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GENDER AND MEXICAN SPANISH

Whether found in the sounds of language, grammar, vocabulary, or even daily conversation, gender distinctions are found in all languages worldwide. Indo-European languages such as Spanish offer a particular variation on a theme, a particular array of grammatical genders, phonemes (elementary units of sound), morphemes (elementary units of meaning), and socio-cultural contexts. What most distinguishes Mexican Spanish from other versions of Spanish with regard to gender and language is the cultural and social institutions within which phonetically, grammatically, and lexically gendered discourses are spoken and interpreted by native Mexican speakers.

Spanish is composed of grammatical genders—words or parts of words that are classified or marked as feminine (f.), masculine (m.), or both feminine and masculine. Grammatical genders are a property of nouns that requires syntactical agreement on the part of other nouns, adjectives, and articles. For example, in the Spanish translation of the phrase “the red house”—*la casa roja*—both the article (*la*) and the adjective (*roja*) must agree with the feminine gender of the noun (*casa*). Spanish words can be of two types: double-form and single-form words. Double-form words have both a masculine and a feminine form, such as *amigo* (a male friend) and *amiga* (a female friend). Single-form words only have a masculine, feminine, or androgynous form despite the sex of the referent. For example, *la persona* and *la gente* are feminine grammatically, but refer generically to person and people respectively; *el personaje* is masculine grammatically, but refers generically to a personage; *ella juez* is androgynous grammatically, and refers generically to a judge.

Spanish words that refer to animate beings (people and animals) as opposed to inanimate things (objects and concepts) do so in three ways: by explicitly or implicitly referring to men, women, or both men and women. *Amigo* is explicitly masculine and *amiga* is explicitly feminine owing to their clearly marked syntactic properties (the suffix *o* versus the suffix *a*), and the sexes of their referents correspond directly

to their grammatical genders. *Amigo* refers to a male friend, *amiga* to a female friend. In contrast to double-form words such as *amigolamiga*, single-form words have an implicit or indirect (rather than an explicit or direct) relationship to the sex of the referent. In these cases qualifiers are required to determine the sex of the implied referent. For example, *la persona* is grammatically feminine but semantically of either or both sex; *la persona* may refer to a man, a woman, or generically to a person, depending upon the context or the qualifiers used by the speaker. In such cases, the speaker must explicitly state the referent's sex if the speaker wishes to convey this information. Ways of doing this are numerous. For example, one may state “*Él es una persona buena*” (he is a good person), emphasizing the subject as male with the pronoun *él* (he). For nouns with ambiguous syntactical endings, an article before the noun is sufficient to make the distinction explicit (e.g., *el juez* or *la juez*, *el artista* or *la artista*, *el periodista* or *la periodista*).

For centuries scholars have wondered whether grammatical genders convey any semantic message of femininity and masculinity. Despite the fact that *el hombre* refers to mankind, does its grammatically masculine form carry any intrinsic meaning of masculinity? In a study of Mexican Spanish, Toshi Konishi found that grammatical gender categories affect meaning and correlate with social and cultural ideas about femininity and masculinity. Significantly, he also found that speakers of Spanish perceive these correlates to have unequal values. Konishi discovered that words in the masculine gender were consistently perceived as higher in potency than those in the feminine. “Gender stereotypes,” he writes, “played a role in the choice of he vs. she since antecedents of he tended to be strong, active, brave, wise, and clever, whereas antecedents of she tended to be weak, passive, and foolish.” For example, in children's literature, the sun (*el sol*) is referred to as “he” and is thought of as more powerful than the moon (*la luna*), which is personi-

fied as "she" and thought of as less potent. Work by other scholars has shown that this phenomenon is not limited to Mexican Spanish.

There is another aspect of the gender-sex relationship worth noting. To explicitly signify men/males there is one gender, the masculine gender. In contrast, to signify women/females there are two genders: one that is feminine (*amiga*) and the other that is masculine/generic (*amigo*), which linguistically, if not psychologically, includes women/females. In other words, the masculine gender in double-form words has two possible referents; *amigo* can refer explicitly to the sex (a male friend) or implicitly to the general class of friends (male or female, friend as a category of person) just as the word *man* in English has traditionally stood for the sex (a person who is male) as well as the generic (a person/mankind, male or female). *Amiga* has only one referent, and it is explicitly female. While *amigos* is the plural for friends and includes both men and women, the plural *amigas* includes only women. Semantic asymmetry such as this, where the masculine gender dominates over the feminine in the generic as the plural form, requires Spanish speakers to make leaps in their understanding. It is also the reason many women listeners rely heavily on context to determine whether or not they are included when the masculine form of a noun is in use. Recent studies such as Konishi's demonstrate that when the generic term is chosen by a speaker—*amigo(s)*—few speakers think of anything other than male referents. To remedy this discrepancy scholars of the Spanish language such as García Meseguer have suggested that speakers employ the generic only as the generic and make use of qualifiers when referring to the specific sexes; thus, *hombre* unqualified refers only to mankind (to both men and women) but never exclusively to men/males. With qualifiers, however, *hombre* may refer specifically to males if stated specifically as *hombre macho* and to females if stated as *hombre hembra*.

