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**Gender and Language: A Comparative Sociolinguistic Analysis of English, Spanish, Italian, and French**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the sociolinguistic dimensions of gender and language through a comparative analysis of four major European languages: English, Spanish, Italian, and French. Drawing on interdisciplinary research in linguistics, gender studies, and language policy, the review examines how grammatical gender systems, lexical choices, pronoun usage, and media representations construct, reinforce, and reflect gender norms. The study synthesizes key empirical findings and theoretical perspectives to highlight both structural and cultural differences in how these languages encode gender and reproduce social hierarchies. The study highlighted that, while English has largely abandoned grammatical gender, its pronoun system and discursive practices continue to reflect gendered ideologies, with recent reforms toward gender-neutral pronouns illustrating how language evolves alongside sociopolitical change. In contrast, Spanish, Italian, and French maintain robust grammatical gender systems, where masculine-default forms persist in mixed-gender contexts but are increasingly contested through inclusive writing practices and public debate. This analysis underscores that gendered language is not merely a reflection of grammar but a dynamic sociocultural phenomenon shaped by activism, policy, and media discourse. The paper argues that developing critical sociolinguistic awareness is essential for understanding the intersections of language, identity, and power, offering implications for more inclusive language education, progressive policy frameworks, and equitable representation in multilingual societies.

**Keywords:** Gendered language, sociolinguistics, inclusive language, gender ideology

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### **Introduction**

Gender is a cognitive and social construct related to role differentiation, shaped by cultural norms and societal values. It exists in the mental frameworks, thoughts, and memories of individuals, influencing how actions are interpreted and performed (Aikhenvald, 2012). The long-standing division of roles between males and females in society is not only sociocultural but also linguistic, as it is deeply reflected in the structure and usage of language (Talbot, 2019). Language, in this regard, is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a tool that both reflects and reinforces gendered ideologies and identities. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) argue, gendered language is a significant communicative resource that shapes cognition, identity, and behavior within communities of practice. This review paper seeks to explore the complex relationship between gender and language from a comparative sociolinguistic perspective by examining four widely spoken Indo-European languages: English, Spanish, Italian, and French. These languages offer a valuable lens for comparison due to their shared historical roots and structural similarities, while also exhibiting distinct grammatical and sociocultural treatments of gender. While English has largely shed grammatical gender, Spanish, Italian, and French continue to maintain robust gendered linguistic systems, making them ideal for a cross-linguistic examination of how gender is encoded, resisted, and evolving in modern contexts. Finally, the purpose of this review is to synthesize existing research on gendered language across these four languages, highlighting both structural features and socio-pragmatic dimensions.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This paper employs a critical review methodology to examine the intersection of gender and language across four Indo-European languages: English, Spanish, Italian, and French. The study surveys a range of scholarly literature from sociolinguistics, gender studies, and language policy to identify how gender is grammatically, lexically, and discursively constructed in each language. Particular attention is given to key themes, such as the use of gendered pronouns, occupational titles, grammatical gender structures, and recent movements toward inclusive or non-binary language practices. The selected sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and academic books that are widely cited in the fields of linguistics and gender studies. The analysis prioritizes patterns of recurrence and points of divergence across languages to trace both structural ideologies and evolving linguistic reforms. Rather than providing an exhaustive account, the aim is to identify the dominant sociolinguistic ideologies and cultural norms that underpin the gendering of language and to analyze their implications for identity, inclusivity, and language change in contemporary contexts.

### **Results**

The results are presented under the following themes.

#### **Gender Influence in the English Language**

Gender influence in the English language in the specific context of the United States has been a central topic in sociolinguistics, where linguistic patterns are shaped by complex social norms, historical contexts, and power structures. The United States has maintained a consistent "gender logic" within its policies, prioritizing gender equality, civil rights, and market-based approaches, but it may overlook the intricate interconnections and interdependencies in shaping and influencing gender dynamics and outcomes (O'Connor et al., 1999). The influence of gender

on language use in the US can be traced back to the inherent biases where women are often compelled to use linguistic forms that do not represent their experiences, resulting in a linguistic landscape that primarily reflects male perspectives (Talbot, 1998). This highlights the significant gender influence present in the English language, shaping consciousness and perceptions of its speakers.

