

REACTIONS TO GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN SPANISH ON TWITTER AND YOUTUBE

Katie Slemm, Martha Black, and Giulia Cortiana
Western University

1. Introduction

Spanish has traditionally been defined as a binary grammatical gender-based language (Loporcaro, 2017). Among the nouns that refer to inanimate objects, the gender is either masculine (e.g. *vaso* ‘glass’ M.S.) or feminine (e.g. *ventana* ‘window’ F.S.). The gender of inanimate nouns, like the ones mentioned previously, is arbitrary. Additionally, semantic gender exists for animate referents like people and some familiar animals (i.e. pets), which is motivated by the apparent biological sex of the referent. Semantic gender, contrary to gender that is purely grammatical and arbitrary, is inherent and, like grammatical gender, also manifests itself within a traditionally binary system in which there are nouns that are inherently of masculine gender (e.g. *chico* ‘boy’ M.S.) and nouns that are inherently of feminine gender inflexion (e.g. *chica* ‘girl’ F.S.). As a general rule, particularly for semantic gender, most nouns that end in *-o* are masculine and those that end in *-a* are feminine, although exceptions exist. Furthermore, there are nouns that could refer to either traditional gender, male or female, due to a lack of overt morphological marking for gender, meaning the specific gender of the referent is not evident from the noun morphology itself (e.g. *estudiante* ‘student’ MF.S.). For these nouns, the gender of the referent is understood due to the syntactic agreement with determiners and adjectives that modify the noun (e.g. *los estudiantes nuevos* ‘the new male/mixed students’ M.P.). Commonly, nouns (and adjectives) that fall into the category of not overtly marked gender end in */-e/*.

Despite significant and recent variation, Spanish continues to be a language dominated by the masculine generic. That is to say, in order to refer to a group of people, the prescriptive grammar from the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE 2018) requires the use of the masculine plural form of the desired word. For example, in order to address a group of students, the prescriptive form would be *los estudiantes* (‘the students’ M.PL.). Even so, this group of students could be made up of entirely males, or it could be a mixed gender group. Contrarily, *las estudiantes* (‘the students’ F.PL.) can only refer to a group completely made up of females. In fact, neither the RAE nor the Argentinean Academy of Letters (AAL) accept alternatives to the masculine generic, and furthermore do not accept the use of doublets, such as *chicos y chicas* (‘boys and girls’, RAE 2018, Moure 2019) because it can appear redundant since the masculine plural form already prescriptively includes both male and female (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003).

We recognize that the binary division of genders pertains to all Romance languages, due to the derivation of the genders from Latin and, at the same time, we recognize that an academic and cultural movement to include gender-inclusive language is appearing in many languages, Romance or not. For example, English, although it does not have

grammatical gender, does recognize the importance of considering nonbinary individuals when it comes to semantic gender; Merriam Webster, the English dictionary, officially recognized in September 2019 the use of the personal pronoun “they” (traditionally used for third person plural) to refer to a person with a nonbinary gender, as an alternative to gendered options “he” or “she”. In the online dictionary, they noticed an increase of 313% in the search for “they”, which was subsequently named the “word of the year” for 2019 (Locker 2019).

In recent decades, an academic, linguistic, and cultural movement has begun that criticizes the use of the masculine generic, which perceptually excludes women and other minority groups who identify with a nonbinary gender (Flaherty 2001, Nissen 2013). In the last two decades ago or more, the *-@* symbol has been used to refer to the two traditional genders: male and female. More recently, not only has the use of the masculine generic been criticized, but also the binary nature of Spanish semantic gender more generally, because the Spanish language lacks a way to express personal gender that falls outside of the traditional binary options (Sczesny et al. 2015: 944). As a result of this criticism, the movement to make Spanish more inclusive of all gender identities has grown. Notably, the movement aims to include a way to express a gender option that is not exclusively binary for nouns with human referents. Two innovative forms that indicate nonbinary gender have appeared in Spanish morphology: the inclusive marker */x/* and the marker */-e/*. What remains to be investigated is how an audience reacts when they experience any type of gender-inclusive language being used (doublets, *-@*, *-x -e*). Thus, the present paper centers on not only how and when gender-inclusive language is incorporated in the social media sites YouTube and Twitter, but also on the public reaction to gender-inclusive language in comparison to the official positions of the RAE and the AAL.

There are two questions developed in this paper:

1. What are the linguistic innovations and distributions used to mark gender inclusive language on YouTube and Twitter?
2. What has been the public reaction on YouTube and Twitter to the use of gender inclusive language?

