
A Brief History of Gender-Inclusive Spanish

by

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Abstract: Spanish-speakers around the world have adopted gender-inclusive forms (e.g. *latinx*, *todes* “everybody”) that allow the possibility of expressing nonbinary gender identities in the language. The most popular gender-inclusive Spanish forms are the e and x inclusive gender morphemes and the inclusive personal pronoun *elle* “they [SG.]”, which is now being used by many Spanish speakers to self-identify. Together, these features create new gender categories in the grammar, ensuring the grammatical representation of all subjects. While the spread of gender-inclusive Spanish is not uncontroversial among different Spanish-speaking communities, its usage is becoming more and more visible among genderqueer speakers, for whom access to gender-inclusive language must be understood as a fundamental human right.

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Like all other modern Romance languages, Spanish, now the fourth-most spoken language in the world as a result of European colonialism (David Eberhard, Gary Simons, and Charles Fennig 2021), offers little to no methods of expressing nonbinary gender identities prescriptively. Its system of masculine-feminine morphological (or grammatical) gender ensures that almost every part of the grammar and lexicon encodes masculine or feminine social gender in words referring to people, and there are relatively few solutions for anyone who does not self-identify with those binary gender categories. Yet in part due to its proliferation around the world, Spanish is perhaps the modern Romance language with the most gender-inclusive innovations and attestations in the present day. Gender-inclusive Spanish

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is characterized by the use of inclusive gender morphemes (e.g. *x*, *e*) and personal pronouns (e.g. *ellx*, *elle* “they [SG.]”), which together belong to what may be identified as inclusive grammatical genders (e.g. *the x gender*, *the e gender*), in place of canonically masculine and feminine grammatical genders in words for people. These forms are used by nonbinary, trans, and other gender-nonconforming Spanish speakers around the world to self-identify, and this is the primary reason their usage is promoted. Gender-inclusive Spanish also serves to solve the impossibility of expressing gender-neutrality in the language, given that every word referring to people must be masculine or feminine prescriptively.

In many ways, the gender-inclusive forms of today follow from a legacy of global feminist activism. Since at least the 1970s, feminist anti-sexist language reformists have argued that the dominance of the masculine linguistic gender is directly reflective of women’s subjugation in society and that this linguistic sexism must be rectified. Both anti-sexist and gender-inclusive language reforms share the underlying logic that masculine and feminine linguistic genders represent the grammaticalization of binary social genders in language (Monique Wittig 1985). Feminist linguists have long argued that the use of the masculine gender as the default linguistic gender, since it is prescribed for use in mixed-gender or supposedly generic personal reference, invisibilizes women, and have proposed that masculine and feminine forms be represented together in some way (e.g. *amigos y amigas* “friends [M.F.]”) instead of using only masculine forms (e.g. *amigos* “friends [M.]”). Gender-inclusive language reforms extend the logic behind anti-sexist reforms to proclaim that masculine and feminine linguistic genders alone are not enough, and that methods of expressing nonbinary gender identities (and relatedly, true gender-neutrality) in the language must be invented (e.g. *amigxs*, *amigues* “friends”). While gender-inclusive Spanish faces ongoing institutional rejection from language academies like the *Real Academia Española [RAE]* “Royal Spanish Academy”, many more universities and other institutions now legitimize its usage as linguistically valid, and the adoption of gender-inclusive Spanish by queer community members and allies continues to increase.

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The modern Romance languages are among the most gendered languages in the world. Each features a system of masculine-feminine morphological gender, which can be defined as a system in which every noun is grouped into one of (minimally) two classes, explicitly named masculine and feminine, and most frequently assigned based on biological sex and/or social gender in the case of words for humans and other animates (Robert Dixon 1982; Greville Corbett 1991; Ruth Kramer 2015). Masculine and feminine linguistic and social genders demonstrate a high degree of correspondence as most words referring to men are masculine linguistically and most words referring to women are feminine linguistically (James Harris 1991, 60). In Spanish, masculine forms of personal reference most frequently feature the suffixal *o* morpheme (e.g. *chico* “boy”), while feminine forms most frequently feature the suffixal *a* morpheme (e.g. *chica* “girl”), though this relationship is not absolute (e.g. [*el*] *artista* “artist [M.]”, [*la*] *modelo* “model [F.]”). Such a system of linguistic gender also stipulates that dependent elements of the noun (e.g.

