

The Acquisition of Sexist Morphology by Native and Non-Native Speakers of Spanish

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Abstract

Most Spanish speakers have become aware of the issues surrounding sexist language and some have become adept at identifying and correcting possibly offensive language. Nevertheless, the idea of sexism in Spanish has been defined much less thoroughly than it has been in English. This is partly due to the grammatical structures of the two languages: relatively few nouns are marked for gender in English, while all nouns are so marked in Spanish. Grammatical markings for gender, whether a speaker is referring to a human or an inanimate object, are unavoidable in Spanish, and finding a genderless option to avoid possible sexism is surely impossible (Whitley 1986; Greenberg 1966). The traditional accepted usage of “le” as a direct object pronoun in Spanish (*leísmo*) is limited to refer to men only. If the direct object is a woman, the Real Academia and others prescribe the use of “la.” This usage is overtly sexist. A group of 45 native-speakers of Spanish was compared with a group of 39 native-speakers of English after all completed a judgment task containing 24 sentences illustrating a variety of both sexist and non-sexist usage. Neither group reflected the prescriptive sexist grammar—both groups accepted “le” as an accusative pronoun for both men and women.

There is, however, a vigorous movement to avoid so-called sexist language in Spanish. Mathews (1995) points out that movements to avoid sexist usage in Spanish and English have followed very different paths—while English speakers have coined non-gender-specific language where sexist terms exist, Spanish speakers have coined gendered terminology where none has existed before. Indeed, most of the published comments on sexist language in Spanish have dealt with the invention of “equalizing” terminology for occupational terms (Mathews 1995; Lathrop 1987).

Sexist Language in Spanish

In Spanish there are two areas where sexism regularly becomes problematic. First, there is a possibility to be exclusive when using occupational terms. These have been discussed already at length earlier (Mathews, 1995). Second is the Spanish pronominal system. Subject and direct object pronouns in Spanish are overtly marked for gender (e.g., *él, ella, nosotros, nosotras, lo, la, etc.*).

Sexist Clitics in Spanish

The unstressed object pronouns in Spanish are often referred to as clitics. The forms discussed here are limited to the direct and indirect object pronouns, which of course can be masculine or feminine, singular or plural. In addition, the direct object paradigm has a form for the neuter singular. Lunn and DeCesaris (1992) point out that Spanish pronouns are increasingly less specific as to gender and number the more oblique they become with reference to the subject of a sentence. That is, subject pronouns are marked for gender and number in all three persons. Direct object pronouns are marked for gender and number only in the third person. Indirect object pronouns are marked only for number, and reflexive pronouns are not even marked for number in the third person.

Sexist language can occur in Spanish wherever a gendered pronoun (i.e., subject or direct object pronoun) is used to refer to an unspecific or non-gendered person as an antecedent. Nevertheless, since all antecedents need to be assigned gender in Spanish, there is no way to produce a gender-neutral solution (see Mathews, 1995). It should

follow, then, that in the case of genderless pronouns (i.e., indirect and reflexive object pronouns) we can dispense with any need for gender agreement and only concentrate on number agreement. However, this is not the case. With the common and accepted use of “le,” the indirect object pronoun, to replace “lo,” we reintroduce a possibility of sexism.

The Prescriptive Use of “le,” “lo,” and “la”

The traditionally accepted usage of “le” as a direct object pronoun in Spanish is limited to refer to men only. If the direct object is a woman, the Real Academia and others prescribe the use of “la.” For example, the sentence “I do not know *him*” can be expressed as either “No *lo* conozco” or “No *le* conozco,” whereas the sentence “I do not know *her*” can only be expressed as “No *la* conozco” (RAEL 1983, 424-425).

The use of “le” in this context, is called *leísmo*, and although not normative it is a dialectal variant that is prestigious and is widely used throughout the Spanish speaking world. It has been described by most prescriptive grammarians.

Obviously this definition of *leísmo* is sexist. As a general rule, indirect objects are people. *El leísmo* allows the simplification of the masculine paradigm—if an object (either direct or indirect) is a man you can use the pronoun “le”, but if a direct object is a woman, you must use the object pronoun “la,” as you would for any other feminine thing. Thus, in the accusative, men are referred to as people, women are objects. You may only use the pronoun “le” to refer to a woman if she is the indirect object. This objectification of woman and personification of men is overtly sexist.

