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**An analysis of sexist language in interpersonal relations—A study on
linguistic communication in higher education**

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Abstract

This project aims to analyse the perceptions of university students about the use of language, as its correct use constitutes an important element for the development of gender equality. We question the idea that in university teaching, language is free of sexism and claim that this sexism is more evident in some branches of knowledge than in others. To this end, we will analyse the degree of importance attributed to language across different branches of knowledge and the identification of sexist expressions in daily use. The methodology used is based on a survey and interview. Different groups belonging to different degree courses of the academic communities of the Universities of Malaga and Seville participated in the research. Following this analysis, we reflect on the language use prevailing in the university environment since it constitutes a central space of action for its educational and socializing mission.

Keywords: Sexist language, discrimination, students, university, communication and education.

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1. Introduction

This research is based on interpersonal relationships, which are of course part of communication. Verbal communication is one of the social skills intrinsic to the human being and in turn it serves us to establish interpersonal relationships of diverse nature. Foucault (1977) clarified that language is not neutral and that it provokes social effects. Verbal language according to Jimenez Rodrigo, Roman Onsalo and Traverso Cortes, (2011) is not limited to being a mere tool by which we express and communicate our thoughts; we also think when we speak and, at the same time, it represents and reflects reality.

The construction of this reality is not objective in nature; language establishes social relations and on many occasions we consider that it reproduces them in time. Butler (2004) has shown that identities and social relations are represented through language, and these can be reproduced, which allows the perpetuation of power relations. The fact that we use certain words to designate certain subjects or groups (or that we do not use any) contributes to their (in) visibility or hyper-visibility, and also to their recognition and identification (Rodrigo et al., 2011).

With this research project, which is presented below, we try to clarify the use of language in interpersonal teaching relationships at the universities of Malaga and Sevilla. This is the core and origin of this study, which seeks to find out, in the current use of language, whether there is egalitarianism or sexism. We also seek to raise awareness of the existence of masculinisation in the use of language in this area, and to this aim we will seek to analyse it in the different faculties, as well as linguistic sexism, which is a serious linguistic and social problem. Linguistic sexism is defined as 'the discriminatory use of language based on sex, which can contribute to emphasise the dominant role of one sex with respect to another, or to hide the presence or contribution of one of them' (Sanchez-Apellaniz, 2009, p. 255).

The main manifestations of sexism in language are: the use of generic masculine language, which contributes to the concealment and exclusion of women and their experiences, and the use of the so called apparent-duals, which acquire different meaning for the masculine and the feminine, and which generally express contempt for women (Meana, 2002).

Teachers' sexist attitudes lead to a perpetuation of this situation, in addition to having a series of mechanisms that help them to strengthen this type of discrimination: Notes, images, texts, textbooks, all probably belong to a specific moment in the history of the teaching community, so it will hardly be a collective history. The language used in them conveys an idea of contempt and inferiority of women in relation to men, which combined with the attitudes and sexist messages in the classrooms becomes a time bomb for students. The language chosen and used by teachers promotes the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes, and if we continue to differentiate, we will be complicit in the dissemination of sexism. Humanity is divided into two groups differentiated by biology factors which have nothing to do with the personal capacities and skills of human beings. These aspects relating to one sex or another are only 'a cultural production that is seriously damaging humanity by restraining particular initiatives and by thwarting individual personality' (Calero Fernandez, 1999, p. 143). It is urgent, therefore, to revise the established linguistic model and the way language is taught at university classrooms. We believe that University of Malaga teachers should be prepared to reflect the reality of true equality that we desire, and to this aim it is necessary to focus not only on the forms of language but also on its contents and on the stereotyped images that transmit through women and men roles and on the relations between sexes (Jimenez Rodrigo et al., 2011).

The general objectives of the research will be the following:

- To explore the perceptions of language in the university field according to the specific objectives.
- To use the questionnaire on linguistic perception.
- To ascertain the degree of importance given to the sexist and non-sexist use of language.
- To identify sexism in every day expressions.
- To identify barriers that can prevent non-sexist use of language.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample of this project is composed by students $N = 92$ students.

