

## **Spanish “Politically Correct” Movement: Reasons for Failure**

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### **Abstract**

*The controversy about sexism in the Spanish language is not a new phenomenon. However, in 2010 it generated a "politically correct" movement propelled by a few political parties by which various non-academic institutions had created guidelines for a "non-sexist" Spanish language and several universities joined in this enterprise. Most non-sexist proposals included splits in order to include both genders and other initiatives in order to cancel, reduce or perhaps counteract those "sexist" language elements. Ignacio Bosque from the Royal Academy of Spanish Language's analysis, published in *El País* on 4 March of 2012, supported by more than eight hundred Spanish linguists, countered this movement and to date it has not been refuted from a linguistic point of view. In this study, the effort, as well as Ignacio Bosque's document will be analyzed from a logical as well as from a linguistic point of view. The reasons for the failure of the movement will be stated as well.*

**Key words:** Politically correct, sexist language, linguistic sexism, non-sexist language guides.

### **Introduction**

Research on the topic of sexism in Spanish language is almost inexistent. However, social events take place which affect sociolinguistic realities. For example, the arrival of the Arabs brought more than four thousands terms to the Spanish language and the discovery of America a large number of indigenisms. Linguistic change and evolution is actually based on a sociolinguistic approach. In this context, the emancipation of women brought forward numerous and elaborate efforts to modify the Spanish language in order for it to become more politically correct and provide women with an elevated linguistic visibility:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation (Barad, 2013).

In this case, the question is; either language is just a reflection of the cultural reality on the ground or realities can be shaped through language? The *Oxford Dictionary* defines language as spoken or written human communication:

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The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way and also a system of communication used by a particular country or community (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2014).

On the other hand the *Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish Language*<sup>1</sup> states that language is 'Conjunto de sonidos articulados con que el hombre manifiesta lo que piensa o siente', "Manera de expresarse" and "Estilo y modo de hablar y escribir de cada persona en particular." If we take the definition "system of communication used by a particular country or community"<sup>2</sup> as valid for our purposes, we have probably direct access to cultural representations of a specific society. It is a fact that language has the power of shaping our world. If we have a look at the euphemisms it will be obvious that they give a different perspective to matters. Fines become 'pecuniary sanctions', unemployed becomes 'in between jobs', etc. Language can be used with multiple purposes, to desensitize or shape the reality. We communicate through language, understand the world around us through language, form ideas through language and learn through language as well. In this sense, the reality on the ground is reflected in the language, as well as reality can be shaped through language. Furthermore, language can be used with sexist purposes and it has been used for this purpose in the past in every language.

El lenguaje, principal vehículo de la comunicación humana, siempre es revelador: refleja la estructura de la sociedad y expresa las características de una cultura poniendo en evidencia las diferencias que en ella se manifiestan (Perissinotto, 1982).

A good definition of sexist language is "Sexist language is language that expresses bias in favor of one sex and thus treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner" (Lei, 2006).

In the last decades with the zenith of the feminist movement and the vindication of women's rights, Spanish language has been accused of containing sexist grammatical elements. There have been efforts to modify the Spanish language with the purpose of eradicating these elements from the language.

In society, men are considered the norm for the human species: their characteristics, thoughts, beliefs and actions are viewed as fully representing

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish Language*. <http://www.rae.es> Accessed 18-2-2014.

<sup>2</sup> Conjunto de sonidos articulados con que el hombre manifiesta lo que piensa o siente', "Manera de expresarse" and "Estilo y modo de hablar y escribir de cada persona en particular.

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those of all humans, male and female. This practice can make women invisible in language or altogether excludes them (Lei, 2006).

The purpose of the Organic Law of March 2007 for the effective equality of men and women, was exactly this. It stated that in the administrative spheres as well as social, cultural and artistic relations a non-sexist language should be implemented:

La implantación de un lenguaje no sexista en el ámbito administrativo y su fomento en la totalidad de las relaciones sociales, culturales y artísticas (Government of Spain. BOE-A-2007).

