

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

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# Outline

- 1. Background**
- 2. Research questions**
- 3. Methods and sample**
- 4. Results**
- 5. Conclusions**

# 1. Background



Feminist language planners argue that sexist language should be eradicated if our society intends to achieve gender equality (based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis)

- Pauwels (2010, 23-26) noticed that L2 users tend to implement non-sexist language approaches that are based on those adopted in their L1.
- However, linguistic expression of gender and tactics to tackle sexist language vary across languages:

In multilingual environments non-sexist language “cannot be applied in the same way in all languages. Some expressions may be acceptable in one language but controversial in another (e.g. 'human rights' and 'Menscherechet' v. 'driots de l'homme').” (European Commission, 2008: 3)

Too little attention has been paid to sexist language from cross-linguistic and multilingual perspectives (Coardy, 2018; Fraser, 2015; Gabriel, *et al* 2008; Hodel *et al*, 2017, Pauwels, 1996).

## 2. Research questions

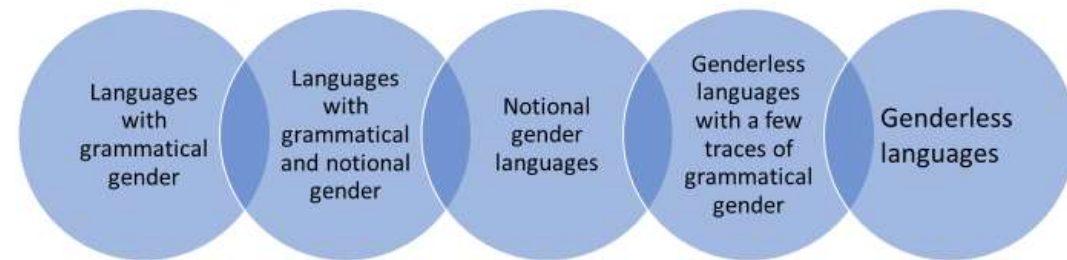
Do the L1 and gender of a person play a role in the attitudes towards (non-)sexist language in an L2?

Comparing L1 speakers of languages with different types of grammatical gender:

- Spanish: language with grammatical gender
- English: language with notional/natural gender
- Finnish: genderless language

Sub-questions:

1. Have they heard of sexist language?
2. Is their L1 a sexist language?
3. Is English a sexist language?
4. Do they try to avoid sexist language in English? How?
5. Do you know any proposals for non-sexist language in English? Do you know any proposals for non-sexist language in English?
6. Why proposals for non-sexist language are necessary/ unnecessary?
7. Should non-sexist language be used and learnt during English lessons?



Representation of the languages according to the taxonomy presented in Gyga et al. (2019)

# 3. Methods and Sample

Online questionnaire consisting of **open** and **close-ended questions** (Likert Scale questions):

