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## Inclusive language and non-binary identities: towards a paradigm change in Argentina

## Lenguaje inclusivo e identidades no binarias: hacia un cambio de paradigmas en Argentina

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### Abstract

In this paper we propose to address the problem of the traditional use of the masculine as 'unmarked' gender in Argentina, in relation to the urgent need to make visible those identities that self-perceive themselves sexually as non-binary, and that have the right to be recognized and named as such. For this purpose, we will put in dialogue certain hegemonic discourses, among which stands out that of the *Real Academia Española* [Royal Spanish Academy] with the theorizations of different authors who argue in favor of inclusive language and of the importance of embracing a paradigm shift that will eventually lead us to more inclusive ways of living with dissident identities that are outside the male/female binomial. Finally, we will propose a reflection on the importance of thinking about the transmission of knowledge in the educational field in Argentina, considering how crucial it is to be able to include in our speeches all those we address.

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*Keywords:* inclusive language, performativity, non-binary identities, language, education in Argentina

### Resumen

En el presente trabajo nos proponemos abordar la problemática del uso tradicional del masculino como género “no marcado” en Argentina, en relación con la urgente necesidad de visibilizar a aquellas identidades que se autoperciben sexogenéricamente como no binarias, y que poseen derecho a ser reconocidas y nombradas como tales. Para esto pondremos en diálogo discursos hegemónicos, entre los que destaca el de la Real Academia Española con las teorizaciones de distintos autores que argumentan en favor del lenguaje inclusivo y de la importancia de abrazar un cambio de paradigma que nos lleve a posicionarnos de manera más inclusiva frente a una realidad en la cual convivimos con identidades disidentes que se encuentran por fuera del binomio masculino/femenino. Por último, propondremos una reflexión en torno a la importancia de pensar la transmisión de conocimiento en el ámbito educativo de nuestro país, atendiendo a lo crucial que resulta el poder incluir en nuestros discursos a todos aquellos a quienes nos dirigimos.

*Palabras clave:* lenguaje inclusivo, performatividad, identidades no binarias, lenguaje, educación en Argentina

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## **Unmarked gender and the hegemonic discourses against the use of inclusive language**

### **Language academies: regulation or censorship?**

Currently, there are different institutions in the world in charge of regulating linguistic standards, determining which are the correct and the incorrect uses of some of the natural languages.

Although it is logical to think that the regulations imposed by these institutions should respond to exclusively linguistic criteria, the truth is that, in many cases, they are based on political and economic criteria that demonstrate, in their prescriptive judgments about the use of languages, complex power struggles. In this article, we believe it is essential to highlight the political, economic and social dimension that underlies the hegemonic discourses of the institutions that strive to impose meaning, particularly with regard to the Spanish language. Our approach to this problem is circumscribed to the field of study of glotopolitics, a term precisely defined by Elvira Arnoux:

Glotopolitics studies interventions in the language space, understood these in a broad sense since they can be planned, explicit, voluntary, generated by agents —collective or individual— that we can identify, or produced “spontaneously” without clearly identifiable mediators. (2016, p. 19)

Arnoux studies different language phenomena starting from the need to clarify the political dimension inherent to such phenomena, which intervene in the public space of language, tending to perpetuate or transform the prevailing social order, through the construction of subjectivities, in a given historical temporality. It is there where institutional linguistic ideologies come into play in relation to the identity of speakers, and where the tension between the most conservative positions on the one hand, and those who fight for respect for diversity, on the other, becomes evident.

We understand linguistic ideologies as systems of representations about diverse linguistic objects ranging, for example, from the regional accent to the privileged mode of reading at school or on the web. (Narvaja de Arnoux, 2016, p. 19)

Among language academies, the conservative stance prevails, often tending to reproduce ideologies of nationalist, patriarchal and elitist roots. Although many countries have this type of institution, among the most prestigious are the *Académie Française*, founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu during the reign of Louis XIII, the *Accademia della Crusca*, founded in 1583, the *Goethe-Institut*, created in 1951 to succeed the *Deutsche Akademie* (1925), and the *Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española* (ASALE). The latter was founded in Mexico in 1951, and is responsible for bringing together twenty-four Academies, among which the *Real Academia Española* stands out for its political and economic weight. Subsequently, other institutions created in countries with a strong presence of the Spanish-speaking community or with a strong

historical link to Spain were also incorporated. Since its foundation, ASALE has organized sixteen regular congresses, whose main objectives have been aimed at the development of pan-Hispanic linguistic policies, and has published works such as *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, *Ortografía de la Lengua Española*, *Nueva gramática de la Lengua española* or *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas*. To try to get an idea of the idiosyncrasy of this institution, we can begin by pointing out that its motto is “*Una stirpe, una lengua y un destino*” (One lineage, one language and one destiny). This, to say the least, is a questioning statement, if we take into account that Spanish is a language spoken by more than 500 million people around the world, and that twenty-one countries have it as their official language, or at least as one of them (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Spain, Guatemala, Equatorial Guinea, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Uruguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, República Dominicana, Uruguay and Venezuela). At this point it is necessary to emphasize the existence of different variants of Spanish, which are inscribed in heterogeneous sociocultural contexts and which, for this reason, have particular characteristics that should not be overlooked. One of the proposed classifications is that of Lope Blanch, who argues that, on the one hand, there are the peninsular and insular variants of the Spanish language (Castilian, Andalusian, Extremaduran, Aragonese, Murcian, Canarian, etc.) and, on the other hand, the American variants of the same language (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Argentine, Chilean, Colombian, etc.) (1992, p. 320).

