The Acategorial Lexicon and the Pairing Strategies
A Critical Account of Inherent Gender in Spanish

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1. Introduction

The explanation for the distribution of lexical items and the articles *el* and *la* (plurals *los* and *las*) in Spanish noun phrases is commonly built around the notions of part-of-speech, gender class, and agreement. As in languages with similar distributions, the co-occurrence of some Spanish words with only *el*, of others with only *la*, and of yet others with both is explained on the basis of three simple principles: (a) the arbitrary partition of the lexicon into words belonging to two categories, the adjectives and the nouns, each of which relates differently to the articles; (b) the arbitrary subdivision of the nouns, but not the adjectives, into two classes, the masculine and feminine genders; and (c) the notion of gender agreement.

This paper will argue for a different understanding of the structure of Spanish noun phrases, one where the terms noun and adjective do not refer to fixed lexical categories, and where the traditional division of the nouns into arbitrary masculine and feminine genders is also set aside. The traditional account is replaced by an analysis where the status of a word as noun or adjective, and as masculine or feminine, is variable and contingent, prompted by local cultural and communicative needs rather than determined by rule.

1.1 Parts of speech and inherent gender

In the standard analysis, the different behavior of *el* and *la* with different types of words provides critical support for the postulation of the distinction between nouns and adjectives, a distinction that, in turn, helps to account for the distribution of
el and la. It is the occurrence of words such as violín, hombre, espada, and mujer with only either el or la that defines these words as nouns, distinguishing them from adjectives such as valiente or mejor, which occur with both.

In the terms that have become familiar, an article appears with a noun because of the noun's "inherent gender", whereas it appears with an adjective because of "gender agreement" (el violín and la espada owe their article to inherent gender; el mejor or la mejor to gender agreement).³

1.2 Double category and common gender

The description just given is only applicable to words that bear a unique classification as nouns or adjectives. Many other words are classified as both noun and adjective, or are said to belong to one category but to be "also used" as the other. The terms 'unicategorial' and 'bicategorial' are used here to distinguish between these two types of words.⁴ Second, just as it is not the case that all words are either noun or adjective, it is also not the case that all nouns are either masculine or feminine. Many nouns are said to be of "common gender" or 'epicene', or are said to be both masculine and feminine, and are predicted by the analysis to co-occur with both el and la.⁵

1.3 Problems with the standard account

The foregoing analysis of articles, nouns, adjectives, gender classification, and gender agreement has long commanded an impressively large consensus. With small individual variations, it is the standard analysis of traditionalists and generativists of various schools as well as that of contemporary morphological theorists.⁶ And it is the analysis that was offered by the Spanish Royal Academy when its widely used grammars were produced by committees of well-respected scholars, as well as the analysis that appears in its most recent edition by the eminent functionalist Emilio Alarcos Llorach (1994).

Still, it is somewhat misleading to refer to this rich account of articles, word categories, and gender as an analysis. The account is usually offered more in the way of a set of obvious assumptions, a description of self-evident facts that perhaps need to be formalized and made explicit, but that hardly need to be put to the rigors of verification. In contrast, in this paper the statements of the standard account will be treated as testable hypotheses, looking first at the claim regarding the distinction between nouns and adjectives, and secondly at the subdivision of the nouns into masculine and feminine genders.

1.4 Arbitrary features of grammar

The standard account of parts of speech and gender fits within the widely held notion that languages have, in addition to their communicatively motivated components, a rich array of autonomous structures that are unrelated to meaning or communication. The postulation of such autonomous components has been central to generative syntax (Chomsky 1972: 119), and was part of work on morphology long before the generative period (Chomsky 1957: 103). Gender classifications of the type found in Spanish nouns are routinely offered as telling examples of the need to postulate components in language that are unrelated to and autonomous from its communicative function (Newmeyer 1983: 7ff).

A particularly clear illustration of autonomy in language is the lexical categorization required to account for morphologically conditioned allomorphy. In Spanish, verbal conjugations offer a particularly striking example. Verbs that belong to the first, -ar ending class form their imperfects with -aba (e.g., cantaba “I sing/I sang”), whereas verbs belonging to the second and third, -er and -ir ending class form their imperfects with -ía (e.g. comíamos “I eat/ate”). This process is completely mechanical and independent of the speaker, a prototypical case of structural autonomy in language.

Gender classes, and the parts-of-speech categorization that underpins them, are presented in the same light in the standard account. Just as canto takes only -aba and como takes only -ía, so does violín take only el and espada take only la, while mejor takes both el and la. In neither conjugational nor gender classes do speakers and their communicative needs play any role. The processes are in both cases completely mechanical and autonomous.

1.5 An alternative proposal

In our proposal, Spanish parts of speech and gender are not instances of autonomous grammar and do not resemble verbal conjugations. Rather, they are part of a set of functionally motivated routines where communicative need and opportunity play a decisive role. In the proposed analysis, the epicenes are not the exception to the division into masculine and feminine nouns; rather, they are the best representatives of the essential nature of Spanish lexical items. Moreover, bicategorial words are not the exception to a fundamental noun-adjective distinction; rather, these words, more properly understood as acategorial, are representative of the true structure of the lexicon.
2. Nouns and adjectives as lexical categories

A clarification is in order before offering a critique of the noun-adjective classification for Spanish. As is well known, the terms noun and adjective are three-ways ambiguous. They are used to refer, one, to lexical categories (asserting that two separate classes of words exist in the lexicon); two, to categories of the sentence (asserting that two types of syntactic categories are found in phrase markers); and three, to notionally categories (asserting that words receive two different kinds of interpretations in a sentential or discourse context).

The type of noun-adjective distinction that purports to account for the distribution of articles and lexical items is the one about lexical classes, not the one about syntactic environments or interpretive types. In evaluating the tenability of the noun-adjective distinction, the issue is not whether the particular syntactic environment in which a word is used in a sentence could be described as nominal in some cases and adjectival in others, nor whether it makes sense to speak of nominal or adjectival interpretations of words in actually occurring utterances in discourse. That this is possible could be readily conceded without it having any bearing on whether there exist in fact two lexical classes, one with and the other without inherent gender. The question, rather, is whether the possibilities of nominal or adjectival syntactic use or notionial interpretation are tightly constrained for any particular word by its membership in one or the other lexical class.

For example, the issue is not whether in example (1a) líder is a noun and valiente an adjective, or whether in (1b) patrón is a noun and viejo is an adjective:

(1) a. Carlos era un líder valiente.
   "Carlos was a courageous leader."
b. Carlos era un patrón viejo.
   "Carlos was an old boss."

The question, rather, is whether líder and patrón are nouns, or valiente and viejo adjectives, by virtue of inherent syntactic or semantic properties that narrowly restrict them to these syntactic or interpretive roles.

2.1 The classification of a word

The only way to test the lexical categorization hypothesis is by taking an individual word and checking whether it behaves as predicted by its classification, then repeating the process for another word, and so on, choosing, one

hopes, examples that will be representative and illuminating of broader patterns. For this purpose, we use the 1984 edition of the Spanish Royal Academy’s Diccionario de la Lengua Española.