1.1 Linguistic change

In general, linguistic change in writing occurs after changes in spoken language (Fought 2013). In any case, it appears that inclusive language in Spanish has behaved in a distinct manner. That is to say, the markers */-x/* and */-@/* were introduced first in writing, and now speakers grapple with how to pronounce these graphemes. Adolescents are frequently the age group that promotes linguistic change (Kirkham and Moore 2013). Thus, Higa and Dunham (2019) signal the importance of analyzing social media because it is where young people generally interact and is likely where innovation, such as gender-inclusive language operating outside of the prescriptive grammar, is occurring.

1.2 Gender acquisition

Gender acquisition in Spanish normally occurs before the age of 34 months (e.g. Pérez-Pereira 1991, Lew-Williams and Fernald 2007, Foote 2014: 370). Children can recognize and correctly identify the gender of animate and inanimate nouns alike at this age. Additionally, adult second language Spanish learners rarely master grammatical gender when their first language does not also have a grammatical gender system (e.g., Alarcón 2011: 335). One way of approaching gender-inclusive language is through an acquisition viewpoint since new innovations of inclusive language (e.g. /-e/ and /-x/) in oral speech imply the acquisition of a new structure to mark nonbinary or neutral gender. Native Spanish speakers who attempt to utilize inclusive language in speech and writing frequently produce errors because greater attention must be paid than what is normally required to fluently and effortlessly produce traditional structures already acquired; we observe this phenomenon in YouTube videos, such as *Alumna Feminista hablando lenguaje inclusivo: diputades, indecises, nosotres, les alumnes* ('Feminist student speaking inclusive language: deputies, undecided, us, the students' 2018), in which the speaker makes several errors when attempting to incorporate gender-inclusive language spontaneously, yet the speaker is also able to notice these errors and self-correct. Therefore, similarly to the first and second language acquisition of traditional binary gender forms in Spanish, gender-inclusive language also appears to be subject to a sort of acquisition process, in which there may be variable stages of development. The acquisition of gender-inclusive language remains to be explored by future research.

1.3 Gender-inclusive language on social media sites

According to the YouTube video corpus of Slemph et al. (2019), the majority of the videos containing inclusive language are from Spain and Argentina, although there are other Latin American countries represented in the corpus. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we consider the official positions on gender-inclusive language of the respective Spanish language academies of Spain and Argentina (previously mentioned as the RAE and AAL). In their study, Slemph et al. (2019) find that speakers from Argentina and Spain incorporate inclusive language more than speakers of other Spanish-speaking countries. In Argentina, innovative forms are used more frequently, with the marker /-e/, and in Spain, spoken doublets are the preferred form. The keywords used to search YouTube to build the corpus were: *todxs*, *todes* and *tod@s* (gender-inclusive variations of the word *todos* 'everyone' M.PL.); *lxs* (gender-inclusive variation of the word *los* 'the' M.PL.); *chiques*, *chicxs* and *chic@s* (gender-inclusive variations of the word *chicos* 'boys' or 'children' M.PL.); and *amigues*, *amigxs* and *amig@s* (gender-inclusive variations of the word *amigos* 'friends' M.PL.).

The corpus consists of 166 videos in total, whose titles contain inclusive written elements, and of which 30 videos also contain spoken inclusive elements of some kind. The basic selection criteria for each video is: 1. demonstrate inclusive language in the title; 2. demonstrate spoken elements of inclusive language; and 3. be recorded in Spanish. The

videos that are excluded from the corpus are not in Spanish, do not contain any spoken elements, are music videos, instructional videos for how to use inclusive language, are publicity videos, or videogame play. There are various themes of the videos: politics, personal vlogs, humor, and journalism/news. From this corpus, we have a preliminary idea of how inclusive language is incorporated on YouTube, but it remains to be seen how inclusive language appears on other social networks, like Twitter. According to Slemp et al. (2019), there are two principal ways to express inclusive *language* in speech: doublets and innovative forms using the marker *-e* (e.g. *todes*, *amigues*). In writing, all four inclusive markers can be seen.

From the little previous literature about gender-inclusive language on social networks (Slemp et al. 2019, Higa and Dunham 2019), we do not yet know about the reactions of the people who experience the use of inclusive language. For this reason, due to the lack of previous research, we approach the present study in an exploratory manner, without establishing specific hypotheses.

2. Methodology

To establish the official position of the academies regarding gender-inclusive language in Spanish, we examined the official websites of the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) and the Argentinean Academy of Letters (AAL), in order to compare the official prescriptive grammar positions of these two academies with a descriptive account of the real use of inclusive language on the social media platforms of YouTube and Twitter.

