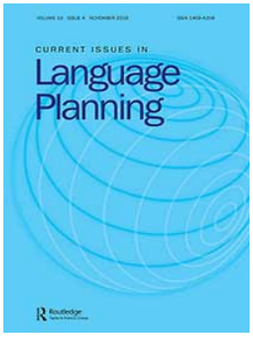

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Making Spanish gender fair: a review of anti-sexist language reform attempts from a language planning perspective

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ABSTRACT

More than four decades after the commencement of feminist linguistic activities, the author critically analyses the bottlenecks in the implementation of the European Spanish non-sexist language policies. Through the lenses of language planning, this study demonstrates that these obstacles are, firstly, the difficulty faced by feminist language planning in pervading the different domains and secondly, the limitations posed by language practices, beliefs and management. Other principal factors include inadequate attention to the role of local contexts in the implementation of gender-fair language. Using a survey, the author finally provides current data on speakers' acceptance or rejection of non-sexist language alternatives. It also provides qualitative data on participants' reaction to anti-sexist language reform attempts and discusses how these factors can be taken into consideration in feminist language planning.

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Introduction

In recent years, studies on gender structures in language have generated debates on the power of language in the promotion of social stereotypes and status differentiation between women and men. Feminist criticism of lexico-grammatical dysymmetries postulates that language is androcentric, since it prejudices women in personal and professional relationships. It aims at identifying, criticizing and eliminating linguistic sexism which has generally been identified as "language that defines, trivializes and degrades women and renders them 'invisible'" (Sunderland, 2006, p. 34).

Spanish feminists argue that women are: (i) made "invisible" by the use of "generics" (e.g. *los ciudadanos* "the citizens");[1] (ii) "defined" by the gendered asymmetry of adult titles that highlight women's marital status, e.g. *señor* "Mr" vis-à-vis *señora* "Mrs" and *señorita* "Miss"; (iii) "trivialized" by asymmetries like *azafata/ auxiliar de vuelo* "airhostess f/m" (in this case, neologisms with more positive connotations are coined to designate men who assume professions traditionally associated with women); (iv) "degraded" by "pairs" such as *zorro* "smart man" viv-a-vis *zorra* "prostitute (f)." Other examples of androcentrism in Spanish are evident in the sexism which stems from entrenched gender stereotypes in some proverbs and other aspects of the lexicon and discourse (Fernández Martín, 2011; Martínez Garrido, 2001).

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Proponents of language reform assert that linguistic sexism enforces gender differentiation and stereotyping. This has been the basis for the initiation of language reform campaigns in many countries, e.g. the United States, England, France, Italy and Spain. Against this background, this research seeks to:

(1) Provide an analytical synthesis of previous research on the impact of feminist language planning (henceforth FLP) in Spain.
(2) Analyse some current limitations to the implementation of non-sexist Spanish language policies from a language planning perspective.

The impact of linguistic inequities on people's inclination toward sexism

Contrary to what detractors of FLP assert (Bosque, 2012; Roca, 2006), there is robust evidence that sexism in language reflects and influences the perceptions society has of the sexes. One of the most interesting aspects of the debate on linguistic sexism is the claim that the male bias in masculine generics has a measurable impact on our social behaviours (e.g. Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012; Vainapel, Shamir, Tenenbaum, & Gilam, 2015; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009).

For example, in the French context, feminists have exposed the fact that in pairs like *chaise* and *fauteuil* or *maison* and *chateau*, the grander item is masculine and the humbler feminine (Cameron, 1985, p. 21). French feminists also affirm that "among less educated French speakers this kind of semantic ranking overrides formal considerations, so that a word like *autoroute* with two feminine roots may nevertheless be accorded the masculine because 'motorway' is a masculine sort of thing (Corbett, 1983)" (Cameron, 1985, p. 22). Actually, as far back as in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir observed the following:

> In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (de Beauvoir, 2013, p. 33)

Furthermore, in 1978, Wendy Martyna identified three problems with the masculine generic: inequity, ambiguity and sex-exclusiveness (as cited in Perissinotto, 1983). Several scholars such as Sczesny, Formanowicz, and Moser (2016) have since provided more recent evidence in support of this assertion. They posit that "the use of gender-unfair language, especially of masculine generics, restricts the *visibility of women* and the *cognitive availability of female exemplars*, which may be disadvantageous for women" (Sczesny et al., 2016, n.p., emphasis in the original). They also argue that the "masculine forms are used to represent all human beings in accord with the traditional gender hierarchy, which grants men more power and higher social status than women" (Sczesny et al., 2016, n.p.). Further evidence of the ambiguity and inequity in masculine generics can be found in Lledó (1992) and Mucchi-Faina (2005, p. 208).

Consequently, with the existence of gender morphemes ("o" masculine and "a" feminine[2]) which allow for the generic[3] use of the masculine gender in Spanish, this language has been identified as sexist (Eisenberg, 1985). Perissinotto (1983) conducted a survey on the Spanish generic *hombre* "man." The hypothesis underlying his research was that generics are sex exclusive. Participants were given 22 sentences (10 critical and 12 fillers).

