

Latin@s or Latinxs? Innovation in Spanish Gender Inclusive Oral Expression

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In recent decades, there has been debate as to how to represent gender inclusive language in Spanish, a language with a binary gender-based grammatical system. Nouns (and determiners and adjectives) in Spanish are binarily gendered, including nouns that refer to people. Generally, nouns are masculine if ended in *-o* and feminine if ended in *-a*, as in (1). One way to represent gender inclusive language has been the symbol *-@*, used for decades, which denotes both masculine and feminine endings, as seen in example (2a) below, and is often pronounced using doublets, (2c). This purported solution is intended to counter the prescriptively accepted masculine plural form (2b) which is traditionally viewed as generic (Real Academia Española 2018). In recent years, *-@* and doublets have been criticized as not being inclusive of all genders, as it still indicates a binary masculine and/or feminine choice (de Onís 2017), as in (2).

1. *el alumno* M.SG. *la alumna* F.SG.
‘the student’ (male) ‘the student’ (female)
2. a. *l@s alumn@s* MFN.PL., traditionally b. *los alumnos* M.PL. ‘the students’
c. *los alumnos y las alumnas* (‘the male students and the female students’)
3. *lxs chicxs imitan a lxs profesorxs* (Operación Triunfo Oficial 2018)
‘the N.PL. kids N.PL. imitate the N.PL. professors N.PL.’
4. *nosotras, bueno, nosotres. Hombres y mujeres.* (‘we-F. well, we-N. Men and women’)
(Raptor Latino 2018)

In place of *-@*, the grapheme *-x* has begun to appear in written discourse more recently as a non-gendered alternative, with the *-x* effectively eliminating any gendered denotation (Milian 2017). This option has been popularized by the term *Latinx*, especially in English, referring to Latin American people of all genders. While this grapheme has been further and further incorporated into written discourse (one can easily find occurrences of *todxs*, *lxs chicxs*, etc.), the pronunciation of this *-x* has yet to be studied in detail, although exploratory studies suggest that orthographic *-x* is rarely pronounced as <x>, but rather can be pronounced as a doublet (2c), the masculine generic (2b), or as an innovative *-e* word (4) (e.g. Slemp et al. 2019). We know that the grapheme <x> pronounced /ks/ or /gz/ cannot be a syllable nucleus in Spanish, and that Spanish prefers open syllables structure, ruling out clusters like /-ks#/ in syllable codas.

This study therefore examines how 40 Spanish speakers from countries such as Spain, Argentina, and Colombia incorporate gender inclusive language through responses to a survey and an interview. Furthermore, this study investigates how gender inclusive language spreads to different parts of speech. For example, does *-x* solely appear in certain parts of speech, such as articles and nouns, as in (3)? In addition to ungendered *-x*, epicene *-e* which exists in Spanish already in words like *estudiantes* (‘students’ MF.PL.) and *verde* (‘green’ MF.SG.) without overt gender marking, has begun appearing in new contexts, replacing traditionally gendered *-o* or *-a*. Furthermore, there is no difficulty in how it might be pronounced, unlike *-x* forms. Initial survey results suggest that there is much variation amongst speakers, but that speaker age and gender affect the type of gender inclusive language incorporated. Speakers choose a variety of ways to incorporate inclusivity and individuals even demonstrate variation as to where and when they incorporate inclusivity, including self-correction, as in (4). Here, the speaker uses *nosotres* (‘we’ N.PL.) as the innovated gender-inclusive form of *nosotras* (‘we’ F.PL.). Finally, we discuss speakers’ motivations for using gender inclusive language, outside of the prescriptive grammar.

References

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