With regard to the Twitter search, the platform allows you to choose some parameters to find tweets. For this study, we include all the keywords used in Slemp et al.'s (2019) YouTube video corpus. Within the tweets that showed any use of keywords, we analyzed tweets with a minimum of 10 replies, 20 likes, and 20 retweets, from January 1, 2012 to December 1, 2019. Only the first 20 tweets found with these selection criteria were taken into account, and we do not analyze responses that only contain GIFs (Graphic Interchange Format). We found no tweets that included videos, so the linguistic innovations presented here for inclusive language on Twitter only reflect the use within the written language. Data was collected from public reactions on Twitter in the form of likes, number of retweets, number of responses, and type of responses, categorized as positive, neutral, and negative. From this data, we describe and quantify the reaction to the use of inclusive language in Spanish on Twitter. Out of the 20 tweets used in this study, 3 are written by users living in Spain and 7 by users living in Latin America. For the other 10 tweets, it is not possible to locate the country of the users. In total, we analyze 5,929 responses, of which only 278 referred to the use of inclusive language used in the main tweet. Only responses reacting specifically to the use of gender-inclusive language were considered for further quantitative and qualitative analyses and were subsequently compared to YouTube comments.

With respect to the YouTube analysis, we use the corpus of Slemp et al. (2019); for each video that demonstrates gender-inclusive language, both in writing (in the video title or in some text used in the video) and oral (pronounced during the video), we analyze users'

public reactions on YouTube in the form of likes/dislikes, number of views, number of comments, and type of comment (i.e. positive, neutral, negative), with the aim of describing and quantifying the public's reaction to inclusive language. In total, 2,347 comments from 27 videos taken from the corpus of Slempp et al. (2019) were analyzed.

For both platforms, the comments that included key phrases such as "I like", "I love", "Well done", "Good work", "Keep it up", and other similar phrases are classified as positive. In addition, the comments that indicated support, both for the content and the use of inclusive language, are also classified as positive. Comments that included questions, expressed curiosity and/or confusion, or indicated another type of feedback without explicitly indicating support or disagreement, are classified as neutral. In contrast, the comments with offensive language, often indicating discrimination against the LGBTQ community, that indicated disagreement, that expressed anger, and/or that indicated in some way that these innovations present a threat to the structure of the Spanish language are classified as negative comments.

3. Analysis and results

We now present the results according to each research question for both social media platforms.

3.1 Linguistic innovations observed

Our first question examined the linguistic innovations and distributions used to mark gender inclusive language on YouTube and Twitter.

Among the tweets analyzed (n=20), there are four main innovations that are used to mark gender-inclusive language, mentioned in section 1 previously. Such innovations are presented in Table 1. The use of the marker /-e/ (e.g. *todes* gender neutral variation of *todos* 'everyone', *nosotres* gender neutral variation of *nosotros* 'we/us') is observed with a frequency of 50% in tweets, and the use of doublets (e.g. *todos/todas* 'everyone M.P./everyone' F.P., *nosotros/nosotras* 'we/us M.P. or we/us' F.P.) at a rate of 16.70% in the selected tweets. Also observed is the use of the -@ with a frequency of 20.8%, and the appearance of the inclusive marker /-x/ with a frequency of 12.5%.

On YouTube, we observed (n = 27 videos) the previously mentioned four innovations to mark gender-inclusive language, also presented in Table 1. Both in writing and speech, we observed the use of doublets (e.g. *los/las* 'the' M.P./'the' F.P., *amigos/amigas* 'friends' M.P./'friends' F.P., *todos/todas* 'everyone' M.P./'everyone' F.P.) in 70.37% of all videos and the marker /-e/ (e.g. *les* 'the' N.P., *nosotres* 'we' N., *amigues* 'friends' N.P., *todes* 'all' N.P.) in 37.04% of the videos. Exclusively in writing, we observed the use of the marker /-x/ (e.g. *lxs* 'the' N.P., *todxs* 'all' N.P., *amigxs* 'friends' N.P.) with 70.37% and the marker /-@/ (e.g. *tod@s* 'all' MF.P., *amig@s* 'friends' MF.P.) in 44.44% of the videos. Based on our dataset, it appears that the /-x/ and doublets co-occur, and thus both innovations demonstrate the same percentage of frequency (70.37%). It should be noted that within these four innovations observed on YouTube, two systems of semantic gender are represented to mark animate (i.e. personal)

nouns: doublets and the marker /-@/ point to an inclusive language that still maintains a binary system, while the marker /-x/ (in writing) and the marker /-e/ represent a nonbinary, neutral system.

