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# REFORMING SPANISH BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE

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***Abstract:*** *This paper emphasizes the great potential of bureaucratic language as pattern of linguistic production and briefly describes the main problems of the use of Spanish language in bureaucratic texts. It also outlines reforming efforts of contemporary Administration towards simplifying bureaucratic communication according to pragmalinguistic criteria and ensuring its adequacy to the rules of non-sexist use.*

***Key words:*** *bureaucracy, language, reform, linguistic sexism.*

## 1. Language of the State. State of the Language.

These past decades we have witnessed an increasing interest of the entire academic society for the quality of the language used by the different media and public institutions. Special attention, however, has been directed towards what is now widely known as the language of bureaucracy or bureaucratic language.

This rather recent interest the linguistic community has taken in this specialized language, defined as a sub-variety of legal language, is highly due to its peculiar nature of addressing and affecting all citizens, as "there breathes hardly a soul who has not dealt with a bureaucrat" (Salvador, 117).

Investigators of bureaucratic language have emphasized the great potential of this language as pattern of linguistic production since the State as supreme authority and Administration have long been perceived as one reality. This aspect has been largely dwelt upon by R. Sarmiento (15) who refers to bureaucratic language as "language of the State". This status of legitimacy attributed to bureaucratic language requires coherence, adequacy and clarity on the part of all its users and, especially, on those in charge of drafting bureaucratic documents.

However, that is hardly the case of most documents produced by Public Administration. In a seminar on "Administration and Language", organized by The INAP (Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública), in 1987, Gregorio Salvador, distinguished member of the Spanish Royal Academy, gave a lecture on the protection of Spanish language in legal and bureaucratic communication, in which he emphasized the general lack of linguistic responsibility in the process of producing bureaucratic texts and accused public authorities of displaying a rather careless attitude towards the linguistic standard of such texts.

According to M. Martínez Bargueño, a fervent investigator of bureaucratic language, the need for reform in this field can no longer be postponed. Bureaucratic texts should be easy to read, precise, unequivocal and user-friendly, but they

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end up being over-elaborate, nebulous and ambiguous instead (225).

The concise analysis which R. Sarmiento (18) makes of the relationship between *language of the State and state of the language* indicates that the solution for improving the language of bureaucratic texts lies in education and training, in awareness of the fact that bureaucratic language is a transcendent pattern, a pattern of spoken and written language for all citizens.

Since the 80's, which opened a whole new perspective on the topic, with the launch of the famous Plain Language Campaign in Great Britain, most Western European countries have taken considerable steps, not only in simplifying bureaucratic procedures and, thus, rendering communication more effectively with citizens, but most importantly, in protecting their national languages against the confusing, excessively formal, frequently ungrammatical and full of clichés use which bureaucratic texts make of it.

## 2. Steps towards Modernizing and Standardizing Bureaucratic Language in Spain

Contemporary administration has been very concerned with changing the traditional pattern of the so called separate Administration which has made communication between the State and its citizens rather difficult.

The example of other European countries, pressing social demands as well as economic reasons attributed to the high costs of administrative documents have impelled greater doctrinal attention towards this matter and Spain has embarked upon an intense process of reforming bureaucratic language.

Such efforts have aimed to rid the language used in bureaucratic texts of complex sentences with numerous digressions and references, archaic phraseology and lexical formulas, abundant use of learned words, technical terms, adverbials and gerunds (the latter has become known as "the gerund of the *Boletín Oficial*"), complicated syntax and the ridiculous replacements of some words by their definitions - those "periphrastic pedantries" as Salvador mockingly identifies them (124) -. All of these have led to inefficient communication and difficult comprehension of the message of these texts. The obvious alternative is the use of a more accessible language, closer to everyday language, with simple syntax, standard vocabulary. To this end, revision of bureaucratic documents according to communicative and pragmalinguistic criteria has been encouraged.

These reforming measures have included training all government employees in the correct use of Spanish as well as establishing rules of clarity and concision for all documents produced by Public Administration in accordance with the international recommendations made by the OCDE towards simplifying all types of bureaucratic communication.

In the early 90`s, as a result of one of Spain`s annual international seminars on the topic of bureaucracy and language, a group of Spanish linguists, among which professor R. Sarmiento, under the coordination of the INAP, accomplished an extremely important project: writing a book of style for bureaucratic language, *Manual de estilo del lenguaje administrativo*. This work, ranked as monumental at the time of its publication, is still considered "an instrument of intellectual work by means of which bureaucratic clerks can make better use in administrative contexts of the various possibilities Spanish language has to offer" (Bargueño, 230).

