

Finnish and Spanish speakers' attitudes towards gender-fair language in English

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, I wish to investigate how the first or dominant language (L1) of speakers influences attitudes towards gender-fair language¹ in a second language (L2). More particularly, it analyses how native speakers with different gender systems, in this case Spanish, a language with grammatical gender and Finnish, a genderless language, perceive gender-fair language in English, a language with natural or notional gender² (Stahlberg et al. 2007, Gygax et al. 2019, McConnell-Ginet 2014).

The study of sexism in language first arose in English during the second wave of feminism (Lakoff 1973, Spender 1980). The researchers at that time supported that most languages “codify an androcentric worldview” and that sexist language should be eradicated if we want to achieve gender equality in society (Hellinger & Bußmann 2001: 18). The third wave of feminism observed that sexism did not reside in single words or expressions, but that there are other factors that are involved when conveying sexist messages. Thus, the study of sexism shifted towards “more insidious discriminatory and exclusionary discourses that abound” (Toolan 1996: 4) using new methods such as Discourse Analysis (Coady 2018: 23). In recent decades and with the rise of the fourth wave of feminism, the study of sexism has “returned to many of the concerns raised by the second wave of feminism” (Coates 2016) However, the “demands for linguistic reform come from trans, non-binary and genderqueer activists; and when they call for ‘inclusive’ language, what they mean is not language that includes women as well as men, but language that includes people of all genders and none” (Cameron 2016).

Multilingual speakers face several challenges when avoiding sexist language in an L2. First, the strategies used in each language are different even when the features that are deemed sexist are similar. For example, in Spanish, feminine nouns such as *concejala*³ ‘councilwoman’, *presidenta* ‘presidentess’ were created to avoid masculine forms and to render women visible, but in languages without grammatical gender, such as English or Finnish, feminising such nouns using the same morphological processes results in nouns that have pejorative connotations. For example, the Finnish words *presidenttinna* or *presidentska* ‘presidentess’ and *naistuomari* ‘female judge’ do not only sound odd to a Finnish native speaker but also possess sexist undertones.

¹ Other terms currently being used are *gender-inclusive language*, *gender neutral language* and *non-sexist language*. When the survey that was used in this study was designed I used the term non-sexist language because it was more popular at the time. This also reflects on the answers of the informants.

² The term *natural gender language* is very controversial (see Hekanaho 2020: 57). Thus, I adopted the term *notional* following the suggestions by Hekanaho's (idem), Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg's (1994), and McConnell-Ginet (2014).

³ The masculine forms are *concejal* and *presidente*. *Concejal* does not explicitly convey gender because it ends in a consonant. *Presidenta* was firstly documented in Spanish in the XV century (Real Academia Española 2019). It was originally used to refer to the wife of the president but now it refers to a woman in a leading or managing position. *Presidente*, on the other hand, like other adjectives and nouns ending in *-ente*, such as *estudiante* ‘student’ and *dirigente* ‘manager’, have common gender and are not always feminized. The feminisation of such titles tends to occur in occupations that were traditionally held by men only to render more visibility to the women that do the same job (UNESCO 1999).

Secondly, most strategies are context-specific, meaning in a language not all strategies are applicable in all scenarios, some are more suitable in formal contexts and others can only be used in written texts. For example, @ is used in Spanish as in *tod@s* 'everyone' to avoid masculine generic forms because it incorporates both gendered morphemes (-a and -o) in one symbol. However, these words can only be used in informal written texts because they are unpronounceable (Sánchez-Torres 2023: 12-15).

Despite the described challenges that multilingual speakers encounter when using gender-fair language in an L2, research on sexist language from a multilingual and multicultural perspective is still scarce (Coardy 2018, Fraser 2015, Gabriel et al. 2008, Hodel et al. 2017, Pauwels 1998). A study carried out by Pauwels (2010: 32) showed that "the supporters of gender inclusive language use are attuned to the norms and rules of the environment within which they operate". This is due to several factors which involve differences in the linguistic expression of gender of their L1, the type of strategies that are used in each language and the state of the feminist language reform within each language community.

Thus, the interest of this study is to expand the knowledge about the role of the L1 in the attitudes and perceptions of gender-fair language in the L2.

1.1. Gender expression and gender-fair language in English, Finnish and Spanish

This study deals with the attitudes of L1 users of Finnish and Spanish who speak and study English as a foreign language. Since these three languages possess different gender systems, the following section describes the expression of gender in said languages and includes a brief discussion on the state of feminist language reform in each language community.

1.1.1 Gender in English

English is a West Germanic language that belongs to the Indo-European family. It is the third most spoken language as an L1 in the world after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. It has an official status in over 60 countries and it is often referred to as the current *lingua franca* of our time (Crystal 1997, Alatis & Straehle 2007: 2) English is classified as a language with notional gender whose only vestige of grammatical gender is found in the third person singular pronoun (*he/she*) (Stahlberg et al. 2007, Gygax et al. 2019). Most English nouns are genderless e.g. *student* and *artist* but referential gender can be conveyed through lexical gender. Nouns with lexical gender are mostly found in the field of kinship, *sister*, *brother*, or farming *chicken*, *rooster*. Yet, it is possible to express lexical gender through other morphological processes such as compounding, e.g. *postman* and derivation, e.g. *waitress*.