Table 1. Innovation types observed across both social media platforms. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.

Platform	Innovation Type % (SD)			
	doublets	/-e/	/-x/	/-@/
Combined Mean	48% (51)	47% (50)	47% (50)	36% (49)
Twitter Mean	20% (41)	60% (50)	15% (37)	25% (44)
YouTube Mean	70% (47)	37% (49)	70% (47)	44% (51)
Combined Total	23	22	22	17
Twitter Total	4	12	3	5
YouTube Total	19	10	19	12

3.2 Public reaction

Our second question examined the public reaction on YouTube and Twitter to the use of gender-inclusive language.

Overall, the tweets taken into consideration received a total of 203,635 likes, 50,822 re-tweets, and 5,929 responses. Of the total responses analyzed, only 278 were related to the use of gender-inclusive language in the main tweet; that is, only 4.60% of responses showed comments specifically referring to the use of inclusive language. Of those 278 responses, most of them exhibited negative reviews (50.36%, *les imbéciles* ‘the imbeciles:N’), followed by positive reviews (33.45%, *un presidente que dice todes. Estoy llorando. Gracias!!!* ‘A president that says ‘todes’. I am crying. Thanks!!!’), and then neutral comments (16.19%, *que significa “todes”?* ‘What does ‘todes’ mean?’). Table 2 presents the number of likes and comments on each social media platform and Table 3 provides a breakdown of reaction types across both YouTube and Twitter. Table 4 displays comments of each category in the Twitter sample.

YouTube videos that feature gender-inclusive language generally appear to be well received and generate extensive discussion among the users on this platform. In general, the videos in the sample (n=27) with inclusive language are widely seen on YouTube with 393,814 views in total. The videos generate an average of 14,586 views, with 2,347 comments in total, and demonstrate an average of 87 comments per video. 44% of the videos contain comments and discussion, while the remaining 56% of the videos have no comments. Among the 44% of videos that include comments, the use of inclusive language is mostly positively received with an average of 93.04% of likes. In addition, among the commented videos, most show positive comments (75.59%, *me animáis a no rendirme con mi homosexualidad :) os kiero* ‘You call encourage me to not give up on my homosexuality :) I love you all’), followed by neutral comments (15.96%, *¿por qué le llaman ‘lenguaje*

inclusivo’ y no *‘inclusive?’* ‘Why do they call it *‘lenguaje inclusivo*’ and not *‘inclusive:N?’*), and overall demonstrate relatively few negative comments (8.44%, *aprende a escribir *****!* ‘Learn to write *****!’). Additional examples of comments per category are presented in Table 4.

Table 2. Number of ‘likes’ and comments across both social media platforms. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.

Platform	No. ‘likes’ (SD)	No. comments (SD)
Combined Mean	4,538 (14, 202)	176 (683)
Twitter Mean	10,182 (20, 665)	296 (968)
YouTube Mean	359 (1,466)	86(348)
Combined Total	213, 329	8,276
Twitter Total	203, 635	5,929
YouTube Total	9,694	2,347

Table 3. Reaction type per social media platform. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.

Platform	Reaction Type % (SD)		
	positive (+)	neutral (/)	negative (-)
Combined Mean	54% (29)	16% (12)	30% (32)
Twitter Mean	39% (22)	16% (14)	45% (29)
YouTube Mean	76% (25)	16% (10)	8% (26)
Combined Total	630	248	1,747
Twitter Total	93	45	140
YouTube Total	537	203	1,607

To determine if the differences observed in the relative distributions in innovation types and the nature of reactions across YouTube and Twitter are statistically different, the data for both platforms was entered into an independent samples *t*-test with a 95% confidence interval. In terms of relative distributions of the four innovation types, results indicate that YouTube videos featuring gender inclusive language also exhibited significantly more use of the doublets ($t(45) = -3.85, d = -1.14, p < .001$) and */-x/* ($t(45) = -4.40, d = -1.30, p < .001$) innovation types as compared to tweets on Twitter. In terms of the public’s reaction on these two platforms, results indicate that the average tweet received significantly more ‘likes’ than the average YouTube video ($t(45) = 2.47, d = 0.73, p = .017$). Nonetheless, the proportion of positive comments on YouTube videos was significantly higher ($t(27) = -4.16, d = -1.57, p < .001$) than the proportion of positive reactions on Twitter. Furthermore, the proportion of negative responses on Twitter was significantly higher ($t(27) = 3.51, d = 1.32, p = .002$) than the proportion of negative comments on YouTube. However, with regards to the */@/* and */-e/* inclusive markers and the average number of comments and the proportion of neutral reactions, YouTube and Twitter were not significantly different. In summary, we can affirm that the public reaction

to gender inclusive language is quite positive on YouTube yet is less positive in Twitter responses.