This study analyzes the changes the different institutions were trying to propose from a linguistic point of view, as well as the validity of the response of the Royal Academy of Spanish Language and why it was supported by more than eight hundred linguists in Spain. Furthermore, this endeavor scrutinizes the reasons why these changes which different institutions were trying to proposed failed.

### **Gender Markers in Spanish Language Grammar**

In order to undergo our analysis we first need to explain the gender related markers in Spanish language. Gender is a linguistic parameter which differences a language from another and when changed may not only alter the gender but even alter the meaning of the term for example; *el cura - la cura, el final – la final*.<sup>3</sup> In this sense many authors have discussed markedness such as Greenberg (Greenberg, 1966)..

In Spanish language there exist three types of endings with regard to gender. The suffixes *-o* and *-a*, mark the masculine and feminine genders and the suffix *-e* (which is a neutral vowel) when used, the word can be either masculine or feminine. The gender situation, however, is not that simple. The suffix *-o* can be used in cases when the noun is feminine, for example; *la radio, la moto*, etc. and *-a* is present in some instances where the noun is male, for example *el cometa, el atleta*, etc. It is obvious then, that what in reality determines the gender of a noun is, in fact, the article.<sup>4</sup>

The gender of the article needs to be in concordance with the gender of the noun and the adjectives that follow. In Spanish language, the masculine gender is the non-marked gender and the female, the marked gender. This means that the male gender on certain occasions comprises or includes the

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<sup>3</sup> Please see *Royal Academy of Spanish Language Dictionary*.

<sup>4</sup> Please see the *Manual de la Nueva Gramatica*.

feminine gender and the opposite does not occur as the feminine gender excludes the male gender. When in Spanish we speak of *los estudiantes universitarios*, the female students are also included. This type of expressions and cases refer to the generic use of the masculine gender. On the other hand, if we speak of *las estudiantes universitarias*, the male gender is not included and the group of students is exclusively female. These are some of the parameters that the Spanish language uses to denote gender.<sup>5</sup>

### **Efforts towards a Non=Sexist Spanish Language**

As mentioned before a law was passed in March of 2007 for the effective equality of women and men. Shortly after the law was passed, in subjects like politics, administration and journalism a tendency developed to construct series of nouns related to the manifestation of both genders within the same sentence: *los profesores y las profesoras, los investigadores e investigadoras*, etc. These splits with the purpose of making sure women were represented and other changes which were proposed, constituted a laudable effort. In this regard, several institutions created language manuals and guides proposing changes in order to make administrative language non-sexist.

Furthermore, in Spain there existed a ministry for equality. The first minister, Ms. Bibiana Aído, from 2008 until 2010 (date in which the ministry disappeared to be adjusted within another one for health and social policy), made some efforts towards equality including speaking in a politically correct manner.

An example of this occurred when on her pursuit, Bibiana Aído called herself publically *miembra* instead of *miembro*<sup>6</sup> *del Gobierno* which unraveled a polemic over the grammatical correctness of the term.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Royal Academy of Spanish Language (RAE) used to consider *miembro* as a genderless noun which could not be made masculine or feminine until 2005. After 2005 the RAE considered it as a common noun able to be used with masculine and feminine articles (*los miembros, las miembros*). That is, it becomes masculine or feminine according to the context. So, in fact, we find ourselves analyzing a case of linguistic evolution.

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<sup>5</sup> Please see the *Manual de la Nueva Gramática*.

<sup>6</sup>Member: The word member's suffix is male in Spanish language, even if it does not refer to a male.

<sup>7</sup>Constenla, Tereixa. El Language es Sexista ¿Hay que forzar el cambio? El País. 14 June, 2008. [http://elpais.com/diario/2008/06/14/sociedad/1213394401\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2008/06/14/sociedad/1213394401_850215.html)

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Nevertheless, Romance languages are not exclusive on this effort. There have been complaints about the English language as well. An example is the recent change in the words which utilize the suffix *-man*, and usually designate a profession or position. *Fireman* and *chairman* have been changed to *firefighter* and *chairperson* *policeman* has been changed to *police officer*, etc.