The most well-known gendered compounds are masculine nouns ending in *-man* which date back to Old English (Marchand 1969: 61). These compounds often designate expertise, nationality and/or titles held by men, for example, *craftsman*, *Frenchman*, *congressman* (Marchand 1969: 61-67). The female counterparts can be created by substituting *-man* for *-woman* as in *craftswoman*, *Frenchwoman* and *congresswoman*. However, the most common way of creating female nouns is through derivation. There are five gender derivative suffixes in English: *-ster*, as in *spinster*, *-ine* as in *concubine*, as in *-trix* as in *dominatrix*, *-ette* as in *usherette* and *-ess* as in *actress*, *mistress*. Except for the latter one, which has enjoyed relative popularity, all these suffixes were short-lived due to the strong pejorative connotations that the resulting nouns possess.

In recent decades, the general trend is to erase gender markers from these nouns, especially occupational titles. In general, it is possible to substitute *-man/-woman* for *-person*, as in *chairperson*, *salesperson*, *craftsperson*. However, there are plenty of examples in which this does not apply. For example, *postperson*, *fireperson* and *dustperson* do not exist. However, some of these genderless alternatives have adopted certain condescending undertones which have led speakers to use them only in low-status professions (Veitch 1979 cited in Mills 1995: 175, Blaubergs 1978: 249-250).

1.1.2 Gender in Finnish

Finnish is one of the official languages of Finland, along with Swedish, and is spoken by five million people (KOTUS, 2022). Finnish, like all Finno-Ugrian languages, is a genderless language (Stahlberg et al. 2007, Gygax et al. 2019). It lacks grammatical gender in all words, for example, *ystävä* 'friend', *kirjailija* 'writer' and all pronouns including *hän* 'third-person singular pronoun' do not convey gender. As in English, referential gender can be expressed through lexical gender, which is mostly found in kinship, *sisko* 'sister', *veli* 'brother', and farming nouns, *kana* 'chicken', *rooster* 'kukko', and *tamma* 'mare'. Moreover, it is also possible to express lexical gender through derivation, e.g. *ystävätär* 'female friend' and compounding, e.g. *esimies* 'boss' *lakinainen* 'female lawyer'. Most gendered compounds end in *nainen* 'woman' or *mies* 'man', as in *puhemies* 'spokesman' and *esinainen* 'female boss' although in recent decades compounds ending in *-emäntä* 'hostess' have gained popularity over compounds with *-nainen* 'women', despite their negative connotations (Engelberg 2018: 83). As in English, the only gendered suffixes that exist in Finnish are female. These are *-tAr*⁴ as in *ystävätär* 'female friend', *-kkO* as in *karjakko* 'milk maid', *-skA* as in *professorka* 'female professor/professor's wife', *-nnA* as in *keisarinna* 'empress', *-ienne* as in *komedienne* 'comédienne', *-ssa* as in *diakonissa* 'deaconess' and *-Ukka* as in *letukka* 'hussy'. Despite *-tAr* being the only productive female suffix in Finnish, the general trend is that "feminine derivational nouns are particularly liable to become trivialized. For example, a *kirjailijatar* 'female writer' is linked to entertainment literature and has become obsolete"⁵ (Engelberg 2018: 62).

1.1.3 Gender in Spanish

Spanish is a Romance language from a branch of the Indo-European language family. It is the second most spoken language as an L1 in the world after Mandarin Chinese and it has official status in Spain and former colonies of Spain which are mostly in Central and South America but also in Africa, such as Equatorial Guinea. It is classified as a language with grammatical gender (Stahlberg et al. 2007, Gygax et al. 2019). It has two grammatical genders: feminine and masculine which are present in nouns, e.g. *niño*_{masc}/*niña*_{fem} 'boy/girl', and adjectives, e.g. *alto*_{masc}/*alta*_{fem} 'tall', determiners, e.g. *este*_{masc}/*esta*_{fem} 'this' and pronouns e.g. *él*_{masc}/*ella*_{fem} 'he/she' which relate to referential gender e.g. *Penélope Cruz es una*_{fem} *actriz*_{fem} *española*_{fem} [Penélope Cruz is a Spanish actress].

Normally, animate female nouns ending in *-a* are female, e.g. *amiga* 'female friend', and nouns ending in *-o* e.g. *amigo* 'male friend' or *-e*, e.g. *conde* 'count' are masculine, although there are countless exceptions to these rules. For example, epicene nouns only have one grammatical form regardless of the person they refer to, e.g. *personaje*_{masc} 'character', *persona*_{fem} 'person', and common gender nouns have a unique form for both grammatical genders but express referential gender with the determiners and adjectives that modify the noun, e.g. *el*_{masc}/*la*_{fem} *modelo* 'the model', *el*_{masc}/*la*_{fem} *estudiante* 'the student', and *el*_{masc}/*la*_{fem} *periodista* 'the journalist'.

1.2 Feminist language Reform

Despite the differences in the expression of gender, these three languages share similar sexist traits. For instance, they all have masculine generic forms and lexical asymmetries between genders. However the proposals that are used in each language depend not only on the type of language and the expression of gender but also on the preference of the speakers for such proposals.

Languages without grammatical gender tend to use *neutralisation strategies* that seek "linguistic equality of the sexes by minimising or discarding gender-specific expressions and constructions" (Pauwels 2003: 111). For instance, in English, neutralisation strategies involve using *singular they* and/or plural forms to avoid gendered pronouns *he/she*, as well as dropping *-man* in compounds, as in *chair* instead of *chairman*, finding

⁴ The realization of A, O and U can be ä/a, ö/o or u/y depending on vowel harmony.