These sentences contained masculine generics which were tested for frequencies of generic interpretations. The results of the study demonstrated that the majority of informants interpreted the Spanish generic masculine as specific and exclusive of women.

As Liddicoat (2011) points out, "such uses [generic masculine] imply that the male is the normal instantiation and that the female is in some way included in, or derived from, or a category of, the male" (p. 2) and they "render the female invisible in relation to the male and devalue the female as a consistent part of social reality" (p. 2). Some authors (e.g. Dever, 2011, p. 9) have pointed out the mostly unconscious nature of linguistic discrimination in Spanish.

In fact, the male bias of masculine generics in other languages has been demonstrated consistently and empirically in various studies involving diverse methods. Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) undertook a comparative study on 111 countries. They classified languages into three groups according to the degree to which they distinguish between genders: (i) grammatical or gendered languages (e.g. Spanish), (ii) natural gender languages (e.g. English) and (iii) genderless languages (e.g. Ga) (see Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012, p. 269). They further investigated the relationship between language conventions and gender equality in society. The aim was to discover whether the presence of gender in a language can determine the social markers of gender equality. The *Global Gender Gap Index* of the *World Economic Forum* was used to determine gender equality while controlling for geographic, religious, political, and developmental differences. They concluded that it appears that countries which speak grammatical gender languages have less gender equality than countries where natural gender or genderless languages are spoken.

Additional evidence for the relationship between linguistic gender asymmetries and societal gender inequalities can be found in Vervecken, Gygax, Gabriel, Guillod, and Hannover (2015). In a study involving 222 adolescents (aged 12–17) from French-speaking Switzerland, they investigated the gender connotation of occupations and found that subtle linguistic markers influence the perception of females' and males' occupational success. They conclude that "it seems that the generic use of masculine only forms when describing occupations is likely to lead adolescents to restrictive, gender-exclusive associations and perceptions about occupations" (Vervecken et al., 2015, n.p.).

Stout and Dasgupta (2011) provide further evidence in their study which involved 169 (96 women and 73 men) undergraduate participants. In the said study, they conducted a mock interview that aimed at probing the hypothesized link between the use of gender-exclusive language and ostracism. They report that women feel ostracized when gender-exclusive language is used to refer to them. The female participants felt a greater sense of belonging when gender-inclusive (*he or she*) or gender-neutral (*one*) forms were used compared to gender-exclusive forms (*he*) (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

Consequently, the evidence provided by the diverse research on the adverse effects of linguistic sexism demonstrates the urgency of gender-fair language (henceforth GFL). In the following sections, we shall proceed to discuss how this urgency has been addressed by Spanish FLP.

Language, power and the sexes: anti-sexist language reform as a form of language planning

The principal aim of initial research in feminist linguistics was to "make visible the unequal ways in which language use and language systems represented men and

women" and "to expose myths around how men and women communicate" (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 1). Feminist language activities can be considered as a form of corpus language planning (Bengoechea, 2011; Cooper, 1989; Pauwels, 1999). According to Liddicoat (2011), "feminist language planning is an active engagement with the ways in which language represents and reproduces gender" (p. 1). Among other strategies used by Spanish FLP, the most successful have been the introduction of gender-neutral terms (*ciudadanía*, "citizens") and the feminization[4] of occupational titles (*la médica* "doctor [*f*]"; *la presidenta* "president [*f*]").

As Liddicoat (2011) notes, although "feminist concern with language planning has a wider focus," this "corpus planning work is commonly what is understood as feminist language planning" (p. 4). He points out the following:

> Within feminist linguistics the identification of sexism as a constituent feature of language is not simply a descriptive project. It is a project which has led to a desire to intervene in language in order to effect change: that is, it has a language-planning dimension. This language-planning dimension is predicated on the idea that "the elimination of sexist language is a necessary condition for eliminating sexism in any society." (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 3; Shute, 1981, p. 23)

Evidence of the achievements of Spanish FLP can be identified in the legal measures which have been taken by both national and supranational organizations to implement anti-sexist language alternatives (henceforth ASLA). An example of these legislations which propose the abolishment of linguistic sexism is the national law "for the effective equality of women and men" (BOE,[5] 2007) which was passed in 2007. Known as the organic law 3/2007 of 22 March, it advocated for the use of non-sexist language among public authorities. Article 14.11 of the aforementioned law specifically states that "non-sexist language must be established within the sphere of the Administration and encouraged in the whole array of social, cultural and artistic relations." Also, articles 37 and 38 of the same organic law, stipulates the use of GFL in the state-owned media and press agency.

Furthermore, the recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Committee of Europe, which was approved on 21 February 1990, acknowledges that: "sexism [ ] which gives preference to the masculine over the feminine – is an obstacle to the process of attaining equality between women and men" and recommends that government of the Member States "promote the use of language which reflects the principle of equality between men and women" (Alfaro Gandarillas, Bengoechea Bartolomé, & Vázquez Gómez, 2010, p. 80).

