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 sociocultural 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 jueza 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 amigo/amiga, 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 sexes: 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 having 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-
ied 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; amiga 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). Amigo has only one referent, and it is explicitly male. While amiga is the plural for friends and includes both men and women, the plural amigos 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—amiga(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 phallocentric 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 madres than it is to ask about their padres, the handbook warns. "In contrast," Riding notes, "the father figure—el padre—plays a lesser linguistic role. A padre rote, or big father, is a pimp, while something that is excellent is may 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 (lm, /m/, /ng/), and those for father (papa) frequently begin with a bilabial or palatal stop (/pl, /bl, /l/ or /l/). 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 /pl/ of papa, but if he had he might have noted that the sound [pl] is forceful whether aspirated: it is in English or unaspirated as in Spanish. It may be the forcefulness of a consonantal stop such as /pl/ or /l/ as opposed to a nasalized murmur such as /ml/ was not an arb: any choice by the infant to signify her/his father any mo: 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 impa: 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 albures. 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 albure: 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 páisme 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 albure 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 ¿coño?, 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 contests 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 Rodriguez, 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)".

Select Bibliography

GENERACIÓN DEL MEDIO SIGLO

During the 1940s the foundation was laid for the consolidation of modern Mexico. The governments of Manuel Ávila 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 Siquieros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco had produced its most important works which already had produced its best work in the previous decades. The 1940s closed with the publication Agustín Yanez's Al filo del agua, which synthesized two basic currents in 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.


—ELIZABETH BAKEWELL