⁵ Translation by the author.

synonyms or coining new terms, as in *police officer* instead of *policeman* and *firefighter* instead of *fireman*, and avoiding gendered suffixes in words such as *actress* and *poetess* (Miller & Swift 1980: 33-34). Finnish also employs neutralisation strategies which involve derivation, compounding, and borrowing (Engelberg 2018: 93-95). The derivational noun *asianajaja* 'lawyer' is used as an alternative to the masculine compound *lakimies* lit. 'law-man', *-henkilö* 'person' and *-tekijä* 'doer' are used to create new compounds such as *virkaenhenkilö* 'civil servant' and *tieteentekijä* 'scientist' that replace *virkamies* lit. 'official-man' and *tiedemies* lit. 'science-man' and the English loan word *journalisti* 'journalist' is used as a genderless alternative to *lehtimies* lit. 'newspaper-man'. On the other hand, languages with grammatical gender, such as Spanish, lend themselves better to *visualisation* or *feminisation* strategies than neutralisation strategies. Visualisation strategies aim at rendering all genders visible through the systematic and symmetrical marking of gender (Pauwels 1998: 112). For example, in Spanish, words that only existed in the masculine form have been feminized using its own morphological rules, e.g. *abogado_{masc}* 'lawyer' became *abogada_{rem}*. Even the nouns that do not have the gender morpheme *-o* or have common gender have adopted feminine morphemes to render visible the women in these occupations. For example, *la juez* and *la jueza* 'judges' and *la concejal* and *la concejala* 'city councillor' are accepted as feminine forms, although the latter ones are preferred among feminist reform supporters (see footnote 3).

Although the type of grammatical structure determines the type of strategy that is more suitable in a language, the reality is that most languages adopt a combination of neutralisation and visualisation strategies (Pauwels 2010: 23). For example, in Spanish, neutralisation strategies involve the use of collective nouns, e.g. *el alumnado* 'student body', to avoid plural masculine 'generic' forms such as *los_{masc} estudiantes* 'the students'. A lesser-known neutralisation strategy is the newly created morpheme *-e*, which is used to avoid the gender dichotomy of Spanish and avoid expressing gender. For example, *amigues* 'friends' is used instead of the generic form *amigos_{masc}* and/or the binary forms *amigos/as* and/or *amig@s*. In English, visualisation strategies are employed when both gendered forms are explicitly mentioned e.g. *mothers and fathers*, *he or she*, and in Finnish, when masculine compounds are feminised, e.g. *tiedenainen* 'female artist' although it should be noted that these strategies both in Finnish and English are falling into disuse in both languages and may no longer be recommended.

Furthermore, the success of language reform or even single proposals in a language does not rely exclusively on the type of strategy itself but rather on the needs of the language community. In some language communities, such as in Spanish, feminist language reform has been very active since it launched in the 80's (Bengoechea & Simon 2014). In others, such as Finnish, it has barely begun (Engelberg 2018: 82-83, *Aamulehti* 2017) and in some others such as English it is considered common in usage (Mills 2008: 6).

In summary, languages use different morphological processes to express gender, and as a result, that affects how they deal with sexist language. However, other variables should be taken into account, such as the preference of the speakers towards each proposal. Given the differences between these three languages and how they tackle sexist language, I became interested in language learners' opinions and attitudes towards sexist language. More specifically, my interest was to study if language learners transfer what they know, do and think about sexist language from the L1 or if they adhere to the strategies that are used in the target language. The next subsection deals with the tool and the methods that were used to study these issues.

2. Materials and methods

The survey, which was specifically designed for this study, investigates how the L1 influences the opinions about sexist language in an L2. More precisely, it gathered data from Spanish and Finnish speakers on their attitudes towards gender-fair and sexist language in English. I consulted several guidelines before designing

the survey (Sapsford 1999, Aldridge & Levine 2001, Fink 2003, Nardi 2003, Saris & Gallhofer 2007 and Vaus 2013,) to assist in the qualitative (Flick 2007, David & Sutton 2004, Rugg & Petre 2007) and quantitative analysis of the questions (Cohen & Lea 2004, Davis 2013). The survey was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Does a person's first language and gender affect the attitudes toward sexist language in English?
2. Does a person's first language and gender affect the attitudes toward gender-fair language in English?
3. If those differences exist, how do they become apparent?

The survey contained close-ended and open-ended questions. The former were used to gather conclusive quantifiable data and the latter allowed informants to express their "thoughts without influencing or constraining them" (Dillman, Smyth & Christian 2014: 132). The Likert scale answers were analysed statistically utilizing the χ^2 test using the L1 and gender of the informants as independent variables. The Likert Scale questions were useful to measure the extent to which informants agreed or disagreed with different topics related to sexist language and gender-fair language, but their primary purpose was to facilitate the categorization and analysis of the answers to the open-ended question. For instance, the question "Why do you think Spanish was or was not a sexist language" was preceded by "1.a Do you think Spanish is a sexist language?" (see table 1). Depending on the answers to the Likert scale question, the answers to the open questions were placed into three blocks: (1) I don't know (2) yes/ I (strongly) agree, and (3) no/ I (strongly) disagree.