Earlier studies have reported the *relative* success of feminist language planning (Bengoechea, 2011; Lomotey, 2015a; Nissen, 2013; Winter & Pauwels, 2006). And even more importantly, FLP researchers like Sczesny et al. (2016), have confirmed that when GFL is used constantly for a more extended period of time it "will contribute even more to the reduction of gender stereotyping and discrimination and may thus function as another barometer for change".

Gabriel and Gygax (2008) also provide empirical evidence that such language "amendments do influence mental representation" (p. 456). Through a sentence evaluation paradigm, they investigated the effects of stereotypical information and grammatical gender on the mental representation of gender in Norwegian. Thirty-six (18 males and 18 females) university students were asked to decide the suitability of the gender of a character(s)

assigned to a role name (e.g. *nurse*; *pilot*). The participants were all less than 30 years old and were thus brought up after the Norwegian language amendment. The findings suggest that both grammatical and stereotypical information influence the representation of gender. Further evidence also showed that "the Norwegian language amendment so far has partly been successful as readers rely on information other then [*sic*] grammatical when building a mental representation" (Gabriel & Gygax, 2008, p. 456).

The above study by Gabriel and Gygax (2008) provides empirical evidence that overtime FLP can diminish language based discrimination successfully. However, more than four decades after the initiation of feminist language planning, certain questions remain of interest to many scholars of feminist linguistics: (1) what is the extent of the success of FLP? and (2) what are the obstacles to the implementation, spread and adoption of the proposed gender-inclusive alternatives? Indeed, Tarif (2015) notes that "even if individuals are fully aware of what sexist language is and of what the strategies to follow in order to avoid it are, the implementation of non-sexist language remains a challenge" (p. 59). And doubtlessly, the unanswered nature of these questions has led authors like Maldonado García (2015) to condemn Spanish FLP as a failure.

In this paper, possible obstacles to a greater success of Spanish FLP activities are analysed through the lenses of Spolsky's (2007) theoretical model of language policy. The author also draws on the features of research approaches to micro-level language planning and policy, as identified by Liddicoat and Baldauf (2008).

A brief overview of research on the success (or failures) of Spanish FLP

There have been few studies that have examined the impact of FLP on the Spanish language. Some of the available works focus on researching the influence of FLP in documented materials. For example, Bengoechea and Simón (2010) analysed a corpus of 60 books for the teaching of Spanish as a Foreign Language. These materials were published in Spain after 1999. They found that sexist terminologies still abound in the textbooks they examined.

Other printed materials, such as newspapers, have also been analysed for the impact of FLP. The author carried out a linguistic analysis of 40 articles extracted from 20 representative Spanish newspapers. Although it was a predominantly qualitative study, it also included a frequency count of ASLA used in peninsular Spanish. The frequency counts were performed using the AntConc Concordancing Programme. The ASLA variety came to a total of 7%, while the usage of the sexist language variety was 93%. The results suggest that although some ASLA variants have been adopted, their usage is inconsistent and the masculine generics are still used extensively. Some examples of the changes identified were the use of the split forms (*chicos y chicas* "boys and girls"), feminized forms (*la ministra* "minister"), and the collective and abstract nouns (*la ciudadanía* "the citizenry").

Some authors take a different approach by investigating perceptions and beliefs about FLP in university settings using questionnaires. Jiménez Rodrigo, Onsalo, and Cortes (2011) and Bengoechea and Simón (2014) have evaluated university students' perceptions and beliefs about anti-sexist language. They also analysed the possible barriers to the adoption of recommended gender-fair forms. Interestingly, their studies reveal that among university students, there is a positive attitude towards non-sexist language. They conclude

that this suggests "a degree of success in the spread and acceptance of the verbal elements which make up these policies" (Bengoechea & Simón, 2014, p. 88). Most importantly, for the aims of this paper, they attribute the success of FLP among university students to both feminist pressure and government intervention (Bengoechea & Simón, 2014, p. 88).

Additionally, other researchers have examined the impact of FLP through questionnaires that test participants' gender associations. Nissen (2013) carried out two investigations in Spain in 1995 and 2005. Native speakers of Spanish were asked to complete specific filler sentences which were aimed at testing the gender associations made by participants. Both investigations revealed that there is no precise connection between some linguistic forms and the mental or gender representations evoked in people's minds. However, the study also showed that mental gender associations are not stable but have rather changed over time since his first study; a male bias that was uncovered appeared to have vanished within a time frame of ten years. In this recent study, Nissen confirms:

> the (nonsexist) recommendations have most likely had an effect, but not necessarily because people in general have rigorously complied with them, but because publishers, journalists, etc. have had to take a position that, more often than not, gave rise to discussions on this issue. (2013, p. 114)

In sum, what these studies demonstrate is that there is a need to improve Spanish FLP's chances of success by addressing the existing difficulties. It is therefore important to investigate from a language planning perspective, how these limitations could be resolved by taking into account some guidelines of language planning theory.

Method

A survey was carried out with 159 participants to examine the limitations of Spanish FLP from a language planning perspective. Demographic information on the participants of the survey is summarized in Table 1.