The selection criteria were as follows:

(1) Being a student. (2) Being over 18. (3) Being a University of Malaga student. (4) Being a University of Seville student.

Groups of students from different degree courses from the academic communities at the universities of Malaga and Seville, with ages ranging from 18 to 60 years old (Figure 1) were selected as sample. In terms of distribution by gender, the sample included 69 women and 23 men (Figure 2).

¿Cuál es su edad?

89 respuestas

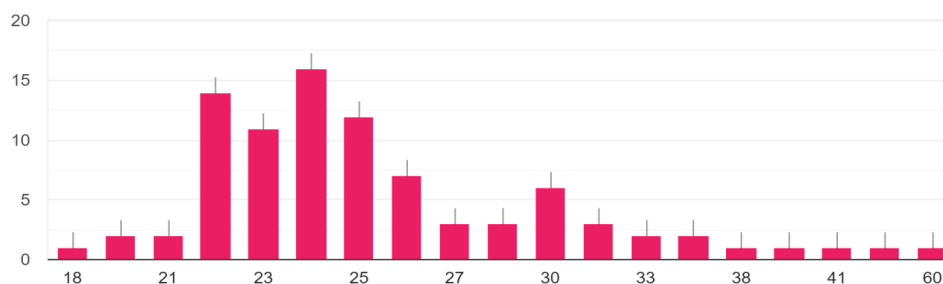


Figure 1. Age range of the sample. [Source: Author. How old are you?]

Género

92 respuestas

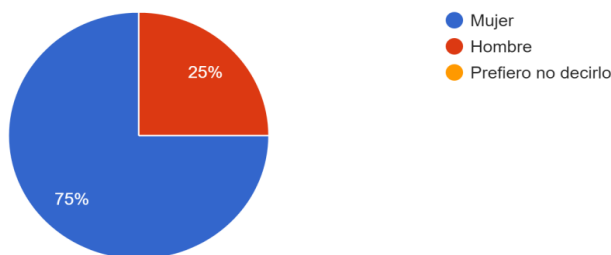


Figure 2. Gender. [Source: Author. Gender. Male/Female/Prefer Not to Say]

2.2. Instruments

We applied a survey technique in the form of a questionnaire on perception on egalitarian language (PLI), previously validated. The questionnaire was designed to adapt a series of handbooks of recommendations and good practices for the use of non-sexist language (Meana, 2002; Rodriguez, 2003). Specifically, different examples of sexist manifestations were taken, such as the use of generic masculine words, apparent-duals, stereotypes and prejudices on subordinate and dependent women roles, and derogatory and discriminatory expressions. It includes 40 items with a Likert-type response. It was made available on Moodle and completed individually.

The variables included fall under the following typologies: socio-demographic is used to determine if the age and gender of a subject affect their use of language. In addition to this, the perception of egalitarian language, the impact on expressions and attitudes and position on egalitarian language were assessed.

2.3. Procedure

The indicator used in the analysis is a distribution index that establishes percentages.

To carry out our project, we have followed an action research model. The questionnaires were applied between October and December of the 2018–2019 academic years. The procedure had four phases:

- 1) Survey selection.
- 2) Sample selection.
- 3) Evaluation phase.
- 4) Analysis phase.

3. Results

Results are presented in relation to the importance and conformity with the language.

1. El profesorado utiliza un lenguaje igualitario en el aula.

92 respuestas

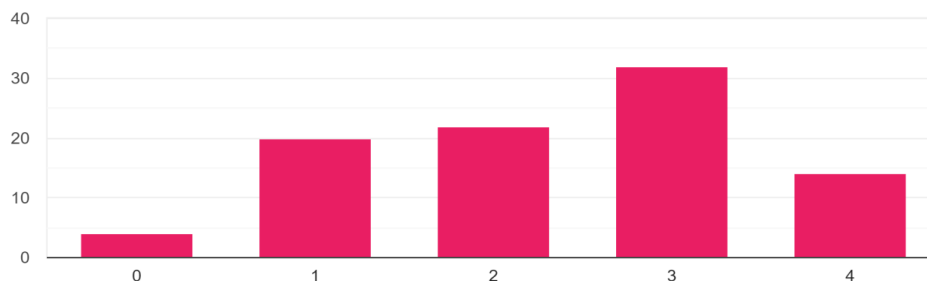


Figure 3. Teachers. [Source: Author. Teaching staff use gender neutral language in class]

Figure 3 shows that teachers—according to their students’ assessment—still do not regularly use gender neutral language.