The open questions were analyzed using inductive content analysis for several reasons. Firstly, the questions dealt with perspectives and opinions and secondly, the data collection approach was open and followed loosely defined themes (Kyngäs 2019: 13-14). This was very useful in these questions because they were conceived to encourage informants to express their opinions, whether they agree or disagree on particular issues regarding sexist language. Following the steps proposed by Elo & Kyngäs (2007) and Kyngäs, Mikkonen & Kääriäinen (2019), the data were coded and organized into categories which were then compared for similarities and differences. If the codes were too similar, they were merged into one. After that, the data were abstracted and the main themes were reported in the results section. Unless otherwise stated, most themes were raised by all language and gender groups. The questions are presented chronologically, and the themes of the answers are in order of popularity. The answers of the informants contain typos and grammatical errors but do not affect the message.

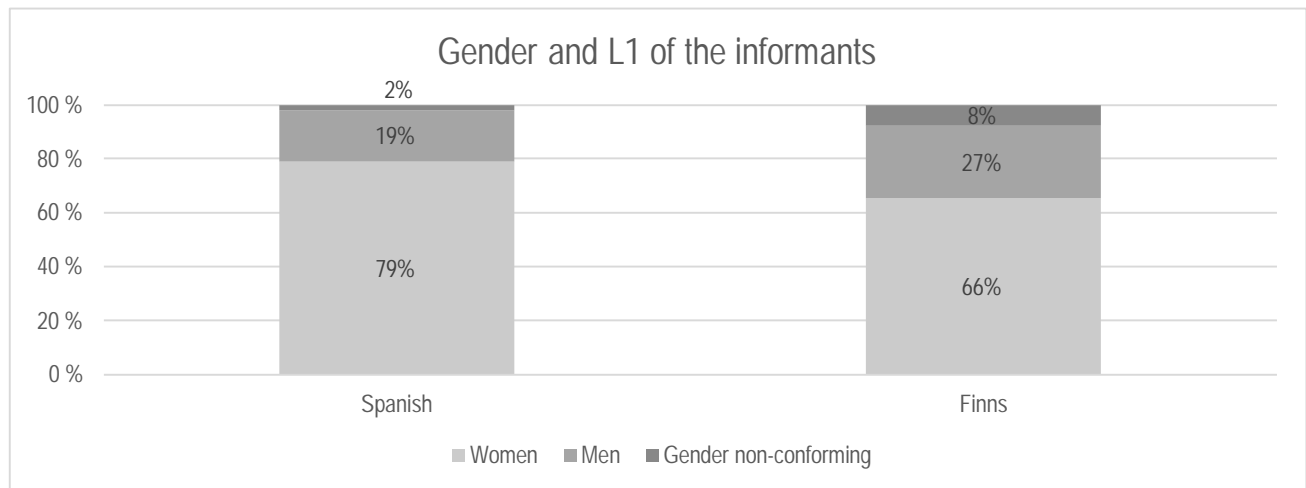
The survey was created following the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (FABRI, 2012) and obtained approval from the Ethics committee at Tampere University on the 23rd of March 2018. All the subjects were informed that the survey was conducted for research purposes and that their answers would be kept confidential and anonymous.

2.1 Sample and informants

The inclusion criteria for the subjects were two: to have either Spanish or Finnish as their first, or at least, second L1, and to be studying English as a major or at least as a minor during their current university studies. The latter requirement was to ensure the subjects were proficient in English. The data were gathered during 2018/2019 from the University of Alcalá in Spain and Tampere University in Finland, and it was formed by 327 informants, of whom 192 spoke Spanish and 132 Finnish. The Spanish sample was formed by 154 women, 38 men, three Spanish speakers who either didn't want to disclose their gender or were non-binary

and who were studying Modern Languages and Translation or English studies. The Finnish sample was formed by 87 women, 35 men, and 10 gender non-conforming informants who were students with a major or minor in the English language from the Degree Program in English Language, Literature and Translation, the Master's Program in Cultural Studies and/or the Program in Multilingual Communication and Translation Studies (see the percentage of the sample in figure 1).

Figure 1. Gender and L1 of the informants



When data were gathered, the mean age of the Finnish sample was 23 and 21 for the Spanish one. However, informants had been studying at university for a similar amount of time: 2.50 years for Spanish speakers (Std. Deviation: 0.960) and 2.95 (Std. Deviation: 2.122) for Finnish speakers. This may be due to several factors, but the main one is that Finnish upper secondary education lasts at least two and a half years whereas in Spain, only two.

3. Results

The questions of the survey dealt with the following topics: (1) sexist language in the L1, (2) in English, (3) gender-fair language in English and (4) opinions regarding teaching gender-fair language during English lessons. For the open questions, each informant was given a code that consisted of a unique number and two letters. The first letter stands for their L1, that is *S* for Spanish and *F* for Finnish, and the second letter for their gender: *M* means man, *W* woman and *N* non-binary.

3.1 Sexist Language in their L1

The first questions of the survey asked informants about sexism in their L1. The results indicate that most of the Spanish speakers described their L1 as a sexist language and most Finnish speakers did not perceive their L1 as such (see table 1). Regarding the answers of men and women, women tend to perceive their L1 as more sexist than men. More particularly, from the Spanish sample, 78% of the Spanish-speaking women and 61% of the Spanish-speaking men who answered the survey said that Spanish was a sexist language (see table 1). This is due to three major reasons: (1) masculine generic forms, (2) lexical asymmetries and (3) the patriarchy. The most frequently-mentioned theme was the first theme: masculine forms. Informant 97WS described the problem as follows:

- (1) (...) the Spanish language tends to comprise both genders in a masculine term when instead of using or creating a neutral one; for instance, when someone is greeting his/her group of friends (men and

women) in Spanish, he/she would say something similar to 'Hola, chicos' [*Hi, boys/guys*]. 'Chicos' is used to comprise both genders, however, the suffix *-o* is, usually, specific to the masculine gender.

