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Investigation Article

Teaching grammatical gender in Spanish as a second language

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Abstract

The present article of reflection constitutes a revision on the teaching of grammatical gender in Spanish as a second language, or L2, to native speakers of English, or L1; its purpose is to make L2 learners aware of the differences that exist between the two languages, regarding grammatical gender with explicit formal marks, to heteronymous nouns, ambiguous nouns, those without a gender mark, and epicene nouns, as they are defined by the *Manual of the New Grammar of the Spanish Language* (2010). From the definitions, we present a series of considerations on grammatical gender in each of the mentioned cases as references for their teaching in second language, with examples and possible forms of construction of the grammatical gender in Spanish. In addition, some grammatical learning strategies in Spanish are suggested for native speakers of English, or L1. The origin of this article is due to a reflection carried out in the Morphology seminar in a master's degree program focused on Linguistics, in which there were analyzed different grammatical topics, such as gender and their possible teaching in both Spanish and in a foreign language.

Keywords: Morphology, grammatical gender, explicit marks, ambiguous nouns, heteronymous nouns, epicene nouns.

Introduction

The teaching of grammatical gender in Spanish as a second language, or L2, can be a topic of reflection, since it is generally referred to this gender as an explicit formal mark on sex, which is the starting point, but not the arrival for its teaching. As it is well known, languages use different processes to form words, as in the case of grammatical gender formation. In some cases, this has explicit formal marks; in others, it is an inherent grammatical property, as it can be seen in noun terminations. In the *Manual of the New Grammar of the Spanish Language* (*Manual de la nueva gramática de la lengua española*), it is affirmed that the gender marks can be: formal explicit, as the terminations of the nouns, and they are denominated grammatical morphemes of gender, as in the case of *tí-o/tí-a*, *león/leon-a*, *tigre/tigre-sa* (uncle/aunt, male lion/female lion, male tiger/female tiger). There are also different endings for heteronyms: *hombre/mujer*, *macho/hembra* (men/woman, male/female). In addition, ambiguous nouns, that is, those that can be used interchangeably as male or female to designate the same entity: *el mar/la mar* (the sea), being the latter used with poetic meaning. Likewise, there is the epicene noun, which has a single grammatical gender. Examples include *hipopótamo* (hippopotamus), which can be both used for male or female. Therefore, when teaching Spanish as a second language to native speakers of English, one can discover cases such as that of the grammatical gender with its particularities, such as those mentioned above, which leads to deep into these criteria in order to focus the teaching of a grammatical theme in Spanish as L2 in a clearer and more precise way.

Next, some definitions on morphology are included, in order to arrive at the definition of gender and its fundamental characteristics.

Definitions

Definition of morphology

Morphology is a discipline that supports the study of all languages, since it is a level of linguistics that is concerned with the formation of words. Among the definitions that are handled in an introductory course in linguistics, there is the definition of S. [Poole](#) (1999: 73), "Just as there may be arbitrary boundaries between semantic ranges, so too ordering knowledge may require us to impose divisions across linkages... I shall in this chapter study the composition of words under the usual heading of morphology." Or this other one by [V. Fromkin](#), (2000:25): "Morphology is the study of words and their structure. What is a word? Words are meaningful linguistic units that can be combined to form phrases and sentences."

In the definitions, morphology can be seen as a discipline in charge of studying the composition of words and, as it is defined in the *Manual of the New Grammar of the Spanish Language*, in its first section of general considerations: "Morphology deals with the structure of words, their internal constitution and their variations" (2010: 3).

It would be expected, then, that morphology changes considerably from one language to another, since languages use different processes to form words. Therefore, when searching the classification of languages, there seems to be a consensus derived from the concept of [Sapir](#) (1954) for the classification of them, by their morpho-syntactic formation, as binders, insulators and flexional.

Authors such as Graddol, Cheshire and Swann, in *Describing Language* (1987), argue that languages

are divided into three classes: analytical or isolating, as in the case of Chinese, which contains simple units, without declinations or affixes; synthetic or flexural, such as Latin, which presents elaborate systems of suffixes; and agglutinating or deleting, such as Turkish or Swahili, which possess a series of morphemes corresponding to pronouns and verbal tenses, among others. Although Sapir in his book *Language (El Lenguaje, 1954)* already warned that the classification of languages in “Insulators, binders and flexional [...] cannot aspire to have a great value as an instrument to discover the intuitive forms of language” (1954: 166).