2. En la Universidad se utiliza el lenguaje igualitario en la Gestión administrativa (impresos y formularios...diantes, personal de administración...)

92 respuestas

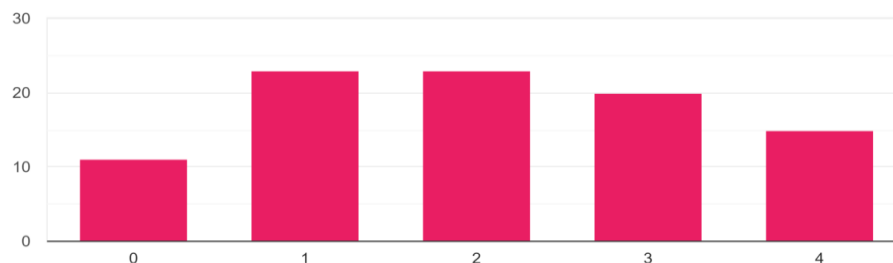


Figure 4. Administrative management. [Source: Author. The University uses gender neutral language in its management and administration (forms, printed notices etc.)]

As seen in Figure 4, it is evident that there is no clear and consistent action at the administrative level in terms of gender neutral language.

7. Este tema es un auténtico coñazo.

92 respuestas

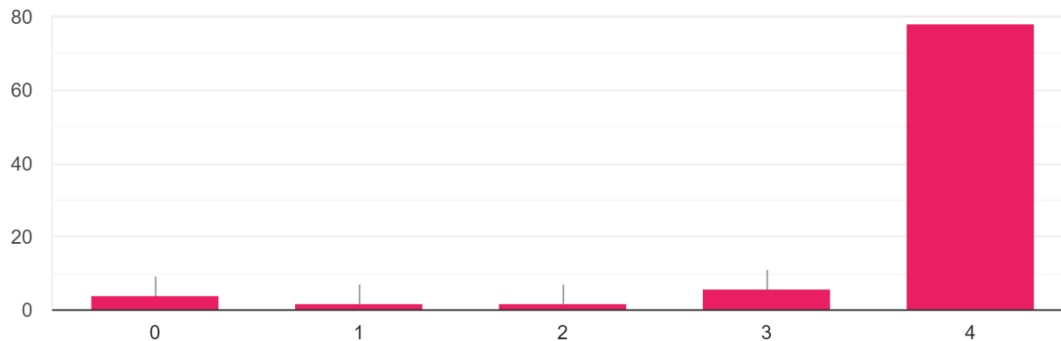


Figure 5. Sexism in words. [Source: Author. This question is a real bitch]

Figure 5 clearly shows the widespread use of sexist words as all students perceive and corroborate their use.

10. A la cena de graduación han asistido más de 200 alumnos.

90 respuestas

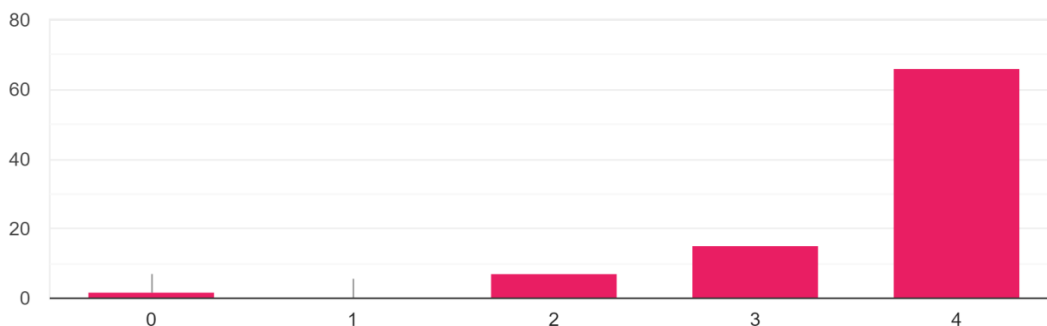


Figure 6. Generic male. [Source: Author. The graduation dinner was attended by more than 200 *alumnos* (generic masculine for students)]