(97WS)

Regarding lexical asymmetries, informants pointed out that “[t]here are many terms and words in Spanish that do not carry a bad or negative connotation in the masculine form (...) while that same term in the feminine form is considered to be disrespectful and mocks the other gender” (177MS). “For example, if someone is a ‘zorra_{fem}’ [lit. vixen/female fox], she is a slut. But if he is a ‘zorro_{masc}’ [lit. fox] he is really smart” (187WS). Lastly, informants blamed the patriarchy for the sexism in Spanish. In their words: “language is influenced by the material reality where it is produced, and since we live in a sexist society we can say that our language is also sexist” (7WS)

On the other hand, only 13% of the Spanish sample maintained that Spanish was not a sexist language because no language can “be sexist on its own since grammar is merely the result of an involuntary evolution. The speakers, however, through the use of certain expressions, can use it in a sexist way. I believe sexism is in our choice of words rather than being an integral part of our language” (171WS). Other informants claimed that Spanish is not sexist because it has “words for both men and women so there is no discrimination” (1WS) whereas other claimed that when they use a masculine word in Spanish, it “includes both genders” (125WS).

Question	Variables	I don't know	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree	df	p. value	
1. a Do you think Spanish is a sexist language?	Spanish	Women	10%	31%	47%	6%		*6	
		Men	18%	21%	39%	8%			
		Total	12%	29%	46%	6%			
	Recoded*	Women	10 %	78 %		12 %		2	<.001
		Men	18 %	61 %		21 %			
	1.b Do you think Finnish is a sexist language?	Finnish	Women	13%	-	36%	49%	2%	
Men			26%	-	9%	66%	0%		
Total			17%	-	28%	51%	4%		
Recoded		Women	13%	36%		52 %		2	<.001
		Men	26 %	9 %		66 %			
2. Do you agree with the following statement? English is a sexist language		L1	Spanish	38%	4%	27%	26%	5%	4
	Finnish		21%	11%	50%	15%	2%		
	Total		31%	7%	36%	21%	4%		
	Gender	Women	32%	8%	39%	18%	3%	4	<.001
		Men	29%	1%	26%	37%	7%		
		Total	31%	6%	36%	22%	4%		
3. Do you think that non-sexist language and the proposals to avoid it should be used and learnt during English lessons?	L1	Spanish	18%	37%	36%	5%	3%	4	<.001
		Finnish	11%	26%	57%	4%	2%		
		Total	15%	33%	45%	4%	3%		
	Gender	Women	17%	37%	42%	2%	2%	4	<.001
		Men	12%	18%	53%	12%	4%		
		Total	16%	32%	45%	4%	2%		

⁶ In questions 1.a and 1b. more than 20.0% of cells had expected count less than 5 and the results were invalid. In order to obtain a valid result with the χ^2 tests, the results were recoded from five categories into three: 'I don't know', 'I agree' and 'I disagree'.

As mentioned, more than half of the Finnish speakers did not find their L1 a sexist language. Only 36% believed the opposite. There were discrepancies between female and male samples: 36% of women and 9% of men believed that Finnish was a sexist language. On the other hand, 52% of women and 66% of men disagreed with this (see table 1). The four major themes that, according to informants, do not make Finnish a sexist language were: (1) languages are not sexist, but users are, (2) masculine nouns, especially occupational titles, are generic, (3) alternatives for masculine nouns have been successfully implemented, and (4) Finnish has no grammatical gender, therefore it cannot be sexist. In the first group, Finnish speakers argued, like Spanish speakers did, that languages are not sexist because “[t]he issue of sexist language is context-specific, at least in the case of Finnish, and though there are some words and phrases with strong connotations of a certain sex or gender, the sexism or lack thereof is born more from the context and the intent of the speaker(s)” (319MF). Informants also believed that the absence of grammatical gender makes Finnish a gender inclusive language, and even if there are (masculine) generic words, they are neutral:

- (2) Even though Finnish does have words to describe men and women, the main pronouns referring to people are neutral. Additionally, most people tend to use a more neutral, for example, occupational term even if there are versions to denote specifically women. (*Näyttelijä* ‘actor’ instead of *näyttelijätär*. ‘actress’) On the other hand, the more “neutral” term might often clearly refer to a more masculine form, but it doesn’t seem like people put much emphasis on it. I mean, a police officer can easily be referred to as a ‘police man’ *‘poliisimies*’ even if they are a woman, I think. And that doesn’t demean the woman’s femininity or somehow establish the men as some kind of a superior gender. For me, ‘man’ can be used as a generic term. But of course there are people who will feel differently. Then again, I don’t think anyone would refer to an actual police ‘man’ as a ‘police woman’ *‘poliisinaimeri*’... Well, perhaps it is in part due to Finnish culture in general that referring to people with masculine terms doesn’t seem that thought-provoking since men and women have been treated mostly equal. At least, compared to many other cultures, that is. I think.