A look at possible limitations to the implementation of non-sexist language policies from a language planning perspective

The study showed that FLP appears to have been successful in creating awareness of linguistic sexism. Some participants (63.2%) confirmed that they were aware of anti-sexist language proposals. In confirmation of the assumption that speakers' language beliefs would make them reject ASLA, less than half (47.8%) believed Spanish GFL proposals were necessary. However, a surprisingly low percentage (10.8%) showed indifference to FLP attempts. This demonstrates that Spanish FLP has made some impact (be it positive or negative) on language users.

The first reason identified for participants' abstinence from ASLA was speakers' (41.2%) perception that ASLA were too complicated, inconvenient and impractical. Secondly, 37.7% indicated unfamiliarity with the ASLA alternatives. Finally, some participants (32.5%) believed ASLA are ungrammatical. Strikingly, a low percentage (12.5%) affirmed they could not explain their reticence to conform to ASLA. This demonstrates that indifference is a low factor for individuals' refusal to adhere to ASLA. This is a positive

Table 1. Demographic profile of sample respondents.

Demographic profile	Variable	Number	Percentage
Sex	Male	34	21.8
	Female	122	78.2
Age	18–25	65	41.7
	26–35	46	29.5
	36–45	18	11.5
	46–55	14	9
	56–65	8	5.1
	66–75	5	3.2
	76+	0	0
Nationality	Spanish	39	24.5
	Other European countries	8	5.0
	North American	13	8.1
	South American	29	18.2
	African	67	42.1
	Unspecified	3	1.8
Profession	Lecturers	55	34.6
	Students	67	42.1
	Linguists	5	3.1
	Others	27	17
	Unspecified	5	3.1

indication for FLP because it demonstrates that the majority of the participants perceive feminist language reform attempts as a topic worthy of discussion.

The difficulty faced by FLP in pervading the different domains

Another obstacle for Spanish FLP is its inability to penetrate the different domains[6] in the same way. In feminist language planning, evidence (Martínez, 2008; Nissen, 2002; see also Lomotey, 2015b) has revealed that it is mostly participants who have social roles in formal settings (offices, conferences, seminars, newspapers) that adhere to GFL suggestions while undertaking their responsibilities in these roles. As a result, compliance with GFL prevails especially in the public administration (e.g. in the use of official applications, forms and letters), newspaper articles and other official documents. It is also frequent in feminist journals and certain publications by the *Instituto de la Mujer* (Women's Institute). On the other hand, ordinary texts, such as books, newspapers, magazines, etc. continue to display an abundance of sexist language such as the generic masculine (see Nissen, 2002, p. 271).

This state of affairs has given rise to what has been termed as *officialese* (Martínez, 2008, p. 155) and indeed, critics of Spanish FLP have constantly attacked GFL attempts based on this unequal penetration in the different domains. Bosque (2012), for example, criticized these attempts in his article *Sexismo lingüístico y visibilidad de la mujer* which was published in *El País* on 4 March 2012. Following his publication, Bosque, who is a member of the Spanish Royal Academy[7] (henceforth RAE), had the support of eight hundred Spanish linguists who opposed Spanish FLP activities (Maldonado García, 2015, p. 237).

Probably, GFL has been most successful in the official domains because the legal measures taken to implement ASLA have facilitated the overall recognition and acceptance of feminist language concerns. In other words, without these legal measures, FLP would most likely not have made much progress. As Winter and Pauwels (2008) show, the use of "guidelines" as the principal strategy to promote GFL reforms is "also indicative of the highly politicized sensitivities towards the reform: it is reflective of the relative

Table 2. Awareness and usage of ASLA.

Question	Answer	Number of responses	Percentage
Are you aware of anti-sexist language suggestions being proposed by certain sections?	Yes	98	63.2
	No	57	36.8
What is your opinion about these suggestions?	They are not necessary	63	40.1
	They are necessary	53	33.8
	They are very necessary	22	14
	I am indifferent	17	10.8
	Disqualified	2	1.3
Reasons for non-usage of anti-sexist language alternatives (tick all that apply)	Unfamiliarity with alternatives	43	37.7
	The anti-sexist proposals are too complicated, inconvenient and impractical	47	41.2
	The anti-sexist alternatives are ungrammatical	37	32.5
	I don't know	14	12.3
	Disqualified	1	0.9

'powerlessness' of feminist language reform as it had no access to enforcing rules with sanctions for noncompliance" (p. 200).

Given the initial challenges faced by GFL campaigns, especially the resistance from the RAE and other Spanish language institutions, the implementation of anti-sexist language proposals at the formal domains was thus a good sprinting point for the take-off of FLP. This detail is confirmed by Sczesny et al. (2016), who suggest that "independent of language structure – GFL is more frequent and more accepted when it is backed by official regulations and when the use of biased language is sanctioned in some way" since "official regulations may stipulate social change by facilitating the internalization of new norms and enforcing their execution" (n.p).

Nonetheless, at the moment, previous research reveals that Spanish feminist linguistic activities have attained some amount of success. Spanish FLP can infiltrate other informal domains by reversing (through conscientization) the assertions and perceptions that non-sexist language mainly targets formal domains. Indeed, Spolsky (2007) argues that, "the regular choices made by an individual are determined by his or her understanding of the language choices appropriate to the domain" (p. 3). From this, it follows that FLP needs to consider grammar as a scientific demonstration of a social conscience.