All of these are efforts that have been undertaken in order to achieve a more politically correct language.

With the purpose of providing more visibility to women, certain public institutions created manuals or guides amending those elements of the language which were considered sexist. Some of the most notable entities and documents are as follows:

<b>INSTITUTION</b>	<b>TITLE OF THE GUIDE</b>
Consejería de Medio Ambiente, Junta de Andalucía. Sevilla,	<i>Guía sobre comunicación socioambiental con perspectiva de género.</i> Notdated.
Secretaría confederal de la mujer de CCOO y Ministerio de Igualdad	<i>Guía para un uso del lenguaje no sexista en las relaciones laborales y en el ámbito sindical y Guía para delegadas y delegados.</i> Madrid, 2010.
Unidad de Igualdad de la Universidad de Granada, Universidad de Granada.	<i>Guía de lenguaje no sexista.</i> Granada, Not dated.
Asociación de estudios históricos sobre la mujer de la Universidad de Málaga y Área de la mujer del Ayuntamiento de Málaga.	<i>Manual de lenguaje administrativo no sexista.</i> Málaga, 2002.
Unidad para la Igualdad entre mujeres y hombres, Universidad de Murcia.	<i>Guía de uso no sexista del lenguaje de la Universidad de Murcia.</i> Murcia, 2011.
Unidad de Igualdad, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.	<i>Manual de lenguaje no sexista en la Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.</i> Madrid. Not dated.
Secretaría de Igualdad, Unión General de Trabajadores.	<i>Guía sindical del lenguaje no sexista.</i> Madrid, 2008.
Oficina de Igualdad, UNED	<i>Guía de lenguaje no sexista.</i> Madrid, Not dated.

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Conselleria de Bienestar Social, Generalitat Valenciana.	<i>Igualdad, lenguaje y Administración: propuestas para un uso no sexista del lenguaje.</i> Valencia, 2009.
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It is to be noted that some of the entities which created guidelines are not experts in the subject, namely Oficina de Igualdad, UNED, Consellerica de Bienestar Social, Generalitat Valenciana, etc. However, some others include entities whose departments are experts in the subject, namely a few universities such as Universidad de Malaga. Every guide proposes a set of guidelines to put in practice. Some of the most important changes that these documents propose are:

1.	To use an equalitarian and not excluding language allowing visibility for women, breaking sexist stereotypes and prejudices, for which men and women have to be named.
2.	To substitute the abusive use of the generic masculine, collective, abstract, or non-marked terms, as well as periphrasis and metonymy.
3.	For professions or titles the female gender morpheme and/or the article. When its use is made in plural the generic masculine will be avoided.
4.	In the cases in which the text refers to whom possesses the entitlement of an entity, area or institution the language will be adequate to the masculine or feminine depending on the case. Those positions occupied by women must be referred to in feminine since the Spanish language gender marks.
5.	Administrative documents directed towards the whole of society must address women with formulas that will be directed to them specifically when the gender is known. When it is not known formulas which comprise both genders will be used, however, the generic masculine will be avoided.
6.	The use of @ symbol to refer to both genders is discouraged since it is not a linguistic sign.
7.	In Spanish language traditionally the masculine gender precedes the feminine. However, it is proposed that the feminine gender precedes the masculine on occasion so that the masculine does not always precede and the feminine gender can also appear in first place.
8.	Utilize the following alternatives to the generic masculine: Collective, abstract and generic nouns Utilize complete gender splits. Forexample, <i>los doctores y las doctoras</i> . (Generic masculine, <i>los doctores</i> ).