Ángela Di Tullio also refers to the variety known as Rioplatense Spanish, stating that the denomination 'rioplatense Spanish' does not coincide with a current political unit, since its corresponding linguistic area encompasses Buenos Aires, the south of the provinces of Santa Fe and Entre Ríos and Patagonia, as well as most of the territory of Uruguay. (2011, pp. 12-13).

Other languages, such as English, with more than 1.13 billion speakers, however, do not have official institutions that regulate their use, although there are works in charge of describing them, such as dictionaries or grammars. For this reason, taking into account that the language that currently has, according to statistical data, the largest number of users worldwide, is not regulated by any institution, we are in a position to assume that, in the case of natural languages, the intervention of any institution for their regulation is not indispensable, but that these languages, beyond all kinds of imposed rules, are self-regulated and legitimized by their own use.

### **Royal Spanish Academy. A reactionary and anachronistic rhetoric**

As historically defined, the *Real Academia Española* (RAE) is a private institution, financed by the Spanish Crown together with large companies, but, in addition, subsidized by public funds<sup>2</sup>. The RAE, based in Madrid, is responsible for studying and describing the Spanish language, as well as regulating its use

<sup>2</sup> Spain also has another renowned organization in charge of ensuring the purity of the Spanish language: the Instituto Cervantes (IC), which, like the RAE, is sponsored by the monarchy. The IC is responsible for the teaching and promotion of the Spanish language. It also aims to promote the culture of Spain and Latin America.

throughout the Spanish-speaking world, based on normative criteria that distinguish “correct uses” from “incorrect uses”. Thus, taking as a parameter the linguistic variety of Spanish considered most prestigious by authoritative voices (it should be noted that it is the one spoken by the most favored social sectors of the Spanish capital and its surroundings), the RAE records the “correct” meanings of words, prescribes spelling rules, and suggests appropriate uses, in order to avoid any illegitimate modification detrimental to the integrity of the language they guard so jealously, believing it to be immutable and, of course, from their place of privilege. It was created in 1713 and is made up of forty-six academicians, one for each letter of the alphabet (upper and lower case), with the exception of the letters v, w, x, y, z, ñ, w, y, which do not have and have never had representation. It should be noted that currently only seven positions are held by women, and that, until 1979, all of the academicians were men. For this reason, it is clear that the composition of the RAE does not comply with the law of parity (although being a private institution it is not obliged to do so), and that, in addition, the fact that the positions are for life, contributes to slowing down the renewal. Although the number of women has increased in the last decade, the fact is that, since 2009, the majority of new members have been men (twelve versus six women).

With regard to the issue of inclusive language, the masculine is, according to the RAE, the ‘unmarked gender’, since it can refer to human beings of both sexes, in generic or unspecific contexts, which is why, according to this perspective, the inclusion of men



and women in any discursive context would be taken for granted, thus making any modification of the traditional gender markers unnecessary. To exemplify this position, let us imagine that we are speaking before an audience in which there are only women present, and, in view of this, we refer to them using the feminine gender; in such a scenario, it would be sufficient for only one man to enter the auditorium for the use of the ‘unmarked’ gender, i.e., the masculine, to become mandatory. However, if we were to reverse the situation, and a woman were to enter this hypothetical auditorium composed of only men, we would not have to worry at all about changing the grammatical gender of our statements, since she would already be included in the use of the masculine.

In 2020, and at the request of the Spanish government, a *Reporte de la Real Academia Española Sobre el Lenguaje Inclusivo y Cuestiones Conexas* (Real Academia Española, 2020) was published, divided into three parts. The first one provides a response to the request for adaptation of the Constitution Spanish to inclusive language, made by the Vice President of the Government in 2018; the second is entitled “*Sobre sexismo lingüístico, femeninos de profesión y masculino genérico. Position of the RAE*”, and the third is made up of two annexes to the latter document showing some of the daily publications made by the @RAEinforma department to try to answer different questions raised by speakers in relation to gender issues, as well as a series of modifications linked to inclusive language embodied in the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (DLE).