As observed in Table 2, quite a number of participants (38.4%) indicated unfamiliarity with ASLA as their reason for noncompliance with FLP proposals and this could be explained by the fact that people who do not work in strictly controlled formal environments might neither be exposed to ASLA nor obliged to use them. In order to truly promote the equality of the sexes through the elimination of linguistic sexism, the different domains must be taken into account by, for example, introducing and disseminating GFL expressions in domains that lack a GFL lexicon (see Bengoechea, 2011, p. 42). In sum, in current Spanish FLP, all the three aspects identified by Fishman (participants, location, and topic [as cited in Spolsky, 2007, p. 3]) as crucial factors in any language planning policy must be taken into account in order to prevent problems of *diglossia*.[8]

The limitations posed by language practices, beliefs and management to FLP

In the attempt to eliminate linguistic sexism, it is important to consider linguistic change as a continuous process of "making" and "unmaking" that involves various factors such as

practices and beliefs. Spolsky (2007, p. 3) identifies three components of language policy: practices, beliefs and management. Let us first consider language practices. He defines language practice as the "observable behaviors and choices [ ], the linguistic features chosen, the variety of language used" (Spolsky, 2007, p. 4).

We have mentioned that GFL is practised mostly in formal contexts. Such language practices affect the complete penetration of GFL in that, as indicated above, speakers might associate this variety only with a particular milieu (official). Consequently, GFL could eventually be restricted only to this domain not only because that is where it is mostly used, but also because that is the context in which its implementation has been most effective. Indeed, this supports Fishman's identification of the importance of location and topic in language planning.

Secondly, the fact that certain individuals have criticized GFL as an unjustified coercion is an example of language beliefs that inhibit the pervasion of FLP campaigns. Some individuals also question the authority of FLP proponents. These perceptions have evoked sentiments of hostility and ridicule towards the supporters of FLP. Such reactions and resentments are understandable (that is not to say they are justified) given that, as Mucchi-Faina (2005) argues, "the idea of changing language is not peculiar to democracy; on the contrary, language restrictions and control are typical of totalitarian regimes" (p. 211). Thus, feminist linguistic activities are by no means free of political intentions. Cameron (1992) has made this clear by pointing out that feminists consider anti-sexist language reform as an "essential part of the struggle for liberation" (p. 1). Actually, Sczesny, Moser, and Wood (2015) report that some individuals who endorse modern sexism,[9] neosexism,[10] or ambivalent sexism[11] "might deliberately avoid using gender-inclusive language because they viewed it as a kind of oppressive political correctness" (p. 952). A participant in this study affirmed:

> *El supuesto antisexismo es una forma de hemiplejía moral. Las lenguas son estructuras. Los sexistas o no son los hablantes*. [The so-called anti sexism is a form of moral hemiplegia. Languages are structures. It is speakers who can be sexist.] (Lecturer, 66–75 years, male, Spaniard)

Furthermore, a major challenge which FLP faces is the linguistic tendency of distinguishing the grammatical from the ungrammatical, the correct usage of language from the incorrect usage of language: prescriptivism. In other words, it is speakers' tendency (or strong need) for differentiating the acceptable, from the unacceptable. This has been identified as a fundamental obstacle to the total success of Spanish FLP, especially because speakers of the language have to choose between complying with the grammatical norms (which are generally established by the RAE), and non-sexist alternatives. Both the RAE and feminist linguists have clearly opposing gender-related language policies. As Bengoechea (2011) points out, non-sexist language policy and planning overtly criticizes sexist language, whereas the covert policies of the RAE sustain gender-unfair language (p. 40).

It is important to note that the RAE functions as the official body for managing the Spanish language. Language management is the "explicit and observable effort by someone or some group that has or claims to have authority over the participants in the domain to modify their practices or beliefs" (Spolsky, 2007, p. 4). Thus, the RAE has accepted some of these proposals, e.g. the feminization of words that refer specifically

to women (e.g. *la jueza* "female judge" instead of *el juez*). It has, however, rejected others and criticized feminist language reform in general. This institution has criticized, among others, the utilization of collective nouns (e.g. la *plantilla* de la empresa "the company workers [gender indefinite]," in place of: los *trabajadores* de la empresa "the company workers [masculine generic]"); the introduction of metonymic constructions (e.g. *abogacía*, *gerencia* in place of *los abogados* "lawyers [masc]," *los gerentes* "managers [masc]"); and the split forms (*chicos y chicas* "boys and girls" in place of *chicos* "boys" or "boys and girls [masculine generic]").

The RAE specifically insists on the generic value of the masculine gender (DRAE, 2005, n.p.). In the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* (2005), it emphasizes the inappropriateness of proposals like "@" to replace (and unite) the morphemes of gender ("o" y "a") when referring to a unisex group (e.g. *chic@s* "boys and girls"). The RAE affirms that "the @ symbol is not a linguistic sign and, for that reason, its use in these cases is inadmissible from the *normative* point of view"[12] (DRAE, 2005, n.p.). It also maintains that "the desire to avoid this supposed linguistic discrimination, together with the desire to mitigate the clumsiness in the expression provoked by such repetitions, has resulted in the creation of artificial solutions which contravene grammatical norms" (DRAE, 2005, n.p.).