Therefore, considering the situation of teaching Spanish - classified as a Romance language - as a second language or L2 to speakers of another language, such as English -Germanic language- it is evident to find problems of different order, because the basic units of a language, such as morphemes or some syntactic features, do not usually coincide with those of other languages.

Definition of gender

According to the *Manual of the New Grammar of the Spanish Language*, (2010: 23), gender is “a grammatical property of nouns and some names that impinge on the concordance with determiners, quantifiers and adjectives or participles.”

This grammatical property must be sought not only within the connotation of sex but also outside it, as defined by the Dictionary of the RAE (Spanish dictionary) in its twenty-second edition, in the grammatical entry:

“Class to which a name, noun or pronoun belongs to the fact of agreeing with it a form and, generally only one, of the inflection of the adjective and the pronoun. In Indo-European languages these forms are three in certain adjectives and pronouns: masculine, feminine, and neutral. “

Another definition of gender worth mentioning is the one by [José Joaquín Montes](#) (1997, p.144-145), who considers that: “Gender is a system of classifying names in groups or classes, which may or may not include the class ‘sex.’ “In addition, he adds that concordance is what makes such classification possible. When referring to gender, the name is the one that carries the grammatical information, but when acting within an expression, it must agree with the other grammatical categories, such as the adjective or the pronoun that accompany it.

However, there are diverse conceptions regarding gender, which are different from those mentioned above. The author [José Manuel González Calvo](#) (1979), in his article called *El género, ¿una categoría*

morfológica? (Genre, a morphological category?), considers genre “as a syntactic resource to express concordance.” For the author, there are three points of view for its characterization: “The sexual one (which no one uses today as a single criterion), the grammatical of concordance one, and the mixed one (which distinguishes the real gender from the grammatical or arbitrary one).” González holds that gender in Spanish is a syntactic category; and from this point of view, there would be no neutral, common, ambiguous or epicene gender. As for some nouns related to animals, the type of sex is not reported as there is no alternation of the forms of the article, thus considering it a syntactic case. The situation is similar when it refers to nouns of inanimate character, insisting that gender is neither semantic nor morphological. He explains this fact by using the word *macho* (male), instead of alternating an article. And he concludes that only nouns imply gender; but neither articles nor adjectives imply gender, they only have endings to accommodate to it.

Teaching grammatical gender in English as a second language

When taking the case of grammatical gender, it can be seen that this is marked by inflection in Spanish in some cases, while English does not present this type of problem in most of them, except with some exceptions.

In order to clarify grammatical gender, we first refer to several cases mentioned in the Manual of the New Grammar of the Spanish Language, since each requires some special treatment. For example, a learner of Spanish as a second language or L2 cannot be provided with the simple and traditional information for gender formation, which generally refers to the explicit marking of noun endings. The explanation in this section for gender marks states: “Gender is sometimes manifested in some explicit formal MARKS (...) interpreted as gender morphemes.” This is the explanation that is generally given by teachers of Spanish as a second language to their apprentices, perhaps without going further into the grammatical field, and they refer mainly to morphological information regarding sex. But what about nouns that do not possess it? It is considered that it is there where the problem lies, in the nouns whose terminations lack such content and, therefore, learning about their male or female form rather depends on using other strategies to learn those words in the target language.

Gender marks such as the explicit formal ones are usually the starting point, and they can be identified as morphemes in cases relating to sex. For example, the association of the vowel -o to masculine nouns and the vowel -a, to feminine nouns, both of them as grammatical morphemes of gender. But what happens when we begin to find nouns ending in -e, -i, or -u?

There undoubtedly arises the first question to approach the teaching of L2 to a foreigner.

In an attempt to find out how this situation has been resolved, a web search has been carried out to address the issue; there appears links such as: remembering gender when learning foreign languages (www.200words-a-day.com/gender.html), in which there are gender explanations such as:

“The gender of a noun is its ‘sex’.