To better understand what these comments tell us about the public reception of gender-inclusive language on YouTube and Twitter, and furthermore, what this public reception indicates about social and linguistic change related to a changing conceptualization of gender as a social construct, we offer in the following discussion a preliminary qualitative analysis, integrating the positive, neutral, and negative comments analyzed. Finally, in the conclusion, we describe the linguistic and social contribution of this study while pointing to directions for future work.

Table 4. Examples of responses on Twitter and YouTube by category: positive, neutral, negative. Original Spanish text appears in italics, followed by English translation in parentheses.

positive	neutral	negative
<p><i>Son bien frágiles los conservadores, se ofenden por una letra lmao</i> (‘Conservatives are very fragile, if they get offended by a letter lmao’)</p> <p><i>del lado correcto de la historia</i> (‘On the right side of history’)</p> <p><i>Me gusto!</i> (‘I liked it!’)</p> <p><i>Un presidente que dice todes. Estoy llorando. Gracias!!!!</i> (‘A president that uses ‘todes’. I am crying. Thanks!!!!’)</p> <p><i>Alberto, el presidente de TODS</i> (‘Alberto, the President for all of us’)</p>	<p><i>Yo entiendo como todes es para los no definidos sexualmente, por qué poner todas todos y TODES 😊</i> (‘I do understand how ‘todes’ is for those who are sexually undefined, why put ‘todas, todos, y TODES’ 😊)</p> <p><i>se supone que todes son (todos y todas) me confundí jajajaja</i> (‘I thought that ‘todes’ included ‘todos y todas’. I got confused’)</p> <p><i>Que significa "todes"?</i> (‘What does ‘todes’ mean?’)</p>	<p><i>Si quiere hablar en lenguaje inclusivo aprenda en de Señas que conocen los Sordomudos.</i> (‘If you want to speak using inclusive language, just learn sign language from the Deaf Community.’)</p> <p><i>Les Imbéciles</i> (‘The [genderless version] idiots’)</p> <p><i>Odio el lenguaje inclusive</i> (‘I hate gender-inclusive language’)</p> <p><i>Estas nuevas especies te aparecen primero con el tema de la aceptación, después con la inclusión. Ya tengo miedo de que se vuelva obligatorio!</i> (‘These new species appear to you first with the theme of acceptance, now with gender. I’m afraid it will be obligatory!’)</p>

4. Discussion

On Twitter, of the 20 tweets analyzed, we observe a more negative reaction in the responses (frequency: 45%), but also observe an average of about 10,000 likes per tweet, which constitutes significantly more likes than the average YouTube video ($M=359$). Gender-inclusive language appears on YouTube, both in writing and speech, through four main innovations. The most common innovations to mark inclusive language are doublets and the marker /-x/ (average = 70%) and often co-occur in which the /-x/ is written but pronounced as a doublet. In general, we can conclude that gender-inclusive language is very well received on YouTube with an average of 76% positive reactions. The mostly positive reception of gender-inclusive language on YouTube represents a stark contrast to the official positions of the two language academies in Spain and Argentina; both the RAE and the AAL maintain prescriptive and rigid visions of the Spanish language, and this prescriptive (and restrictive) vision has a greater impact on the public's reactions to inclusive language on the Twitter platform.

It is important to note that there is no way to know the exact reason for a like on Twitter and YouTube as it could be a reaction to either (or both) the content of the video or tweet and the use of inclusive language. Nonetheless, we observe a direct relationship between the types of comments (e.g. positive/neutral/negative) and the proportion of likes; in the case of YouTube, videos with more positive comments also showed more likes and this relationship is evident in the strong positive linear correlation ($r = .89$) between the percentage of likes and the percentage of positive comments. This positive correlation demonstrates the validity of including the percentage of likes as one of the measures to quantify the public's reaction. In addition, we can say that videos with gender-inclusive language on YouTube generate extensive discussion, that is, a total of 2,347 comments with an average of 87 comments per video. Most of the comments are positive (76%) and only an average of 8% of the comments were negative. It should be noted that, while all the tweets taken into account were produced from January 2019 to November 2019, the number of videos produced with inclusive language in our sample has risen from 2012 to the present moment by 600% (only 2 videos in 2012 to 12 videos in 2019 in the corpus used by Slempp et al. 2019).