Feminist language studies have moved beyond simply examining speech differences between men and women, instead focusing on how gender is constructed and represented through language, such as the use of pronouns and the portrayal of gender in texts (Cameron, 1998). This shift recognizes that gendered meanings in English are not solely the product of individual speech behaviors but are embedded in broader linguistic and cultural practices. The gender influence on the English language is also evident among the immigrants in the United States. Such as males, who often migrate for economic reasons, tend to achieve higher English proficiency than women, who more frequently migrate for family-related purposes (Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009). This shows how gender dynamics intersect with language acquisition and usage among immigrant populations in the United States. Similarly, Adamson and Regan (1991) studied the acquisition of English variable *-ING* among the immigrants in Philadelphia and Washington, D, C., and discovered that the male non-native speakers favored for the suffix *-in'* while female nonnative speakers favored suffix *-ing* indicating similar patterns of sex differentiation in the use the variable. The linguistic differentiation among immigrants of Lao individuals in the United States was noticeable, which illustrates how language learning can challenge traditional gender roles and reshape identities (Gordon, 2004). Additionally, the influence of gender in the English language was also seen in the US prison in the process of identification of documentation and gender inconsistencies that created barriers to legal employment for transgender individuals (Pemberton, 2013). These findings illustrated the gender influences on language in societal practices within the specific context of the US prison system.

Public discourse and activism further highlight the role of gender in English, particularly in shaping perceptions of gender-related rights and issues. Welfare activists, for instance, have used language strategically to introduce the concept of needs into political debates, influencing public understanding and policy regarding citizenship rights (Gordon, 1992). The language used in official and public contexts not only reflects but also shapes societal beliefs about gender equality and women's rights. When language fails to promote gender equality, it can negatively affect societal attitudes and reduce the likelihood of enacting protective legislation for women (Liu et al., 2018). Thus, gendered language in the U.S. context impacts individuals, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks in profound ways. Importantly, the linguistic turn in feminist language studies has expanded the analytical lens from gendered speech patterns to the broader representation of gender in discourse. This shift emphasizes language as both a site of ideological reproduction and a potential tool for social transformation in the pursuit of gender justice.

### **Gender Influence in the Spanish Language**

The Spanish language, one of the most widely spoken languages globally, reflects a deep-rooted interplay between linguistic form, gender roles, and cultural identity. Particularly in contexts such as the United States, where Spanish continues to evolve amid contact with English and shifting social dynamics, examining gender in language becomes a critical sociolinguistic inquiry. Research has consistently shown that gendered variation is present in both lexical choices and stylistic usage among Spanish speakers. For instance, studies have found that females tend to adopt more standard or prestigious language forms than males, a pattern that holds true across various Spanish-speaking communities (Major, 2004). These distinctions, often acquired early in life, indicate that gender-based variation precedes stylistic differentiation in language development. Among Latina/Hispanic women, gendered linguistic behavior is also closely tied to socialization processes, where parental attitudes, particularly those shaped by paternal education and maternal reinforcement of traditional masculinity, influence gender-related speech and behavior (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004).

Grammatical gender is another prominent feature in Spanish, systematically encoded in nouns, articles, and adjectives. Spanish assigns gender to nouns based on a combination of phonological, semantic, and morphological cues, with masculine endings such as /o/, /n/, /r/, and /l/, and feminine ones like /a/, /ión/, and /dad/ (Clegg & Waltermire, 2009). Notably, grammatical gender does not always align with biological sex. For example, the noun *sofá* is masculine despite ending in /a/ due to historical borrowing from French. Studies on Spanish-speaking children with Specific Language Impairments (SLI) further reveal challenges with gender agreement, such as confusion between masculine (*el*) and feminine (*la*) articles (Restrepo & Clellen, 2001). These difficulties highlight how the abstract nature and irregular frequency of gender markers pose cognitive and developmental challenges for language learners, especially in educational contexts.

Pronouns and possessive constructions in Spanish also reveal gender complexities. While third-person possessives such as *su* (his/her) do not mark gender overtly, gender agreement becomes evident in forms like *nuestra hija* (our daughter), where the possessive aligns with the gender of the possessed noun (Lago et al., 2019). Spanish further distinguishes between masculine and feminine in plural forms, *nosotros/nosotras* and *vosotros/vosotras*, and uses gendered possessive adjectives like *suyo/suya* and *nuestro/nuestra*. The masculine form is often the default in mixed-gender groups, reflecting broader patterns of androcentrism in grammar. Moreover, language simplification and variation among contact communities, such as Rapa Nui Spanish speakers, illustrate the ongoing shifts in gender marking, including inconsistent pronoun and verb usage, and a tendency to default to feminine forms (Fantini, 2012). These examples underscore how gender agreement is both a prescriptive grammatical rule and a dynamic sociolinguistic practice influenced by identity and interaction.