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Over the years, Spain has continued to enable an effective dialogue between public institutions, experts of the administrative field and linguists with the purpose of elaborating guidelines for the improvement of Spanish bureaucratic language.

Last but not least, an exceptionally intense standardizing activity in the field of bureaucratic language has characterized Spanish bilingual regions. Not only have they created special organisms (in a fashion very similar to France with its well known Terminology Commissions, The High Committee of French Language and the CERCA) to establish the bureaucratic terminology of their co-official languages and to impose the correct use of these languages in the area of bureaucracy, but they also rely on a rich bibliographic production. For instance, Catalonia publishes the only existing magazine in Spanish language, specialized on topics of law, bureaucracy and language (*Revista de Llengua i Dret*).

## 3. Non-Sexist Use of Bureaucratic Language

In more recent years, the reform of bureaucratic language has also become extremely concerned with matters of gender discrimination, so common in all bureaucratic documents. This violence of gender is, however, one of the main problems of present day society as stated in the introduction of a recent work coordinated by A. Medina Guerra of the University of Málaga.

Although modern legislation establishes equal rights for both men and women, everyday practice proves that women are still disadvantaged as compared to men and, perhaps, one of the most noticeable manifestations of this inequity is the discrimination of women on the level of language. Language is the projection of thought; it transmits and consolidates identities, values, stereotypes, representations of reality and, as M. Bengoechea points out, "we have been taught to see and read with masculine eyes and, thus, lack the means to detect sexism in written texts or public discourse" (12).

Since the 90`s, feminist organizations together with language experts have been creating strategies to fight linguistic sexism and have published subsequent recommendations for the revision of public documents and dictionaries. These recommendations have also been taken into account by the European Community which is now strongly supporting adequacy of all types of bureaucratic communication to the rules of non-sexist language.

Nevertheless, at present, the possible alternative to the solution of this problem is neither simple and universal nor applicable both to written and spoken language. In A. García Messeguer`s view, "the best way this problem can be tackled at the moment is by outlining existing errors and suggesting ways of eliminating forms and uses that are extremely sexist" (58).

According to Calero Fernández (23), the syntagm "linguistic sexism" can be applied to the discriminatory use of language by means of certain words or structures, that is, due to its form not its essence. In his opinion, Spanish language offers enough resources, both morpho-syntactic and lexical semantic, meant to avoid linguistic sexism. As a matter of fact, the quite generous Spanish bibliography on this topic offers an array of solutions for the use of grammatical gender with reference to people, their attributes, activities and public positions. Among these are: the use of pronouns without gender specification, the omission of the subject, the use of abstract nouns or repetitions. Also, when trying to avoid abuse of generic masculine,

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one may find it quite efficient to resort to collective nouns, phrasal constructions, metonymy or non personal forms of verbs. Equally useful in this respect is adapting words to their feminine inflection, with corresponding suffixes. Homogeneous discourse treatment of both sexes is highly advised against context ambiguity and, most certainly, systematic placing of masculine forms ahead of feminine ones is to be avoided.

The latest work published by the *Instituto Canario de la Mujer* includes some valuable recommendations of non-sexist use of Spanish language in bureaucratic contexts. Thus, documents issued by Public Administration should mark distinctions based on sex not gender when referring to persons, men and women, as it is the biological and not the cultural differences that are brought forward here. Also, they should ensure a good balance of formal treatment of persons of both sexes as well as of job titles in masculine and feminine.

While it is true that the gradual incorporation of women to the professional field and, most importantly, to managerial positions has created many feminine forms of nouns that usage had long fixed only as masculine and which are now well known to the entire Spanish speaking community and are present in the latest editions of dictionaries, the grammatical feminization of jobs and positions has not yet been extended to all major bureaucratic documents such as employment contracts.

These suggestions towards avoiding linguistic sexism attempt to make the entire speaking community aware of the values and stereotypes we are using and passing on. The changes produced in the social roles of both sexes require language adequacy so that it should be cleared of discriminatory stereotypes.

## 4. Conclusion

Although avoiding sexist use of language may not always be possible, bureaucratic language must constantly take into account any linguistic strategy which, without neglecting grammar rules, may help against gender discrimination.

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