In summary, we can affirm that: 1. gender-inclusive language is featured in videos shared on YouTube and in tweets on Twitter in the form of four main innovations (e.g. doublets, /-@/, /-x/, /-e/); 2. sources that demonstrate inclusive language generate extensive discussion among users on both social media platforms; 3. the public reaction to inclusive language is quite positive on YouTube and is less positive in Twitter responses; and 4. the use of inclusive language has become even more frequent in recent years and continues to rise.

To offer a preliminary qualitative analysis and thus indicate the status of this linguistic phenomenon observed in online social media, we consider the nature of the comments categorized as positive, neutral and negative. In general, positive comments on YouTube and Twitter indicated that people appreciate both intellectually and personally the use of gender-inclusive language; in their comments, these users made use of words

such as "important", "educational", "enlightening", and others pointed out that language is always changing in some way: *no entiendo porque el rechazo desmedido al lenguaje inclusivo [...] el lenguaje evoluciona junto con la sociedad* ('I do not understand the excessive rejection of inclusive language [...] language evolves along with society'). In addition, there were other users on YouTube and Twitter who indicated the personal impact that this type of language has on their lives and in their struggle with their own identity: *Me animáis a no rendirme con mi homosexualidad [...]* ('You encourage me not to give up on my homosexuality [...]'). That is, gender-inclusive language seems to be a linguistic phenomenon used as a tool to mark and defend one's identity, which carries important social consequences.

Neutral comments mostly indicated confusion and curiosity about inclusive language and many users commented with questions. These curiosities and confusions generated extensive discussion among users on YouTube in the form of responses about the use and intention behind gender-inclusive language. For example, a user asked: *¿Por qué ponéis lxs en vez de los? ¿Os habéis equivocado?* ('Why do you put 'lxs' instead of 'los'? Did you make a mistake?'), or simply *qué es lxs?* ('What is 'lxs'?'). Questions like these stimulated the response of other more informed users, such as one YouTube user who responded: *Porque las personas pueden ser 'los', 'las' o quizás no se reflejan en ninguna de esas dos y prefieren el 'lxs' que es más inclusivo y amplio para las personas no binarias (hombre/mujer)* ('Because people can be 'los', 'las' or perhaps they do not identify with either of those two and prefer the 'lxs' that is more inclusive and broad for nonbinary people (man/woman)'). Conversations like these on YouTube and Twitter demonstrate how social networks provide a community and a potentially educational platform to discuss issues about linguistic change and its corresponding social meaning, as the change happens in real time. Although many of the comments were positive, the negative comments provide us with important information about the nature of the opposition against the use of gender-inclusive language.

Negative comments were categorized into three groups: 1. comments that indicate a lack of understanding of the phenomenon and what it really marks, mainly indicating a confusion between biological (i.e. semantic) gender and grammatical gender in inanimate objects; 2. comments (often very offensive) that indicate discrimination against the LGBTQ community, since gender-inclusive language appears to be associated with this community; and 3. comments that express a concern for the maintenance of the Spanish language in which the use of suffixes to mark nonbinary gender (e.g., */-e/* and */-x/*) is seen as a threat to the linguistic system of the Spanish language. These latter concerns regarding a possible threat to the Spanish language are in stark contrast with the linguistic reality of language change; it is known that all (living) languages evolve, in part, thanks to changing communicative needs, in such a way that linguistic innovations often reflect important social changes (Keller 2005: 4).

From this preliminary qualitative analysis, we affirm that: 1. YouTube and Twitter constitute important sources of information about gender-inclusive language, providing an online community platform where people can become more informed about its use and

importance, some users appear to change their views as a result, and others utilize these platforms to express the personal importance that inclusive language has in their own lives; 2. inclusive language still generates confusion and as such inspires questions and discussions about its use and meaning; and 3. oppositions to inclusive language appear to be based on a lack of understanding about the phenomenon, its meaning, and about the nature of language itself as a social artifact that continually changes according to the changing needs of speakers, and also indicate persistent discrimination against the LGBTQ community. Therefore, the study of gender-inclusive language in Spanish provides a valuable lens through which to observe a linguistic change (with morphosyntactic consequences) that is simultaneously the cause and product of a social movement to reconceptualize the way we think and speak about gender.

It should be noted that among the results collected on Twitter and YouTube there are differences, both in the relative frequency of each innovation, as well as in the reactions of the public. Although all four innovations of inclusive language appear on the two social networks, we note that the relative frequencies of each type of innovation are different. On Twitter, users prefer the marker */-e/* (frequency: 60%) more than any other type of innovation, but on YouTube it is the least frequent innovation of the four (frequency: 37%). In addition, doublets appear more on YouTube (frequency: 70%), but their frequency on Twitter is the second lowest of the four innovations (frequency: 20%). We hypothesize that doublets appear at a lower rate on Twitter because they involve the use of more characters, and Twitter imposes a fixed limit (280 characters). We cannot conclude exactly why users prefer to use the marker */-e/* more on Twitter, but it may be because Twitter's environment is often more controversial, yet innovative.