In English we have no genders, but in many languages nouns have different genders or ‘sex’.

They are either male or female - masculine or feminine!

... and sometimes other things as well.

To recap some basic grammar, a noun is a word that describes a THING... So you must know the gender of the noun when using it.

For example in Spanish . . .

Well, most courses do not have any particular technique for teaching gender when teaching foreign vocabulary.

Most just teach the word with its ‘definite article’, and this tells you the gender.

So most courses just give you a long list of words, with their articles.

So to answer the question regarding “What is the most efficient and least-effort way to learn genders when learning a modern foreign language such as Spanish, French, German?”, the answer is: You should learn the gender when you learn the word, and the most effective way to implant this is through the use of a Gender Trigger.”

Explanations like the previous ones lead to the hopeless reality of what really happens when grammatical gender is explained. It is therefore essential to address the issue in a more comprehensive way and to use gender explanations as appropriate. For example, the introduction to the topic might begin with gender classes, as referred to in the *New Grammar Handbook*: “With many nouns that designate animate beings, gender serves to differentiate sex from referent (...) in the remaining cases, the gender of nouns is an inherent grammatical property, unrelated to sex.”(2010: 24)

It is probable that when referring to an inherent grammatical property, one begins to make the learner of Spanish as L2, whose L1 is English, to perceive the gender of nouns from another perspective, that of the exceptions, e.g., inanimate objects that only have

grammatical gender not related to sex, and those of words that come from formal languages, from which it is adopted their conception of gender. This situation is later exemplified by different possibilities.

Considerations

As for the nouns in which gender allows to differentiate the sex of the designated beings, several possibilities are shown, as stated in the *Manual*. In this case, it could refer to those names that in English -L2- form the feminine with suffixes similar to Spanish. Such is the case of *duque/duquesa* (duke/duchess) or *poeta/poetisa* (male poet/female poet) whose formation process in English exists in names such as *steward/stewardess*, *prince/princess*, *duke/duchess*, *lion/lioness*, among others. These nouns add the suffixes -ess /-ss and, in a particular case, an orthographic variation *ch* instead of *k* to form the feminine.

In the case of heteronyms that use different (lexical) endings, the tendency in L2 to use morphological processes as explicit gender markings is greater in English. In this language, different endings are used depending on the case, to explain it as it is shown in the following examples, regarding members of the family or kinship relations:

brother	sister
mother	father
son	daughter
uncle	aunt
father-in-law	mother-in-law

In Spanish these heteronyms are formed with explicit gender mark, with the exception of father/mother. For example:

hermano	hermana
hijo	hija
tío	tía
suegro	suegra

Another relevant point that can be considered when explaining gender has to do with ambiguous nouns that can be used as masculine or feminine to designate the same entity. However, native English speakers, as apprentices of Spanish as L2, do not have the elements to refer to them through a cognitive strategy such as positive transference. Therefore, they should learn a list of names, depending on their learning style. However, activities that include a list of words do not seem to be sufficient to solve this new situation presented to them. Therefore, what could be done is an awareness of the

existence of this case in the (target) L2, in order for the students to have more tools in their process of learning gender in L2. The *Manual* provides examples such as *el mar/la mar* (the sea), *el vodka/la vodka* (the vodka) and, to name others such as *el calor/la calor* (the heat); being the latter of dialectal character because it is used in some regions, especially in the countryside and by people with little schooling.

From the nouns of person that designate both men and women, those who distinguish sex through concordance seem to present less complication, since the adjectives and determiners are those that give the mark of the genre; hence the contribution of Chomsky’s syntax, which covers both (nouns and adjectives) with the concept of determiner. Within a context, it would be easier for the L2 apprentice to remember which male or female determiner is appropriate using prior knowledge. For example, in the noun *pianista* (pianist), students must know, among other things, the anthroponym, in order to have concrete information about the noun that let them know the gender:

Gillian is a wonderful pianist.

Gillian es una pianista maravillosa.