In the Summary of the intervention of the director of the RAE in the press conference held on January 20, 2020 to present the report on inclusive language in the Constitution, we can observe that, according to Muñoz Machado, the expression “inclusive language” admits, at least, two interpretations:

- a. ‘Inclusive language’ is sometimes understood as that in which express references to women are carried out exclusively through words of feminine gender (...).
- b. Inclusive language can also be interpreted as the use of masculine terms that clearly integrate men and women in their reference when the context makes it sufficiently clear that this is so, in accordance with the linguistic awareness of Spanish speakers and with the grammatical and lexical structure of Romance languages. (2020, pp. 209-210)

Beyond the fact that we notice from the outset the arbitrary nature of this position, in which the (entirely substantial) differences between biological sex and gender (as a social construct) are completely left aside, and only the splitting of the noun into its masculine and feminine forms is discussed, what causes even greater confusion is the fact that, in its discourse, the RAE completely ignores the existence of non-binary identities, that is, of human beings who do not identify sexually with either women or men. It should be noted, in this sense, that if disputes over the meaning of words can be, in some cases, an expression of a dispute between

oppressed and oppressors, the RAE's ignorance of non-binary identities does not express mere ignorance, but constitutes an obvious political stance that, additionally, contributes to deepen the invisibilization of such identities.

It is precisely in this sense that Diana Maffía (2011) analyzes the problem of the use of inclusive language not only in terms of the "sexism" that places men above women and that is present in all spheres of human practice, but also in terms of the "androcentrism"<sup>3</sup> that grants privileges to adult, white men with a certain level of education, thus segregating not only women, but also many other subjectivities and dissidences. Maffía argues, in effect, that

<sup>3</sup>"The androcentric optic consists of considering men the prototype of human representation, which reduces women to the status of beings subsumed in the general norm, from which they are mere particular or different cases" (Bengoechea Bartolomé, 2015, p. 19).

The androcentrism of language contains other power relations that are not named either, and the gender problem does not end by changing the "we", which is not natural for us women, for an "us and we" that will not be a natural linguistic shelter for transvestites, intersexuals, and transgenders who have proposed the @, the X or the \* (nosotr@s, nosotrxs, nosotr\*s) [...] And sexism in language also hides diversity. (2011, p. 6)

In line with Maffía's statement, we believe it essential for the discussion about the use of inclusive language to disregard the prescriptive judgments of institutions that express markedly

conservative and reactionary ideologies (as is the case of the RAE, among many others), putting the focus, on the contrary, on the fact that all people have the right to be named according to the way in which they self-perceive themselves from a sex/gender perspective.

Leaving aside for a moment the debate on inclusive language and the RAE's blatant disdain for it, it is worth noting that this is not the only example of the regressive and arbitrary position of the RAE. Victoria Scotto comments on a singular example:

The inclusion of "femicide" in the DLE is linked to the action of feminist movements in Spain and Latin America [...]. Even having a strong legitimization by one of the most conservative languages in society, the legal language, "femicide" is not registered until the term was on the "agenda". (2020, p. 4)

<sup>4</sup>Only in 2014, in the 23rd edition of its Dictionary, the RAE accepted the modification of the term "Franquismo". The new dictionary defines the term as follows: "Franquismo: 1.- Dictatorship of totalitarian character imposed in Spain by General Franco after the civil war of 1936-1939 and maintained until his death. 2.- Historical period that includes the dictatorship of General Franco". However, in the 22nd edition, this term was defined as follows: "Franquismo: 1.- Movimiento político y social de tendencia totalitaria, iniciado en España durante la Guerra Civil de 1936-1939, en torno al general Franco, y desarrollado durante los años que ocupó la jefatura del Estado. 2.- Período histórico que comprende el gobierno del general Franco".

Other matters of controversy have been, on the one hand, the arbitrariness with which the RAE decides the incorporation of new words in its Dictionary (DRAE), and, on the other, its manifest resistance to the modification of definitions (already obsolete) of pre-existing words<sup>4</sup>, which, clearly evinces a regressive stance.

With what has been briefly presented in this section we intend, first of all, to try to elucidate the linguistic ideology of the RAE, an ideology to

which a large number of Spanish speakers are partial to when replicating discourses of intolerance that show a clear rejection of inclusive forms of language, but which, in general terms, have no real theoretical basis, nor are based on respectful positions with respect to dissident sexualities. On the other hand, we aim to stress the fact that the Spanish language (like all languages) is in a process of permanent transformation, which, in practice, reflects the dynamic communicational needs of real speakers from all sectors of society.

That is why certain changes that today may seem difficult to incorporate, in the not too distant future may possibly become part of what we can call the standardized language, without any major inconvenience, as has happened on countless instances throughout history. It is precisely these permanent and progressive transformations of the language that have (fortunately) led to the denaturalization of the use of many derogatory, discriminatory or misogynistic terms that were once commonplace.

### **The case of Argentina**

In our country, since 1931, there has been an institution devoted to dealing with different issues related to the Spanish language, studying it and prescribing its uses. It is the *Academia Argentina de Letras* (AAL), created by the first dictator of our history, José Félix Uriburu, and whose headquarters are located in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. The AAL is made up of twenty-four regular members, and has maintained relations, since its foundation, with

other language academies such as the RAE (of which it was an associate until 1999, when it was officially named its correspondent), the North American Academy of the Spanish Language, and the ASALE.