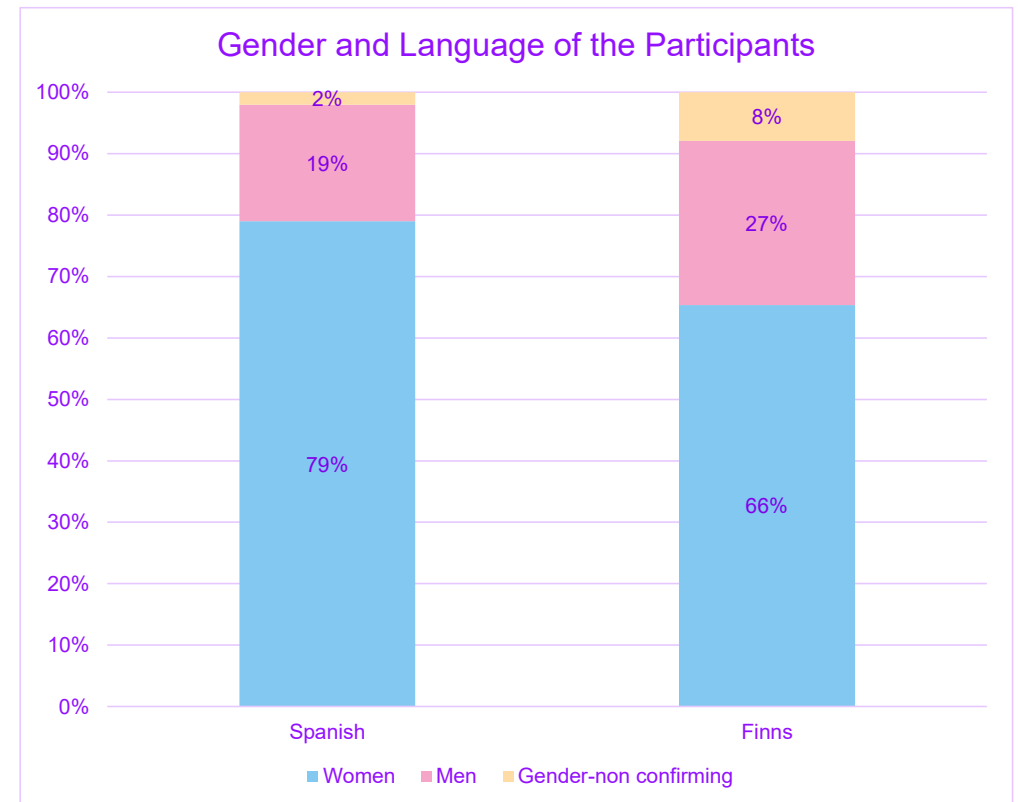
- **Quantitative data:**  $\chi^2$  test using L1 and gender as variables (Flick, 2007; Rugg & Petre, 2007; David & Sutton, 2004).
- **Qualitative data:** inductive content analysis (Kyngäs, Mikkonen, & Kääriäinen, 2019; Elo & Kyngäs, 2007)

Sample size: 327 (195 from Spain and 132 from Finland)

- a) Have Spanish/Finnish as their first or, at least, as a second L1.
- b) Studying an English degree programme (or at least as a minor for Finns).

Mean age: 21 for Spaniards and 23 for Finns

Years at university: 2.50 for Spaniards (Std. Deviation: 0.960) and 2.95 for Finns (Std. Deviation: 2.122)