Figure 6 shows that the widespread use of generic masculine language prevails since virtually all the students consulted state that it is used on a daily basis.

14. Las administrativas pueden ayudarte a resolver los problemas con tu matrícula.

92 respuestas

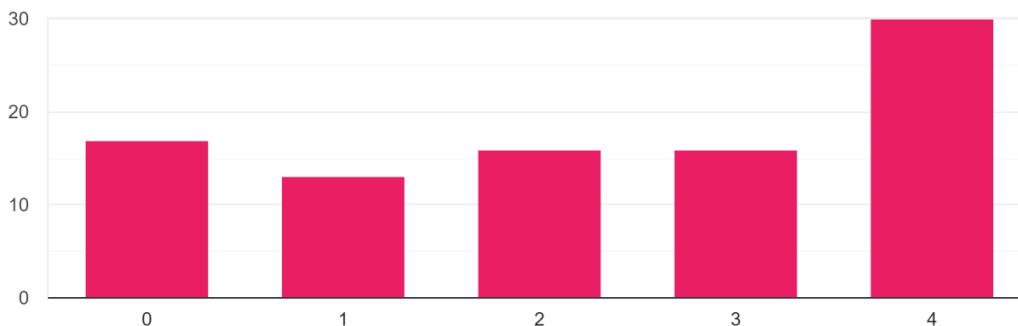


Figure 7. Tendency to feminisation in professions. [Source: Author. The assistants can help you solve your problems]

The results here show that a tendency towards the feminisation of the administrative profession is recurrent.

18. Hay desconocimiento de fórmulas alternativas no sexistas (Uso de profesorado y alumnado como genérico)

91 respuestas

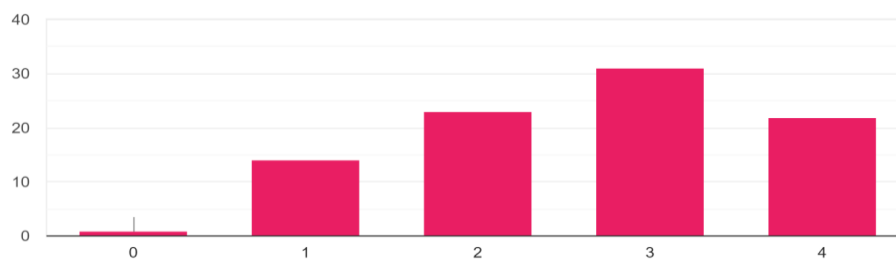


Figure 8. Ignorance of alternatives to sexist language:
[Source: Author. There is ignorance of non-sexist language alternatives]

Figure 8 shows that there is ignorance, to a greater or lesser degree, of non-sexist language alternatives.

23. Hay actividades formativas para promover el uso del lenguaje igualitario.

92 respuestas

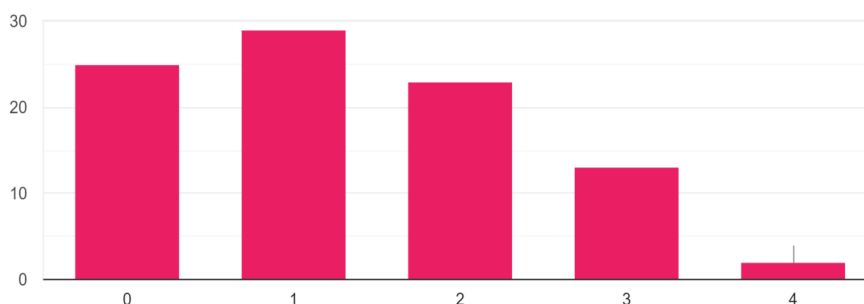


Figure 9. Training activities. [Source: Author. There are training activities to promote the use of gender-neutral language]

In Figure 9, if the data are grouped in a general way, the perception of scarcity of training activities is more prevalent.