Teachers and other language instructors, who undoubtedly play an important role in language policy and management, are caught in this conflict between feminist linguists and the RAE (and other language authorities). Some of these professionals have criticized how the guidelines for non-sexist language are established "without their participation, nor even asking for their opinions" (Bosque, 2012). Generally, FLP encounters a great challenge posed by normative grammar which teachers and other language users might feel compelled to adhere to since they associate it (the Spanish language) with their membership group (Spanish national identity) and give it the highest value (Bengoechea, 2011, p. 38). A participant in this study affirmed:

> *Es muy difícil cambiar algo que tiene años de tradición y que los propios hablantes hemos concordado de manera arbitraria. Por tanto, creo que las propuestas anti-sexistas no serán más que, como bien lo indica su nombre, unas propuestas. Ahora, sí, pienso que es necesario enseñárselas tanto a los extranjeros que quieren aprender nuestro idioma como a los propios hispanohablantes, pero finalmente quien decide o acepta su uso es la propia comunidad lingüística.* [It's very difficult to change something which has existed for ages and which speakers themselves have accepted arbitrarily. I therefore think the antisexist proposals will only be, as the name indicates, proposals. Now, yes, I think it's necessary to teach both Spanish learners and native speakers these alternatives; but in the end, those who will decide or accept its usage will be the linguistic community itself.] (Spanish lecturer, 26–35 years, male, Chilean)

Consequently, other Spanish language users support the view of the RAE by insisting that the universal usage of the masculine gender is "normal." As a matter of fact, this goes in support of Jiménez Rodrigo et al.'s (2011) assertion that one of the obstacles that restrain the use of GFL is the "weight of tradition in the use of the masculine generic" (p. 180). For this reason, the purported traditional usage neutralizes the perceived sexism in the universal usage of the masculine gender; and women, as well as men, consider it as a mere case of custom and grammar.

The "weight of tradition" identified by Jiménez Rodrigo et al. (2011, p. 175) is an example of the beliefs about language which can affect language practices and language

policy in general. This assertion is also underscored by Mucchi-Faina (2005) who points out that "for young people too, individual resistance to change and the perceived importance of tradition are the two principal arguments against non-sexist language" (p. 194). Thus, language users reject what is probably the strongest argument of Spanish FLP and rather perceive sexism in vocabulary and discourse.

Another belief identified by Blaubergs in 1980 which some speakers still hold presently is the perception that FLP proposals are unrealistic and ineffective.

> *Hay que cambiar el sexismo en la cultura hispana y eso cambiaría el lenguaje. Dudo que decir ellos y ellas o cualquier otra de las propuestas en vez de usar solo el masculino cambie nada. Si la gente ve que por ejemplo hay tantos gerentes hombres como mujeres, cuando lee o escucha "los gerentes" imaginarán un grupo mixto. Mientras los puestos importantes están ocupados por hombres, el que nos esforcemos en decir "gerentes y gerentas" no hará que la gente cambie su sexismo porque se seguirá imaginando una mayoría masculina.* [We have to change the sexism in Hispanic culture and that will change the language. I doubt saying "ellos" and "ellas" or any other antisexist alternative rather than using only the masculine will change anything. If people realize that, for example, there are as many male managers as female ones, when they read or hear "the managers [masc]", they will imagine a mixed group. If the important positions are occupied by men, forcing ourselves to say "managers [masc] and managers [fem]" will not make people change their sexist attitudes because people will continue to imagine a masculine majority.] (Linguist, 46–55 years, female, Peruvian and North American)

Such beliefs about language and the general association of language and identity are fortified by (and also fortify) the immense authority of the RAE. This powerful institution which is identified with the history and the sociocultural identity of the Spanish community is a monumental force which the proponents of Spanish FLP have to contend and compete with (Paffey, 2007, 2008). As Bengoechea (2011) states, in Spain, "where there is a very strong bond between culture, national identity and language, the notion of Spanish as the almost exclusive core value of the monolingual hegemonic sub-community rests upon its normative body, *la Academia*" (p. 38). Thus, it is obvious that changes in language are inevitable since languages change to reflect the cultural realities and sociopolitical identities of their users. However, in the debate on GFL, the conflict resides in who will wield the ultimate power. It appears the principal disadvantage FLP faces is that it has existed for merely a few decades, while the RAE was founded as far back as 1713, and consists of members who are considered as Spanish language experts. The undeniable influence of the RAE is also summarized in the following quotation from Paffey (2008):

> … there is in fact a continuing demand for the RAE's activities and publications. [Its] Ortografía de la Lengua Española (1999) and the Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas (2005) as well as various speeches by Academicians all make reference to the hundreds of queries that the RAE receives on a daily basis from the Spanish-speaking public who seek its decisions on matters of "correct" language use. As one [of its] members seeks to explain: "when the language raises uncertainties or curiosities, the Academy appears quite naturally on Spanish speakers' mental horizon." (pp. 129–130)