Years ago as a student learning Spanish in an area that is predominantly *leísta*, I was unaware of the peculiarities of the rule. I figured that if a direct object was a person, I could use “le” instead of “lo” or “la.” Only years later did I find out that I had acquired the wrong rule. The impetus for this study was to find out if other learners of Spanish, both native and non-native, have “learned the wrong rule.”

The Collection of Data and the Judgment Task

For this project I first presented a grammatical judgment task to a group of native Spanish speakers. The task contained a list of sentences that presented a variety of contexts for “lo,” “le” and “la.” The subjects were asked to judge the sentences as acceptable Spanish or not acceptable. The responses were compared to traditional prescriptive grammar.

Second, I presented the same grammatical judgment task to a group of English speakers who had learned Spanish through residency in Spain. All of these speakers were Intermediate or Advanced on the ACTFL Scale. These subjects were asked to judge the same sentences as acceptable or unacceptable.

The Subjects

As mentioned above, there were two groups of subjects. The first group was made up of 45 native speakers of Spanish from Tenerife, Canary Islands. They were all junior high and high school students between 14 and 18 years old, and were all born and reared in Spain. Of this group, 20 were males and 25 were females.

The second group was made up of 39 native speakers of English. Thirty-four were males and five were females. All of the members of this group had lived in Spain. The shortest residence was three months and the longest was 24 months. The average time spent in Spain was 20 months. About half of this group were college students and the others were either not in school or had graduated.

The Judgment Task

The individuals in both groups were given a list of 26 sentences in Spanish. The list was identical for both groups. The subjects marked each of the sentences as “good” or

“bad”—meaning that they could imagine a native speaker saying the sentence in question or they could not. The sentences provided contexts for the different uses of “le” “lo,” and “la”. Table 1 shows the different possible contexts, the sentences used to illustrate them, and the prescriptive “correctness” of each sentence—incorrect sentences are marked with an asterisk. The sentences were presented in random order on the judgment task and not in the order in which they appear in Table 1.

Table 1. *The sentences in the judgment task*

* Sentences marked with an asterisk are deemed ungrammatical by the Real Academia.

† Sentences marked with a cross illustrate *léismo*.

Direct Object Masculine Thing

1. Estos libros, ¿dónde los pongo?
2. Si usted tiene mucho dinero, debe guardarlo en el banco.
3. Mi padre me regaló un libro y le leí la semana pasada.

Direct Object Masculine Person

4. Carlos es tan malo que tengo ganas de golpearlo.
5. Si Mauricio no me escribe pronto, lo voy a matar.
6. † Señor García, mucho gusto conocerle.
7. † Mis hermanos están muy animados porque Ana María les invitó a su fiesta.
8. † Sr. Martínez, tengo que verle esta tarde por favor.

Direct Object Feminine Thing

9. ¿Dónde pongo estas cosas? —Debes ponerlas en la mesa.
10. Lencho tenía dos vacas, y las ordeñaba todos los días.
11. La familia Suárez vive en una casa nueva; le construyeron el año pasado.

Direct Object Feminine Person

12. Federico se casa mañana con Dolores. La conoció hace más de un año.
13. La señorita González es tu maestra y tienes que obedecerla.
14. *† Marta es estupenda; vamos a recomendarle para el puesto.
15. *† Juan se acercó a su abuelita y le besó en la mejilla.
16. *† Mi hermana es buena actriz; le vi en el teatro Colón la semana pasada.

Indirect Object Masculine

17. Llévale los calcetines a tu hermano.
18. Como Pepe es muy amigo del dueño, le dieron un precio muy reducido.
19. Lo escribió una carta a Paco.
20. A Nacho lo dije que tuviera más cuidado.

Indirect Object Feminine

21. Le traigo el sillón a María.
22. Le mandé dos cartas a mi hermana ayer.
23. A mi hermana, la presté mi suéter negro.
24. La traje a mi mamá lo que me pidió.

Three possible phenomena, differing from the ideal pronominal system, present themselves in the items from the judgment task. The first is *léismo*, using “le” for “lo” (which is acceptable) or “le” for “la” which is said to be unacceptable. The second is *laísmo* which is the use of the accusative “la” in place of “le” and which is specifically prohibited in many Spanish grammar books, meaning that many native speakers tend to do it (it is parallel to “ain’t” and the double negative in English). The third we can call *loísmo*,

the use of the accusative “lo” for “le.” This does not seem to be a dialectal variant in Spanish, acceptable or otherwise.

