudios» (UDC, 2023b, p. 3).

As far as the University of Salamanca is concerned, the solutions used in their documents are different. This institution opts for the use of the generic masculine. Thus, for example, sentences such as «los estudiantes matriculados en la Universidad de Salamanca», «[e]star matriculado en el curso 2022-2023», «un título académico de Máster oficial o de Doctor», «en el expediente del solicitante», «estará integrado por una

comisión de cinco profesores», «los listados provisionales de candidatos y definitivos de adjudicatarios» or «[l]a colaboración prestada por el becario» (USAL, 2022) can be found. In the same way as the University of A Coruña, there is an omission of the article in some examples such as «[e]n los supuestos de estudiantes» (USAL, 2022). In addition, despite the continued use of the generic masculine, the feminine is used in titles when the person referred to is a woman: «corresponderá a la Vicerrectora de Estudiantes» (USAL, 2022).

On the other hand, the University Complutense of Madrid shows a paradoxical situation. In their documents, there is a predominance of the generic masculine: «[e]l solicitante», «los estudiantes de Doctorado» or «deberá ser aceptada por el coordinador ERASMUS+ de la Facultad o Centro en el que está matriculado el estudiante» (UCM, 2023) are some of the multiple examples noted. Furthermore, masculine adjectives are not replaced by similar invariable options. For instance, this can be observed in the use of *matriculado* and *titulados* in the sentences «[e]l solicitante deberá estar matriculado en la UCM» and «[l]os estudiantes y titulados recientes» (UCM, 2023). Besides, it must be noted the use of *aquellos* in sentences such as «aquellos que cuentan con la condición» or «[a]quellos que tengan la condición de refugiado» (UCM, 2023). However, some inclusive solutions can be found. For example, the use of *cada* in «[c]ada estudiante de Doctorado» and the second person singular *usted* in «[s]i desea solicitar una estancia de corta duración Erasmus Prácticas» (UCM, 2023).

In order to observe in a more concrete way the implementation of inclusive language, it is necessary to go deeper into the university environment and analyse the teaching guides. In these texts, the voice of the teaching staff is fully observed with a less

strong institutional filter than the one present in public university documents. In this case, Spanish and English universities show strong differences, albeit interesting similarities. On the one hand, the University Complutense of Madrid introduces the two genders through the application of slashes: « [e]/la profesor/a» and «[l]os/as alumnos/as». However, there are also examples of the generic masculine («los estudiantes» and « por parte del estudiante») which, in contrast to the use of slashes, cause a discordance in terms of textual cohesion. Similar to the observations made above, the University of A Coruña introduces two different options: on the one hand, the alternation of the masculine and feminine gender («si el alumno/a desea optar por el sistema de evaluación continua debe manifestarlo por escrito al profesor/a») and, on the other, the use of the generic masculine («los estudiantes» and «por cada uno de los profesores responsables»). Besides, the University of Salamanca includes collective nouns such as «el alumnado» together with the repeated generic masculine («todos los estudiantes», «LIBROS DE CONSULTA PARA EL ALUMNO» and «a los alumnos»).

3.3.2. English-speaking universities

In addition, in the case of English-speaking countries, the University of Bristol recommends avoiding gendered language. For instance, they propose using «graduate» or «former student» instead of «alumna» or «alumnus», «everyone» or «people» instead of «guys» or «ladies» and «attending» or «staffing» instead of «manning», among other solutions. Besides, this institution suggests preventing condescending gender-specific terms («women» is preferred over «ladies» or «girls») and sexist expressions such as «take it like a man» or «stop acting like a girl» that strengthen gender discrimination. Moreover, the University of Bristol rejects the use of gendered titles such as Ms, Mr, Mrs,

Miss and recommend including a gender-neutral title («Mx») or the person's academic title. With regard to pronouns, they recommend a variety of pronouns, including some recently introduced ones such as *ze* and *hir*. However, they clarify that pronouns are not rigid and, therefore, it is important to ask the interlocutor which ones are preferred. In order to be inclusive, the University of Bristol suggests using singular *they* in the first contact before discovering the pronouns of the person referred to. Besides, it is important to recognise how people describe themselves and «solicit gender pronouns» (University of Bristol). Although these questions «may initially feel awkward or uncomfortable, but it is preferable to making hurtful assumptions and using the wrong pronoun» (University of Bristol).

On the other hand, the University of Greenwich proposes a series of non-sexist references. In this case, it is recommended to use gender neutral terms such as «[h]umans» or «[h]umankind» and gender-neutral pronouns and expressions such as singular *they* or «friends and colleagues» instead of «ladies and gentleman» (University of Greenwich, 2021, p. 8). In particular, this university insists on respecting those individuals who want to be referred to by gender-neutral pronouns. Furthermore, it is suggested to use terms such as «[p]artner» or «spouse» that include all relationships and not sexist references such as «wife» or «husband» (University of Greenwich, 2021, p. 8). The university forms must contain a series of titles («Dr, Miss, Mr, Mrs, Ms, Mx, Prof») arranged in alphabetical order and they insist that it is be advisable to avoid nouns with reference to gender (sex) such as «[c]leaning ladies» or «[p]oliceman» (University of Greenwich, 2021, p. 8). Besides, these guidelines propose the elimination of «patronising terms» like «[g]irls», «[d]ear» or «[s]on» and gender (sex) specifications such as «female scientist» or «male nurse» (University of Greenwich, 2021, p. 9).