In an attitude analogous to that of the RAE, the AAL has made public its position regarding inclusive language: in 2020 it published

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/canalaal/status/1310718047741710339>

on the social network Twitter an article by its president<sup>5</sup>, Alicia María Zorrilla, in which she analyzes the phenomenon of inclusive language and justifies the academic position adopted by the AAL. Relying on the political and linguistic guidelines of the RAE, Zorrilla defends the use of the masculine as ‘unmarked’ gender and rejects the use of words such as *niñ@s*, *niñ\*s* or *niñxs*, arguing that

The Argentine Academy of Letters agrees [...] with the other Academies of Language and with some linguists that the so-called “inclusive language” is not a language, but the mirror of a sociopolitical position that a minority group wishes to impose without taking into account the grammatical system of Spanish (Zorrilla, 2020, p. 3).

We observe that in this discourse a distortion of reality operates as a political strategy, which is evident in the lexical choice, inasmuch as, according to Zorrilla’s view (representing the AAL), there would exist a minority group that would aim to *impose* (emphasis added) the use of inclusive language on the rest of the speakers. The falsity

of the author's qualification becomes evident if we consider that, even when it is convenient for that institution to speak of 'imposition' without offering evidence of it, what the dissident minorities are trying to do (and they do so on the basis of solid arguments, some of which we will explain below) is to 'make visible' and 'promote' the use of a language that names us all, concepts (those of 'visibilization' and 'promotion') that, as we can see, carry a completely different semantic load than the idea of 'imposition', whose synonyms include, for example, 'to force' or 'to submit'.

For its part, in June of this year, the Declaration of the National Academy of Education on the use of inclusive language<sup>6</sup> was published, in which this governmental body openly expresses its support for the AAL, adhering to the rationale explained by Zorrilla, and consequently, to the linguistic policies of the RAE and ASALE.

<sup>6</sup>Academia Nacional de Educación (2021), "Declaración de la Academia Nacional de Educación sobre el uso del lenguaje inclusivo" <http://www.acaedu.edu.ar/index.php/declaraciones/428-06-2021-declaracion-de-la-academia-nacional-de-educacion-sobre-el-uso-del-lenguaje-inclusivo>.

Faced with this scenario, the concept of "gramacentrism" proposed by Paula Salerno helps us to understand the basis underlying the positions adopted by the language academies and other institutions, and why they generate interference and lead to disputes by trying to separate language from its social dimension:

It should be noted that the academic argument focuses on grammatical gender, as if it were isolated from the social uses of language. This what we could call gramacentrism is problematic because it disregards the discursive character of the phenomenon

at hand: inclusive language does not discuss a grammatical norm but an institutional and social norm (Salerno, 2019, p.4).

In order to try to clarify this problem, we will offer below a brief analysis of the relationship between inclusive language and the shaping of the subjective identities of speakers, and then address the case of Argentina as the epicenter of the phenomenon that concerns us.

### **Inclusive language and identity: disputes over meaning**

### **Why is it so important to reflect on the performativity of language?**

In this section, we will try to account for the importance of problematizing the use of language in relation to the construction of identity of dissident minorities. To this end, we believe it may be useful to begin by presenting a point of view that seems to us decisive, in order to approach the idea that institutionally authorized statements have an impact and repercussion on the reality of the speakers. We refer to the approach of Barrendonner (1987), who argues that language *per se* has no power whatsoever, but that, nevertheless, it acquires power through the institutional character of whoever is constituted as the issuer. This power, institutionally legitimized, thus acquires, in addition, performative capacity. Barrendonner states that



there is no 'power of words'. In any case there is a power over words. For an act to be H-substitutable, there must exist, external to any system of signs, a guarantee that its result will be preserved. This guarantee is a power, an instance of authorization, in short, what I have called an 'institution', which does not come from the structure of the code, but from a regulation that weighs on the communication maneuvers of individuals, that is, on their way of using the code (Barrendonner, 1987, p. 80).

We do not share with the author the idea that language itself lacks performative capacity, since, regardless of its possible institutional character, we believe that it operates transformations in others, even though they may not be easily perceptible in all cases. Even so, it seems interesting to us to be able to recover the idea outlined by Barrendonner about the relationships within the language-power-institution triad, which helps us to begin to resist the discourses that allude to minorities with pretensions of imposing certain discursive practices. Concerning the conception of 'performance' and its implications, Aguilar (S/F) points out that "the 'performance' is a form of legitimization, affirmation and construction of identity. And as such, a political instrument at the service of a group of people who assume their condition precisely from this performativity". (p. 5).