The Results and Analysis

The data were compared to try to understand the conception among natives and non-natives of the possible sexist nature of pronoun use in Spanish. Have they realized that Spanish allows the use of a personal compliment replacement if an accusative referent is a man, but insists on the use of an object complement if the same referent is a woman? More importantly, do native or non-native speakers consistently judge sentences to be ungrammatical if they do not follow these rules?

Comparing Natives to Prescriptive Grammar

Emphasis when looking at the data was placed on those items that were deemed ungrammatical by prescriptive standards and those that were *leísta*. In addition to the sentences listed in Table 1, two control sentences were judged by each subject. These were listed first on the judgment task and were, as I judged them, unmistakably grammatical.

The native speakers were in total agreement that the first control was indeed grammatical, but 4 natives (or 9%) judged the second control sentence to be ungrammatical. This kind of inconsistency in response is typical of native speakers on all kinds of grammaticality judgment tasks. Still, on the control items, the native speakers were in agreement with prescriptive grammarians 96% of the time. This indicates that at least they understood the nature of the task.

However, several of the items showed rather startling results. Table 2 shows the response rates for the native speaker group on those items that might illustrate sexist usage.

Table 2. Native speaker responses

*Items marked with an astrisk are deemed ungrammatical by the real Academia

Item	Acceptable		Unacceptable	
	Number	%	Number	%
Leísmo--masculine antecedent				
6	23	51%	22	49%
7	39	87%	6	13%
8	33	73%	12	26%
Leísmo--feminine antecedent				
*14	31	69%	14	31%
*15	40	89%	5	11%
*16	26	58%	19	42%
Laísmo				
*23	14	31%	31	69%
*24	10	22%	35	78%
Loísmo				
*19	3	7%	42	93%
*20	15	33%	30	67%

Notice that in sentence numbers 6, 7, and 8, the sexist *leísta* examples were judged correct by 51%, 87% and 73% of the native speakers, respectively, whereas sentences 14, 15 and 16, the supposedly unacceptable uses of *leísmo* were judged correct by 69%, 89% and 58% of the native speakers. Statistically, there is no difference between these two judgments, that is, the native speakers judge the use of “le” to be equally correct with either masculine and feminine antecedents ($t = 0, p = .50$). Nevertheless, on average 71%

of the natives approved of both kinds of sentences, meaning a sizable minority considered them unacceptable.

It is also notable that items 23 and 24, which display *laísmo*, were rejected by the native speakers at 69% and 78%. Items 19 and 20, showing *loísmo*, were rejected at 93% and 67%. This is in keeping with what prescriptive grammarians would predict. *Laísmo* although considered “incorrect” is a common dialectal variant, particularly at lower socio-economic levels, whereas *loísmo* should sound wrong to any native ear. However, again the difference in responses is not statistically significant ($t = -0.76, p = .29$).

Items 3 and 11 represent aberrations so bizarre in Spanish that they don't even have a name, yet they were deemed acceptable by 12% and 27% of the native speakers, respectively.

Comparing the Judgments of Native males to those of Native Females

Since the native speaker sample was well represented with both male and female subjects, the responses were compared based on the sex of the subjects. Table 3 shows the responses of the native speaker group for those items that were the emphasis of this study.

Table 3. Native speaker responses by sex

The number indicates the number of subjects that rejected the items as ungrammatical.

*Items marked with an asterisk are deemed ungrammatical by the Real Academia

Item	Male		Female		
	Number	%	Number	%	
Leísmo--masculine antecedent					
6	14	70%	8	32%	†
7	2	10%	4	16%	
8	7	35%	5	20%	
Leísmo--femimime antecedent					
*14	4	20%	10	40%	
*15	1	5%	4	16%	
*16	8	40%	11	44%	
Laísmo					
*23	14	70%	17	68%	
*24	12	60%	23	92%	†
Loísmo					
*19	19	95%	23	92%	
*20	12	60%	18	72%	

† Significant difference at the $p < .05$ level

The only sentences on which the judgments differed significantly were items 6 and 24. Seventy percent of the males found item 6 to be ungrammatical compared to only 32% of the females ($c^2 = 6.421, p < .05$). The opposite was the case with item 24, where 92% of the females rejected the sentence compared to only 60% of the males ($c^2 = 6.583, p < .05$). I can only assume that these are anomalies, because the males and females rated so similarly on other similar items (cf. items 8, 21 and 11).

Comparing Non-Native Judgments by Male vs. Female

Owing to difficulty found obtaining a sample of relatively young native speakers of English who had acquired Spanish while living in Spain, the makeup of the native English-speaking group was quite lopsided. Only 13% of the sample were women and therefore, making a comparison of judgment responses based on sex is unreliable. Nevertheless, in

contrast to the native Spanish-speaking group, there were no significant differences between the 34 men and 5 women on any of the items in the judgment task.