(326NF)

Lastly, some informants argued that Finnish is no longer a sexist language because of the implementation of genderless forms for masculine generic nouns. For example, “The “worst” words like “palomies” [fireman] have been changed to neutral terms. No words oppress women nor lead to women’s inequality.” (303WF)

On the other hand, those who perceived Finnish as a sexist language argued that despite it being “less sexist than many European languages in terms of pronouns and a lack of gendered definitives”, masculine generic forms, and more precisely masculine occupational titles, were a concerning issue in Finnish because “[t]his creates unnecessary gender binaries that affect what opportunities we see as available for people and is especially harmful for people who do not identify as their assigned gender”(218WF).

3.2 Sexist language in English

Next, students were asked about sexism in English. The statistical analysis revealed that the gender and language of a person were significant factors in determining the perception of sexism in English (see question 2 in table 1). Almost 50% of women said that English was a sexist language, which is roughly double the percentage of men in the same category. Regarding the language groups, 60% of Finnish speakers claimed that English was a sexist language which is double the percentage of Spanish speakers.

In the follow-up open question, the analysis of the answers by the informants who claimed that English was a sexist language exposed five major reasons: (1) masculine generics, (2) lexical asymmetries and sexist idioms, (3) grammatical gender, and (4) the patriarchy. The most reported sexist feature of English dealt with masculine generics. These portray a world sorely “through [the] male perspective” (18WS). In other words, “[i]t implies that men are the norm and women are the subcategory” (205MF). The second most popular theme was lexical asymmetries, which were only discussed exclusively by non-binary people and women.

According to informants, lexical asymmetries “reflect some sexist attitudes (...) [For example, there are] no positive words for females who have lots of sex but tons for men (*stallion, stud, Romeo, Don Juan*). Also, it seems like the female titles have a lot less impressive connotations compared to the male titles, like *headmistress* does not seem as authoritative as *headmaster* at all” (212NF). The third theme was grammatical gender. Finnish informants perceive that, despite the fact that “English does not have a grammatical gender, meaning nouns and adjectives are not gendered unlike for example in Spanish or German” (301WF), English has the “-tress suffix [meaning the female suffix -ess] that can rather easily be attached to almost any word and people seem happy using them” (204WF). In their opinion, using different words to denote men and women such as *actor/actress* implies that “*Actor* is the baseline male status, while *actress* is something else that needs to be differentiated.” (299 WF). Spanish speakers perceive the absence of grammatical gender a positive trait “because one can choose to use *they/them*, and nouns and adjectives do not usually have a male or female form” (8WS). For example, when someone talks about a big chair, “big is not really ‘genderful’” (176MS).

When the subjects discussed that English is a sexist language due to the patriarchy, they claimed that languages, not just English, have sexism ingrained in their system because they were developed and are used patriarchal societies. For instance, informant 201WF wrote:

- (3) English (like all languages, probably) is the language of a patriarchal society; as such, it has been shaped by the ideals of that society and therefore necessarily includes sexist ideas, connotations and constructs. The *he/she* pronoun division is problematic, and personally I prefer the singular *they* in general. In English, the tendency to describe a female worker of a profession with affixes, such as ‘actress’, or with extra specification such as ‘female author’, while allowing male actors and authors to remain unmarked gender-wise, assumes maleness as the norm and femaleness as marginal.

In general, Finnish and Spanish speakers assess the sexism in English in relationship to their L1. In that sense, Finnish speakers believe that “English is a sexist language in a very similar way that Finnish” because of the lexical gender that both language have or “perhaps even more so than Finnish” (235WF) because “Finnish is more neutral/ambiguous (...) [English pronouns] are causing problems” (206WF). Whilst Spanish speakers think that English is a sexist language but “on a smaller scale compared to Spanish” (120WS), for the same reasons described above: despite not having grammatical gender, there are still masculine generic words, e.g. *man, chairman*.

On the other hand, the informants who said that English was not a sexist language raised two recurring themes: languages are not sexist and English does not have gender, thus it cannot be sexist. Regarding the former, they argued that “[a] language is just as sexist as a person makes it to be (...) at this point in time I do not consider English to be a sexist language” (271MF). In other words, “only a speaker can be sexist, not the language specifically” (55WS). The second theme is that the absence of gender prevents a language from being sexist, which was mostly discussed by Spanish speakers. In their view, “English doesn’t have genders for words either [meaning grammatical gender] and although the pronouns aren’t generic, English doesn’t favour the masculine over the feminine like Roman [meaning Romance] languages do” (221WS). Most nouns are genderless, “for example, ‘friend’, ‘child’, ‘kid’ (...). This means gender is less important than in Spanish, and I believe as a result there is more equality” (183MS). Some Finnish informants suggested that “terms that appear masculine have or are seen mostly as universal terms” (284MF). For instance, it is not “sexist to call a woman *fireman*” (236WF).

3.3 Gender-fair language in English

The following topic dealt with gender-fair language in English. Firstly, informants were asked if they knew any proposals for gender-fair language in English: one third of Spanish speakers and two thirds of Finnish speakers answered affirmatively and so did 36% of women and 44% of men (see table 2). In the follow up open-ended question, those who said they knew gender fair language in English were asked to provide some examples.