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	Utilize abbreviated gender splits (with graphic symbols). For example, <i>Estimado/a doctor/a</i> . Utilize generic and non-personalized constructions.
9.	Strategies such as: Splits Slashes, hyphens and the @ sign. Synthetic uses of generic and collective constructions of non-personalization are encouraged. Different strategies through pronouns (splits). Use of articles. Use of adjectives and participles. Comparatives and superlatives. Changes in the usual order of words.
10.	Instead of using the generic masculine utilize the persons ( <i>las personas</i> ), whom ( <i>quienes</i> ), professionals ( <i>profesionales</i> ), etc.
11.	Utilize common slash and the@ symbol. For example <i>compañeros/as</i> , <i>compañer@s</i> . Although the @ symbol is not an orthographic sign rather a symbol for which is use is not advised for formal communication.
12.	The use of the word <i>hombre</i> , can be substituted for alternatives such as <i>serhumano</i> , <i>la persona</i> , <i>el sujeto</i> , <i>el personaje</i> , <i>la figura</i> , <i>el individuo</i> , etc. according to the context.
13.	Eliminate the article wherever possible with the purpose of making statements neutral.
15.	Make feminine those professions which were traditionally male dominated and women now share. Forexample, <i>la médica</i> , <i>la notaria</i> , <i>la arquitecta</i> , <i>la primera ministra</i> , etc.
16.	Utilize impersonal forms of expresión, etc.

The solutions proposed by all manuals are similar. The rest of the proposals have not been prepared by universities, rather, by public offices which aim is to increase the linguistic visibility of women.

### **Linguists for and Against a Non-Sexist Spanish Language: Both Standpoints**

The standpoint which supports a non-sexist language according to PilarCareagastates that Spanish language, is in fact sexist, made by men, for men, and its object is the language of men (Constenla, 2008).Under this environment, can women ensure their own share of Spanish discourse?

In any case, language reforms have taken place even in languages like English, in which the nouns and articles are genderless and gender is used in different manners. Interestingly enough the very term *hombre*<sup>8</sup> does not simply designate a member of the male population but also constitutes the designative label under which the totality of the human species is comprised, men and women. The RAE defines *hombre* as “*Ser animado racional, varón o mujer*” (Diccionario RAE, 2014). This definition makes clear reference to beings of both genders. In the English Language something similar occurs (Lei, 2006). In fact, “in the context of language and gender research, a framing approach conceptualizes the creation of gendered identities as one component of the creation of social identities more generally” (Holmes, 2003).

This is basically what the proponents of a non-sexist language mean when they say that the Spanish language is sexist. With the term *hombre* the visibility of women disappears and this is the case with many other terms, *los alumnos, los candidatos, los interesados, los abonados, los profesores, los jueces, los ingenieros, los funcionarios*, etc. Many end with the male suffix *-o* and others, are accompanied by the male article (*el, los*), denoting the male gender of the noun.

The generic masculine pronoun ‘*el*’ is another instance of this case. In addition to finding a male-bias, linguists have demonstrated that the generic ‘*el*’ or in English ‘*he*’ and other generic male language principles, reinforce sexist assertiveness and conduct (Nilsen, 1977; Silveira, 1980).

## **The Opposition**

The efforts undertaken by the institutions mentioned above spurred favorable as well as unfavorable replies. A representative of The Royal Academy of Spanish Language, D. Ignacio Bosque, replied to the non-sexist efforts with a document duly endorsed by the RAE. The document in question is titled *Sexismo Lingüístico y visibilidad de la mujer* and it is eighteen pages long.

In this document,<sup>9</sup> Ignacio Bosque, professor from Universidad Complutense de Madrid and member of the Royal Academy of Spanish language, states that of all the manuals, the one from Universidad de Málaga (MAL) is made by linguists, it is the most complete one, the one with the largest bibliography and

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<sup>8</sup> Man in Spanish language: Animated being.

<sup>9</sup> BOSQUE, I. (2012): “Sexismo lingüístico y visibilidad de la mujer”, Boletín de información lingüística de la Real Academia Española (BILRAE):

<http://www.rae.es/rae/Noticias.nsf/Portada3?ReadForm&menu=3>.