Tom is a wonderful pianist

Tom es un pianista maravilloso

As for the nouns that denote professions, activities or attributes, apprentices can make the association and generalize that most of them end up in *-a* when they come from Greek or from another foreign language. For example:

astronaut	astronauta
democrat	demócrata
burocrat	burócrata
tennisplayer	tenista
piano player	pianista

In this way, it could be presented a list of examples that would serve as a guide in their learning process. The pertinent thing would be to emphasize that in this case, it refers to nouns that do not possess gender mark, and whose mark is given by determiners or adjectives that accompany them. Exceptions may occur, as in all natural linguistic systems, because morphologically they have been built in an anomalous way. At present, they are subject to generic motion, as stated in *The Manual*, as in *modisto/modista* (dressmaker).

As for the nouns that designate professions or occupations that previously were performed exclusively by men, the apprentice will be able to perceive that there

has been a gradual marking of feminine gender, since women in their evolution (right to education, work and thinking) have begun to occupy positions, to specialize or to compete in fields that were domain of the opposite gender. However, it should be noted that there is no apparent systematic way for this to happen; and that not all Latin American countries accept this gender mark evenly. To exemplify, check the word “*juez*” (judge). In the country (Colombia), it is not used the termination *-a*, but if one speaks of other professions, the feminine marking is present: *ginecóloga, psicóloga, dermatóloga, odontóloga*, (gynecologist, psychologist, dermatologist, dentist), among others (notice the reluctance to accept *médica y doctora* –doctor- in academic degrees). And if you look for a morphological explanation, you probably won’t find it. This is often due to suffixes that are beyond the masculine and feminine. Rather, it would be sufficient to say that it is due to other social, cultural, historical phenomena, rather than a purely linguistic one. The only advantage in this case is that L2 learners appreciate such endings in their mother tongue, and identifying them in different oral or written contexts would provide those learners an advantage to produce the proper words in L2.

Finally, a space has been reserved for those nouns that do not have any formal marks to determine their sex: Epicenes, that is, those that refer to living beings of either sex by a single grammatical gender. Having read and analyzed their training can bring to mind works of English literature such as *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, which shows how the English language forms the feminine goat in the following part:

However, I killed a she-goat, and with much difficulty got it home, and broiled some of it, and ate. (pg. 108)

Now, in reflecting on morphological constructions in Spanish, a similar phenomenon is perceived, since, on the one hand, most epicenes are names of animals and, on the other hand, their construction can be modified by the terms *macho-hembra* (male-female), which in English would correspond to the personal pronouns *he/she*, as in the case of *she-goat*.

To give some examples in L2 and their corresponding in L1, it is included the following list provided by *The manual* with some examples, in order to corroborate that it happens in this way in the L2:

búho	owl
camaleón	chameleon
zebra	zebra
culebra	snake
hiena	hyena
hormiga	ant
girafa	giraffe
lechuza	owl
liebre	hare
mosca	fly
mosquito	mosquito
perdiz	partridge

When searching for how to find grammar gender marking, links are displayed on the web such as: Animal Gender names of Male and Female Animals (www.myuniversalfacts.com/.../animal-gender-na), in which it is observed that the epicene nouns in Spanish are not formed in the same way as it is in English:

fly:

male: fly

female: fly

Hare

male: buck

female: doe, jill, pus

In addition, when using a bilingual dictionary, there's a similar situation since there is no clarity as to why these endings in male and female refer not only to *liebre* (hare), but to other meanings such as: *macho del venado, antilope, ciervo, liebre o conejo* (male deer, antelope, deer, hare or rabbit). And here it is used the word *macho* (male), which is the usual one in Spanish to mark the gender of epicene nouns.

Imagine now a hypothetical case of learners of Spanish as a second language whose native language is English: Why does in English the formation of the word *She-wolf* do not match that of *Loba* in Shakira's song? It could probably be answered the following:

“In the formation of epicene nouns in Spanish, the words *macho* (male) or *hembra* (female) sometimes are used to refer to those animals that have no gender in themselves, like *hipopótamo* or *avispa* (hippopotamus or wasp); to name them in masculine or feminine one must use the words *macho/hembra* (male/female), which in English could be formed with the noun preceded by the personal pronoun in third person singular, masculine or feminine, and that's the reason for the formation of the word in the song called *Loba* in Spanish, whose English equivalent is: *She-wolf*.”