To continue with this analysis, we consider it essential to recover some reflections developed by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech*. A

*Politics of the Performative* (1997), reflections that are built on the central premise that language structures our thinking and that, therefore, any development outside language is impossible for human beings, insofar as we are defined by the fact of being, precisely, linguistic beings. Although Butler's studies are based on the theorizations of authors such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, it is particularly interesting to focus on the work of John Austin and his paradigmatic perspective on the performativity of language (strictly speaking, Austin uses the terms performative and realizational in an equivalent way) as it is essential to understand the analysis proposed by Butler. For Austin (1962) language does not limit itself to describing reality (either by means of true or false statements), but constructs it through its capacity to abstract it. Austin called this capacity of language to 'found reality', a capacity that allows us as speakers of a given language to "do things with words", performativity. Butler recovers this concept and analyzes language as a necessary condition for the formation of individuals, pointing out that, as a constitutive power, it pre-exists and conditions every decision that any speaker can make about Butler it, and that, therefore, it submits us, starting from a prior power that is inherent to it. In line with this she points out: "To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one's situation as the effect of such speech" (Butler, 1997, p. 4).

With Butler's help, we arrive then at the idea that there are no innocent utterances, from the moment in which every enunciative

emission performs, that is, it has the power to modify the environment, either for good or for bad. This explains the importance of pausing to reflect on the impact that what we say can have on those to whom we address our discourse, an impact that often goes unnoticed and that, on many occasions, is part of deeply rooted customs and naturalized violent practices and, therefore, socially accepted.

One of the most important faculties that language possesses and through which it exercises its symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1988) over subjects is the capacity to name. The name by means of which we identify ourselves, and which an other confers on us since our arrival in the world (and even before), individualizes and categorizes us, assigning us a label that will accompany us for the rest of our lives. Likewise, this name is accompanied by articles, pronouns and adjectives that also contribute to classify us, by means of exclusively biological criteria: feminine if we are born with a vagina, masculine if we are born with a penis<sup>7</sup>. Beyond the fact that, as we know, these attributes given by nature can be modified thanks to the intervention of medicine (as in the case of transsexuals who decide to undergo a sex change), they can also cease to coincide with the sexual preferences dictated by heteronormativity<sup>8</sup>, and can, moreover, have to do (leaving aside the question of sexual attraction to an other), simply with the fact

<sup>7</sup> We cannot fail to take into consideration the existence of intersex people, who possess a biological variation that places them outside of the man/woman binary standard, and which is characterized, in general lines, by genital ambiguity. As Violeta Hernández Guanche states: "Medicine, making use of the technological advances concerning techniques of surgical interventions, acknowledges subjects classified as intersex from their birth and establishes by medical prescription the reconversion of their sex under the assumption of an adequate physical and psychological adaptation" (2009, p. 93).

<sup>8</sup> <https://diccionario.pear-euskadi.org/heteronormatividad/>

<sup>9</sup>On the one hand, gender identity has been defined as the “internal and individual experience of gender as each person feels it, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth” (Gender Identity Law No. 26,743). At the same time, the individual experience is not alien to socio-cultural representations: gender is a cultural, historical and social construction, and this explains the unstable and contradictory nature of identities. From a performative perspective, moreover, gender is constructed and made through the way we speak, dress, and move in society. On the other hand, grammatical gender is the inflection that the words of the language -in our case, Spanish- have incorporated (Salerno, 2019, p. 3). Cf. also Butler (2007).

of perceiving ourselves with a gender<sup>9</sup> different from the one that would correspond to us according to the genitalia we have been assigned, and according to the symbolic burden that weighs on our shoulders from the very beginning of our intrauterine development. In this connection, Butler states:

If one comes to be through address, can we imagine a subject apart from his or her linguistic bearing? We cannot imagine them or they could not be what they are, apart from the constitutive possibility of addressing others and being addressed by others. (1997, p. 30)

Although we fully agree with Butler’s statement, we extend this principle to those people who do not identify with either the pronoun “he” or the pronoun “she”, that is, to all those identities that could be generally referred to as non-binary.

In the Spanish-speaking context, the discussions that have arisen from the questioning of the sexist nature of the Spanish language

have their origin in the struggle of feminist movements and the LGBTTTIQ+<sup>10</sup> collective. Although these questionings date back several decades, they gained

<sup>10</sup>LGBTTTIQ+ refers to: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transvestite, transexual, intersexual, queer. The sign + indicates the existence of other identities not contemplated by the previously mentioned.

particular relevance in Argentina since the formation in 2015 of the feminist collective against sexist violence, called “*Ni una menos*” (Not one less). This controversy also gained ground thanks to gender studies, and it became a central debate in recent years that was addressed from fields of knowledge as diverse as sociology, psychology, anthropology, ethnolinguistics, and educational sciences, among others. Milagros Andrea Lagneaux (2018) contextualizes the evolution of inclusive forms of language in Argentina starting from a fact that is not minor: on November 20, 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopts the Convention on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (in Spanish: *Convención de los Derechos de los Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes*; emphasis added), and in 1990 and 1994 Argentina ratifies it. The author states that this background is relevant to our understand of the emergence of the problem at hand, which began with the questioning by certain social sectors of expressions such as “*todos y todas*”<sup>11</sup> or “*presidenta*”<sup>12</sup> during Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s administration. Lagneaux argues that

<sup>11</sup>“Everyone” in Spanish, distinguishing male and female subjects.