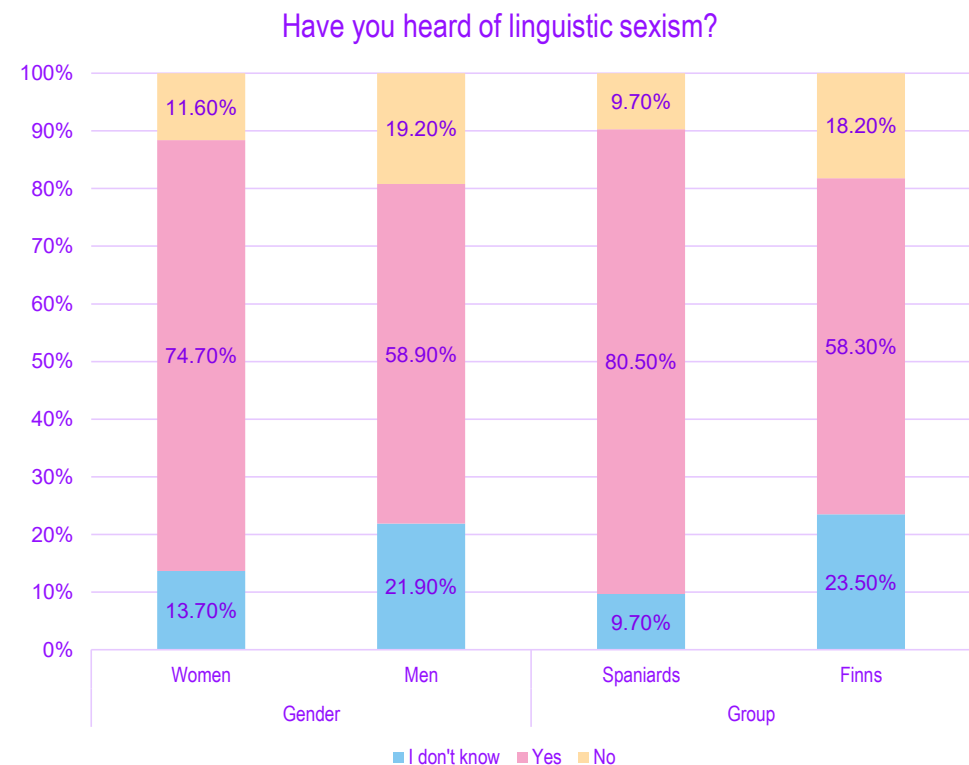
## 4. Results

### 4.1 Have you heard of linguistic sexism?

Significant differences between language (p. value: 0.000061, df: 2) and gender groups (p. value: 0.034, df: 2)

More women and more Spaniards have heard of linguistic sexism:

- Debate over sexist language is more vigorous in Spain than in Finland (Bengoechea & Simon, 2014; Engelberg, 2018:82-83).
- Women are more receptive to non-sexist language than men (Parks & Robertson, 2002, 2004, Serrasin et al. 2012, Douglas & Sutton, 2014)



## 4.2 Is your L1 a sexist language?

**Spanish** is a **sexist language** (no statistical differences between women and men (p. value, 0.08, df: 2) because of:

- (1) **masculine generics**,
- (2) **lexical asymmetries**,
- (3) **the patriarchy** and
- (4) **the absence of genderless forms**

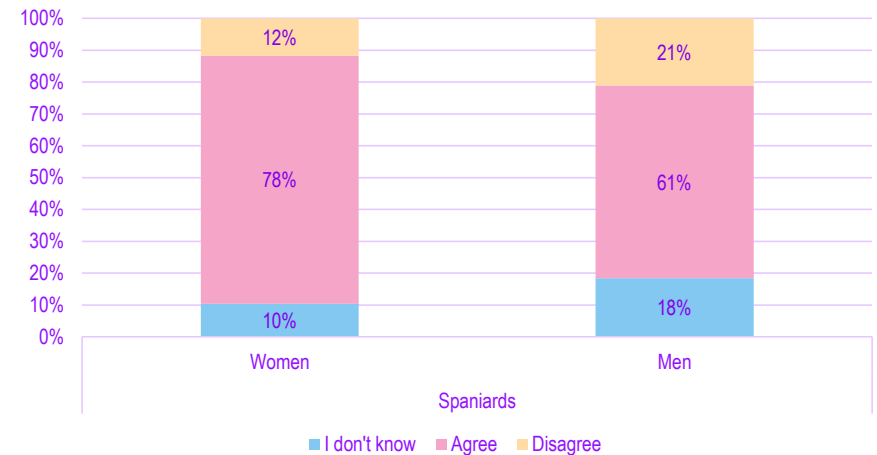
Because, usually, we tend to use the masculine form for everything, and feminine forms are usually despective while masculine forms are just natural (as, for example, zorro vs. zorra). It is true that nowadays we are trying to inverse this trend but I personally think that it is far away from being reversed. (Participant 176, man)

**Finnish** is **not a sexist language** (statistical difference between women and men (p. value: 0.0066, df: 2) because:

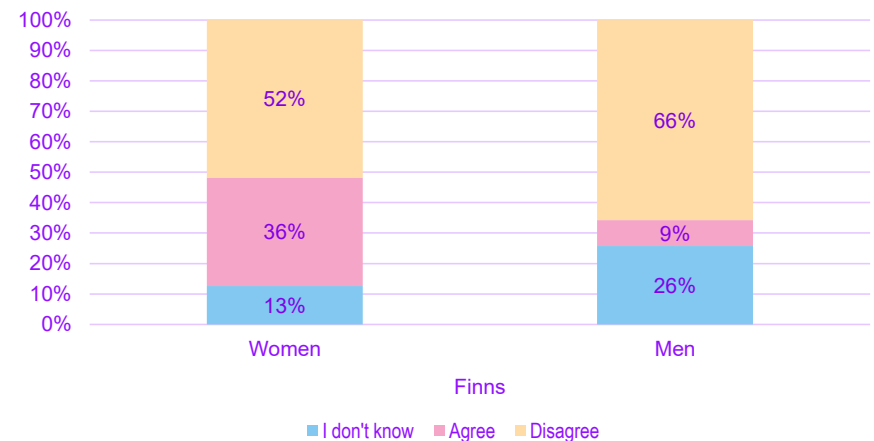
- (1) **languages are not sexist**
- (2) **masculine nouns are generic**,
- (3) **alternatives** for masculine nouns have been **successfully implemented**,
- and (4) **absence of grammatical gender**

First, we don't have gender-specific pronouns ("hän" could be a man or a woman). Second, if we think about words like "palomies" or "tiedemies", I think it's pretty established that these don't have to refer to men only. (Participant 302, woman)

Do you think Spanish is a sexist language?



Do you think Finnish is a sexist language?



## 4.3 Is English a sexist language?

Significant differences between language (p. value 0 .000002, df: 4) and gender groups (p. value: 0.0012, df: 4)

Why do you think English is a sexist language?

- 1) masculine generics
- 2) lexical asymmetries
- 3) sexist idioms
- 4) grammatical gender
- 5) the patriarchy

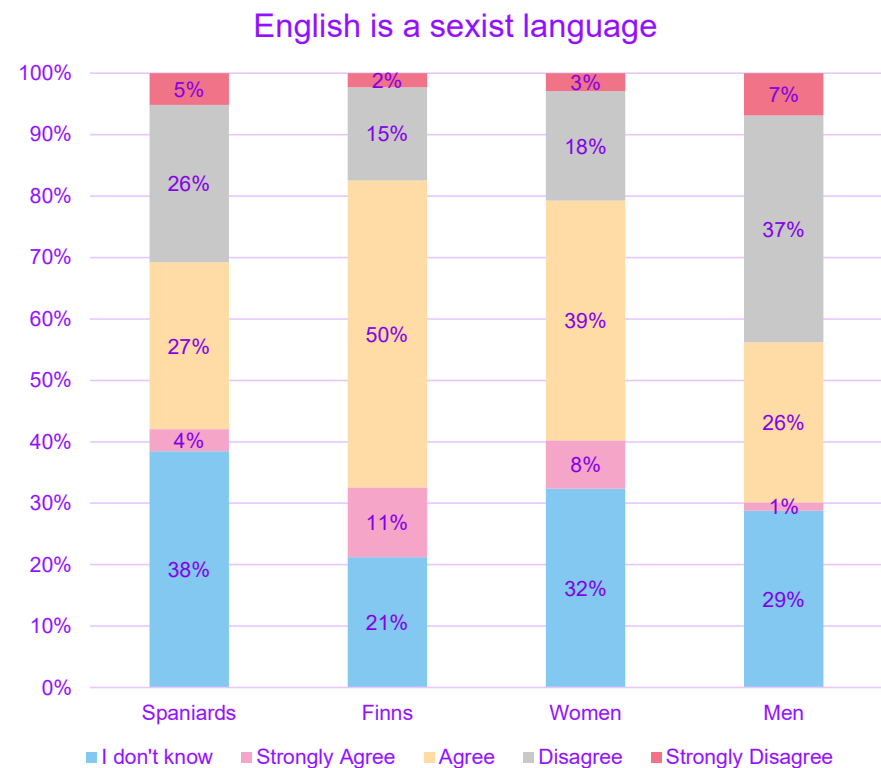
Participants compared English with their L1 and/or other languages they speak. For example:

I think that it is on a smaller scale compared to Spanish, but you can find many examples, for instance when talking about jobs is always -man, instead of -woman, or even a neutral suffix that can include everyone.