With regard to reactions, if on the one hand the Twitter audience does not seem to accept the use of inclusive language (average positive comments on Twitter: 39%), YouTube users seem to be more welcoming of these innovations (average positive comments on YouTube: 76%). Although we do not have sufficient data to draft specific hypotheses, we consider that the presence of the RAE on Twitter counts as a key element in accommodating innovations of gender-inclusive language. The Twitter public profile of the RAE offers a hashtag *#dudaRAE* ('doubtRAE') through which the RAE answers the questions of Twitter users. Each time a Twitter user asks for clarification on the use of gender-inclusive language, the RAE's response usually includes the following information: *el masculino gramatical es el término no marcado de la oposición de género, lo que faculta a esa forma, y solo a esa, para referirse al colectivo formado por hombres y mujeres* ('the masculine generic is the unmarked term of gender opposition, which empowers this form, and only to this, to refer to the collective made up of men and women'). On the YouTube platform, however, there is no presence of the RAE, and therefore it does not exert a prescriptive influence on the use of gender-inclusive language by its users and by its public. Potentially as a result, gender-inclusive language is more accepted on YouTube.

However, it is essential to recognize the high level of variation observed in our sample, both in the ranges and in the standard deviations. That is, the reaction to the phenomenon of gender-inclusive language on YouTube and Twitter varies greatly across

the measures used in this study to quantify its reception: number of views, likes, number of retweets, number of comments, and type of comment.

In addition, we recognize the limits imposed by YouTube and Twitter as platforms where, in most cases, it is not possible to collect biographical information about those who produce content or comment on the content produced. These limitations make it difficult to incorporate a rigorous analysis of the social variables (such as gender, age, level of education, and socioeconomic status) that could potentially influence the use and reception of gender-inclusive language. Furthermore, we acknowledge that not all the specific metrics of Twitter and YouTube can be mutually analyzed and compared, as they do not have matching criteria. For instance, we were able to compare the number of likes on tweets with the number of likes on YouTube videos and the number of Twitter replies with the number of YouTube comments. However, comparing the two platforms with regards to the number of views on YouTube videos and the number of retweets on Twitter was not feasible because these two metrics are not comparable across the platforms; although the number of views on YouTube videos is public, only the author of a tweet can see the statistics of how many times a tweet has been viewed and the influence it has had on other users. Likewise, retweets on Twitter are public, but there is no way to see the number of times that a YouTube video has been shared. In addition, with regards to the sampling of YouTube videos and tweets, it should be noted here that there are inherent limitations with comparing across these two platforms due to their different search criteria algorithms. Most notably, when searching for a YouTube video, only the words contained in the title of the video are considered, while one is able to directly search the content of a tweet on Twitter.

This asymmetry in search criteria resulted in more efficient searches for tweets that contained gender-inclusive language, while the same search criteria retrieved YouTube videos that only contained gender-inclusive language in the video titles, but crucially not in the content of the video, and therefore, had to be excluded from the original corpus of Slemp et al. (2019). This asymmetry in search criteria may favor a more rich and detailed Twitter corpus that features relatively more extensive use of gender-inclusive language while the YouTube corpus features videos that may only exhibit a single instance of a gender-inclusive linguistic innovation. Therefore, we recommend that future research set a stricter selection criteria that establishes a minimum threshold of gender-inclusive innovation expression at the outset to ensure that tweets and YouTube videos are both quantitatively and qualitatively comparable with regards to their respective uses of inclusive language.

Therefore, while recognizing the inherent limitations associated with using publicly available social media content, this exploratory study offers a preliminary analysis as a basis for future research.

5. Conclusion

The use of gender-inclusive language in social media demonstrates how language is able to change by following social changes, and how individuals manifest their own identity through the language they use. Gender, as a socially constructed concept, is seen in a state

of transition from an exclusively (traditionally) binary construction to a broader and more dynamic conceptualization. Language can and does need, in some way, to accommodate the changing concepts of semantic gender to better represent current reality. Languages should meet the need to express a new conceptualization of gender as it is related to, but distinct from, biological sex. Noam Chomsky (1987: 152) stated that language is a process of free creation: although it has well-defined rules and principles, the way language changes and evolves is not restricted to any principle, rather, it is free and infinitely varied.