The utilization of the dictionary in the testing procedure should not be taken as an indication that the purpose here is to verify the accuracy of the philologist’s work. The point, rather, is to test the tenability of the constructs of part-of-speech and inherent gender. Such constructs involve the appeal to the existence of a linguistic lexicon or mental dictionary that is not explicitly detailed anywhere except, however imperfectly, in the philologist’s tome. And since often different philologists give different classifications to the same word, use of a single dictionary is required; the Academy’s is the obvious choice because of its wide recognition and acceptance.

2.2 Bicategorical words

Once the hypothesis is taken to be the existence of syntactic or semantic features that define noun and adjective classes in the lexicon, bicategorical words acquire a special significance. These words constitute in themselves a considerable weakening of the hypothesis about noun-adjective lexical classes, for two important reasons. First, because in any taxonomy with two categories, the existence of individuals with membership in both taxons tends to cast doubt on the wisdom of the initial categorization; and second, because these bicategorical words reduce rather sharply the neatness and generality of the explanation for the distribution of el and la. The explanation can no longer be that lexical nouns can take only one article whereas lexical adjectives can take both. An additional, different explanation would seem to be required for words that are bicategorical in the lexicon.

Bicategorical words do not constitute by any means a small group of exceptions. Depending on the text used and how one counts, between 30 and 40 percent of all words classified in Spanish as either noun or adjective also bear the other classification or the other use. Moreover, an important pattern is to be noted: Approximately eight in ten bicategorical words are adjectives that are also classified or used as nouns, and only two in ten is a noun that is also classified or used as an adjective. By a similar ratio, most words that have an initial adjectival categorization are bicategorical: Eight in ten adjectives are bicategorical. This is not true of nouns, which are only very rarely said to be also classified or also used as adjectives.

These observations regarding word categorization amount to saying that the noun-adjective distinction, which presumably lies at the heart of the explanation
of the distribution of lexical items in interaction with el and la, is applicable in roughly 60 to 70 percent of cases, but no more. Moreover, the hypothesis applies only to items that are said to be exclusively nouns. For the adjectives, analysts have already conceded that the hypothesis fails or that it cannot be tested, since most adjectives are bicategorial.

2.3 Word type

The most common piece of morphological evidence purporting to support the lexical categorization in Spanish relates to the claim that nouns are invariant words with a single form, like café, hombre, clave and mujer, whereas adjectives are variable words that have masculine and feminine forms, like cansado/cansada, auténtico/auténtica, and sincero/sinsera (“tired, authentic, sincere”). But these two groups do not match the groups of nouns and adjectives. First, because alongside variable words that are said to be adjectives one finds variable words that are said to be nouns such as niño/nina, hijo/hija, enfermero/enfermera (“boy/girl, son/ daughter, male nurse/female nurse”). Second, because alongside invariant words said to be nouns one finds invariant words said to be adjectives such as valiente, feliz, and azul (“courageous, happy, blue”). Morphological type cannot be used as a criterion for establishing the categories of noun and adjective because, quite simply, both morphological types are found in both lexical categories.

2.4 Pluralization

No other morphological support exists for the noun-adjective distinction, and it is to be noted that common morphological factors that presumably help to differentiate the two categories in other familiar languages do not produce correct predictions for Spanish. The English lexicon is said to be susceptible to a division between words that can take the plural suffix and those that cannot. As a result, the latter attach a pronominal ones to form the plural. Thus one finds the boys, the tall boys, the tall ones, but not *the tall; and one finds the dogs, the ugly dogs, the ugly ones, but not *the uglies. This distribution is felt to provide morphological support for the distinction in English. Nouns are the words that can pluralize, like boy and dog, whereas adjectives are the words that can’t, like tall and ugly.

Whatever its merits for English, this analysis does not apply to Spanish, where both the words said to be nouns and the words said to be adjectives pluralize equally well, without either requiring support from pronominals, as in the familiar examples displayed in (2).

(2)  

a. los niños, los niños altos  
   “the boys, the tall boys”

b. los altos  
   “the tall ones” (lit: “the tall"

c. los perros, los perros feos  
   “the dogs, the ugly dogs”

d. los feos  
   “the ugly ones” (lit: “the uglies”)

A point that has been made throughout the long history of this problem (as for example in Matthews 1974:6) is that these examples do support a noun-adjective distinction, because the kind of reference being made by los niños in (2a) and los perros in (2c) is different from the one made by los altos in (2b) and los feos in (2d). This difference, such as it exists, does not represent strictly speaking a distributional argument and will be taken up when semantic factors are dealt with below.

2.5 Co-occurrence with adverbials

Turning now to syntactic arguments, it can be noted that for English, the lexical classification predicts correctly the co-occurrence of adverbials with adjectives but not with nouns, as in the grammatical very tall and too tall, compared to the ungrammatical *very paint and *too pain.

In Spanish, however, this prediction does not come through, syntactic arguments failing to support the lexical categorization. With adverbials such as muy, más, demasiado (“very, more, too much”) words that are said to be nouns occur in (3a) as easily as words said to be adjectives in (3b):

(3)  

a. muy mujer, más niño, demasiado hombre  
   lit: “very woman, more child, too man”
   i.e., “very womanly, more of a child, too manly”

b. muy alto, más alto, demasiado alto  
   “very tall, taller, too tall”

The usage in (3a) is not limited to words said to be nouns that have animate meanings, but is also found with words that refer to inanimates. A busy, wealthy man who neglects his children can be told, to be sure, that he has to be más padre (lit: “more father”); but if he’s about to buy a smallish house, he will also be told that a family like his needs más casa (lit: “more house”). So again here, even though it might make sense as an argument for the lexical distinction in
English to contrast the common use of *very tall and *more paint with the less likely *very boy and *more woman, the point cannot be made for Spanish.

2.6 Co-occurrence with the, a, 0

In English, adjectives as heads of noun phrases are said to co-occur only with definite articles, while nouns can occur not only with definite articles, but also with indefinite articles and zero articles. Furthermore, when the head of an English noun phrase is an adjective, it always occurs with a plural verb even though the adjective itself is morphologically singular, a distributional fact not found with nouns. The English noun boss and the adjective sincere illustrate the presumably general fulfillment of these syntactic predictions:

(4) a. The boss always pays taxes.
   *A boss always pays taxes.
   The bosses always pay taxes.
   Bosses always pay taxes.
b. *The sincere always pays taxes.
   *A sincere always pays taxes.
   The sincere always pay taxes.
   *Sincerely always pay taxes.

This pattern of distribution, regardless of whether the grammaticality judgements are entirely tenable, and regardless of whether they actually help establish the lexical categories for English, cannot be advanced as evidence for the categories in Spanish. Using words with similar meanings and categorization, we find the distribution in (4).

(4) c. El patrón siempre paga impuestos.
   "The boss always pays taxes."
   ?Un patrón siempre paga impuestos.
   "A boss always pays taxes."
   Los patrones siempre pagan impuestos.
   "The bosses always pay taxes."
   *Patrones siempre pagan impuestos.
   "Bosses always pay taxes."
   d. El pobre siempre paga impuestos.
   "The poor always pay taxes."

Words classified as nouns such as patrón, and words classified as adjectives such as sincero, unlike English nouns and adjectives, show identical patterns of distribution with regard to definite articles, indefinite articles, and zero articles, thus voiding this argument too for the postulation of a noun-adjective distinction in Spanish.