Unlike grammatical genders, which show gender with grammatical markers, the lexicon, or vocabulary, creates gender distinctions with words and meanings. For example, the proper term of address for a man is *señor*, which may be used on its own or with a surname. It is a term of address applied indiscriminately to adult males. There is no equivalent term in Spanish to signify an adult woman. Instead there are two terms to address a woman, *señora* and *señorita*, each of which discriminates two categories of women, married and unmarried. A *señorita* is an unmarried woman or girl; a *señora*, a married one. *Señor* makes no such distinction. In Mexico there are numerous occasions when it is more polite to address a woman whose marital status is unknown as *señorita* than *señora*, despite her age, not so much for the youth but the virginity the former implies. The categorization of women, but not men, along such lines occurs in many other semantic domains. The term *hombre público* is a man in the public eye or sphere, but a *mujer pública* is a prostitute; an *hombre honrado* is an honest man, but a *mujer honrada* is a chaste woman. Words that describe the sexuality of men do so in celebratory tones as *viril* and *potente*. Those same traits

in a woman are considered negative. Not surprisingly, words for coitus almost always are cast in phallogocentric terms, focused on *penetración* by the male; terms for the female role are passive, unless negatively described. The colloquial terms for sex in Mexico are based on metaphors of conquest: striking, causing harm, even killing; penises are sticks, clubs, and guns, which men, depending often but not always on their class, either put into (*meter*) or throw at (*echar*) a woman. While married men commonly refer to their spouses generically by their sex and in the possessive as *mi mujer*, "my woman," women have no such equivalent available to them, only words for husband (*marido* or *esposo*) or personal names. And finally, while a *señora* does not change her name to that of her husband, as is common practice in English-speaking countries, she often adds her husband's name to hers by using the possessive *de* (of), as in "Señora García de Bustos."

In Mexico and around the world, cultural codes and social conventions have an enormous impact on the shaping of language and its messages. *Padre* and *madre* are two words that provide an example of culturally encoded gender difference in Mexican Spanish. Literally, *padre* is a noun and means "father." When part of the expression *que padre*, however, *padre* is an adjective that translates as "that's terrific." It is a mundane expression, as common as its counterpart *me vale madre*, which literally translates as "it's worth a mother." While *madre* means mother, both as a noun (e.g., the mother of children) and an adjective (e.g., the mother country), idiomatically *madre* is used to describe any number of bad experiences, objects, or circumstances. *Me vale madre* stands in contrast to *que padre*. Instead of referring to greatness, it refers to uselessness. In free translation *me vale madre* renders into something like "it's worthless" or "I don't give a damn." Yet mothers are revered in Mexico, in both the religious (the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God) and secular spheres.

According to Alan Riding there are many words in Mexican Spanish filled with multiple meanings rich in "psychosexual and religious connotations." However, few are as complex in meaning and abundant in variation as *madre*. For example,

Nuestra madre refers to the Virgin Mary, yet, puzzlingly, the word usually is used negatively. The insult *chinga tu madre* can be reduced to *tu madre* with little loss of intensity, while *una madre* can signify something that is unimportant, and *un desmadre* converts a situation into chaos. A *madrazo* is a heavy blow, a *madreador* is a bouncer or hired thug, and *partir la madre*—to "divide" the mother—means to shatter someone or something. . . . A son will use the diminutive form *madrecita* to address his own mother, but *mamacita* is a vulgar street comment to a passing girl or a term of endearment for a mistress.