<sup>12</sup>“Madame president” in Spanish, adding the final -a to specify gender.

The phrase “*todos y todas*” began to be appropriated by different sectors. With the passage of time [...] the use of the ‘x’ allowed the replacement of “*todos y todas*” by ‘*todxs*’ and was based on the criticism of gender binarism that only classifies sex and gender in two distinct and complementary forms: masculine and feminine. [...] the modifications that were made in written texts, where the terms were modified with the letter ‘x’ had a

complexity: they could not be read. For that reason the letter 'x' was replaced by the vowel 'e' to (sic) make it possible to read them. (2018, s/n)

According to what we have presented so far, we consider that, as speakers in constant relation with other speakers, we should, at least, take the time to reflect around the problematic of the use of inclusive language, as well as the interferences that generate in our exchanges with others an inherited conception of "identity" as something that we obtain at birth and that, from that moment on, remains unalterable. For our part, we are convinced that both the identity of human beings and the different languages they speak are under permanent construction and deconstruction, which is why we must ask ourselves whether it is really worth excluding or offending other people simply to avoid tarnishing the tradition of a language which, as is evident, has undergone all kinds of modifications over time. Or are we still speaking Cervantes' Spanish?

Finally, there is an alternative position, which rejects the use of inclusive language not because it goes against the "integrity" of language, but because of the conviction that language does not really change people's reality. In view of this, we consider, based on the above, that this type of statements, such as "words do not change anything", reveal, on the one hand, naivety, and, on the other, disinformation, or, even worse, disinterest on the part of detractors regarding a struggle for signifiers that, beyond our identity

self-perception, “reaches” all of us, as it has, undoubtedly, a clearly political background.

### Language and colonialism

In an interview for the newspaper *El País*, Violeta Demonte, *professor emeritus* of Spanish language at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, affirms that “there is something of colonialism in the leadership that the Real Academia wants to have”.<sup>13</sup> The reader might recall the declarations of independence of the Latin American republics and, in the case of Argentina (which concerns us particularly in this paper), the Declaration of Independence of 1816 (by which the rupture of the ties of political dependence of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata on Spain was formally manifested) and, as a result of this, adopt a skeptical position with respect to Demonte’s assertion. However, if we go deeper into the matter, we may come up against the undeniable reality that the domination exercised by a State over foreign territories, nowadays, can take on multiple forms and disguises. Accepting this possibility as a fact, as the very drifts of a modernity that has made subjectivities and relations of domination more complex, making the mechanisms of control of the masses more subtle and effective, we face the following question: has the process of Argentina’s independence completely achieved its goal? Does not a cultural colonialism strongly rooted in our societies and reinforced by institutionally legitimized discourses

<sup>13</sup>[https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/07/15/eps/1436960968\\_385442.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/07/15/eps/1436960968_385442.html)

persist to this day? Placing the focus on the relationship between the Spanish language and colonialism, Solveig Villegas Zerlin argues in this regard:

Let us now consider the Iberian Spanish or also called Peninsular Spanish, the linguistic variety of the metropolis, the center of imperial power and undisputed radiator of its historical and cultural tradition; and in front of it, the great periphery formed by the set of varieties of Spanish forged in the context of our continent from the process of invasion, conquest and colonization (2021, p. 67).

Fajardo Aguirre (2011), for his part, examines the debates about the linguistic norm of Spanish and focuses on the controversies raised by the change of discourse of the RAE, by proposing, in agreement with the ASALE, a “new pan-Hispanic linguistic policy” that would enable a shift from the norms based on peninsular Spanish to pan-Hispanic-based norms, although this only occurs in theory. These institutions, however, have at no point demonstrated a real departure from their traditional purist stance, which places the “beauty”, “integrity” and “richness” of the language above the needs of its users. As far as we are concerned, and taking into account the conservative discourse that the RAE manifests whenever it finds the opportunity (which we commented in section 2), we believe that this is just a change of “label” and that these new pan-Hispanic linguistic policies are, in reality, a disguise that seeks, only in



appearance, to update to these times a rhetoric that for almost 300 years spoke of an imperative need to “clean, fix and give splendor” to the Spanish language, but which, nevertheless, in 2022, continues to be functional to the interests of the Spanish Crown and other powerful political actors, and continues, likewise, to strongly influence the cultural life of all of Latin America.