Furthermore, the University of North Carolina suggests the elimination of gendered nouns. In this way, words such as «the common man», «man-made» or «Sir» must be replaced with more neutral terms like «the average person», «machine-made» or «To Whom it May Concern». Besides, the specification of the gender of the worker of a job tends to be introduced when it differs from what is commonly established. For instance, the constructions «female doctor» and «male nurse» are used due to the fact that people assume that doctors are men and nurses are women. This aspect only helps to reinforce the gender gap and, in the same way as the University of Greenwich suggested, these guidelines indicate the avoidance of gender specifications in jobs or positions unless the gender is relevant to understand the meaning of the sentence. For example, in the sentence «[s]ome women feel more comfortable seeing female gynecologists» the specification is significant. In addition, references to titles should be taken into account. While men can be referred to by *Mr* without allusion to their marital status, *Miss* and *Mrs* define women according to their marriage. Thus, it is advisable to use *Ms* to refer to women in order to avoid references to their civil status. As far as proper names are concerned, allusions to women by their name only can be observed «in contexts where they would typically refer to men by their full names, last names, or titles». The utilisation of the first name is displayed as a lack of respect and authority towards the person being mentioned. In this way, Hilary Clinton may not be recognised by Hilary in the same way as Barack Obama is not named Barack. With regard to pronouns, «English offers no widely accepted pronoun choice for gender-neutral, third-person singular nouns that refer to people». In this case, the inclusive guidelines of this university propose the use of the plural. For instance, the sentence «[a] student who loses too much sleep may have trouble focusing during [his/her] exams» can be transformed into «[s]tudents who lose too much

sleep may have trouble focusing during their exams». Furthermore, the University of North Carolina classifies singular *they* as «the most respectful way to be mindful of those of all genders».

In the same way as the Spanish universities compared, concrete examples should be taken into account in order to observe the application of these guidelines. Within the University of Bristol, the second person singular is widely used to refer to the student community («you will normally find a link» and «[y]our total learning time»). Likewise, students are referred to in the plural number: «[t]he aim is to provide students with a working knowledge» and «[o]n completion of the unit students should be able to» are some of the examples observed. Furthermore, it is important to note that references to teachers vary and are not all-inclusive. Thus, for instance, the unit director «Mr. Mike Davies» contrasts with the unit director «Dr. Fabiana Gomez»

On the other hand, the University of Greenwich stands out for its use of singular *they*: «the applicant will only be admitted with the written authorisation of an appropriate adult, normally their parent or guardian» (University of Greenwich, 2022, p. 8), «[a]n applicant wishing to withdraw their application (p. 6)», «if the applicant selects the offer as their firm(first) choice» (p. 7) and «[t]he applicant will normally need to have completed their employer's selection process» (p. 8) are some of the examples observed. In addition, they tend to use the plural form of the noun or the second person singular *you* to avoid references to the gender (sex) of the referent. For instance, «[t]he University requires all applicants to provide evidence that they have access» (University of Greenwich, 2022, p. 10) and «[y]ou must have completed an undergraduate degree» (University of Greenwich, 2020, p. 2).

As far as the American University of North Carolina is concerned, it is worth noting the absence of singular *they*. Thus, for example, there is a tendency to use a synonym to indicate the referent: «[i]n evaluating each candidate's academic record, the admissions committee considers not only the student's grades but also the courses attempted» (University of North Carolina⁸, 2022, p. 1). In the same way as the University of Greenwich, they employ the plural form of the noun or the second person singular *you* to avoid references to the gender (sex) of the referent. For instance, «[s]tudents may apply for first-year admission by following the instructions available at the Office of Undergraduate Admissions» (UNC, 2022, p. 1) and «[p]lease indicate whether you wish to study voice or an instrument; if an instrument, please indicate which one» (p. 4).

With regard to the teaching guides of the English universities, the University of Greenwich is committed to the use of the second person singular to refer to students without the need to indicate gender. For instance, examples such as «you'll explore great literary works and be inspired to find your own creative voice» and «[y]ou can continue your studies» can be observed. Along with this strategy, the use of plural nouns dominates («[s]tudents are required to study», «the work of other students» and «part-time students»). In the case of the university of North Carolina, the solutions are similar. Although the use of plural nouns is advocated, the use of the second person singular is not notable. For instance, «particular interests of the students and instructor» and «[s]tudents in linguistics» are some of the solutions introduced. Furthermore, neuter nouns such as *professor* are used instead of the labels Miss, Mrs or Mr. to accompany the

⁸ From now on the acronym UNC will be used in future quotations.

name of the person concerned («Professor David Mora-Marín» and «Professor Katya Pertsova»).