adjectives, articles) inherit the noun's gender, meaning that almost every part of the grammar and lexicon, excluding the verbal system, is gendered. The constraints of this system as it exists prescriptively offer almost no methods of expressing nonbinary gender identities – even the term “nonbinary” is forcibly binary prescriptively (*no binario* “nonbinary [M.]” or *no binaria* “nonbinary [F.]”). Furthermore, the prescriptive rules of its usage maintained by language regulators arbitrarily assign the masculine gender a default or unmarked value, meaning that where gender is unspecified or intended to be universal, and in mixed-gender reference, even if there is just one man in a group of ninety-nine women, the masculine gender is to be used instead of the feminine gender (*Real Academia Española* and *Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española* 2010: 25). Feminist linguists have assigned the name “linguistic sexism” to this and other inequalities in the usage of masculine and feminine linguistic genders (Anne Pauwels 2003). They have argued that the markedness of feminine forms in language is emblematic of women's markedness in society, as the prescriptive shape of a language reflects the behavior and ideologies of its speakers, and that the prescriptive function of masculine-feminine gender languages should be modified. The concept of linguistic sexism establishes the primary logic behind both anti-sexist and gender-inclusive language reforms: that masculine and feminine linguistic and social genders are directly related, perhaps even one and the same, in most words for people. While the language academies that reject gender-inclusive language themselves acknowledge this relationship (*Real Academia Española* and *Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española* 2005), it has still not been established empirically in formal linguistics. In this way, community-level understandings of gender in language guide us toward a reimagined empirical understanding of linguistic gender which may serve to address persistent societal inequalities reflected in language.

Beginning around the 1970s, feminists' anti-sexist Spanish language reform proposals have primarily been targeted at the *Real Academia Española*, the most powerful institution of prescriptive Spanish to which all other official or national Spanish language academies defer (*Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española* 2021). Together, these institutions police the “official” Spanish used in governmental contexts and uphold many of the patriarchal traits of the language's prescriptive function that feminists have attempted to modify. Their reform proposals have focused on the generic use of the masculine gender (sometimes called masculine generics) and the lack of feminine counterparts for grammatically masculine occupational titles, in addition to other proposals. Instead of using masculine plural forms to refer to mixed-gender groups (e.g. *amigos*), they have suggested that masculine and feminine forms be represented together in some way (e.g. *amigos y amigas*, *amigas y amigos*), including by using a dash (e.g. *amigos, -as*), a slash (e.g. *amigos/as*), or the at-sign (e.g. *amig@s*), which is an orthographic combination of the canonical masculine (*o*) and feminine (*a*) gender morphemes (Uwe Kjør Nissen 2002: 271). Less popular proposals were to employ feminine generics (e.g. *amigas*) or abstract forms (e.g. *el alumnado* “student body”, *la ciudadanía* “citizenry”) in collective reference (Mercedes Bengoechea 2008: 42). An equally prominent focus of anti-sexist language reforms in Spanish was the institutional legitimization of feminized occupational titles and other descriptors that have only mascu-

line forms prescriptively (e.g. *cancillera* “chancellor [F.]”, *caba* “corporal [F.]”), an issue directly related to the presence of women in the workforce (Bengoechea 2008). These two categories of reform proposals are interrelated in the sense that feminists largely rejected the idea that the use of masculine forms alone adequately represents women. Since these supposedly generic forms of collective (e.g. *¡Hola a todos!* “Hello, everyone! [M.]”) and individual (e.g. *mujer obispo* “woman bishop [M.]”) personal reference are indeed masculine grammatically, they are said to represent the denial of women’s subjectivity in discourse (Luce Irigaray 1993: 67-74). Many psycholinguistic studies have indeed provided evidence that the “generic” or “universal” sense of masculine forms as inclusive of all genders is notoriously difficult to activate: when people see masculine forms, they often envision men to the exclusion of women and people of other genders (e.g. Nissen 1997). As of the year 2020, the RAE has accepted 366 feminized forms as a result of decades of global feminist activism, yet they continue to reject many proposals to avoid the use of masculine generics, as well as any and all gender-inclusive forms (Real Academia Española 2020).