(Participant 120, Spanish woman)

Gendered pronouns. He/him is usually the first choice. There are also many gendered professions just as in Finnish, but maybe worse because the gender difference is highlighted more, for example the differentiating between actors and actresses. Actor is the baseline male status, while actress is something else that needs to be differentiated.

(Participant 299, Finnish woman)

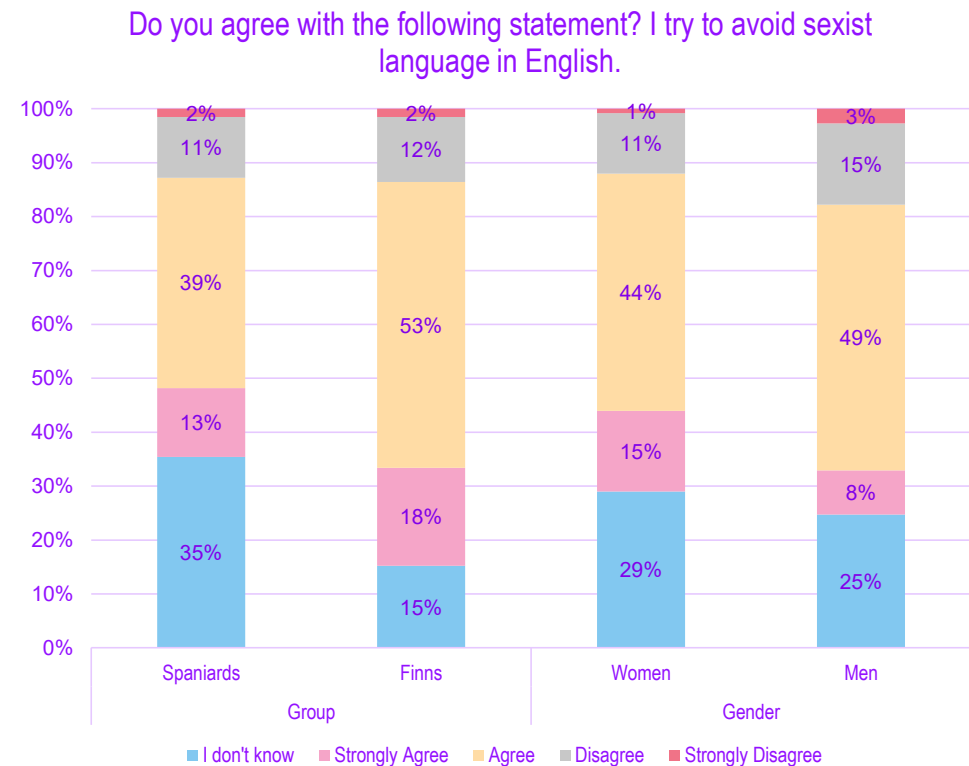




## 4.4. I try to avoid sexist language in English.

Significant differences between language groups (p. value: 0.002, df: 4) but not between genders (p. value: 0.295, df:4)

- Double the percentage of Spaniards not knowing compared to the percentage of Finns
  - Spaniards felt were not entitled to take a stand because they did not live in an English-speaking country or did not know enough about the topic
- Previously 30% of Spaniards and 61% of Finns said English was a sexist language yet but the number of participants who said they avoid sexist language in English is relatively superior.
  - A case of *cognitive dissonance* and/or *social desirability*?