2.7 Occurrence as modifier and modified

There remains one environment where the hypothesis about a noun-adjective distinction generates syntactic predictions. In syntags involving heads and modifiers in adjacent position, words classified as nouns are said to be limited to the syntactic role of heads, whereas words classified as adjectives are said to be limited to the role of modifiers. (For bicategorial words, the prediction is that they will be found in both head and modifier roles. This last prediction is easily confirmed, bicategorial words occurring often in fact in both roles. But, as we have seen, bicategorial words do not support the hypothesis, involving, in fact, a weakening of the noun-adjective distinction.)

The unicategorial adjectives cursi and crudo can serve to test the lexical categorization hypothesis for unicategorial adjectives in adjacency. Examples (5a) and (5c) show the predicted modifier uses, while (5b) and (5d) show these words used as heads, in violation of the restrictions that presumably should hold because of their status as unicategorial adjectives.

(5) a. Anacleta es esa señora cursi que conociste en la feria.
   "Anacleta is that ridiculous lady you met at the fair."
   b. La esposa de Carlos es de un cursi increíble; es esa cursi insoportable que conociste en la feria.
   "Anacleta is of an incredible tastelessness; she is that insufferable tasteless person that you met at the fair."
   c. Ya utilizan casi todo el petróleo crudo para la exportación.
   "They already use all of the crude oil for export."
d. La petrolera se ha negado a comprar el crudo árabe por miedo a represalias del gobierno.

“The oil company refuses to buy Arab crude for fear of reprisals from the government.”

On the strength of this evidence, cursi “ridiculous” and crudo “raw” are simply more examples of adjectives that need to be regarded as bicategorial, casting further doubt on whether unicategorial adjectives really exist.

A more important test of the lexical categorization applies to the more numerous class of unicategorial nouns, which are predicted by hypothesis to occur only as heads in adjacency. Contrary to the prediction, líder is used as a modifier in (6a). Similarly, the noun comandante “commander” is a modifier in (6b), against the prediction:

(6) a. En estos dos cayos existen 38 km de playas de arena muy fina y aguas verdeazules transparentes y limpias, de cálida temperatura todo el año, donde se comercializan 1700 habitaciones, todas 4 y 5 estrellas entre hoteles, moteles, villas y cabañas, construidas desde 1980, en el mayor complejo turístico del Caribe, administrados en asociaciones mixtas por tres compañías españolas: Tryp Hoteles, Sol Mélia y RIU; y una italiana, Viaggi del Ventaglio, junto a los grupos líderes nacionales Cubanaclán S.A. y Gran Caribe, donde el Todo incluido se impone con fuerza de calidad. GRI 041798.

“In these two keys there are 38 km of beaches with fine sand and blue-green, clean and transparent water, where the temperature is warm all year. Here, 1700 rooms are commercialized, all of them four-star accommodations, including hotels, villas and cabins, all built since 1980 in the largest tourist complex in the Caribbean, administered in joint ventures by three Spanish companies: Tryp Hotels, Sol Meliá, and RIU, and one Italian company, Viaggi del Ventaglio, in cooperation with the national leader groups, Cubanaclán S.A., and Gran Caribe, where the ‘all expenses covered’ approach makes its quality mark.”

b. Al día siguiente, en el Hotel Capri, está el hombre comandante, pálido de cansancio. Lo rodean unas jóvenes vestidas de negro que casi no hablan por lo que lloran. Son las hijas del hombre del circo, muy jóvenes ellas. Al hombre van a fusilarlo. Pero otro grupo de mujeres les cierra el paso ... El hombre comandante tiene cara de cansancio. PSN 68.

“There, the next day, in the Capri Hotel, is the commander man, pale with exhaustion. Around him are a few young women dressed in black, who can’t speak for their crying. They are the daughters of the man from the circus, very young these girls. The man is going to be executed. But another group of women bars the way ... The commander man has a tired face.”

A similar point can be made with the unicategorial noun patrón, which appears as a modifier in (7).

(7) Como garante del diálogo, no sólo del EZLN sino también del gobierno, se escogió al obispo de San Cristóbal, que también había puesto su catedral a disposición de aquel increíble encuentro entre los representantes indígenas y los funcionarios del estado patrón. MUC 48

“Chosen as a guarantor of the negotiations, not only for the EZLN but also for the government, was the bishop of San Cristóbal, who had also opened his cathedral for that incredible meeting between the native people’s representatives and the officials of the overseer state.”

The distribution of unicategorial nouns and adjectives in adjacency does not match, as predicted, that of heads and modifiers. No evidence for the existence of noun and adjective classes can be derived from restrictions of occurrence in adjacency, where both types of words appear in both roles.

2.8 Entity and attribute interpretation

Related to the failed syntactic prediction in adjacency is the semantic prediction that nouns will be limited, in any environment, to nominal or entity interpretations, whereas adjectives will be restricted to adjectival or attributive interpretations. In pointing out a child in a group and saying el niño, we are naming the entity and making a direct reference to the child. But when in the same situation we say el nuevo we are denoting one of the attributes of the child and making an indirect reference to him through one of his qualities, in this case that of being new (Matthews 1974). The noun-adjective hypothesis predicts that lexical nouns will always be like el niño and lexical adjectives always like el nuevo.

This prediction, which has already been disconfirmed in adjacency with cursi, líder and patrón, can also be tested in environments other than adjacency, and it is again shown to fail. The word ilícito/ilícita “illicit”, classified as a unicategorial adjective, is used here to denote an entity and make a direct reference.
Pérez Aguilar negó cualquier relación del gobierno estatal en este caso de intervención de llamadas privadas, y aunque en su denuncia Sansores Sanromán exige la presentación de Francisco Fernández, actual secretario de la Contraloría, para que rinda su declaración ministerial, sostuvo que ningún funcionario de la actual administración ha incurrido en ilícitos. NOV 980331.

"Pérez Aguilar denied any relationship with the state government in this case of wiretapping private calls, and even though in his allegations Sansores Sanromán demands the testimony of Francisco Fernández, the present secretary of the Controller's office, he maintains that no official from the present administration has perpetrated any illicit acts."

Note that ilícito is not anaphoric and that it does not denote a quality of any other named object, it directly names the acts as "ilícitos". The same point can be made with the unicategorial adjective, divino/divina "divine":

a. El juez noveno de distrito en Materia Penal, Cuauhtémoc Carlock Sánchez, decidió no liberar una orden de aprehensión contra Ángel Isidoro Rodríguez Sáez, alias "El Divino", ex banquero mexicano actualmente detenido en España. NOV 980331.

"The judge from the ninth criminal district, Cuauhtémoc Carlock Sánchez, decided not to lift an arrest order against Ángel Isidoro Rodríguez Sáez, alias "The Divine", a former Mexican banker who is presently under arrest in Spain."

b. El Divino tiene a su favor dos amparos provisionales otorgados por los jueces Carlock Sánchez y por Hiram García, del 11 de Distrito en Materia Penal con sede en el Reclusorio Preventivo Sur. NOV 980331.

"The Divine has in his favor two provisional orders of protection issued by judges Carlock Sánchez and Hiram García, from the 11th criminal district located in the Southern House of Detention."