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the less radical one. He states as well, that the majority of these manuals have been written without the collaboration of linguists as if it was not the decision of the professionals of this subject. In this sense, he points out, whether linguistic sexism occurs or not in Spanish language, seems to be judged only by women or those citizens who oppose discrimination. In addition, he mentions that the professors of Universidad de Murcia were offended at the fact that their university's manual was created without their participation or consultation (Agudo, 2012). He further elaborates on the fact that MAL (Castro, 2002) is the only one which allows the use of the generic masculine, simply censuring its widespread utilization. The effort undertaken by Universidad de Málaga according to him displays more linguistic rigor since it was made by linguists.

On the other hand, in his opinion, the generic masculine is not sexist since includes both genders and wonders about the reaction of the people who do not feel discriminated due to the use of the generic masculine, when it is labeled as sexist. He further insists on those female scientists who have fought for the professional equality of women in Spain and who continue to use the generic masculine. He stated that professional women in all ranks of society and a diversity of professions fully engaged with the defense of women rights, do not utilize the linguistic recommendations of those manuals for a non-sexist language:

La mayor parte de estas guías han sido escritas sin la participación de los lingüistas y el autor asegura que, en algunos casos, las propuestas «conculcan aspectos gramaticales o léxicos firmemente asentados en nuestro sistema lingüístico, o bien anulan distinciones y matices que deberían explicar en sus clases de Lengua los profesores de Enseñanza Media, lo que introduce en cierta manera un conflicto de competencias» (Agudo, 2012).

Bosque's criticism continued, since the manuals were only directed towards a politically correct language in the press, administration, official documents, public speeches, declarations, newspaper articles and other public manifestation of the oral or written official language. He questions then, whether apart from these instances, when not in front of cameras or microphones, is acceptable to utilize sexist language (Bosque, 2012).

Bosque's major concern is actually the evolution of the Spanish language and respect for its morphology and syntax so that correction can be achieved, that too in equality. That too in equality. Infact according to him:

Se trata de lograr que aprendan a usar el idioma para expresarse con corrección y con rigor; de contribuir a que lo empleen para argumentar,

desarrollar sus pensamientos, defender sus ideas, luchar por sus derechos y realizarse personal y profesionalmente. En plena igualdad, porsupuesto.(Bosque, 2012).

After Bosque made public his opinion on behalf of the Royal Academy of Spanish Language a ferocious criticism spurred towards his document until a group of more than eight hundred linguists supported, not only his document but also his stance by publishing a petition which allowed signingonline.<sup>10</sup> On the website, the linguists state the main problems and provide several reasons for their support.

Linguists have expressed their opinions in both regards; some of them in support of the effort, some of them against. According to the Manual de la Nueva Gramática, “El circunloquio es innecesario en estos casos, puesto que el empleo del género no marcado es suficientemente explícito para abarcar a los individuos de uno y otro sexo” (Manual, 2010).

Another linguist, Dr. Gonzalez Calvo in his book *Variacionesentorno a la Gramática Española* comments how a notification of his own university reflected such language by saying:

Pregunto asombrado, sorprendido y estupefacto, aunque con la estrategia que me permite la pregunta retórica: ¿Cómo es posible que algo tan constitucional, y que personalmente apoyo, y apoyaría mil veces si fuera preciso, como es la no discriminación por el sexo conduzca a redacciones sistemáticamente asmáticas, espasmódicas, traqueteantes y cojitrancas como la muestra leída? La lengua es nuestro vehículo más importante de comunicación social. Pero ese uso al que he aludido, es gramaticalmente incorrecto además de absurdo. Y seguirá siendo gramaticalmente incorrecto y absurdo por más que intente atenerse, con buena actitud y voluntad, pero con patética ejecución y pésima práctica, al principio no gramatical de la no discriminación por el sexo.(Gonzalez Calvo, 1998).

As such linguists like Gonzalez Calvo support the no discrimination on the basis of gender as they consider it constitutional and, in fact, is in favor of gender equality. This is the case also of the many linguists who signed the petition in favor of Bosque’s document. On the other hand, they do not support the uses proposed by those who created the guides of the non-sexist

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<sup>10</sup> Acerca de la discriminación de la mujer y de los lingüistas en la sociedad: Manifiesto de apoyo a D. Ignacio Bosque <http://manifiestolingüistica.weebly.com/> Accessed 6-3-2015.