24. Considero que pesa mucho la costumbre en el uso del masculino como genérico

91 respuestas

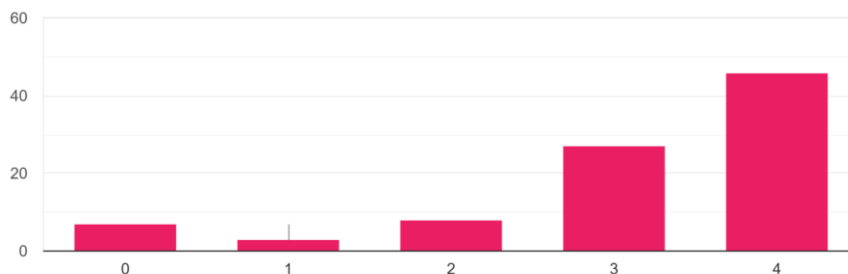
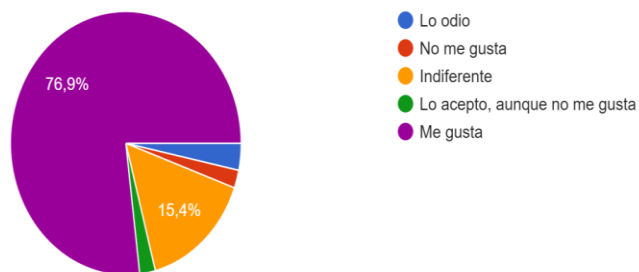


Figure 10. Generic masculine. [Source: Author. The customary use of the generic masculine continues to prevail]

In the data obtained for this item, the weight of the generic masculine and how the students detect it in current society are clear.

40. ¿Estaría conforme de escribir o decir siempre profesorado (en lugar de profesor)?

91 respuestas



**Figure 11. Use of inclusive language. [Source: Author]
Would you be happy to always say or write *profesorado* instead of *profesor*?
I hate it. I don't like it. I'm indifferent. I accept it although I don't like it. I like it**

As seen in Figure 11, 76% of the students surveyed would be happy to use more inclusive language in the field of higher education. It is striking that 15% of respondents were indifferent.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Following the analysis of the results, we can say that although there is a positive predisposition to use gender neutral language, 76% of the subjects say that they will use more gender neutral forms such as '*profesorado*' and abandon the generic masculine. It is demonstrated that there is sexism in language, in this particular case, in the language used to address university students. Among a majority of women (75%), more sensitivity to linguistic inequality is detected. Sexist manifestations were identified in expressions in everyday use ('This topic is a *bitch*', or 'the *assistant* settled my

tuition’). These data show that the use of the generic masculine in society has been perpetuated and is perceived as such.

Since the rise of feminism, the role of language in the reproduction and legitimation of gender inequalities has been evident (Cameron, 2005), thus the importance of progressing and moving forward from a patriarchal society to a true egalitarian society. To this end, we must bear in mind that in the context of a patriarchal society, language reproduces androcentric structures of thought and social organisation, placing men as the only subject of action and reference and women as dependent and subordinate (Emakunde, 1998). Internalising sexual roles imposed by a society that models our way of thinking and understanding the world must be avoided. Since childhood (and perhaps long before birth), we have been overwhelmed with sexist messages in all areas of life, which is why certain attitudes and certain behaviours seem natural to us. These characteristic and traditional roles affect both sexes in the same way (Chamorro, 2016). In this study, we have aimed to reflect the reality of higher education because its educational and socialising mission constitutes a central area of action and it is therefore a benchmark in the use of the appropriate language for the sake of inclusion and social equity.^a

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^a To be consistent with the project presented, we include in the references the first name of the authors to highlight the contribution of women as well as men.