Variables		yes	no	df	p.value
		%	%		
L1	Spanish	27.7%	72.3%	1	<.001
	Finnish	57.6%	42.4%		
	Total	39.8%	60.2%		
gender	Women	36.1%	63.9%	1	0.23
	Men	43.8%	56.2%		
	Total	37.9%	62.1%		

Of the 130 students who said they knew of proposals for gender-fair language in English, 120 described at least one strategy or proposal. The analysis of this question indicates that less than 1% of informants know and/or use visualisation strategies. These involve mostly " *He/she* instead of just saying *he*" (140WS). On the other hand, around 70% of informants described one type of strategy that involve neutralisation. More precisely, 68% mentioned *singular they*. Those who discussed *singular they* argued that it works well (1) as an alternative to masculine generic pronouns and (2) the double-up pronoun *he/she*, whilst it can also be used (3) to refer to non-binary people or those whose gender is unknown. Moreover, some informants also said they avoid gendered forms, both masculine and feminine, by dropping gendered suffixes, and/or finding synonyms:

- (4) Trying to use gender-neutral expressions instead of those that seem to specifically refer to one gender only ('people' or 'humankind' instead of 'men' or 'mankind') and using the pronoun 'they' instead of the somewhat clumsy 'he or she' when possible.

(192WS)

- (5) I prefer to use 'one' or 'their' in academic texts, but sometimes fail to do so. Also, there are some terms I am unsure whether they are sexist or just common terms in the language (as in *man/mankind* while referring to the entire population). If I am unsure I tend to avoid such terms.

(287WS)

Despite students knowing proposals for gender fair language, it does not imply that they would find the proposals useful or perceive them as important. For that reason, they were asked to rate the importance of avoiding sexist language. The analysis revealed that around 80% of informants claimed that avoiding sexist language was (very) necessary. The differences between the gender and language groups are statistically significant. More precisely, Spanish speakers and women were more receptive towards avoiding sexist language (see table 3).

			Very Necessary	Moderately Necessary	Slightly Necessary	Not necessary	Ruining the language	df	p.value
What is your opinion on the proposals to avoid sexist language?	L1	Spanish	60.6%	19.7%	11.2%	6.9%	1.6%	4	<.001
		Finnish	34.7%	39.5%	17.7%	7.3%	0.8%		
		Total	50.3%	27.6%	13.8%	7.1%	1.3%		
	Gender	Women	55.2%	27.0%	11.3%	5.2%	1.3%	4	<.001
		Men	29.0%	31.9%	24.6%	14.5%	0.0%		
		Total	49.2%	28.1%	14.4%	7.4%	1.0%		

The follow-up question asked informants to elaborate on the reasons why gender-fair language was necessary or unnecessary. The first group, which is comprised by 78% of informants who said that avoiding sexist language was very and moderately necessary, raised three major themes. These themes were that gender-fair language promotes (1) equality and (2) inclusivity and (3) there is a strong link between language and thought and thus the need to avoid it if we want to live in an equalitarian society. The ones who discussed the first theme claimed that avoiding sexist language supports gender equality because women are discriminated against in the language. According to some, however, the best approach was to render women visible in the language, e.g. “[w]omen are evidently equal to men and there shouldn't be a predominant male form in language”(24WS) while others felt that that marking gender, and especially using feminine forms, discriminates against women by placing them in a second category. Regarding inclusivity, informants proposed using gender-fair language to “be more inclusive and respectful” (73WS), especially “since gender/sex issues are very real for many people” (206WF). The third theme was the relationship between language and thought, which relates to linguistic relativity. They stated using sexist language conveys the idea of someone being inferior solely based on their gender, which can lead to “the tendency to think in a more sexist way without it being a conscious decision” (205WF). In other words, “[a]voiding sexist language is extremely important because language heavily controls the way that we think. If we are surrounded by sexist language that a) assumes all people are either men or women, and sees gender as something that affects a persons value and/or b) belittles women, it will lead to future generations internalizing these values.” (268WF)

The second group was comprised by informants who found the proposals slightly necessary. More particularly, 14% of all informants argued that non-sexist language “ may be important” (110WS), for instance, “to avoid misunderstanding[s]” and to allow people to “feel more included than they have done before” (327WF). However, “these changes are not vital” (209MF). Lastly, around 8% of the informants said that proposals for sexist language were not necessary or that they could ruin the language. They contemplated so, as discussed previously, because languages cannot be sexist but only users can. Moreover, they claimed that “[l]anguages are made to include every member of the society that speaks that language” (58MS) and that “language is something natural and you can't force it [to change].” (140WS) nor should it “be modified to satisfy the necessities of minorities (49WS).

3.4 Opinions regarding teaching gender-fair language during English lessons

Lastly, informants were asked about their opinions regarding teaching gender-fair language in the L2. The results indicate that a significant majority of informants support the idea of gender-fair language being taught in the classroom. In fact, only 7% of all the informants disagreed with this statement (see table 3). In general, women and Finnish speakers are more supportive of the idea of teaching gender-fair language during the lessons (see table 1, question 3). More specifically, 74% of Spanish speakers and 83% of Finnish said this was important for five different reasons: (1) gender-fair language is widely used, (2) it promotes inclusivity, (3) the proposals are the key to solving the problem of linguistic sexism, (4) they help to eradicate sexism because language and thought are closely linked, and (5) students should be presented with alternatives because learning them outside the classroom is difficult.

Regarding the first theme, informants said that on one hand, “they [the proposals for gender-fair language] are widely used in English and not knowing them would create confusion (256WF). “Also teaching them

would help people avoid being accidentally rude or sexist due to lack of understanding of the situation” (317FM). On the other hand, “[l]anguage lessons should reflect the language that is actually being used. In the case of English, that includes more and more gender-neutral terms. Therefore, they should at least be mentioned” (315MF).