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language because they considers the language splits ineffective and redundant as well as linguistically incorrect.

According to them, the guides are apt only from an administrative language point of view, rather than a real spoken language with the purpose of daily communication. Nevertheless, organizations tried to implement the guidelines of these non-sexist language guides. In any case, the efforts to create a politically correct language have failed. Feminism and Spanish language grammar don't seem to get along since in romance languages the masculine is the non-marked gender.

### **Reasons for the Failure**

Even after a considerable amount of effort towards a practical reform of the language, these efforts failed. The reasons for this are various:

1. In the first place, the institution which has the authority to make modifications in the Spanish language is the Royal Academy of Spanish Language (La Real Academia de la Lengua Española) whose members are renowned Spanish linguists and philologists and they disapproved of the proposed changes on the basis of linguistic reasons.<sup>11</sup>
2. Inserting sudden changes into a language with the purpose of reforming specific features which are inherent to it, entails a great deal of dedication, purpose and linguistic correctness, so that the changes will reach and will be accepted by all the speakers.
3. In addition, while a language naturally undergoes an evolution process reflecting social and cultural realities, trying to artificially alter it at a massive scale, will undoubtedly face with a counter-reaction from the general body of society. Society, will naturally rebel against changes pertaining to the language they have been using for centuries. In this case, the institutions which proposed the non-sexist changes made their guides and manuals available to society, however, society at large did not adopt the changes.
4. The new features need to be able to render the language effective rather than causing speech or linguistic inconveniences to the speakers. In this case, the non-sexist features certain institutions were trying to impose in their

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<sup>11</sup>BOSQUE, I. (2012): “Sexismo lingüístico y visibilidad de la mujer”, Boletín de información lingüística de la Real Academia Española (BILRAE): <http://www.rae.es/rae/Noticias.nsf/Portada3?ReadForm&menu=3>.

administrative correspondence and documents have yielded no result, mainly due to the fact that they were not effective. Rather, made the language more difficult and created unnecessary repetitions which the *sexist* type of language solved with just one term. Linguistic economy ruled over gender correctness. In Ignacio Bosque's words, recognizing that if the directions proposed in the guides were applied in their most strict terms we would not be able to speak (Agudo, 2012).<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This research examined the efforts of different Spanish public institutions to ensure a politically correct non-sexist administrative language in a descriptive contextual framework. Some of the factors that are thought to be responsible for the gender insensitivity are not changeable at this point in time, especially at a massive scale. Planned language reforms are never easy to carry out.

The investigation revealed a noticeable finding which is that in spite of a majority sentiment of gender equality among all professionals and the general body of the Spanish population, the amendments to the language were proposed by a group of non-language experts which created an environment of resentment between those whose input should have been consulted.

Further, since the linguistic changes were proposed by lay people rather than linguists, they did not take into account linguistic correctness which is, in fact, the very first reason of the failure of this organized gender equality effort.

In any case, there is no doubt that the language is sexist and one of the most important aspects of this sexism is the generic masculine. This has been proven in psychology experiments where the subjects, due to the use of the generic masculine had no imagery of female associations where the generic masculine was used (Gastil, 629-643)

In this sense, language planning and reforms need to be able to yield benefits for the linguistic community at large rather than creating inconveniences for the speakers which was the main reason of the failure of this law and the guides for a politically correct non-sexist language. Yet, Spanish language's experts are to find a model that would allow for better linguistic visibility of

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<sup>12</sup>“Reconocer, simple y llanamente, que, si se aplicaran las directrices propuestas en estas guías en sus términos más estrictos, no se podría hablar” –Bosque.

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women at the same time that the linguistic economy of the Spanish language, as well as morphological and syntax elements are not disturbed.

Language movements emerge and die but their impact can remain alive and remembered. Therefore, despite this effort which seems, apparently, a futile endeavor, in fact it dared to bring changes in the society regarding language and any future non-sexist language reform or movement will benefit from the lessons learned from it and its results.

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