The work of the global feminist movement, while still ongoing, has left behind two main concerns: a lack of true gender-neutrality in the language and a lack of forms capable of expressing nonbinary gender identities. Gender-neutrality and gender-inclusivity, while conceptually different in that the latter places focus on genderqueer speakers, both require forms which are neither exclusively masculine nor feminine grammatically. Anti-sexist language, while undoubtedly meant to be inclusive of women, has the overall effect of emphasizing masculine and feminine linguistic genders, highlighting the primary limitation of the extant system of gender in Spanish: that there are only two gender categories in the grammar. As informed by the lived experience of nonbinary, trans, and other gender-nonconforming Spanish speakers, these categories exclude those who do not identify with masculine or feminine social genders. In response, these speakers have invented methods of linguistic gender self-expression for use in speech and in writing, and their ability to express nonbinary gender identities in the language is the primary reason their use is promoted. The majority of gender-inclusive Spanish forms are invented (or *innovative*), meaning that they do not come from the extant morphemic or pronominal inventories of the language. One class is comprised of vocalic morphemes (*e*, *i*, *u*), each with their own canonical third-person personal pronouns (*elle(s)*, *elli(s)*, *ellu(s)*). These morphemes represent the three other vowels in the inventory of the language besides the *o* and *a* vocalic morphemes, which are canonically gendered prescriptively. Of the three, the *e* morpheme is the only which is an extant gender morpheme in the language. In fact, *e* is almost always a common gender morpheme, meaning that it can be variably assigned masculine or feminine gender prescriptively, though it creates no gendered distinction between noun forms themselves (e.g. [*e*l] *estudiante* “student [M.]”, [*la*] *estudiante* “student [F.]”; Daniel Eisenberg 1985, 195). Another class is comprised of mostly symbolic morphemes (e.g. *x*, ***, *§*, *⊃*, *=*). Overall, the most popular gender-inclusive Spanish forms are the *e* and *x* inclusive gender morphemes and the inclusive personal pronoun *elle*, which is now being used by Spanish speakers around the world to self-identify (Ben Papadopoulos, Jesus Duarte, Julie Duran, and Chandler Fliege 2021).

While its status as a gender-inclusive staple was only solidified in the 2010s, the *e* morpheme was originally proposed in 1976 as a solution to the problem of linguistic sexism. Álvaro García Meseguer (1976), a Spanish engineer, offered his proposal to use the *e* morpheme, designating common gender or the general meaning of “person”, to eliminate the use of masculine generics and to refer to those whose gender is unknown or intended to be unspecified. The author stated that this proposal would reduce the frequency of the masculine gender to that of the feminine gender, thereby equalizing the two. While García Meseguer (2001) seems to have later abandoned his original argument that the prescriptive function of the Spanish language is sexist and must change, the *e* has since become one of the most popular gender-inclusive innovations. In 2011, an independent proposal to use the *e* gender, improved by a focus on genderqueer speakers not present in García Meseguer’s (1976) proposal, was drafted by the Spanish anarchist group Pirexia, who proposed it as a true neutral gender (Grupo Anarquista Pirexia 2011). Similarly, in 2013, another independent proposal to use the *e* gender was drafted by Sophia Gubb (2013), and this proposal included the innovative pronoun *elle* (equivalent to English *they* [SG.]). In 2015, *elle* was the subject of a change.org petition authored by Valentina Ramirez (2015) and targeted at the RAE, which garnered more than 40,000 signatures. There also surfaced some community-generated grammars describing the use of the *e* gender among nonbinary and other queer Spanish-speakers (e.g. Rocío Gómez 2016). The *e* is useful in that it already exists as a prescriptive gender morpheme in common noun forms (e.g. [el/la] *cantante* “singer”), where it is not any one gender canonically. It also has a straightforward pronunciation (IPA: [e]). The *e* gender is used in place of masculine and feminine grammatical genders in words for people. In many cases, for example in canonically *o/a* gender-paired nouns (e.g. *bombero*, *bombero* “firefighter”), this involves a simple substitution of gender morphemes that extends to dependent elements of the noun, including personal pronouns (e.g. *Él es un bombero talentoso*. “He is a talented firefighter.” → *Elle es une bombere talentose*. “They are a talented firefighter.”). Some nouns require an orthographic transformation to preserve the sound of the word in writing (e.g. *amigo* → *amigue* “friend”). While the use of specific pronouns does not necessarily reveal one’s gender identity, *elle* (and the rest of the *e* inclusive gender) is widely used by many nonbinary, trans, and other gender-nonconforming Spanish speakers to self-identify. The *e* gender is more commonly attested than the *i* gender, which was also proposed by an engineer (Richard Stallman 2011), and the *u* gender, which are infrequently attested on the internet and in experimental linguistic research (e.g. Papadopoulos 2019).