According to A. Bryson Gerrard's handbook of everyday spoken Spanish, *madre* "should need no entry but Mexican usage makes one essential; insults connected with mothers are so

common . . . and so offensive that in Mexico [that Mexicans] have steered off the word altogether when it is a matter of referring to immediate relatives." It is better to ask friends about the health of their *mamás* than it is to ask about their *madres*, the handbook warns. "In contrast," Riding notes, "the father figure—*el padre*—plays a lesser linguistic role. A *padrote*, or big father, is a pimp, while something that is excellent is *muy padre*." The list of idioms deriving from *padre* are all but exhausted by these few expressions, not one of which connotes worthlessness.

The inconsistencies that surround the cultural meaning of the term *madre* are intriguing. Along with *me vale madre* there are expressions such as *a toda madre* and *de poca madre*. The former literally translates into "a total mother," the latter into "of little mother." Yet both are as powerful in their reference to greatness as is *que padre*. The gender-blending of common Mexican names like María José for a girl and José María for a boy or Jesús for a boy and Jesusa for a girl offers some hint of the complexity of gender difference and maintenance with regard to mother-father issues. They suggest that the linguistic construction of gender difference is more than a simple black-and-white matter.

It is quite possible that gender differences may be encoded in the most elementary units of sound in Mexican Spanish. In 1954 Roman Jakobson suggested that there might be biological and psychological roots to the phonology of the terms mother and father. Based on a study by George Peter Murdock of unrelated languages from around the world, Jakobson observed a correspondence in the structure of parental terms used by infants. Words for mother (*mama*) more often than not begin with a nasalized consonant (/m/, /n/, /ng/), and those for father (*papa*) frequently begin with a bilabial or palatal stop (/p/, /b/, /t/ or /d/). Jakobson traced the sounds for mother to the nasalized murmur that children make while sucking at a mother's breast. In Spanish, sounds associated with sucking (*mamar*, to suck) also begin with a nasalized sound. Jakobson did not explore the possible biological and psychological roots to the /p/ of *papa*, but if he had he might have noted that the sound [p] is forceful whether aspirated as it is in English or unaspirated as in Spanish. It may be that the forcefulness of a consonantal stop such as /p/ or /t/ as opposed to a nasalized murmur such as /m/ was not an arbitrary choice by the infant to signify her/his father any more than the choice of a nasalized murmur to represent the mother was arbitrary. Approximately 30 percent of men's names in Spanish begin with a consonantal stop, but only 4 percent of women's names do. Despite these provocative general data, however, there have been no studies of the phonetic encoding of gender in Mexican Spanish.

Over the past 15 years sociolinguists have demonstrated that in addition to language itself, other nonlinguistic factors have a large impact on the perception and perpetuation of gender difference in language, particularly conversational contexts. Class, culture, ethnicity, and gender (meaning in this case the cultural construction of one's sexuality) can each influence the message conveyed by a language. Gender-specific speech styles, for example, affect the

way men and women interact and interpret one another. Confusing linguistic genders (masculine and feminine words) with sexual difference (male and female) on the one hand and socioculturally constructed genders (e.g., masculinity and femininity) on the other is a common occurrence among speakers of a language filled with gender-encoded sounds, syntax, and semantics. Making this confusion conscious is a central activity of many Mexican Spanish speakers, particularly in marked situations such as joking sessions, musical lyrics, and other out-of-the-ordinary performances.

In Mexico there is a social form of discourse found primarily among men, a particular kind of joking called *albur*. Men of all classes and in almost all parts of Mexico outside the indigenous populations engage in these joking sessions. *Albures* are always about sex and sexual conquests that, while stated in male-female terms, are contests between two men, the speakers themselves. There are many circumstances that might spark an *albur*: food at the dinner table, a word, a color. But most commonly *albures* center around women: a passing woman on a street, someone's grandmother, sister, and only on rare occasions, mother. *Albures* are often but not always set pieces, which a boy learns growing up. Just as an English speaker might follow someone's "see you later" with "alligator" so a Mexican man might follow someone's *chico* or *pequeño* with *pásame el plato grande*, thereby initiating a contest that will appear competitive only to someone educated in the craft. While "see you later, alligator" is a simple rhyme without contest, an *albur* always has a winner and a loser so that the initiator in the case above must respond quickly with some sexual reference or he loses. He asks *¿cómo?*, which might on the surface translate into "what did you say?" but is quickly interpreted by his contestant to be the first person singular of the verb *comer*, to eat, thereby making it easy for the respondent to win by feminizing his contestant with the retort *Siéntate que te veo cansado* (sit down [on me], you look tired). Although the contestants in *albures* are generally men, on occasion women will participate in them. Nonetheless, women's participation in *albures* is limited.