3.3.3. Spanish non-academic public institutions

It is interesting to underline that, although universities are powerful in introducing inclusive language to young citizens, the role of state institutions is also very significant in the propagation of inclusive language. In this way, different documents in both Spanish and English have been analysed to observe their inclusive characteristics. In the Spanish documents, it is possible to note different solutions regarding the use of the articles: the usage of generic noun (which may refer to both genders (sex) and it is feminine in gender) in «[d]atos de la persona» (Consejería de Sanidad, p. 1) and «la persona solicitante» (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, p. 1), the employment of the masculine form in «el solicitante» (Consejería de Sanidad, p. 1), «el interesado» (Consejería de Sanidad, p. 3) and «del otro progenitor» (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, p. 2), and the introduction of the two genders through the application of slashes in «el/la representante» (Consejería de Sanidad, p. 1), «hijos/as», «enterado/a» «ellos/as» and «informado/a» (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, p. 2). In addition, the second person singular of courtesy *usted* is used to refer to the receiver: «[u]na vez cumplimentado correctamente este formulario [...] recibirá la Tarjeta Sanitaria en el centro de salud donde la solicitó» (Consejería de Sanidad, p. 3) and «indique la fecha de obtención de las rentas declaradas a continuación» (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, p. 1). Besides, the reference to the partner is made by the term *cónyuge*, whereby the gender of the partner is not specified («datos y rentas del cónyuge», Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, p. 2).

3.3.4. English non-academic public institutions

Regarding documents of English origin, a variety of different options can be observed. Firstly, it is worth noting the use of the second person singular to refer to the receiver. Thus, the pronoun *you* can be identified in the following sentences: «[d]o you have an existing relationship with HSBC?» (HSBC, p. 1), «if you are not a UK, EU/EEA or Swiss national, send a copy of your visa or residence permit» (National Health System⁹, p. 3) and «[i]f your partner is the person who has died» (United Kingdom Government, 2023a, p. 2). Furthermore, in some cases the use of singular *they* is preferred: «[a]bout the child [...] [t]heir surname or family name [...] [t]heir date of birth [...] [t]heir sex» (United Kingdom Government, 2023c, p. 2), «[d]oes this person live with the main applicant at the address given at section 2? If ‘No’, send evidence with this application that they are dependent on the main applicant» (NHS, p. 4) and «[d]id the person who has died have their main home in the UK» (United Kingdom Government, 2023a, p. 4). Besides, the alternative pronouns *he* and *she*, separated by slashes or by the conjunction *o*, are also considered. In this way, these documents tend to contain sentences such as «should the main applicant have a change to residency status, move abroad to live, or work on a long-term basis, then he or she may no longer be entitled to a UK EHIC» (NHS, p. 1) and «[i]f the person making a GENERAL SEARCH is uncertain whether a reference found in the indexes relates to the entry for which he/she is searching» (Leicester City Council). Secondly, the references to the receiver and other individual involved are made with generic nouns such as «[f]irst applicant» (HSBC, p. 1) or «[y]our partner’s email, if they have one» (United Kingdom Government, 2023a, p. 3). In addition, the references to the titles include inclusive options by including *Ms.* among

⁹ From now on the acronym NHS will be used in future quotations.

their options: «Mr, Miss, Mrs, Ms, Dr [or] [o]ther» (HSBC, p. 2). Thirdly, it is interesting to comment on the references to fathers and mothers in official documents. In some cases, it is recognised that the gender of the parents may not be female and male («Father's/Parent's full name»). Thus, it is explained that the term «[p]arent means the mother's female partner who under the Human Fertilisation and Embriology Act 2008 is to be treated as a parent of the child» (Leicester City Council). However, there are also options where this concept is not contemplated: «[f]ather's full name [...] [i]f he has a British passport» and «[m]other's full name [...] [h]er town of birth» (United Kingdom Government).

4. Conclusion

This paper has provided a comparison between Spanish and English in terms of grammatical gender. Furthermore, it has also contributed to showcasing inclusive guidelines for each language analysed and its presence in institutions such as the university or the government.

The considerations observed in the contrast between Spanish and English gender have less marked sexist tendency in English language. Spanish, in contrast, tends to mark gender in a stronger way due to the existence of the generic masculine and its expression in gender morphemes, forms that do not exist in English.

On the other hand, although inclusive language is fully developed in both languages, English contains an inclusive pronoun: the singular *they*. As has been explained, this personal pronoun is the subject of a considerable and deep debate, and it can be traced

back to ancient states of the language. In terms of the solutions offered by inclusive language, they can be observed in institutional documents. However, their presence is stronger in the documents presented to the general public and weaker in those writings that are produced for a more closed context. In other words, institutional documents tend to take inclusive language into account to a wider extent than more restricted academic documents written by teachers in their teaching guides for students.

Finally, I would like to add a personal consideration. From my point of view, the introduction of inclusive language into the language has improved in a considerable degree over the last years. There are numerous official and unofficial documents recognizing linguistic discrimination and suggesting alternatives for its eradication from the language. However, it should be borne in mind that the implementation and transmission of these solutions depends on the speaking population, i.e., the change comes from the people and not from the guidelines that are created. This is a long process in which change can only be achieved in one way and it is in the hands of the people to obtain it.

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