The other gender-inclusive Spanish form which has gained widespread popularity is the *x*. The *x* morpheme is perhaps the innovation with the most locally-specific ideological associations, and it is also perhaps the most polarizing. The *x* is generally recognized as a method of neutralizing gendered distinctions between forms by “crossing out” gender marking (María Hinojosa 2016). Many authors locate the origin of the *x* morpheme in the early 2000s or before among online queer communities. In the past decade, it has risen to prominence in the word *latinx*, whose use is now widespread in the United States, even in institutional contexts (see María Scharrón-del Río and Alan Aja 2020). Among different communities

and geographical zones, the *x* symbolizes many different things to Spanish speakers. Similarly to the *e*, it is used by anarchist communities in Spain and Latin America (Mariel Mercedes Acosta Matos 2016). The *x* is also associated with intersex communities, including in its use as a legal sex marker (Bengoechea 2015), though a volume edited by Argentine intersex activist Mauro Cabral (2009: 14) focused on intersexuality prefers the asterisk (*), as for Cabral it does not signify the crossing-out or erasure of identity. Spanish artist Garazi Lara Icaza's (2014) thesis outlines the use of the *x* as a transfeminist artistic proposal to adopt a non-sexed style of writing into institutional contexts. The *x* morpheme also carries other locally-meaningful ideological associations. For instance, for some native Spanish speakers in the United States, the *x* symbolizes the colonization of the language, as they perceive it to bear influence from English, and many believe that it threatens the "purity" of the language (Catalina DeOnís 2017). But much to the contrary, use of the *x* represents the decolonization of Spanish for many speakers. As María Lugones (2008) outlines, the central goal of decolonial feminism is to overcome the coloniality of gender, which she describes as the imposition of binary gender and racial categories (where no such distinctions existed before) by the colonizers in the conquest of Latin America. The coloniality of gender is reflected in the Spanish language, which was also a colonial imposition, with its binary gender categories. As the *x* is found in the orthography of many Indigenous languages of Latin America, its usage produces associations with Indigeneity and can be described as a method of decolonizing the language (Papadopoulos 2020). In this way, the *x* is subject to ideological associations which are at times polar opposites, yet its adoption by Spanish speakers continues to increase. The use of the *x* gender extends throughout the grammar and lexicon in much the same way as the *e* gender with the advantage that it does not require additional orthographic transformations (e.g. *amigo* → *amigx*). Because it is not a vocalic morpheme, some critics claim that it "breaks" words that include it and disobeys the rules of Spanish phonology, though this is inaccurate. The most common pronunciations of the *x* all include a vowel: for native speakers, it is commonly pronounced [eks], while others pronounce it as simply [e]. Besides the *x* and the asterisk, a number of other symbolic morphemes (e.g. \$, _, =) are occasionally attested in writing, especially on the queer community-oriented website [pronouns.page](https://es.pronouns.page/) (<https://es.pronouns.page/>; Dante Uribe, Andrea, and Paweł Dembowski 2021).

A grammar of nonbinary Spanish which includes the *x*, *e*, and other genders may be viewed at the Gender in Language Project website (<https://genderinlanguage.com/spanish/grammar>). This resource is based on attestations of gender-inclusive forms across the Spanish-speaking world. Gender-inclusive Spanish is now being used in the translation of nonbinary gender identities (e.g. Artemis López 2019), in governmental contexts (e.g. República Argentina 2020), in university contexts (e.g. Brenda Ibetta Alvarez Alvarez 2020), and of course, among queer speakers in different speech communities, for whom it is a necessity. While the status of gender-inclusivity in the modern Romance languages differs, most now have at least some proposals that have been attested for the purpose of expressing nonbinary gender identities. Many other languages with or without a system of masculine-feminine morphological gender have also generated

nonbinary methods of linguistic gender self-expression where none are available prescriptively. Since most of these forms are innovative, gender-inclusive language is subject to disenfranchisement and disinformation, though it must be understood from an empirical standpoint that this innovation is linguistically valid, necessary, and part of normal processes of language change. Furthermore, access to gender-inclusive language must be understood as a fundamental human right, and queer speakers around the world continue working toward this goal.

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