As it was done in the previous explanation, one could exemplify each one of the options that Spanish presents in the formation of grammar gender; although sometimes it shows coincidences with English, in the majority of the cases its formation uses different processes.

Some suggestions for possible implementation

It should be remembered that the classical typology of linguistic systems based on morphology divides languages into (classifies languages as) agglutinative, isolating and inflective (Sapir, 1954). Spanish is considered as an inflected language and English as an isolating one. Both languages have, by definition, marked differences such as gender formation. According to Nikola Reinosová (2009: 34): “Gender is always a syntactic category; that is, not only nouns that do not present the male/female opposition, but all nouns, whether animate or inanimate, reflect gender in the syntactic process called concordance.” Thus, proposals might appear to begin their teaching with some determiners that accompany nouns, such as definite and indefinite articles.

Below are some suggestions to begin teaching them in L2, in this case Spanish, to L1 speakers, that is, English.

Determiners as the definite and indefinite article

The first step to be considered here could be the inclusion of the definite article, considered by *The New Grammar Handbook* as a word syntactic class (p.11) that provides grammatical but not lexical information. This article contains four lexical forms respectively. English, for its part, has only one: (The). Therefore, English native speakers who learn Spanish as L2 must keep in mind that for determiners like the definite article, they will find four different forms:

	masculino	femenino
singular	el	la
plural	los	las

Likewise, it happens with the indefinite article, which is also considered as a word syntactic class that provides grammatical information and, like the definite article, is a gender marker.

	masculino	femenino
singular	un	una
plural	unos	unas

Therefore, starting to teach gender through determiners such as definite or indefinite articles would be one of the possibilities, in order to help L1 (English) speakers

to recognize this phenomenon, which is not found in their language.

Example:

The noun *gato* (cat) is accompanied by the definite article when it is to designate a single animal, of masculine genre. However, the other forms like *la, los, las* (**the**, in all cases) could also be used, depending on the case: if it is singular, plural, masculine or feminine, for reasons of concordance:

	masculino	femenino
singular	el gato	la gata
plural	los gatos	las gatas

The same can apply to the indefinite article *un, una, unos, unas* (**a, an**).

	masculino	femenino
singular	un gato	una gata
plural	unos gatos	unas gatas

In order to supplement the information, it could be made reference to exceptions. The marks of both gender and number are in the determiner and not in the determined, that is, in the noun. In some words that end in **-sis**: *crisis, tesis* (crisis, thesis) or the case of lent words, as *graffiti*. Or when nouns accept plural but not singular: *las pinzas, los alicates, las tenazas* (tongs, pliers, pliers), among others, since it is commonly taught the explicit marker of plural numbers **-s** or **-es**, but not the exceptions.

Conclusions

It is evident that a deeper approach to grammatical gender formation in Spanish opens a wide range of possibilities that serve as a tool for teaching Spanish as a second language or L2 to native English or L1 speakers. Each of the items provided by the *Manual of the New Grammar of the Spanish Language* represents a rather detailed treatment of the subject, which obviously serves as a reference manual to be aware of all these possibilities and to find an explanation according to each case for their formation.

Grammatical gender with explicit formal marks can be the starting point for gender teaching, as it is the case of the vowel **-o** for masculine nouns, and the vowel **-a** for feminine ones. Next, heteronyms can be introduced, those that employ different radicals, and then move on to those that contain an inherent grammatical property, without connection with sex, as in the case of inanimate objects and those that come from formal languages. Later, there can be included the ambiguous ones, that

is, those that have equal termination for male/female, with no gender mark. Finally, the epicenes related to alive beings by a unique grammatical gender. Taking into account each of the mentioned cases, it would be necessary to accompany them with examples and practice-based exercises that contemplate language in use. This can become a starting point to facilitate the learning of Spanish as L2. In addition, it is pertinent that from the different considerations already mentioned, be proposed the development a module that includes the morphology of genre for learning Spanish as a second language or L2, for native speakers of English.

Finally, it would be important for a teacher of Spanish as L2 to take into account the morpho-syntactic classification of both Spanish and English when explaining and designing activities related to grammatical themes such as gender, since it appears that L1 does not present the variety of cases that are present in Spanish, in order to minimize the errors that often arise when using grammatical gender in L2.

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