**Inclusive language, even in the classroom. An approach to the state of affairs in Argentina**

**Towards the reality of a language that leaves no one out. Tensions and transformations in teaching contexts**

For some years now, inclusive language has begun to be installed in Argentine classrooms, ignoring any kind of existing norm or prescription. This language not only spread among students, but also among some teachers (mainly the younger ones), which gave rise to strong controversies that persist to this day. Those who appropriated this language had to deal from the beginning with opposition from educational institutions, from the most conservative social sectors, from the media that supported these sectors, and, fundamentally, with a whole series of prejudices based on questionable arguments. Overnight everyone became an expert in grammar and in the correct uses of Rioplatense Spanish (although in many cases based on criteria imposed by institutions from countries that speak peninsular Spanish, such as the RAE). Beyond the fact

that living in a democracy, the prohibition or imposition (in practice) of certain linguistic uses sounds unthinkable, the debate about the use of inclusive language in the educational field in our country became a real inquisitorial trial in which very few were willing to listen to the arguments in its favor. Thus, vehement detractors emerged who expressed arguments such as that the use of the morpheme “e” constituted a “degeneration of the language”, or associated it to a supposed educational decadence or to the “demon” of feminism and dissidence; others, for their part, did not hesitate to express their disagreement in a clearly derogative and even violent manner.

This attack on inclusive language and its followers was also closely linked to the implementation of ESI (Comprehensive Sex Education) in Argentine schools, an implementation that in many educational establishments has encountered among its most important obstacles the resistance not only of the Catholic Church and Evangelical Churches, but also of reactionary groups congregated around the ambiguous slogan of “don’t mess with my child”. Although the law regulating its implementation (No. 26,150), which establishes that the right to receive comprehensive sex education is a right of all persons studying within the Argentine territory and is also a human right, was sanctioned in 2006, it is still not applied in all educational establishments, despite its obligatory nature. As far as our objective in these pages is concerned, the link between the Comprehensive Sex Education Law and inclusive language is clear: given that two of the nodal principles of that law

are to recognize the gender perspective and to respect diversity, the sanction of inclusive language as a valid alternative of expression within schools would contribute to that objective, insofar as it would promote knowledge and acceptance of diversity, as well as critical and reflective thinking that would make possible, in the not too distant future, a change of paradigm in which all people receive the respect they deserve, regardless of their gender.

What has been, in this respect, the concrete attitude of the State towards the phenomenon of inclusive language? As Carolina Tosi points out, at least in some specific cases the State has adopted a position of open rejection, as shown by the position adopted in 2018 by the Ministry of Education of Corrientes, which “issued a note that dismissed inclusive language as curricular content. From various arguments that tended to show that inclusive language ‘attempted’ against the language system and was used by a minority group” (Tosi, 2019, s/n).

It should be noted, however, that rejection has not been the hegemonic attitude: in October 2020, in fact, the INAES (National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy) approved a resolution that advises the use of inclusive language in order to promote communication that avoids sexist expressions and favors the migration from androcentric language to inclusive language, as a way to avoid gender discrimination and to appeal to all genders<sup>14</sup>. In the field of higher education, on the other hand, there are nine public universities in Argentina that have accepted inclusive language in

<sup>14</sup><https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/uso-de-lenguaje-inclusivo>

oral and written productions: the *Universidad Nacional de Río Negro* has had a non-sexist statute since 2017, in 2019 it was approved at the *Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires*, the *Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia San Juan Bosco*, the *Universidad Nacional de San*

*Martín*, the *Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata*<sup>15</sup>, the *Universidad Nacional de Córdoba* and the *Universidad Nacional de Rosario*, and in 2020 the *Universidad Nacional de Santa Cruz* was added. Although the sanction of these and similar projects represent real battles that were fought and won, their approval does not mean that in the daily practice of teaching (in the different university

academic units) these resolutions do not encounter resistance, nor that they are not, in some cases, strongly questioned or, even worse, completely ignored.

The formal opening to the voluntary and optional incorporation of inclusive language at the higher level represents, from now on, an important advance in terms of the legal status of such linguistic practices. In spite of this, it is necessary that such progress be transferred to the primary and secondary educational context of our country, not with the aim of imposing its use in the institutions, but as a way of making it clear that its use constitutes a right of students and teachers, who should feel completely free to use it, either in their oral or written expressions.

<sup>15</sup>In 2020, from the Integral Program of Gender Policies, under the Secretariat of Welfare of the University Community of the National University of Mar del Plata, a Guide for the use of inclusive language was published, which was made in the framework of the approval of the Inclusive Language Project for the UNMDP (OCS 1245/19). This guide contains a rationale for the use of non-binary and non-sexist language, as well as recommendations for its implementation (prepared by INADI), glossary and examples of use. Available at <https://www.mdp.edu.ar/attachments/article/127/GUIA%20Lenguaje%20Inclusivo%20en%20la%20UNMDP.pdf>

It is unavoidable to add that, in June of this year, by means of Resolution No. 2566/MEDGC/22, the Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires prohibited the use of inclusive language in classrooms, using, in our opinion, questionable arguments such as “The uses of language in the teaching of language in education are not areas where teachers can impose their particular linguistic preferences” or that “an adequate development of language facilitates learning, this being the basis of school performance”<sup>16</sup>, referring to the positions adopted by the RAE and the *Academia Argentina de Letras* (on which we have focused in section 1).