In both of these, el divino does not denote a quality but names an entity and makes reference to a single, specific individual (note the use of capital letters, indicating that the word is not only used as a noun, but as a proper noun). Finally, a similar situation obtains with the unicategorial adjective parlante "speaker", which is used here not as an attribute, but nominally, to name an entity.

Los pequeños detalles hacen la gran diferencia. En esta sala de estar contemporánea predominan los tonos pastel y se nota armonía en la decoración, hasta en los parlantes del equipo de sonido. VAN 980421.

"Small details make a big difference. In this contemporary living room, pastel tones are predominant, and one notes great harmony in the decoration, even in the speakers of the sound system."

Turning now to unicategorial nouns, the prediction made by the lexical categorization hypothesis, which failed in the cases of líder and patrón in adjacency, also fails in other environments:

En Cuba, tanto el hombre de color como el blanco hijos del país combaten contra la dominación española. Carta de Antonio Maceo, TAM 114.

"In Cuba, the colored as much as the white, who are children of the country, fight against Spanish control."

In this passage which is difficult to translate, hijos "children" does not make a direct reference to children, but rather denotes a quality of white and colored men.

In short, interpretive restrictions cannot be used as evidence for the unicategorial classification of words like cursi, parlante, ilícito/ilícita, divino/divina, líder, hijo/hija, patrón, and others like them. Irrespective of whether they are nouns or adjectives, these words can be used nominally or adjectively, to name entities or denote attributes.

3. Masculine and feminine as lexical categories

The gender hypothesis predicts that adjectives such as valiente or mejor will co-occur with both el and la, as in el valiente/la valiente, el mejor/la mejor, and that the same will be true of common-gender nouns, as in el telegrafista/la telegrafista, el hijo/la hija. In contrast, nouns such as violín or espada will co-occur only with the article assigned by their inherent gender.

These predictions are successful with regard to adjectives and epicene nouns, since it is true enough that both types of words allow both el and la. But the prediction fails in the crucial case of nouns, which are not restricted exclusively to the article presumably generated by their inherent gender. Grammars of Spanish have traditionally offered long lists of words, usually in references to animates, where masculine words appear with la and feminine words appear with el. These are taken from a survey of Spanish novels by Fernández (1951:156):
predictable, process whereby certain verb endings arbitrarily occur with verbs of different conjugations and the process by which articles occur with nouns of different genders. The standard account of the distribution and interpretation of lexical items and articles, built around the notion of arbitrary parts of speech and gender, does not stand up to scrutiny and needs to be replaced.

5. Acategorial and genderless words

Our alternative analysis is presented in two parts, dealing with (a) acategorial and genderless words in the lexicon and (b) the pairing strategies.

The true structure of the Spanish lexicon is best reflected by the words that the traditional account regards as bicategorial. The traditional account simply has not gone far enough in recognizing what the facts so forcefully suggest, namely, that these Spanish words are not unicategorial in some cases and bicategorial in others, but are always acategorial.

Spanish lexical items are equally open to both modifier and modified uses, equally susceptible to entity and attribute interpretations, and equally useful for direct or indirect reference. The use of a word as entity or attribute at a particular place or time is not limited by linguistic categorization, but by the interaction of the word’s individual lexical meaning with culturally dictated local communicative needs. A word that, at a particular time or place, displays only adjectival uses is not a lexical adjective; it simply so happens that speakers have had no need to use its meaning as the name of anything. Conversely, a word that displays only nominal uses is not a lexical noun; it simply so happens that its lexical meaning has not been found useful to denote a quality.

5.1 Entity uses of unicategorial adjectives

The lexical meaning and acategorial nature of the words that the tradition calls adjectives makes them useful, not only for denoting qualities, but also for naming people and objects. In some cases, the word may have always had this double usage. In others, there has been an initial period of attribute usage followed by an intervening anaphoric period that set the stage for uses for direct reference. The use of papel periódico “newspaper” to name the new cultural artifact led to anaphoric uses of el periódico in denotation of a quality of the paper that appeared periodically. As the artifact became more familiar, anaphora yielded to direct reference, the word periódico now being simply the Spanish word used to name a newspaper.
Similarly, there may have been a point in the history of *crudo* when it only denoted raw or crude qualities, among them the qualities of unrefined oil, as in the example repeated here as (13a). But at some point it became common to use the word, not in syntagms like *petróleo crudo* “crude oil” denoting a quality, but as the name of the substance itself, making a direct reference to the oil, as in (13c). One might speculate that an intervening step may have seen the word used as anaphoric reference, as in (13b):

(13) a. *Ya utilizan casi todo el petróleo crudo para la exportación.*
   “They use all the crude for export.”

b. *Tenemos buenos precios para el petróleo refinado y para el petróleo crudo. Pero el refinado no se puede vender con tanta facilidad como el crudo.*
   “We have good prices for refined oil and for crude oil. But refined oil cannot be sold as easily as crude.”

c. *La petrolera se ha negado a comprar el crudo árabe por miedo a represalias del gobierno.*
   “The oil company has refused to buy Arab crude for fear of reprisals from the government.”

The point to stress here is that even if we concede that there may have been a stage when *crudo* was only used as a modifier or anaphor of *petróleo*, as in (13a), parallel to the use of *periódico* as a modifier or anaphor of *papel*, these facts of usage do not support the postulation of categorial limitations in the Spanish lexicon.

The limited distributions were due to the fact that it had not become useful to name objects having as their central defining traits the properties of unrefined oil or of periodic appearance. When discussions of oil and of the difference between the refined and unrefined substances became common, the acategorial nature of the Spanish lexicon easily allowed for the entity use of *crudo*, just as when the newspaper became a common cultural artifact the linguistic system allowed for the entity use of *periódico*. Thus the exact history of usage of each word, though interesting, is however beside the point. The central idea is that the Spanish lexicon regularly licenses both entity and attribute uses, even though this license may not be exercised for every word everywhere and at every point in time.

That these entity and attribute usages reflect the acategorial nature of the lexicon is supported by the multiplicity of entities named by these words, and by the fact that in different environments the word’s acategoricity is exploited to name many different types of concepts. So *crudo* not only denotes raw qualities and names a type of oil in general Spanish, but also names a type of unfinished cloth in the Spanish of Southern Spain. In other words, this is not a case of homonymy, with a word *crudo* meaning raw and being a true unicategorial adjective, and another word *crudo* meaning unfinished oil. There is a single monosemic *crudo*, licensed for both adjectival and nominal uses, and which in the nominal uses can name anything for which its meaning is appropriate.

Similarly, the word *blanco* “white” is used to denote qualities of whiteness and also, as *el blanco* or *los blancos*, to name entities. But there isn’t just one entity named *el blanco*. The word can be used to name a type of person, a type of wine, a type of target, etc. The word *pronto* “soon, fast” is used to denote qualities of speed, but also, as in *el pronto*, to name an entity. But the entity named *el pronto* can be a burst of anger or a spark of good humor. And in Puerto Rico, where American-style commercial practices prevail, a *blanco* can be, in addition to all the entities already listed, an application form, and a *pronto* can be, in addition to the ones listed, a down payment (the money that one has to put down pronto). In a similar process, the use of the prepositional adjective *contra* “against” to name an abstract object, as in the familiar phrase *hacer la contra* “to oppose”, was joined, when the need arose, by *la contra* and *los contras* as names of opposition groups and opposition fighters in Nicaragua and other countries.