Beyond grammar, media and discourse studies reveal how gendered representations in Spanish reinforce societal stereotypes. Spanish-language television (SLTV) has been found to depict women as sexualized and subordinate, while men are portrayed as authoritative and active

agents (Rivadeneira, 2011; Prieler, 2016). Similarly, sports media coverage in Spanish, such as the 2011 Women's World Cup in Mexico, highlights sexist discourses that position women's sports as inferior to men's, reinforcing gender hierarchies (Cashman & Raymond, 2014). Cultural discourses such as *piropos* (romantic compliments or street remarks) further illustrate gender asymmetries, where men are portrayed as assertive initiators and women as passive recipients (Achugar, 2001). Additionally, media portrayals reflect colorism and gendered language ideologies, where lighter-skinned male characters are presented as more intelligent and articulate, while lighter-skinned females are shown as less competent or eloquent (Mastro & Ortiz, 2008). These patterns affirm that language is not only structurally gendered but also serves as a vehicle for social stratification and identity formation.

### **Gender Influence in the Italian Language**

Gender differentiation in the Italian language is a significant area of sociolinguistic inquiry, as linguistic structures often mirror and reinforce societal gender roles and expectations. Historically, Italy has experienced a notable linguistic shift, with Italian evolving from a minority-spoken language which is used by only 2% of the population, to one spoken by 98% of Italians today (Cavanaugh, 2006). This transformation underscores the dynamic relationship between language, society, and identity. Pronoun usage, particularly concerning non-binary individuals, has become a topic of contemporary debate. Despite growing awareness, non-binary speakers in Italy continue to face challenges in asserting gender-neutral pronouns across contexts such as the workplace, education, and domestic life. The gendered structure of Italian names and nouns further reinforces binary distinctions; masculine names typically end in *-o* (e.g., *Mario, Francesco*), while feminine names end in *-a* (e.g., *Maria, Francesca*). Gender roles are also encoded in occupational nouns, such as *psicologo* (male psychologist) and *psicologa* (female psychologist). Additionally, gendered language use appears in regional practices, where studies have shown that young women in Southern Italy prefer politeness strategies and hedging tactics in written communication (Remberger, 2012).

The grammatical gender system of Italian is central to understanding how gender is encoded in language. Italian nouns are typically marked as either masculine or feminine, and this categorization affects the agreement of articles, adjectives, and pronouns. For example, nouns ending in *-o* are usually masculine, while those ending in *-a* are generally feminine. Notably, grammatical gender does not always align with natural or semantic gender. Asexual or non-human referents, such as  *sedia* (chair, feminine) or *sentinella* (sentry, feminine despite typically male referents), exemplify this disjunction. Grammatical gender extends beyond human referents to encompass objects, abstract ideas, and categories that exist solely within the linguistic framework. This arbitrariness illustrates the distinction between language and reality, supporting theories of linguistic relativity that argue language influences but does not mirror perception. Cross-linguistic comparisons further reveal how gender categorization in Italian is a product of internal linguistic conventions rather than a direct reflection of the external world (Bassetti, 2007).

Italian gender morphology is marked through various forms and suffixes that denote both gender and number. Definite and indefinite articles such as *il, un, lo, uno, i, and gli* change according to the gender and phonological features of the nouns they precede. Masculine forms tend to follow predictable endings, while feminine forms involve elision or modification, especially

before vowels. While nouns in the first and second declension classes provide clear gender indicators through their endings, those in subsequent classes present irregularities. For instance, nouns ending in *-e* may be either masculine or feminine, and some masculine nouns may end in *-a*. Greek-origin nouns ending in *-ma* are typically masculine. Derivational suffixes also vary: *-tore* signifies masculine singular while *-trice* indicates feminine singular. These suffixes demonstrate how final vowels in Italian function as morphological markers for both gender and number. Furthermore, the presence of phonologically opaque forms, such as nouns and adjectives ending in *-e* in the singular and *-i* in the plural, complicates gender prediction (Bates et al., 1996; Ayoun & Maranzana, 2022). Such morphological complexity highlights the multifaceted nature of gender assignment in Italian.