<sup>16</sup>[https://documentosboletinoficial.buenosaires.gob.ar/publico/ck\\_PE-RES-MEDGC-MEDGC-2566-22-6395.pdf](https://documentosboletinoficial.buenosaires.gob.ar/publico/ck_PE-RES-MEDGC-MEDGC-2566-22-6395.pdf)

### **Some strategies for thinking about inclusive forms of language in education**

We can find several manuals and guides that try to explain the use of inclusive language, but if we talk about the educational field, we believe that, first of all, it is necessary to break down some prejudices, starting with our own. First of all, we feel it is necessary to be clear about something that we have already mentioned earlier in this paper: just as the use of inclusive language cannot be prohibited in practice, neither can it be imposed by minority groups, and attempting to do so would probably be counterproductive. That is why we consider it pertinent to stimulate the discussion about which are the arguments that we can present in favor of its use and which are against it, trying to discard, in the first instance, those that threaten individual

freedoms, as well as those that defend something that we could synthesize as the “purity of language”, since, if we try to reason logically and dialectically about them, it is quite possible that we will find that the former infringe upon basic human rights, while the latter are truly anachronistic and historically unsustainable, while being totally detached from the reality of a language that, whether we like it or not, is in permanent transformation. On the other hand, we consider it decisive to be able to ask ourselves, as educators, questions such as: What are we educating our students for? Do we believe it is important to foster critical thinking in them? Can the use of inclusive language forms really be harmful to anyone? Or is it, rather, the use of a masculinized language, a legacy of centuries of hegemony of a patriarchal and oppressive system?

In addition to this, we want to emphasize that, beyond the fact that as teachers we may not feel comfortable using inclusive language frequently, or we are not sure how to do it “correctly” (despite the fact that, in this sense, many of the people who promote its use advocate for the non-existence of norms that regulate correct and incorrect uses of it, given that the existence of such set of norms would contradict the essence of a socio-linguistic practice that ultimately aims to subvert symbolic dominion), we can nevertheless find a way to let our students know that, at the very least, we are not against its use. This, we believe, can make an important difference if we have among our students people who self-perceive themselves as non-binary from a sex/gender perspective. In addition, the use of inclusive language by teachers can contribute to stimulate

discussion and reflection among students about the legitimacy of the binary structures that are latent in our culture.

Finally, we would also like to emphasize that it is crucial for us to understand that, when it comes to the use of inclusive language, it is convenient to avoid dichotomous judgments, and that, in addition, being able to use it successfully in our speeches is the result of a unique process that depends on multiple and complex variables. In any case, from our perspective, we consider it a worthwhile challenge. Lagneaux argues, on this note, that “the use of inclusive language that distances itself from the norms imposed by the RAE and from structured formalisms, is in a bid for meaning before academic institutions” (2018, s/n)

In order to begin to question the use of language in educational contexts, Martínez Moscoso’s (2012) reflections (although referring to sexist language in dichotomous terms) can help us to think about the incidence of language inside the classroom:

In the classroom, the use of sexist language is not the exclusive prerogative of teachers; it is also the prerogative of students; likewise, it is not only the prerogative of men, but women practice it as assiduously as men. The content of language and the modes of speech affect the construction of gender and express it in different ways: in the contents we include forms through which women in particular are invisible, discriminated against or assaulted (linguistic sexism) (cf. Medina Guerra, 2002, p. 19), and in some modes what is considered suitable to be expressed by a person is manifested, depending on whether he/she is a woman or a man; that is, gender operates.

However, just like gender, language is recreated and transformed in daily life, new words and ways of using it are created; it is not given once and for all, it changes. Therefore, making inequalities and injustices visible and naming the marginalized or oppressed through language and speech [...] is a possible and desirable task, because, with this visibility, we manage to introduce changes in the ways of speaking and in the words we use to communicate; thus, we contribute to the development of democratic and fair forms in society. (Martínez Moscoso, 2012, p. 43).

### Conclusions

From what we have presented so far, we can conclude that fostering a respectful and sustained debate through rational argumentation around the tradition of the (undoubtedly androcentric) use of unmarked gender, should be a priority issue, especially as far as the Argentine educational field is concerned. We also believe that it is equally important to promote awareness in the community at large, so that more people can reflect on the power that our words exert over others, and their possible consequences. We also consider it essential to support a paradigm shift whose main objective is to decolonize language, together with social and educational practices, in order to recognize the mechanisms of symbolic domination and subvert them, thus undermining institutionally authorized discourses, which respond only to the interests of those who hold political and economic power, and which are far from pretending to provide real



answers to real speakers in a context of diversity. For this, it is essential that we start from a reality that can hardly be reasonably questioned: what we cannot name is, in our eyes, invisible.

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