# 4.5 Do you know any proposals for non-sexist language in English?

Yes/No: Significant differences between language groups (p.value: 6.04E-8, df: 1) but not between genders (p.value=0.23, df= 1)

”If you marked yes, please, give some examples”

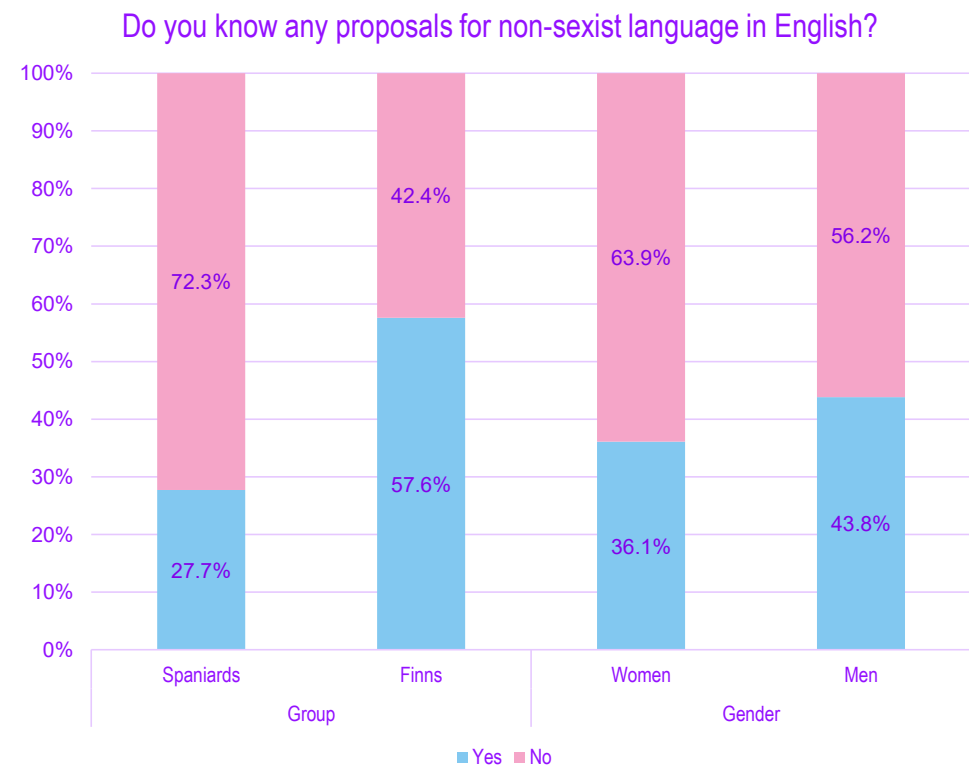
- Only 9 out of 120 described visualisation strategies, the rest used exclusively neutralisation strategies

He/she instead of just saying he. The use of they instead of providing a gender if you don't fully know the gender of the person you're talking to. Avoiding expressions like "policemen". (Participant 176, Spanish man)

- 85 out of 120 explicitly mentioned *singular they*

I think the introduction of 'they' to replace the binary he/she in some situations is one proposal quite extensively used already. Another example might be the talk about whether to use gendered titles of jobs, etc. or how to avoid that. (Participant 206, Spanish woman)

Aso, they substitute *-man* and/or *-woman* for *-person*, avoid adjectival modifications (*female/male*), female suffixes (*-ess*), etc.



