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SOCIAL CHANGE AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Inclusive Language in Spanish as Interpellation to Educational Authorities

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FORUM

Inclusive language in Spanish as interpellation to educational authorities

Abstract

The aim of this commentary is to discuss and promote discussion on some linguistic and pedagogical issues around the use of gender inclusive language, particularly the –*e* morpheme in plural forms, in Spanish. Its speakers are experiencing and becoming aware of language change in real time concerning the use of morphosyntactic choices that seek embrace gender equality, diversity, representation, and diversity. This language change impacts directly on formal education and educational administrators who are under pressure not only from different social actors but also from their own beliefs on whether they should promote, ignore, or mitigate the linguistic changes that society is producing through their situated practices. Against this background, to what extent are educational authorities professionally prepared to encourage academic discussions on inclusive language in education? How can applied linguists help? Having these questions as our Southern Cross, our commentary lies at the intersection of language change and educational authorities' professional knowledge.

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INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AS INTERPELLATION

This is the genesis of this forum article. In August 2018, a group of primary school superintendents in southern Argentina invited us to discuss a sociolinguistic phenomenon: the use of inclusive language in Spanish by fellow superintendents, school heads, and teachers. They noted the uncritical reproduction of opinions around inclusive language in online educational circles and the incipient practice of some school heads and teachers using inclusive language in formal correspondence and teaching. Their first reaction had been to ask for advice from the general superintendent at the Ministry of Education, who instructed educators to follow the dominant linguistic norm of using the masculine noun forms to identify mixed-gender groups. Aware that this order would cause tensions, their second reaction was to seek professional guidance from us, two applied linguists working at a local teacher education institution.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Agreement on the socio-cultural and socio-political reasons behind language change is stable. Language change or ‘speaker innovation’ (Holmes 2013: 206) occurs when a new form is used alongside an already accepted form. Language, as a semiotic and meaning-making system of choices, is a living organism in the hands of its speakers; therefore language change is a natural phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is difficult to discern whether a change is a phase that will succumb to different social factors, or whether it will become a norm socially accepted. In our understanding, a language change becomes normalised when (1) speakers use it naturally, and (2) it does not become a distractor or miscommunication factor.

Concerning inclusive/non-sexist/gender-neutral language, there are two main divergent views. On the one hand, feminist groups and linguists together with LGBT supporters have developed new linguistic forms to ensure the respect, discursive

inscription, and visibilisation of all social actors (Mare 2018). Drawing on social constructionist theory and feminist linguistics, Baxter (2013) explains that language and gender research has adopted a post-modern turn to (1) study gender as diversity and language as a constitutive factor, and (2) raise awareness of gendered language or the indexing of binary gendered identities. On the other hand, language academies and orthodox linguists (eg. Echeverría 2006) defend already established linguistic forms drawing on traditional linguistics and morphosyntactic rules. Mare (2013) explains that while the former base their stance on social theories, the latter resort to traditional linguistics and a technical view of language.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN SPANISH

Spanish has a binary system, masculine and feminine, for the representation and indexing of human experience. In, for example, 'El niño es hermoso' (The boy is beautiful) or 'Las niñas son hermosas' (The girls are beautiful), the gender morphemes *-o* and *-a* are carried through in the phrase as there must be gender-number agreement. In Standard Spanish, the masculine option is used as a generic to refer to a group regardless of its gender composition. On the contested male bias of masculine generics, Estomba (2017) indicates that *-o* does not carry masculine information; it is an unmarked option by default in Spanish, and that the feminine option is marked. However, it is usually perceived that the unmarked forms correspond to one particular gender and that females derive from or are included in males (Liddicoat 2011). In Spain, Bengoechea (2006) found the use of plural feminine as a generic form to name mixed groups in newspaper articles. Nonetheless, this 'feminist' option seems to marginalise others in the same way that the masculine forms as false generics do, and speakers would be moving from a patriarchal to a matriarchal use of language.

Since the spread of demands on gender equity, diversity and social justice (Lomotey 2018; Pauwels 2003; Sunderland 2006) in relation to inclusive language, two particular phenomena have been observed in Spanish: (1) the introduction of a marked

form with the feminine morpheme in items which did not have it, and (2) the introduction of syntactic and morphological variations to identify mixed-gender groups.

Concerning the first phenomenon, a noun such as 'presidente' (president) is the present participle of the verb 'presidir' (to preside); therefore the *-nte* morpheme lacks gender. However, history shows that mostly males have been presidents and the morpheme was assigned a masculine trait. At least in Latin America, this situation changed when Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was president of Argentina between 2007 and 2015, a fact which triggered the use of 'president*a*' to mark that the president was female. In Argentina, Mare (2018) observes that this change provoked debates between feminists and orthodox academics but did not alter the dynamics of educational institutions.