Beyond grammar, gendered language ideologies shape social attitudes and identity in specific regional contexts. Cavanaugh (2006) examined how the Bergamasco dialect is socially constructed as masculine due to its coarse phonology and association with manual labor and male-dominated professions. As a result, young women, particularly those with higher educational attainment, tend to reject the dialect, viewing it as incompatible with femininity and refinement. The stigma attached to female use of Bergamasco contributes to language shift, as young women increasingly adopt standard Italian, even in intimate or domestic settings. This gendered perception of dialects illustrates how linguistic practices are intertwined with broader social ideologies, reflecting cultural conceptions of gender and class. In sum, gender differentiation in the Italian language is shaped not only by grammatical conventions but also by social attitudes, historical developments, and ideological constructs, all of which play a role in the ongoing evolution of linguistic norms in Italy.

### **Gender Influence in the French Language**

Gender differentiation in language is a complex sociolinguistic construct that reflects broader social attitudes and ideologies. In the French context, the interplay between language and gender has been particularly salient, positioning France as a leading European nation in the political and cultural pursuit of reducing gender bias in linguistic practices. A pivotal moment in this linguistic gender politics was the demand by French women to be addressed with gender-appropriate titles, such as *Madame la Ministre*, challenging long-standing masculine defaults. Historically, during wartime, language in France was used by men as a tool to express power, class, and masculinity (Boittin et al., 2011). However, gender ideologies have increasingly been contested, revealing a dynamic and multifaceted influence of gender on language use and policy from the past to present.

The grammatical structure of French enforces a binary gender system, with approximately 61% of nouns classified as masculine and 39% as feminine. Gender agreement extends to determiners, adjectives, and pronouns, although gender markers are not always audibly or visibly apparent, often leading to inconsistencies and exceptions (Kupisch et al., 2013). Gender acquisition in French is also influenced by environmental exposure during early language development, emphasizing the intersection of linguistic form, social context, and cognitive processing. As Schafroth (2008) noted, gender agreement in French operates through systematic morphological patterns, yet the logic behind noun classification often diverges from biological or natural gender. Possessives and determiners agree with the grammatical gender of the noun they modify,

regardless of the gender of the possessor, and plural forms may neutralize gender distinctions, highlighting the structural but sometimes arbitrary nature of gendered language in French.

Empirical studies have further examined the nuances of gender marking and assignment in French. Ingham (2017), for example, explored Anglo-Norman French and found a remarkable persistence of gender agreement, particularly where phonological erosion did not obscure grammatical forms, such as gender distinction after the preposition *de* (e.g., *du* for masculine and *de la* for feminine nouns). Ranson and Carlisle (1996) emphasized that grammatical gender in French is a formal linguistic category, built upon systemic agreements rather than logical links to natural gender. Moreover, while rules such as final -e indicating feminine gender are common, anomalies exist. For example, lexemes ending in *-oer* are predominantly masculine, contrary to general expectations, demonstrating the limitations of phonological cues in determining gender. These linguistic patterns reflect both structural rules and culturally embedded gender ideologies.

Beyond grammatical structures, perceptions of the French language are also shaped by gendered attitudes. Kissau and Wierzalis (2008) found that male students often perceived French as a "feminine" subject, contributing to decreased motivation to learn the language compared to their female counterparts. Such gendered perceptions reinforce stereotypes that affect language learning and engagement. Collectively, research into gender in the French language reveals not only the pervasive role of gender in linguistic structure but also its broader implications in language ideology, social identity, and educational choices. The French case exemplifies how grammatical systems and social constructs of gender intersect to shape both language use and attitudes toward the language itself.

### Discussion

The thematic review of English, Spanish, Italian, and French illustrates the pervasive influence of gender in language, while highlighting the diverse mechanisms through which gender is encoded and enacted. While all four languages originate from the Indo-European family, their treatment of gender reveals a spectrum of structural and sociocultural differences that reflect broader societal ideologies and cognitive understanding related to gender (Aikhenvald, 2012; Talbot, 2019). The findings of this study also align with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) assertion that language functions not merely as a neutral communicative tool but as a social resource through which gendered identities and ideologies are both constructed and reproduced.