These words are thus not primarily adjectives with a general meaning that gets completely narrowed when they are secondarily used, perhaps in a homonym, as names of entities. While it is true that any white object can be described as having the quality of *blanco*, not all white objects can be named as *el blanco* or *los blancos*, the latter themselves forming an open-ended set. The exact extent of the set of things named *el blanco* is limited only by local communicative needs, and by the diminishing returns that would set in if one gave the same name to large numbers of different objects. (At some point, one has to stop naming white or blank objects *el blanco*, or it will become impossible to distinguish one object from the other.)

The point about cultural factors bears stressing, and can be illustrated not only with unicategorial adjectives and nouns but, as in the case of *contra*, with words said to belong to other categories as well. Participles like *pedido* “request” are often listed in dictionaries and classified as nouns; but a word like *desaparecido* is regarded as a unicategorial adjective and, being a variant of the lexeme *desaparecer* “to disappear”, is not even listed by the Academy. But when political dissenters in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay started to disappear into military gulags in the 1970s, the need arose to name these victims, and the nominal usage of *los desaparecidos* became grim but common currency in Spanish. The word *auténtico* “authentic”, also classified as a unicategorial adjective, may have been used only to denote attributes at some point in the
word's history and in some areas of the Spanish-speaking world. But in the
1950s it was used to name a famous political party in Cuba, El Partido Autén-
tico, whose followers were universally known as los auténticos. The words
desaparecido and auténtico were not unicategorial adjectives in some dialects at
some point in time and bicategorial in other places and at other points in time.
They were always acategorial and were used differently in response to differing
cultural-communicative factors.

Thus the counterexamples to unicategorial adjectives shown in the previous
section (curst, ilícito, divino) fall into a broader pattern, whereby words that may
appear to be limited by linguistic categorization to denoting qualities bear in fact
no such restriction, and are deployed as the names of entities as soon as the
culturally mediated communicative opportunity or need arises.

5.2 Attribute uses of unicategorial nouns

There is every indication that the same is true of unicategorial nouns. Given a
communicative opportunity, the lexical meanings of these words will be used to
denote qualities rather than to name entities directly. It may very well be that the
word líder is only used for entities in some places and periods of time; but the
use of grupos líderes in (6) shows that there is no categorial limitation on the
word, which is available to name a quality, in this case a quality of certain hotel
groups, when a speaker or writer finds that this is useful.

Similarly, the noun comandante is used as a quality in hombre comandante
great ironic effect in (6), to describe a man who is clearly not in command as he
is about to be shot; he is not a commander, as naming him through the entity
use of comandante would suggest; he is a mere man, fallen on fatally hard times,
who happens to have the quality of being, or having been, a commander.

The same is true of patrón, which is more commonly used to name a boss or an
overseer, but was found useful, in the usage estado patrón in (7), as a way of
characterizing a State that behaves like a plantation foreman toward its citizens.

Many other familiar combinations in Spanish show unicategorial nouns being used as denotations of qualities, particularly in the environment of
adjacency where they appear as modifiers. First cousins are typically called
primos hermanos, with the unicategorial noun hermanos used as a modifier. And
such uses as reina madre "queen mother" and rey consorte "consort king" show
prototypical nouns being used as modifiers.

5.3 Compounds

There seems to be little justification for maintaining that grupos líderes, estado
patrón, hombre comandante, along with primos hermanos "first cousins" and
reina madre "queen mother" and many like them are compounds that do not
threaten the status of these words as nouns. Such an analysis would help
preserve the noun-adjective distinction only at the expense of making it untest-
able. If the argument is made, each time a unicategorial noun is shown to be used
as an adjective, that the use is not adjectival but nominal inside a compound, the
status of the word as a lexical noun ceases to be an empirical hypothesis.

Semantically, there is no difference between, for example, grupos líderes
and grupos grandes ("leader groups" and "big groups"). Just as the latter refers
to large-type groups, so does the former refer to leader-type groups. Moreover,
there are no syntactic or morphological differences, as líderes shows number
agreement no less than grandes. While it is true that many combinations of
modified and modifier in Spanish fail to show number agreement (novelas rosa
"romance", chaquetas azul marino "navy blue jacket", tonos pastel "pastel
tones"), and while it may very well be true that many unicategorial nouns do not
agree, many others do (as in grupos líderes and primos hermanos). Failure to
show number agreement is a complicated process in Spanish that cannot be
investigated in depth here, but that does not diminish the force of counter-
examples to the claim that there are unicategorial nouns.

5.4 Dictionary entries and parts of speech

From the perspective offered here, the part of speech classification proposed by
linguists and detailed by philologists turns out to be a record of usage rather than
a statement of linguistic structure. Dictionaries simply keep a record of how a
word has been used, not of how the structure of the language allows it to be
used. But the record is necessarily flawed and incomplete, as it fails to keep up
with usage. Worse, the record presents as essential linguistic structure what is a
matter of accidental cultural need. The Academy's dictionary classifies fenómeno
"phenomenon" as a unicategorial noun, ignoring such common adjectival usages
as un día fenómeno, una actriz fenómena "phenomenal day, phenomenal actress",
and The Clave dictionary does record these usages, and thus registers fenómeno
as an adjective also used as a noun. Although Clave is more up to date culturally,
both dictionaries are wrong linguistically, as fenómeno is neither one nor the other.
5.5 Not a diachronic process

The persistence of the phenomenon of nouns being used as adjectives and adjectives being used as nouns, and its active, productive character, strongly suggest that this is not a diachronic linguistic process whereby words change from unaccusative to bicategorial status. All indications are that the distribution observed for each word reflects a synchronic stage characterized by an acategorial lexicon, interacting with individual communicative creativity and changing cultural needs, and that it is these cultural needs, and not a presumed lexical categorization, that are limiting, in a temporary and contingent fashion, the distribution of words.

5.6 Indeterminate usage

The acategorial nature of Spanish words is reflected with particular clarity in the many uses that cannot be classified as nominal or adjectival. Contrary to what one would expect if words were lexically marked as nouns or adjectives, there are many instances in Spanish where one cannot tell whether a particular word is denoting an attribute or naming an entity, making a direct or anaphoric reference, or even in some cases whether it is being used as head or modifier in adjacency. In (14a), the lack of context, and the habit of thinking in terms of nouns and adjectives, favors a description of el mayor as a nominal usage. But in (14b), the usage is indeterminate: it could be an anaphoric reference to the previous mention of hijo mayor, or a direct entity reference parallel to that of (a), the important point being that the message would be the same either way.

(14) a. El mayor de Carmen ya se casó, pero todavía no tiene hijos; es ese médico del que te hablé cuando el problema de Chucó.
   "Carmen's eldest is already married, but still has no children; he is that doctor that I talked to you about when Chucó had a problem."

b. Carmen tiene dos hijos. El hijo mayor estudió para arquitecto y el menor trabaja en una fábrica, igual que el más pequeño de Consuelo.
   "Carmen has two children. The older one is studying to be an architect and the younger one works in a factory, same as Consuelo's youngest. Carmen's eldest is already married, but"

still has no children; he is that doctor that I talked to you about when Chucó had a problem."

