

Finnish and Spanish speakers' attitudes towards (non-) sexist language in English

The current study deals with attitudes towards sexist and non-sexist language of native speakers of Iberian Spanish, a language with grammatical gender, and Finnish, a language without grammatical gender, in English, a language with notional gender (Stahlberg et al., 2007; Gygax et al. 2019; McConnell-Ginet, 2014: 8). The aim is to better understand how the mother tongue, culture, and gender of a speaker influence the attitudes towards non-sexist language in a second language. Despite most languages sharing similar sexist features such as masculine generic forms and lexical asymmetries, using non-sexist language is perceived as challenging in multilingual contexts because the “expressions may be acceptable in one language but controversial in another” (European Commission, 2008:3). Consequently, adopting the same strategies for non-sexist language in all languages can have the opposite of the desired effect.

The method used to gather data was a questionnaire, which combined Likert scale questions and open answer questions. These dealt with different topics regarding sexist features of English, the actions taken to avoid them, the importance of not using sexist language and whether the proposals for non-sexist language should be taught during English lessons. The analysis used for the Likert scale questions were χ^2 tests using L1 and gender as independent variables, and for the open questions inductive content analysis. Participants were recruited from two universities: the University of Alcalá (Spain) and Tampere University (Finland). To ensure the subjects' proficiency in English, the sample was drawn among university students of English. The final sample was formed by 327 participants of which 192 spoke Spanish as an L1 (154 women, 38 men, 3 people who either did not want to disclose their gender or were non-binary) and 132 Finnish as an L1 (87 women, 35 men, and 10 people who either did not want to disclose their gender or were non-binary).

Overall, the results indicate that the majority of the participants had heard of linguistic sexism although the percentage is significantly higher among Spaniards and women. A common view amongst students was that the bigger presence of grammatical gender in a language the more sexist the language is. More specifically, Finns claimed that Finnish was a gender-neutral language due to the absence of grammatical gender and Spaniards said that Spanish was a sexist language because of its presence. However, when participants were asked whether English was a sexist language, Finnish speakers perceived English as a more sexist language than Spaniards. They also tend to compare what they know about sexist language in their L1 to what they think is sexist in English. The results also revealed that Finns have slightly more positive attitudes and opinions towards non-sexist language in English than Spaniards. The most striking result was the percentage of Spanish participants who said that they did not know about sexist language in English and whether non-sexist language has had an impact on English. Some participants further explained that they felt they were not entitled to take a stand on these topics because they did not live in an English-speaking country or did not know enough about the topic.

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