English, having largely moved away from grammatical gender, presents a different kind of gendered landscape, one that operates through pronouns, discourse patterns, and socio-political usage rather than noun classification. Yet, even in the absence of formal gender inflection, English remains deeply gendered in practice, especially through social norms, immigrant assimilation, media narratives, and legal discourse. This demonstrates that the English language, though it sounds as gender neutral, does not eliminate gendered ideologies (Pemberton, 2013; Tubergen & Kalmijin, 2009). Moreover, the increasing adoption of gender-neutral pronouns and inclusive language reforms illustrates how sociopolitical activism can play the role of a catalyst for linguistic evolution, reinforcing Cameron's (1998) argument that gendered meanings are embedded in broader sociocultural practices rather than merely in individual speech behaviors.

In contrast to the English language, Spanish, Italian, and French maintain robust grammatical gender systems that influence virtually all parts of speech, from articles to adjectives and pronouns. This linguistic structure not only encodes binary gender distinctions but also reinforces traditional gender ideologies. As noted in the analysis, the use of masculine forms in mixed-gender contexts, common in all three languages, reflects a deeply entrenched androcentric bias (Clegg & Waltermine, 2009). Such structures not only reinforce traditional gender ideologies but also present cognitive and social challenges for those seeking to express non-binary or gender-fluid identities, as their morphological systems often lack neutral alternatives, as mentioned by (Raffaelli & Onati, 2004; Bates et al., 1996). At the same time, all four linguistic contexts demonstrate dynamic resistance to prescriptive norms. Inclusive language initiatives, such as “écriture inclusive” in French, gender-neutral pronoun debates in Italian, and reforms in occupational naming in Spanish, exemplify the capacity for language to adapt under social and political pressure. These findings echoed Gordon’s (1992) and Liu et al.’s (2018) observations that language both reproduces and challenges power structures, serving simultaneously as a mechanism of ideological reinforcement and a tool for social transformation. Media representations, television, advertising, and legal texts across these linguistic contexts often perpetuate this duality, as they frequently reinforce gender hierarchies, with women being underrepresented or sexualized and men portrayed as dominant (Rivadeneira, 2011; Prieler, 2016).

Critically, this comparative analysis highlights that gender issues in language are not solely a structural phenomenon but emerge at the intersection of grammar, culture, and identity. Across all four languages, the interplay between linguistic forms, sociopolitical activism, and cultural attitudes underscores the co-constitutive nature of language and social norms (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Furthermore, these findings reinforce the necessity of an intersectional perspective in future research, as gendered language practices are mediated by race, class, migration, and other social variables. By examining these dimensions, scholars can better understand the evolving relationship between gender, identity, and language, and how linguistic structures both constrain and enable social change. In conclusion, the comparative review of English, Spanish, Italian, and French demonstrates that while grammatical systems shape the possibilities for gender expression, language remains a flexible and contested social practice. Structural norms, cultural ideologies, and emerging sociolinguistic activism interact to both challenge and reproduce traditional gendered discourses, offering a nuanced perspective on the ongoing evolution of gendered language across these diverse linguistic contexts.

### Conclusion

This paper has presented a comparative sociolinguistic analysis of gender in English, Spanish, Italian, and French, demonstrating that the language functions both as the structural mechanisms and ideological underpinnings through which gender is encoded as a tool for negotiating identity. While English operates through discursive strategies and shifting pronoun usage, other languages maintain grammatical gender systems that often default to masculine forms, reinforcing binary norms. These findings support Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s assertion that

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language simultaneously reproduces and challenges social hierarchies. However, the growing push for gender-neutral pronouns, inclusive language policy reforms, and non-binary expression, especially visible in activist movements and scholarly discourse, signals a broader sociolinguistic shift. Overall, this comparative perspective underscores that gendered language is dynamic and responsive to cultural, institutional, and political forces. Media, education, and legal discourse remain central in either reinforcing or transforming gender ideologies. Understanding the relationship between language and gender requires a critical, comparative approach that considers not only grammatical structures but also socio-political contexts. Such awareness is vital for fostering inclusive language practices, advancing gender equity, and informing language education and policy in multilingual and multicultural societies. Future research should adopt an intersectional lens to examine how gender interacts with race, class, and migration, thereby informing inclusive pedagogies and policy frameworks that promote gender equity across multilingual and multicultural contexts.

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