The same happens with el viejo, which one tends to think of as having a nominal use in (15a), but which could be seen as nominal or adjectival in (15b) without any consequences for the overall interpretation.

(15) a. El viejo me cayó mejor que el londinense.
   "I like the old man more than the Londoner."

b. Llegaron dos hombres, un señor viejo que parecía español, y un señor de Londres. El viejo me cayó mejor que el londinense.
   "Two men arrived, an old gentleman who seemed to be Spanish, and a man from London. I like the old man more than the Londoner."

This is a widespread phenomenon in Spanish and can be observed in real examples. In (16a), the unaccusative noun hermano is a head, as predicted, whereas in (16b) it is modifier, against the prediction. But in (16c), there is no way to tell, that is, the message is indeterminate with regard to the relationship between hermano "brother" and the also unaccusative noun obispo "bishop"; as there is no way to know whether the author meant bishop brothers or bishop brothers. Either way, the communication is the same.

(16) a. Es un buen hermano.
   "He is a good brother."

b. Es primo hermano de Carlos.
   "He is Carlos's first cousin."

c. Ha hecho tiempo vivir una experiencia particular: en una Asamblea Episcopal me encargaron leer un documento redactado por una pequeña comisión. Puse énfasis en una cita que no le gustó a muchos hermanos obispos, que la consideraron incluso marxista. Entonces hice la observación de que la "tremenda cita" marxista era en realidad de Isácas, del Viejo Testamento, y, por lo tanto, de muchos siglos antes. MUC 64.
   "A long time ago I had a special experience: at an Episcopal Assembly I was asked to read a document that had been drafted by a small commission. I emphasized a quote that did not please many of the bishop brothers, who even regarded it as Marxist. Then I pointed out that the "tremendous Marxist
quote" was in reality from Isaiah, from the Old Testament and, therefore, from many centuries before Marx."

This indeterminacy of interpretation is precisely what one would expect of acategorial words. Since lexical items are not marked as nouns or adjectives, and since nominalness and adjectivalness are simply facts of usage, they hold true for many uses but not for others. When the message does not require a distinction, there is no way to tell whether the word is being used one way or the other.

5.7 Masculines with la and feminines with el

If there are neither nouns nor adjectives in the lexicon, then there can't very well be some words with inherent gender and some words whose gender is acquired. The facts of Spanish reflect this situation clearly, lexical items being not only acategorial but genderless. The lack of inherent gender is what allows for the observation that, for human reference, masculine words can be used with la, as in la primer violín, and feminine words with el, as in el espada. These cross-gender uses cannot be dismissed as minor exceptions any more than can the cross-categorial uses, for they too are productive and not confined to a few items.

As with the lexical categories, the observed regularities of gender usage are not structural but cultural. The reason a word appears to be used with only el or only la (about which more presently) is not inherent gender, but the always contingent absence of a culturally mediated need to use the word to name a human being. The word base "base", which is categorized as a feminine noun, was likely used only with la in many places and for many years. But when U.S. soldiers introduced baseball in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, the genderless nature of the lexicon easily allowed for usages of base with el, as in el primera base "the first baseman", usages that are now commonplace. The distribution in the Caribbean today shows el with primera base, segunda base, and tercera base "first baseman, second baseman, third baseman", but not with cuarta base "fourth base". But this has nothing to do with the Spanish language, and everything to do with the cultural accident that the baseball diamond has only three bases.

6. The pairing strategies

Far from epitomizing lack of communicative motivation in linguistic structure, the distribution of articles and lexical items in Spanish reveals the operation of functionally motivated pairing strategies. The pairing strategies establish an association between certain words and one or the other of the articles through the repetition of the same article with the same word (violín is repeatedly used with el, espada with la). A paired word is one that shows a statistical skewing in favor of (not an absolute categorial co-occurrence with) one of the articles (violín occasionally occurs with la, espada with el). Pairing is made possible by the fact that el and la have the same meanings, and that as a result they are both equally compatible with all lexical items.10

6.1 The communicative motivation of pairing

Pairing enables what was called "avoidance of the obvious" in Diver (1972) and will be called here the Avoidance Maneuver. That is, pairing makes possible, to a much greater extent than if there were no pairing, the familiar use of "pronouns in place of nouns", as in (17a) and (17b), and the use of headless articles, as in (17c) and (17d), and (17e) and (17f).11

(17) a. Carlos la rompió.
   "Carlos broke it."

b. Carlos lo rompió.
   "Carlos broke it."

c. Tráeme la de Carlos.
   "Bring me Carlos's."  

d. Tráeme el de Carlos.
   "Bring me Carlos's."

e. Tráeme el que te compré.
   "Bring me the one I bought you."

f. Tráeme la que te compré.
   "Bring me the one I bought you."

In English, which has no pairing, (17a) and (17b) would be the same, and thus could not be used to pick out espada or violín as unambiguous antecedents of the pronoun; similar limitations would apply to (17c) through (17e). Pairing, then, enhances the possibilities of avoiding the obvious (in comparison to English, these possibilities are doubled); the investment in memorization required by the pairing pays off in vastly increased non-repetition of lexical items.12

6.2 Paired and unpaired words

All variable words are paired according to a morphologically based principle: The -a ending form is paired with la (la niña, la buena, la presidenta), the other
form is paired with el (el niño, el buen, el presidente). Of invariant words, some are paired (columns A and B in Figure 1) while others are unpaired (column C). Words that skew towards predominant occurrence with la are in column A, those that skew towards predominant occurrence with el are in column B. Paired invariant words have many different kinds of endings, but, mirroring somewhat the pattern of variable words, invariant words ending in -a tend to be paired with la, while those ending in -o tend to be paired with el.\textsuperscript{13}

Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
<th>Column C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paired with la</td>
<td>Paired with el</td>
<td>Unpaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>espada</td>
<td>violín</td>
<td>valiente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mesa</td>
<td>lápiz</td>
<td>mejor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>casa</td>
<td>escritorio</td>
<td>azul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>víctima</td>
<td>ídolo</td>
<td>grande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>persona</td>
<td>poeta</td>
<td>patrón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mayoría</td>
<td>planeta</td>
<td>bebé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>madre</td>
<td>padre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hembra</td>
<td>varón</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mujer</td>
<td>hombre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3 The communicative motivation for unpaired words

The advantage of leaving some words unpaired is that it allows the Avoidance Maneuver of pronouns and articles to be extended to lexical items themselves. Thus the fact that *violín* and *espada* are paired, but that *mejor* is not, allows the Avoidance Maneuver not only in (17), as already shown, but in (18) as well.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Tráeme el mejor de Carlos.
\item Tráeme la mejor de Carlos.
\end{enumerate}

Bring me the better one of Carlos's.

"Bring me the better one of Carlos's."

6.4 Two pairing strategies

There are two ways to pair words with articles: the Mechanical Pairing Strategy and the Semantic Pairing Strategy. In the Mechanical Pairing Strategy (MPS), no meaning criterion determines membership in the set of words that are skewed toward one or the other article, whereas in the Semantic Pairing Strategy (SPS) there is a meaning criterion, namely sex.

Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
<th>Column C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paired with la</td>
<td>Paired with el</td>
<td>Unpaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPS</td>
<td>MPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>espada</td>
<td>violín</td>
<td>valiente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mesa</td>
<td>lápiz</td>
<td>mejor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>víctima</td>
<td>ídolo</td>
<td>azul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mayoría</td>
<td>planeta</td>
<td>grande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>persona</td>
<td>centro</td>
<td>patrón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>madre</td>
<td>padre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hembra</td>
<td>varón</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mujer</td>
<td>hombre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not all words that refer to humans are paired under the SPS (*la víctima*, for example, is paired under the MPS). Paired under SPS are only those words that tend to be used exclusively for males (like *hombre* and *padre*) or exclusively for females (like *mujer* and *madre*).

The pairing of particular words with a particular article is completely arbitrary in both the MPS and the SPS. (Pairing would work equally well if columns A and B in Figure 2 were switched, as long as they were completely switched, without scrambling the words.) But this does not mean that the entire procedure is arbitrary in the sense of being communicatively unmotivated. On the contrary, the Avoidance Maneuver, which provides the functional motivation for pairing, is made possible precisely by the arbitrary but consistent pairing of different words with different articles.\textsuperscript{14}

6.5 The communicative motivation of the SPS

Pairing all predominantly male words with one article and all predominantly female words with the other one enables a particularly important application of the Avoidance Maneuver. The three applications of the maneuver shown so far,
with pronouns, headless articles, and lexical items, all rest on references of the anaphoric type to antecedents that are previously mentioned or that are salient in the context.

(19)
  a. Tráeme el de Carlos.
     "Bring me Carlos’s.”
  b. Tráeme el que te compré.
     "Bring me the one I bought you.”
  c. Traéme la grande de Carlos.
     "Bring me Carlos’s big one.”

But given the importance of humans in human communication, the SPS allows the establishment of a strong association between la and females, leaving el to be associated with males or with collectivities of both sexes. This association is established through the repeated, consistent pairing of male words with el and female words with la. The association is not categorical enough to be regarded as grounds for postulating sex meanings for the articles. Nevertheless, it is strong enough to allow a special operation of the Avoidance Maneuver, under which reference can be made to males or females without mentioning them directly.

(20)
  a. Carlos la llamó.
     "Carlos called her.”
  b. Carlos lo llamó.
     "Carlos called him.”
  c. Nació la de Carlos.
     "Carlos’s daughter was born.”
  d. Nació el de Carlos.
     "Carlos’s son was born.”
  e. Llegó la mayor de Carlos.
     "Carlos’s eldest daughter arrived.”
  f. Llegó el mayor de Carlos.
     "Carlos’s eldest son arrived.”
  g. Carlos los llamó.
     "Carlos called them.”

Because of the SPS, items (20a), (20c), and (20e) are clear references to women or girls, while (20b), (20d), and (20f) are clear references to men or boys. In the plural, reference with el (that is, with los) can be to a group of males or to a mixed group, as in (20g). Whether the Avoidance Maneuver is relying on the MPS for references to inanimates, or on the SPS for reference to animates, appears to be entirely a matter of context.

(21)  a. De los jugadores equipo, aquel era el mejor.
     "Of the team’s players, that one was the best one.”
  b. De los violines que vimos, aquel era el mejor.
     "Of the violins we saw, that one was the best one.”
  c. Le molestó la señora que le pusieron de jefe, no la que compró la compañía.
     "She is bothered by the lady that became boss, not the one that bought the company.”
  d. De entre esas espadas, escogió la que había usado en el torneo olímpico.
     "Among those swords, he chose the one he had used in the Olympic tournament.”

In (21a) and (21c) the context makes it clear that the articles refer to a human player and a human boss, whereas in (21b) and (21d) it is clear that reference is to a violin and a sword.

This analysis predicts that in uses of pronouns and headless articles without antecedents, the most frequent type of reference will be to humans. That is, the analysis predicts that (22a) will be common and (22b) will be rare.

(22)  a. Empezaría por Lola. A ella le interesaría aquello más que a nadie. Además, era la que mejor podía opinar si era verdad o no.
     "She would begin with Lola. She would be more interested in that than anyone. Besides, she was the one who could best tell whether it was true.”
  b. Consuelate hija. Por lo menos están juntos. Mira yo la que estoy pasando con lo de Ana y José Javier. PSN 90.
     "Console yourself, my child. At least they are together. Look at what I’m going through with Ana and José Javier.”

This is indeed what we find. When pronominals and headless articles have an antecedent, both the MPS and the SPS are relevant, and as expected, they refer to humans only 13 percent of the time. But when they have no antecedent, only the SPS is in fact relevant. In the absence of a word with which to associate an article, only the SPS is relevant. In such cases, as expected, pronouns and headless articles refer to humans in 83 percent of the cases and, in all of these, the reference is unambiguous to a male or a female.15

The sameness of meaning of el and la, and their pairing with words through the MPS and the SPS, allow maximal use of the Avoidance Maneuver, making
6.6 Conflict of strategies

Pairing under the MPS is not a rule of autonomous grammar but a contingent communicative move, which allows the pairing to dissolve when more pressing needs are present. This is the origin of the counterexamples to the standard account. Any time a word like violín is used for a woman and a word like espada for a man, the pairing under the MPS clashes with the male-female association that has been established for el and la by the SPS. The association that allows the inference that la mejor is a woman in a context where human reference is suggested will also allow the inference that la violín is a woman in such a context, but at the expense of a momentary clash of the pairing of violín with el.

In principle, all words can occur with el and la under the sex association established by the SPS. Many more examples of el-words with la and of la words with el can be added to la primer violín, el mejor espada, and el tercera base, as the process is completely productive. A male pop artist or sports hero is el estrella “the star” of the group, a female one is la idolo, “the idol” and will have her picture taken in her role of la modelo “the model”, even though, when not referring to humans, estrella is paired with la, and idolo and modelo with el. The counterpart to the man who plays third-base and pushes base into use with el is the woman who plays center in basketball and is referred to as la centro. Which of the words that are paired under the MPS thus come into conflict with the male-female association of the SPS, and which do not, is purely a matter of cultural contingency. In a culture with no violins, or with no female violin players, the conflict illustrated by la primer violín would not arise, neither would the clash of el estrella or la modelo arise in a culture that didn’t discuss show business, nor would the conflict of el tercera base and la centro have arisen if speakers of Spanish didn’t play baseball or basketball, or if they limited baseball to women and basketball to men.

6.7 Morphological structure

That these uses represent a clash of strategies is shown by the fact that speakers of Spanish are in an active conflict-reducing mode. In addition to the strong, statistically-based association between males and el and females and la, there is a parallel association between males and the -o form of variable words, and females and the -a forms of these words. Invariant words in -o have a strong male flavor, abetted by their frequent use to refer to traditionally male occupations, such as abogado, ingeniero or ministro ("lawyer, engineer, minister"). When women engage in these professions, there is a clash of strategies similar to the one caused by the use for males of words normally paired with el. The response to the clash presents an even clearer case of the intrusion of culture into seemingly structural areas. Even though modelo and idolo have remained as invariant words in the middle of the conflict (la modelo and la idolo), words like abogado, ingeniero or ministro have not, changing their morphological status, in the usage of many speakers, to variable words (el abogado/la abogada, el ingeniero/la ingeniera, etc.). Handling these words as la abogada, la ingeniera etc, as some speakers still do, places them at the point where the MPS and the SPS-established sex association of el and la are in conflict (as in el modelo under MPS, la modelo under the sex association). Changing these items to variable words solves the problem (as el abogado/la abogada and el ingeniero/la ingeniera are now like el maestro/la maestra, el niño/la niña, el bueno/la buena).