One of the most reported themes dealt with the role that younger generations have in fixing the problems that we are currently facing. On one hand, they argued that younger speakers are more likely to adopt gender-fair language than older speakers. On the other hand, they believe that education is key to broadening people’s minds and that younger speakers may opt for strategies to avoid sexist language if they are presented with options. For example, informant 326NF claims that “education is often times the key to finding equality [...] Besides, presenting these things in school as legitimate options shows people that they are indeed correct and usable alternatives.”

A recurrent theme also in this question was the relationship between language and thought. For instance, “[i]f we use non-sexist language, we may end up living in a non-sexist society” (80WS). Also introducing alternatives for sexist language already in the school can be beneficial because they are difficult to learn about them otherwise. For example:

- (6) If when we are learning the language, we are told since the very beginning these possibilities, we are probably going to put them into practice if we agree with them. But if we are not taught that these possibilities and variations exist, it is almost impossible for us as second or third language students to acknowledge them.

(178MS)

- (7) I think many non-native speakers of English use ‘he’ as the generic because they might not know any other suitable ways to express the same idea.

(204MF)

The remaining 7% said that these proposals should not be taught. The themes are the same as in the previous questions: (1) languages are not sexist, (2) masculine forms work as generics, and (3) gender-fair language is not an important issue to be taught. Those who were against teaching gender-fair language ~~also~~ argue that it is “unnecessary and ideology-driven language policing (202MF), that “[l]essons are busy enough” (220MF) and that “there are different opinions about this topic so the theory may vary from one teacher to another and, therefore, make the learner feel confused” (140WS).

Conclusions and implications

In this investigation, the aim is to assess how native speakers of Spanish and Finnish perceived gender-fair language in English. The predominant finding that emerged from the analysis of the Likert Scale question is significant differences in opinions between the two language and gender groups. On the one hand, women perceived English and their L1 as more sexist than men. They also expressed that the need for avoiding sexist language and teach gender-fair language was more pressing as well (see tables 1 and 3). These results are aligned with the results of previous studies which indicate that women are more supportive of gender-fair language (see Parks & Robertson 2002, 2005, Sarrasin et al. 2012, Douglas & Sutton 2014). On the other hand, the analysis using the L1 as a variable revealed significant differences between the language groups. This means that a person’s L1 plays a relevant role in the perception of sexist language and gender-fair language in an L2. More particularly, this research has revealed that Spanish speakers found the gender-fair language more necessary than Finnish speakers, which was expected because the debate over sexist language is more intense in Spain than in Finland (Engelberg 2018:82-83, Bengoechea & Simon 2014) but the percentage of Spanish speakers who said that they knew proposals for gender-fair language in English is significantly smaller than the percentage of Finnish speakers.

The combination of the Likert scale questions and the open-ended questions helped to shed light on the topics that were raised, for example, the reasons that make a language sexist. In this case, and according to the opinion of the informants, the more grammatical gender a language has, the more sexist it is. Therefore, Spanish speakers found their L1 as a very sexist language and English as a rather neutral one, while Finnish speakers did not find their L1 as a sexist language but perceived English as more sexist than Spanish speakers.

When the informants were asked to elaborate on the particular issues that were problematic and needed mending in English, they described the same issues that are discussed by feminist language reformers. In these questions, there were no major differences in the opinions and attitudes between the two gender and language groups. In general, informants found problematic masculine generic forms and lexical asymmetries between genders. When queried about the strategies that they use to avoid such forms, the vast majority mentioned *singular they* because it avoids expressing gender when it is not relevant and also includes non-binary people. This result is aligned with the results from previous research that revealed an increased use of *singular they* (see Hekanaho 2020, Stormbom 2021).

However, one of the most significant results is that the overwhelming majority, including those who said that English was not a sexist language, support teaching gender-fair language in English lessons. As they explained, the biggest challenge that language learners face is that are still taught words and expressions that can be perceived as sexist. However, they are hardly made aware of the connotations that such words convey. In their opinion, teaching gender-fair language does not involve teaching what is right or wrong. It is about allowing them how to tackle these problems when they arise with the tools they have available, even in a second or a foreign language.

The truth is that very few textbooks in English discuss gender-fair language. For example, someone who delivers the post is a *postman*, someone who serves customers at their tables in a restaurant is a *waitress*, someone who is in charge of a school is a *headmaster*, someone who takes care of children is a *nanny* etc. These terms may not be problematic when you know the person does the job and their gender, but most of the time we do not know who delivers our post or who is going to serve us in a restaurant. So, why do we still teach gendered forms when native speakers have come up with genderless alternatives? For instance, the genderless alternative for *postman* is *postie*, for *waiter* or *waitress* is *waitperson*, for *headmaster* or *headmistress* is *headteacher*, for *salesman* is *sales representative* and for *nanny* is *caretaker*. Therefore, I believe that the most important implication of this study is that gender-fair language should be made available to all language learners regardless of their age.

This study also proves the significant role of the L1 and gender of a person in the attitudes towards gender-fair language from a crosslinguistic perspective. Despite the study of sexist language having originated in the 1970s, there is a small body of literature that studies sexist language in different languages and in multilingual settings (Gabriel et al. 2008, Pauwels 2011, Fraser 2015, Hodel et al. 2017, Coady 2018). Thus, more research is needed to expand the results of this study.

One of the limitations of this study was that the target sample was students in higher education from Spain and Finland. It would be extremely beneficial for this debate to allow people of different ages and language communities, as well as different educational and linguistic backgrounds. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that the topic of gender-fair language is more relevant and important than ever and that this debate should not remain isolated to monolingual and monocultural environments.

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