The second phenomenon is observed through four distinctive forms. One form, Mare (2018) notes, is syntactic duplication through coordination: 'todos y todas' (everybody), or 'los/las doctores/doctoras' (the doctors). While this option helps visibilise women, it becomes tedious to sustain in oral and written communication and compromises one linguistic feature: economy. Furthermore, such a syntactic duplication is binary and thus heteronormative. A second form is the use of the semiotic sign '@' to include all genders and avoid the *-o* and *-a* morphemes as in 'maestr@s' (teachers). The problem is that this option is only possible in writing as it does not have phonological realisation. A third form is the use of the linguistic sign 'x' as in 'maestrxs'. While this sign has phonological representation (pronounced either /s/ or /ks/ depending on its position), it cannot be pronounced when it is in interconsonantal position. However, the use of '@' and 'x' among others may be recognised in formal writing. For example, Lagneaux (2017) observes that students at the School of Journalism (Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina) use gender inclusive language in academic writing as sign of 'emancipación escritural' (writing emancipation) (p. 6).Similarly, official document analysis shows that

guidelines on inclusive language agreed by Uruguayan mayors (Furtado 2013) and the judiciary system in Spain (Rubio 2016) have incorporated the three forms described above.

The fourth form entails the substitution of both *-o* and *-a* for *-e* so that we can say 'les maestres'. This is a radical change as it unmarks and neutralises gender as a linguistic category to index humans. Unlike the second and third options, this morphological alternative can be pronounced and the change is possible in both spoken and written Spanish. However, it requires a high degree of consciousness because such a morphological change impacts on other levels of the language as a system; thus, the syntactic and phonological levels also need to be accommodated to avoid syntagmatic inconsistencies. Because Spanish seems to be more permeable to this change in particular, it is the one which has unleashed controversies (Lomotey 2018; Mare 2018), and, as described at the beginning of this commentary, has made superintendents aware that the educational community demands guidance and a clear stance on all forms of gender inclusive language, and on this fourth form in particular.

EDUCATION AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS MEET

In the context of this commentary, we suggest two reasons for the superintendents' concerns: (1) the ideological force behind language change, and (2) limited sociolinguistic preparation to address such topics.

The question of ideology and power is inherent to language change (Holmes 2013). We agree that language users need to feel named by the language they use mostly; this demand is legitimate and ethical. To feminist and LGBT supporters, linguistic distinctiveness is a powerful identifying value and some specific language changes are to them, but also to detractors, axiologic. On the one hand, the promotion

and acceptance of the gender inclusive morpheme *-e* may be taken as a sign of progress and cultural sensitivity to speakers. Conversely, its rejection or relegation could be a sign of discrimination, reproduction of oppressive patriarchal practices, and the defence of norms and forms over meaning. It is at this dichotomy of language-driven ideological representations (Narvaja de Arnoux and Del Valle 2010) where the superintendents stand as they are aware of the socio-educational implications of their decisions.

The second concern is critical since authorities are expected to clarify the topic of inclusive language from a systemic stance in the educational domain, not in the speakers' domain. For various reasons, educational authorities may lack updated sociolinguistic arguments to guide discussions within educational communities, and instead, they rely on internal theories, personal beliefs, and purely prescriptive conceptions of language education. It is at this intersection between (lack of) professional knowledge and language change that there surfaces a genuine necessity to facilitate transdisciplinary work between pedagogy and applied linguistics (Rose and McKinley 2017).

When educational authorities are aware of their limited preparation, they may also be aware that their context-responsive decisions may impact on linguistic planning and policy and resent the dialogue within the communities in which schools are imbued. We believe that one of the roles of applied linguists is to offer their expertise; thus since that first meeting we have supported the superintendents through different initiatives. We led two one-hour sessions in which we discussed inclusive language and the need to understand language change as a natural and social phenomenon that goes beyond schools. In such meetings we discussed language from a systemic functional perspective to emphasise meaning, function, and identity over form, and explained the limited power that the Real Academia Española actually has on Spanish speakers. We have also offered reading material and suggested that the superintendents can accept formal correspondence written in gender inclusive

language, but they can choose whether their reply will feature gender inclusive forms or not as it is a right that speakers exercise when using the language. We have participated in school meetings called by the superintendents to help the community develop higher degrees of language awareness drawing on other changes Spanish has undergone and showing examples of naturally occurring data. In such meetings, we encourage the school community to understand language change as a process from a non-prescriptive or determinist view. Our presence has become a bridge that helps the school community reconcile positions, respect opinions, and celebrate inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Following Kramsch (2015), critical incidents on L1 use may become a call for applied linguists to immerse themselves in L1 practices that may be issues to schools, but inherent to a society whose speakers demand to be named. We invite applied linguists to engage with the school communities they are part of as citizens to offer expert advice that can help people increase their sociolinguistic awareness for inclusion and social justice.

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