Comparing Natives to Non-Natives

The English-speaking group was similar in many ways to the native speaking group. They also displayed a lack of agreement on the whole as to whether most sentences were acceptable or not. In all, 75% of these subjects judged the masculine *leísmo* sentences to be grammatical, while 66% accepted the feminine *leísmo* sentences as grammatical. Although a higher percentage of English speakers rejected the *leísmo* sentences than did the native speakers, the difference between “le” for “lo” and “le” for “la” is far from statistically significant ($t = .87, p = .47$).

Table 4 shows the rate of ungrammatical judgment for the non-native group and the native speaker group.

Table 4. Non-native and native responses compared

The number indicates the number of subjects that rejected the item as ungrammatical.

*Items marked with an asterisk are deemed ungrammatical by the Real Academia.

Item	English Speakers		Native Spanish Speakers		
	Number	%	Number	%	
Leísmo—masculine antecedent					
6	15		39 %	22	48 %
7	2		5 %	6	13 %
8	12		31 %	12	26 %
Leísmo—feminine antecedent					
*14	13		33 %	14	31 %
*15	11		28 %	5	11 % †
*16	15		38 %	19	42 %
Laísmo					
*23	17		44 %	31	69 % †
*24	26		67 %	35	78 %
Loísmo					
*19	36		92 %	42	93 %
*20	31		79 %	30	37 %

† Significant difference at the $p < .05$ level.

As with the comparison of native speakers by gender, there are two items, 15 and 23, in which statistically significant differences obtained in the data. However, they were not the same items found in Table 3 and again, I feel that the difference is merely an anomaly.

Conclusions

By administering this judgment task I wanted to shed light on the competence that exists in native speakers of Spanish, as well as non-native speakers of Spanish regarding their acceptance of direct and indirect object pronouns. I wondered if any speakers had internalized the grammarians' rules that allow the use of *leísmo* only if an accusative referent is a man, and not if the same referent is a woman. In addition, I wondered if native and non-native speakers consistently judge sentences to be ungrammatical if they do not follow those rules.

I found the answers to be negative in both cases. It seems that most of the time the native speakers of Spanish in my sample allow any human direct object, either male or female, to be replaced with “le.” Both situations were judged correct 71% of the time. This may lead some to ask whether the sexist norms of Real Academia and others reflect a

usage that is disappearing or whether they reflect wishful thinking on the part of an aging mostly-male institution.

The non-native speaking group had acquired a similar competence to that of the native group. They accepted the masculine *leísmo* 75% of the time and the feminine *leísmo* 66% of the time. Since it is unlikely that many of the non-natives learned to accept the feminine *leísmo* in school or from grammar texts (most grammar texts claim it to be incorrect if they mention it all), I conclude that the non-natives have acquired the similar rate of acceptance from the native-speaker community. In addition to making logical sense, this makes an argument that my native sample may indeed be fairly representative of peninsular Spanish-speakers.

From the data presented in this paper, it appears that the overt sexism explained in Spanish textbooks and grammar books is not descriptive of contemporary Spanish usage.

Furthermore, both native and non-native subjects were relatively consistent in rejecting the use of direct object pronouns for the dative case—*loísmo* and *laísmo*. The native speaking group rejected the use of “lo” 65% of the time, and the use of “la” in 74% of cases. The non-natives seem more tolerant of the use of “la” which they rejected only 56% of the time, while at the same time they rejected “lo” more often than the native speakers—86% of the time.

This may represent a general confusion among native speakers of English regarding the distinction between direct and indirect objects. El *leísmo* may indeed be easier to acquire because the distinction is basically not grammatical but pragmatic. Simply put—use “le” if the pronoun represents a person. The rejection of “lo” and “la” as dative pronouns, however, requires an internalized understanding of the dative/accusative distinction, a difference that seems fuzzy in English, to say the least.

Missing in this study is a breakdown of non-native speaker judgments by sex. This is because all but five of the non-native sample were males. Further use of the judgment task with female non-native subjects may shed a different light on some of the results. It should be noted however, that very few differences were noticed between males and females in the native speaking sample.

In conclusion, if the data collected here are indeed representative of the acquisition of gendered clitics in Spanish, it may be that the sexist passages in our dusty grammar texts can be excised, since they do not represent any actual reality.

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