It is important to recognize that there is extensive variation in our video sample (both in the value ranges and standard deviations), which limits the possibilities of generalizing the results to all videos and comments on YouTube and to all tweets and responses on Twitter that contain gender-inclusive language. The sample size is also relatively small (27 videos with 2,347 comments on YouTube; 20 tweets and 278 responses on Twitter). Therefore, for future studies, it would be useful to include more videos, in order to provide more concrete and generalizable conclusions, as well as examine public reactions on other social networks. In addition, classifying comments as positive, negative, or neutral is a subjective process and, in the future, it would be better if the researchers develop concrete guidelines for the consistent classification of comments, in order to reach a more objective consensus. For this exploratory study, the work was divided amongst the members of the research team. In the future, to ensure objectivity, rather than each team member collecting and analyzing the data for one social media platform, each member should examine both social media platforms and then, as a team, come to a consensus according to the established guidelines. Finally, as gender-inclusive language continues to increase in frequency, and since at the moment there are different innovations to mark it, it would be interesting to analyze how the relative frequency of each innovation changes over time in order to determine whether a single innovation in particular will become the preferred form among the diverse speakers of Spanish.

References

- Alarcón, Irma V. 2011. Spanish gender agreement under complete and incomplete acquisition: Early and late bilinguals' linguistic behavior within the noun phrase. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 14(3): 332-350.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1987. *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck. New York: Pantheon.
- Eckert, Penelope, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 2003. *Language and Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Flaherty, Mary. 2001. How a language gender system creeps into perception. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32(1): 18-31.
- Foote, Rebecca. 2014. Age of Acquisition and Sensitivity to Gender in Spanish Word Recognition. *Language Acquisition*, 21(1): 365-385.
- Fought, Carmen. 2013. Ethnicity. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, 16j-1h. 2nd ed. Chichester: Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

- Higa, Julia, and Michael Dunham. 2019. Can linguistic innovations bridge the gender divide?: Inclusive language in contemporary Spanish social media. Paper presented at *Student Research Conference of the University of Vermont* in Burlington, VT. April 17, 2019.
- Keller, Rudi. 2005. *On language change: The invisible hand in language*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kirkham, Sam, and Emma Moore. 2013. Adolescence. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, 399-3100. 2nd ed. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Lew-Williams, Casey, and Anne Fernald. 2007. Young Children Learning Spanish Make Rapid Use of Grammatical Gender in Spoken Word Recognition. *Psychological Science* 18(3): 193–198.
- Locker, Melissa. 2019. Merriam Webster Names 'They' as Its Word of the Year for 2019. Time Online Newsfeed. December 10, 2019. <https://time.com/5746516/merriam-webster-word-of-the-year-2019/>
- Loporcaro, Michele. 2018. *Gender from Latin to Romance*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Moure, José Luis. 2019. Sobre el lenguaje inclusivo. Una nota del Presidente de la Academia Argentina de Letras. <http://www.aal.edu.ar/?q=node/637>
- Nissen, Uwe Kjør. 2013. Is Spanish Becoming More Gender Fair? A Historical Perspective on the Interpretation of Gender Specific and Gender-Neutral Expressions. *Linguistik Online*, 58.
- Pérez-Pereira, Miguel. 1991. The acquisition of gender: What Spanish children tell us. *Journal of Child Language*, 18(2): 571–590.
- Queen, Robin. 2013. Gender, Sex, Sexuality, and Sexual Identities. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, 13-16. 2nd ed. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- [Raptor Latino]. 2018, June 12. Alumna Feminista hablando lenguaje inclusivo: diputades, indecises, nosotres, les alumnes [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwozaE24z_w
- Real Academia Española. 2018. *Libro de estilo de la lengua española según la norma panhispánica*. Madrid: Espasa.
- Real Academia Española. (@RAEinforma). “El uso de las letras «e» y «x» como supuestas marcas de género inclusivo es ajeno a la morfología del español, además de innecesario, pues el masculino gramatical ya cumple esa función como término no marcado de la oposición de género.” February 22, 2019, 8:15AM ET. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/RAEinforma/status/1098934390552444930>.
- Sczesny, Sabine, Franziska Moser, and Wendy Wood. 2015. Beyond sexist beliefs: How do people decide to use gender-inclusive language?. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(7): 943-954.
- Slemp, Katie, Yarubi Díaz, and David Heap. 2019. Todxs lxs youtuberxs: pronunciaciones del lenguaje inclusivo por hispanohablantes en línea. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Hispanists, Vancouver, BC.