The women's movement in Mexico has sought to change the perception and position of women in Mexican society by several means, including cultural and sociolinguistic ones. Mexican women writers, playwrights, performance artists, and songwriters such as Elena Poniatowska, Jesusa Rodríguez, Astrid Hadad, and Gloria Trevi have in their novels, plays, performances, and songs challenged the sexual biases in Mexican Spanish and society. In addition the Chicana movement in the United States, which includes such Mexican American women writers as Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa, has through its written poetry, poetry slams, short stories, and novels challenged the social construction and linguistic usage of Mexican Spanish that subordinate women. All these verbal artists have as their ancestor Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century nun who left a legacy of poetry and letters she had written about sex discrimination. For Sor Juana it was colonial society and the Catholic Church that regulated women's behavior, including what they had to say. Much has changed since the seven-

teenth century, although some Mexican women argue that the continuities are more striking. What becomes of Mexican Spanish in the days ahead will depend on the work of feminist linguists and verbal artists, as well as such individuals as the young married Mexican woman who responded to the inquiry "Do you use *de* García after your name to indicate you are married?" with "No, I occasionally use *con* (with) or *contra* (against) but never *de* (of)".

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—ELIZABETH BAKEWELL

GENERACIÓN DEL MEDIO SIGLO

During the 1940s the foundation was laid for the consolidation of modern Mexico. The governments of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940–46) and Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946–52) not only put an end to the internecine struggle among Revolutionary factions, but also imposed relative political stability and economic growth and diversification. Mexico passed through a process of transformation from a largely agrarian to a primarily industrial economy, with strong participation both domestic businesses and foreign capital.

The repercussions of this process for Mexico's cultural life were felt immediately. If Mexican culture before the 1940s largely had been rural, by then end of the decade it had become more urban-based and cosmopolitan. If the arts had responded to the Revolutionary project in previous decades, in the 1940s their political engagement suffered a marked decline. By 1940, for example, the Mexican muralism of David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco had produced its most important works and began to lose ground to other, more emphatically avant-garde visual arts. During the Alemán administration muralism and the Mexican School of painting was reduced to a purely decorative art form, insipid ornamentation for public buildings and luxury hotels, whose Revolutionary commitment amounted to little more than empty posturing. As the artist Rufino Tamayo acidly remarked, "The peasants have triumphed in Mexico only in murals."

A new current in the visual arts gained strength in the 1940s, however, and in the 1950s would displace Mexican muralism. Its mentor was Rufino Tamayo, who insisted that the Revolutionary character of art rested not in its content but in its forms of expression. This current soon came to known as the Generación de Ruptura: first, Carlos Mérida, Juan Soriano, Pedro Coronel, and Alfonso Michel; and later

younger artists such as Vicente Rojo, Manuel Felguéz, Lilia Carrillo, Fernando García Ponce, Alberto Gironella, and Arnaldo Coen. The Generación de Ruptura also spurred a revalorization of the work of such artists as Gunther Gerszo and Leonora Carrington, which had been largely forgotten during the heyday of muralism.

A similar trend occurred in music. The nationalist current of Silvestre Revueltas, Carlos Chávez, and Pablo Moncayo began to lose ground to the work of artists who followed the experiments of avant-garde composers in other countries. This current would rise to prominence during the 1950s and 1960s and included such artists as Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras, Armando Lavalle, Raúl Cosío, Manuel Henríquez, Héctor Quintanar, and Julio Estrada.

Literature was far more resistant to these changes. The 1940s continued the long-running conflict between socially engaged literature—emerging largely out of the novel of the Mexican Revolution—and avant-garde currents led by the Estridentistas (Stridentists) and the Contemporáneos Group, which already had produced its best work in the previous decades. The first group included such writers as José Rubén Romero, Gregorio López y Fuentes, Mauricio Magdaleno, Francisco Rojas González, José Mancisidor, Ermilo Abreu Gómez, Juan de la Cabada, Rubén Salazar Mallén, and José Revueltas. The second group centered on the journals *Taller* and *Tierra Nueva* and included such writers as Octavio Paz, Efraín Huerta, Neftalí Beltrán, Rafael Solana, and Alí Chumacero. The 1940s closed with the publication Agustín Yáñez's *Al filo del agua*, which synthesized to two basic currents of the 1940s. If the content of the novel puts its firmly in the tradition of socially engaged literature, it also incorporated the formal experiments of the avant-garde, particularly the innovations of John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*.