The above quotation echoes Carspecken's (1996) idea of *charm* in the language planning context. That is, "the ability to use culturally understood identity claims and norms to gain the trust and loyalty of others" (as cited in Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008, p. 4). This applies not only to native Spanish speakers but also to Spanish students who find the grammatical gender distinction "exotic." A participant affirmed:

Estos cambios son innecesarios porque para mí simplemente es la belleza de la lengua. [In my opinion these changes are unnecessary because it adds to the style of the language.] (Student, 18–25 years, female, Ghanaian)

As Spolsky (2007) argues, "the beliefs that are most significant to our concerns are the values assigned to the varieties and features" (p. 4). Thus, since language varieties play an important role in identification, speakers ascribe the highest value to the variety which they associate with their most important membership group (e.g. nation, educational class, ethnic heritage etc.). On the other hand, other varieties which have less value for a speaker will subsequently be stigmatized. Presently, the main argument of detractors of ASLA is that masculine generics are not sexist. Therefore, in the call for GFL, greater success will be achieved if such beliefs are positively altered by emphasizing that the ambiguity in masculine generics leads to female invisibility and exclusiveness and consequently sexism. That is to say, Spanish FLP needs to rather focus more on the lack of semantic accuracy which is sometimes caused by the use of the masculine generics.

The role of local contexts in FLP

The attitudes and behaviours of local agents (individuals, pressure groups, organizations, etc.) are essential in FLP. For example, the importance of school and education is paramount in language policy and planning. Winter and Pauwels (2008) have pointed out that the "educational system is seen as a key agent in the spread of linguistic reform" (p. 201). In addition, Valiente (2002) argues that teachers "often unconsciously" promote sexism by the use of "masculine language forms (for example 'boys' or 'men') when referring to female and male pupils or, even worse, when referring only to female students" (p. 772). Unfortunately, the conflict between the RAE and FLP makes this key agent problematic. Bengoechea (2011), for instance, argues that "secondary schools and universities, with their language teachers' attitudes to gender-inclusive language, are not sites for implementing non-sexist language planning" and language policy and planning "cannot be effectively implemented with teachers' strong opposition to those laws" (p. 45).

While this is a real difficulty for FLP, it is essential to note that there is evidence that some Spanish language teachers (and students) do not perceive GFL as incorrect after all. In this study, the assertion that GFL alternatives are ungrammatical was contradicted by the close split between participants who were in agreement (49.6%) with taking ASLA into consideration in Spanish as a foreign language classes and those who were in disagreement (41.3%) (Table 3). A participant also asserted in this study:

Conozco las opciones anti sexistas y no me parece que sean incorrectas desde el punto de vista gramatical. Aunque algunas son poco prácticas yo las adoptaría con gusto si creyera que pueden tener algún efecto … [I am familiar with non-sexist language options and I don't think they are grammatically incorrect. Although some of them are not practical I would

Table 3. Acceptance of ASLA in Spanish language classes.

It is necessary to take anti-sexist language proposals into consideration when teaching Spanish as a foreign language	I agree	54	34.8%
	I completely agree	23	14.8%
	I don't agree	46	29.7%
	I completely disagree	18	11.6%
	I am indifferent	14	9%

> readily use them if I believed they could have some effect.] (Linguist, 46–55 years, female, Peruvian and North American)

The fact that some participants agreed on the need to make Spanish learners aware of ASLA constitutes an acknowledgement of its existence and could ultimately promote the recognition of feminist activities in the educational sector. This is because semi-speakers, learners and heritage speakers are also crucial in language policy and planning. Indeed, Sallabank (2012) notes the following:

> Linguists often seek the collaboration of elders and traditional community leaders. But when planning the future of a language, the views of other stakeholders may be equally valid: e.g. semi-speakers, learners and heritage speakers, who are often key actors in language revitalization; and language activists and supporters, who may not learn or speak the language at all. (p. 123)

These findings contradict critics' observations about the ungrammaticality of gender-inclusive language and thus highlight the importance of disseminating appropriately research done on FLP. Evidence from this study shows that although at the moment it might appear highly unlikely, FLP can gain grounds in the educational sector if academic writers and publishers are taken into account as key agents in the elimination of linguistic sexism. Indeed, Sczesny et al. have pointed out that education and policy-making "need to increase the efforts of circulating new scientific insights about GFL to break the vicious circle of ill-informed controversies and discussions about GFL" (2016, n.p.). These researchers have offered further suggestions as to how FLP can redress these difficulties posed by the conflict between GFL and normative grammar. Firstly, authors of educational materials need to be trained and sensitized on GFL policies. Secondly, it would also be beneficial for proponents of FLP to fight for the establishment of official guidelines and regulations concerning schoolbooks. And finally, schoolbooks should be officially monitored by the government agencies such as the Ministry of Education. In addition to these, training programmes should be organized for language teachers as important agents of language change (Sczesny et al., 2016).