## 4.6 A Why do you think that such proposals are necessary/ unnecessary?

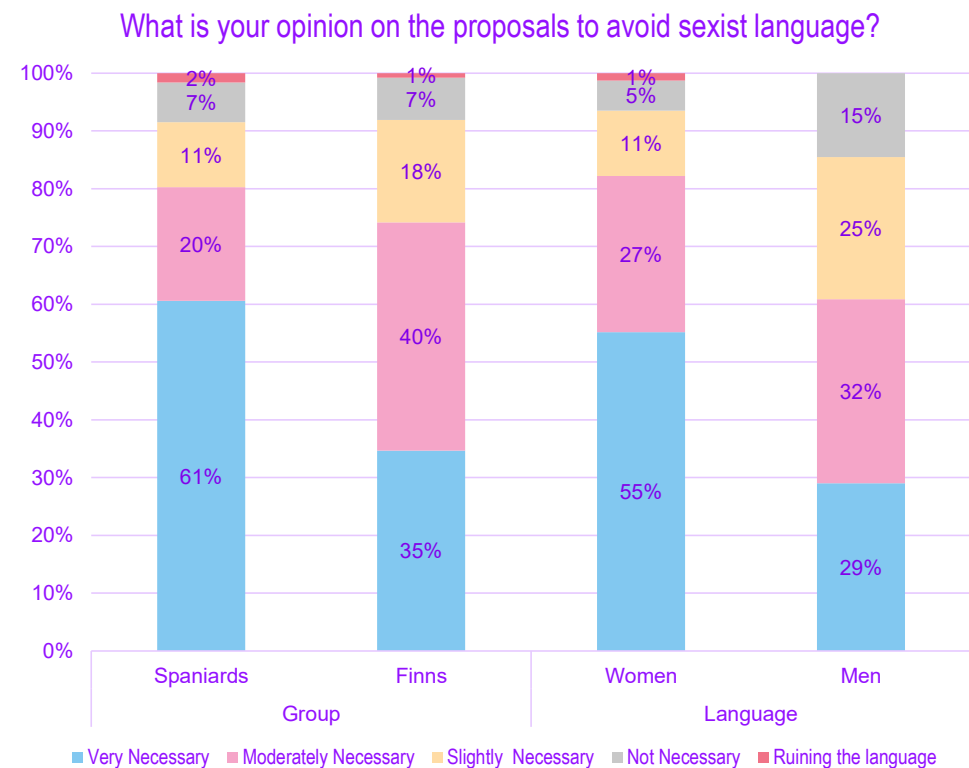
Significant differences between language (p.value: 0.000106, df: 4) and gender groups (p.value=0.00025, df= 4)

Those who said that proposals are **slightly necessary** argue that:

- 1) Non-sexist language is useful because they represent a **shift of mentality**, but they are **not vital**.

They are necessary in a way that they help us be more respectful towards women and their feelings, but they are not very useful in the sense that the system is what codifies the language and not the other way around, so we should focus on modifying the system instead of modifying the language (Participant 7, Spanish man)

I don't think that these choices massively impact our thinking, but if there is an easy way to avoid misunderstanding, then why not. (Participant 302, Finnish woman)



## 4.6.B Why do you think that such proposals are necessary?

Those who said that proposals are **(very) necessary** argue that non-sexist language:

- 1) promotes equality
- 2) inclusivity
- 3) language and thought are linked
- 4) visualizes certain gender groups
- 5) respectful towards women and non-binary people

Two opposite views:

1. Women are marginalised and hidden, thus they should be rendered visible in the language:

Women are evidently equal to men and there shouldn't be a predominant male form in language. (Participant 24, Spanish woman)

I think they are necessary to make everyone visible in this society (Participant 90, Spanish woman)

2. Gendered language places people in different categories, which is harmful to women and gender non-conforming people:

Gendered profession names might direct only/mostly a specific gender to the profession, and other genders might not be valued as much in such professions. Gender-neutral words and especially pronouns also make life easier and more fair for, for instance, non-binary people and other non-cis people. (Participant 301, Finnish woman)

## 4.6.C Why do you think that such proposals are unnecessary?

Those who said that proposals are **not necessary** argue that:

- 1) Languages are not sexist, but the users are.

There are no such things as sexist languages. The problem are on people, who feel too atacked by nothing. (Participant 51, Spanish woman)

It doesn't matter. People who are sexist will be sexist and people who aren't won't be sexist, no matter the terms they use in their language. (Participant 252, Finnish man)

- 2) Languages are by nature inclusive.

Languages are made to include every member of the society that speaks that language (Participant 58, Spanish man)

As I said, I don't feel discriminated as a woman for being included in a "male" form. There are more important things to take care of (Participant 191, Spanish woman)

- 3) They are either useless and/or unnatural.