This development suggests once again that what appeared to be a structural fact of Spanish, the nominal, masculine, invariant nature of words like abogado and ingeniero, was a cultural fact about Hispanic culture. The reason maestro/maestra is registered in dictionaries as a variable word is that philologists are familiar with female teachers. The reason that ingeniero was registered as invariant is that female engineers were not as common. The creation of -a endings for these words is facilitating the operation of the pairing strategies by reducing the conflict between the MPS and the SPS.

6.8 Differences between gender and pairing

The standard account in terms of parts-of-speech and gender is postulated as part of the autonomous mechanism of Spanish. The gender classification, like the autonomous rule that assigns different imperfect endings to verbs of different conjugations, has nothing to do with facilitating communication. As would be the case in any analogous procedure, any occurrence of an inherent-gender word with the “other” article represents a counterexample to the autonomous analysis.

The distinction between paired and unpaired words is not simply the old noun-adjective distinction in sheep’s clothing. Pairing is a functionally motivated strategy designed to enable the Avoidance Maneuver. The counterexamples to the standard account are, in the analysis proposed here, simply cases where paired words are being treated as if they were unpaired (espada, violín, base, estrella,
modelo, etc. are being treated like grande, mejor, etc.), for clearly motivated communicative reasons, namely their exploitation for human reference. The less frequent, unpaired use of these words is as coherent as their more frequent paired use, since both cases represent different aspects of the general Avoidance Maneuver. Uses of the el espada type, which are incoherent in the standard account, are perfectly coherent within a system designed to facilitate anaphoric reference by pronouns and headless articles under the MPS and human reference under the SPS.

From the standpoint of the standard account it is simply an accident that the gender pattern is broken where it is, that is, the standard account has no explanation for why the counterexamples are mostly like el espada and seldom like el mujer. Since both espada and mujer are feminine words, the standard account cannot predict why one, but not the other, appears with the “wrong” article. In the account presented here, uses like el espada are frequent because there is a reason to exploit the sex associations acquired by the articles through the SPS, and because there is a reason to name humans through words that commonly refer to objects such as swords. In contrast, el mujer occurs but rarely because it would only be useful for the less common task of conveying a contradictory message, one having to do with a male woman.

7. Conclusions

The force of tradition notwithstanding, there is little reason to believe that the Spanish lexicon distinguishes between categorial nouns and adjectives, or that it has inherently masculine and feminine nouns. No morphological or syntactic evidence exists for the noun-adjective distinction. And no semantic or interpretive consequences follow from it. Once the distinction is taken seriously as a testable hypothesis, all its predictions fail, including the all-important one that nouns have a masculine class that occurs only with el and a feminine class that occurs only with la. Any word classified as an adjective can be used as a noun, and most adjectives are already on record in this alternative usage. And, as supported by the illustrations here, any word classified as a noun can be used as an adjective when it becomes communicatively useful to apply its narrow meaning as the denotation of a quality. Nouns that have hitherto not been observed in adjectival usage are not being kept away by categorial classification, but by accidents of culture interacting with lexical meaning.

Once it is realized that there are no nouns and no adjectives, the standard account is left without an explanation for the distribution of el and la in relation to these acategorial words, since the entire explanatory edifice was built on the distinction between inherent-gender nouns and agreement-gender adjectives. It is of no small theoretical interest that this collapsed explanation has been commonly regarded as a particularly strong argument for the existence of autonomous structure in language.

A language possessing a categorial, gendered lexicon such as described in the standard account would not produce the observations made here. Such a language would hold its nouns to strict nominal uses, its masculines and feminines to strict co-occurrence with a single set of determiners, and its adjectives to quality and attribute interpretations. Moreover, in such a language the uses of words in discourse would be clearly identifiable as denotations of attributes or as names of entities, and would never be indeterminate in this regard. The philologists working with such a language would display a high level of accuracy in their lexical classifications, which would show considerable historical stability in the short term. None of this matches our observations for the simple reason that the Spanish lexicon is acategorial and genderless.

The distribution of el and la in relation to acategorial lexical items is explained by the existence of two pairing strategies, both of which establish a match between certain invariant words and certain articles. The articles are also paired with variable words by assigning one form of the word to one article and another form to the other article. One of the pairing strategies relies on a sex criterion for grouping words, the other one does not. Paired words tend to have narrow applicability, due to their lexical meaning. Words whose lexical meaning makes them widely applicable tend not to be paired.

The pairing strategies exist to make possible an important functional goal, the Avoidance Maneuver, and consequently, pairing is not automatic, but contingent on communicative need. A paired word is allowed to occur with the other article, that is, to become momentarily unpaired, any time that it becomes communicatively useful to describe a human being using a word that is more normally associated with an inanimate object. This means that any word can occur with any article, since any word can potentially become useful in this way. It also means that there will inevitably be occasions when the two strategies will come into conflict. This conflict is reduced by altering the morphology of words, increasing the size of the pool of variable words. When Spanish words and articles are seen as epiphenomenon of autonomous structure, empirical success is elusive. A more coherent account emerges when the functional basis for acategoricity and the pairing procedure is recognized.
11. Very likely, articles are the heads of their constructions, so that the term headless article, which is adopted here for convenience, does not entirely make sense. For discussion, see Otheguy 1977.

12. The investment in memorization required by pairing is actually much smaller than it may seem at first. Internal morphological and semantic patternings of the type detailed for German by Zubin & Köpcke (1986) also very likely work for Spanish, making the matching up between words and articles much more motivated than the traditional notion of grammatical gender suggests. The huge morphological skewing of -o ending words towards el and of -a ending words towards la is the best known case. But, as is well known, this is a tendency, not an absolute, as there are a few -o ending words paired with la and many -a ending words paired with el (la mano, el atleta, el planeta, etc).

13. For exceptions, see previous note.

14. The terms "natural gender" and "grammatical gender", which are used for the approximate equivalent of the SPS and the MPS, and which suggest that the SPS pairing is more motivated than MPS pairing, thus miss the point. Neither of the pairings is natural or motivated, because in neither of them is there any comparability between the words and the article. It is in the total operation of pairing, and in the Avoidance Maneuver that it makes possible, that the motivation resides.

15. This count was based on a corpus of 50,000 words, and included all pronominal and headless article uses involving el and la. Texts used were short stories by Cela, García Velasco, Goytisolo, Mellizo, Moreno, Sanz, and Vidal, plus an editorial from the magazine Arte both Villalón and a novel of Perera.

References


**Texts cited**


GRI = *Gramma Internacional*, Havana.


MNY = Martí, José. *Nueva York bajo la Nieve*, 1888.


NOV = *Novedades*, Mexico DF.


VAN = Vanidades

VMB = Vega, Bernardo. *Memorias de Bernardo Vega*. 