Other key agents in Spanish FLP are the youth and the social media. Both the youth, and the social media (which is used mostly by the youth, but also by individuals of all walks of life) are critical agents in the spread and adoption of language innovations. There is a tendency to associate what is accepted by the youth with what is in vogue. Thus, GFL recommendations that might presently be considered as novelties will have a higher potential of being adopted once they "catch on" with this group of language users and become a habit, or, in linguistic terms, a language practice. That is, GFL will subsequently become a linguistic norm. As Spolsky (2007) notes, the strongest of all the three components within the domain is language practice given that "in its absence there is no available model of language to learn" (p. 4). In consonance with what Sczesny et al. (2016) affirm, this "underscores the importance of implementing GFL in everyday language and of using it consistently, so that speakers take up this usage in their own texts and utterances" (n.p.). Hence, once GFL becomes a language practice the achievements of FLP will be enhanced. Research on the impact of the youth and the social media on the spread and adoption of Spanish GFL alternatives should therefore be promoted.

At a glance, the success of FLP seems unfeasible. Notwithstanding, as Sczesny et al. (2016) indicate, "establishing GFL habits via teaching and practicing current linguistic standards [ ] is a promising approach which should follow the initial phase of GFL implementation and may reduce political controversies" (n.p.). As these authors affirm, independent of language structures and country-specific aspects, "the novelty of gender-fair forms, which conflicts with speakers' linguistic habits" (Sczesny et al., 2016, n.p.), is one major factor that can either promote or undermine the adoption of GFL. Nonetheless, if these GFL "novelties" become linguistic habits over time and cease being stigmatized, gender-inclusive language can eventually find a stronger acceptance as they start to impact all domains.

Conclusion

The effects of discriminatory language on speakers' attitudes and behaviour cannot be understated. Certainly, it is necessary to endorse and support language change with the aim of promoting gender equality and eliminating the adverse effects of gender inequality. In this light, feminist language planning is a significantly relevant area of research that contributes to the well-being and global development of the human race.

Change, however, is never an easy process; especially not in matters concerning language planning which constitute a conscious effort at modifying language users' linguistic habits. This resistance to language change is not unique to FLP. Actually, Schiffman (2009) has argued that "implementation is almost always the weakest link in language policies" (p. 119). It is therefore not surprising that certain limitations, as those identified in this paper, constitute stumbling blocks to the adequate spread and adoption of non-sexist language guidelines.

However, present positive (or negative) attitudes from language users do not only foreshadow the future of FLP efforts. They will also facilitate the acceptance of these GFL recommendations which, at present, are ridiculed by some detractors of FLP as incorrect language variants. It is essential to note that it falls within the norms of language change for such derision to take place while the change is in progress. As mentioned earlier, this is a result of the conflict between the novelty of GFL variants and speakers' linguistic habits. There is, however, a positive side to the ridicule being faced by FLP. Imitation is one way by which speakers develop their language habits (Sczesny et al., 2015, p. 3). What is presently a negative attitude towards GFL will change with time given that Spanish speakers will eventually become familiar with these variants- they will become a language practice. That is, as Sczesny et al. (2016) have observed, after a period of repeated usage, GFL will surpass the phase where it is perceived as an "unwelcome novelty" that arouses negative associations. Certainly, public awareness for GFL through public debates over feminist language planning would enhance this process.

In sum, as the findings in this study demonstrate, these limitations can be redressed by (a) considering participants, location and topic (as identified by Fishman) in Spanish FLP; (b) the modification of language beliefs of the Spanish community; and (c) the appropriate dissemination of research done on feminist language planning with the aim of making teachers-to-be and other local agents representatives of the reform and speakers of non-sexist language.

Notes

1. Interestingly, although the generic masculine is the most debated example of gender bias in Spanish, current research (Nissen, 2013) shows that presently, some speakers interpret the generic masculine generically and not as gender biased.
2. Not all nouns behave this way (e.g. la foto). Furthermore, many nouns are invariable (periodista). In such cases, determiners are employed.
3. The use of the masculine gender to refer to both sexes.
4. The modification of previously masculine words in order to make an explicit reference to women.
5. *The Boletín Oficial del Estado (BOE)* "Official State Gazette" is the official gazette of the Government of Spain.
6. That is, a social space. For example, home or family, school, neighbourhood, religious institutions such as churches, workplace, public media, and government (Spolsky, 2007, p. 2).
7. The European Spanish official institution responsible for overseeing the correct usage of the Spanish language.
8. This is the situation in which speakers within the same speech community use two distinct varieties of the same language under diverse circumstances. One form may be the prestige dialect while the other variety may be a common dialect spoken by the majority of the populace.
9. Modern sexism comprises beliefs in which individuals disavow women's present-day discrimination, reject their demands for political and economic power, and disapprove of policies designed to promote gender equality (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995).
10. Neosexism describes the conflict between egalitarian values and negative feelings toward women, including the belief that it is important to maintain the status-quo in women's and men's roles (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995).
11. Ambivalent sexism toward women addresses the coexistence of positive and negative feelings that reflects ambivalence (Glick & Fiske, 1996).
12. The emphasis is mine.

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