Because language is something natural and you can't force it. Trying to look for proposals make it not natural (Participant 140, Spanish woman)

## 4.7 Should non-sexist language be used and learnt during English lessons?

Significant differences between language (p. value: 0.008, df: 4) and gender groups (p. value: 0.000135, df: 4).

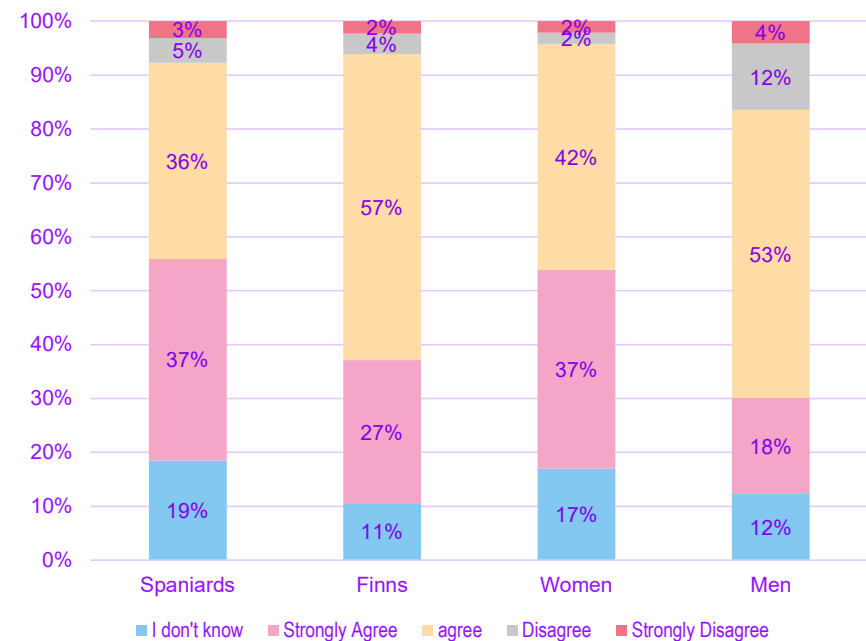
Those who **agreed** said that non-sexist language should be taught because:

- 1) widely used
- 2) promotes inclusivity
- 3) key to solve the problem of linguistic sexism
- 4) language and thought are closely linked → eradicating sexism
- 5) learning about it outside the classroom is difficult

Those who **disagreed** said that non-sexist language should not be taught because:

- 1) languages are not sexist
- 2) masculine forms work as generics
- 3) not important enough

Do you think that non-sexist language and the proposals to avoid it should be used and learnt during English lessons?



## 5. Conclusions

- According to the informants, the bigger presence of **grammatical gender** in a language the more **sexist** the language.
  - Likert Scale questions:
    - Finns perceive English a sexist language (but their L1 is not)
    - Spaniards do not perceive English as a sexist language (but their L1 is)
  - Open questions:
    - They compare English to their L1
    - They discuss the presence or absence of grammatical gender
- **Neutralisation strategies** are preferred **over visualisation/feminisation strategies**
  - *Singular they* (most discussed strategy), genderless nouns, etc.
- **Important to teach** and discuss non-sexist language during lessons

# 5. Conclusions

## Language Groups

- **Finns** do not perceive nouns with **masculine lexical gender** as sexist
  - Similarly, as it is being argued in Finnish.
  - However, they are more likely to espouse positive attitudes and opinions towards non-sexist language in English than Spaniards
- **Spanish** participants **did not express their opinions** about sexist language in English:
  - The result of the differences in the educational systems?
    - The **Finnish educational system** encourages **critical thinking** (Horn, & Veermans, 2019) while the **Spanish** one is known for promoting **memorization** (Agudo-Saiz, Salcines-Talledo, & González-Fernández, 2021).

## Gender groups

- Significant differences between women and men in some questions:
  - Likert Scale questions:
    - Women are more likely to have positive attitudes towards non-sexist language
  - Open questions: women and gender non-conforming people discuss more explicitly the discrimination of gender non-conforming people in the language



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# Thank you! Any questions?

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