

## GENDER DIVERGENCE BETWEEN COGNATES IN FRENCH AND SPANISH

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**Abstract:** This is a study of the characteristics of French-Spanish cognate pairs showing opposite gender. The sources of this divergence include absorption of the Latin neuter by opposite genders, the creation of nominalizations by means of different derivational suffixes (with opposite gender), and divergent gender assignment to new (borrowed) nouns. The cognates studied here were French-Spanish bilingual dictionary equivalents of intuitively "similar" form as judged by the investigators. A search for semantic categories in which gender divergence was especially frequent led to plant and animal names. Since the gender-divergent pairs in these classes were relatively exotic, we assumed that low frequency plays a role in gender change, and examined the ranks of gender-divergent noun pairs in French and Spanish frequency dictionaries. The properties of the few high-frequency, but gender-divergent cognate pairs were examined in detail.

**Keywords :** French Spanish cognates gender divergence

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The question of gender change in general and of the consequent gender divergence between cognate nouns in genetically related languages has been a topic of occasional interest in historical linguistics and linguistic philology. The problem of phonetic or phonological (Tucker *et al.*, 1977; Poplack *et al.*, 1982) and of semantic (Yaguello, 1978; Zubin and Köpcke, 1986) criteria for gender assignment has also occasionally interested psycho- or sociolinguists. This last question is of interest in linguistic typology, insofar as noun

classification is, potentially at least, a language-universal problem with, apparently, quite divergent solutions across the world's languages (Corbett, 1991; Dixon, 1986). The Romance languages present the problem of gender changes from Latin to the daughter varieties, not only because for most of the latter, there has been a reduction from three to two genders, i.e., from a masculine-feminine-neuter system to masculine and feminine only, but also because there have been gender changes since Latin, and divergent gender assignments to more recent words. French and Spanish, for example, have hundreds of cognate noun pairs with opposite gender assignments. Like Teschner (1987), we have noticed that this divergence touches a great number and variety of types of nouns. Unlike that author, however, we want to try to go beyond a list of gender-divergent cognates and a quantitative characterization of morphological subtypes among these pairs. In this phase of our research, we are especially interested in patterns of divergence which are not accounted for by opposite-gender derivational suffixation, though this process can be seen as "explaining" most of this divergence. We considered "cognates" to be pairs of similar form which are given as equivalents in at least one context in a (*Larousse*) bilingual dictionary (Cazalaà and Cabot, 1993) and retained 623 pairs of gender-divergent cognates (see Table I).

## 2. DERIVATIONAL SUFFIXES

This corpus is not representative of a very common contrast between French and Spanish: pairs with opposite gender associated with non-cognate, gender-divergent derivational suffixes. If morphologically complex nouns, one with the *-tion* suffix in French and one with the *-miento* suffix in Spanish, for example, are otherwise cognate, the derivational suffixes are of course the assigners of feminine and masculine gender, respectively. This does not solve the problem of the basis for divergent gender assignment, however, and the latter is complicated in such cases by the fact that these endings are different nominalizers as well. From the viewpoint of gender, these derivational suffixes in fact behave as nouns, since they have intrinsic gender, and some of them are, in addition, inflected for gender, such as French *-ier* : *-ière* and Spanish *-ero* : *-era*. In morphologically simple Spanish words with masculine *-o* or feminine *-a* inflections only, these endings are of course then indicators of gender assignment, not explanations for them. Despite its quantitative importance, we have not concentrated on gender assignment by derivational suffixation here, dividing and then restricting our corpus in ways presented below in order to focus on morphologically simpler words which are clearly cognate, yet show gender divergence.

Inspection of inverse dictionaries (e.g. Juilland, 1965 for French; Bosque and Pérez Fernández, 1987 for Spanish) indicates little gender divergence between these two languages associated with cognate derivational suffixes, just as their noun lexicons as a whole share genders for the vast majority of cognates. Teschner (1987: 237) in fact gives the figure of 92.38% for gender-sharing cognates. The few cases of gender divergence between cognate derivational suffixes come in part from gender neutralization from sound changes in French: for example, *-oire* can be masculine or feminine and is cognate to *-orio* (m) and *-oria* (f) in Spanish; *-aire*, (m) or (f) in French, is cognate to *-ario* (m) and *-aria* (f) in Spanish. The latter language has of course conserved gender inflection in these derivational suffixes. Groups of systematically opposite gender assignments for pairs whose stems and derivational suffix are cognate can be detected. It is the suffix, of course, that is of the opposite gender in these 2 languages (see Table II for examples). However, the *-ier* : *-era* cognates show that some sets of pairs are not cases of neutralization but of opposite gender assignment. It would be interesting to be able to identify any of these patterns which remain productive today. As we see in Table II, some are much more numerous represented, at least, than others.

### 3. DATA INCLUDED AND EXCLUDED

In French and Spanish, words with a Latin etymology have undergone gender change in cases where these languages have opposite genders for their modern form of the word. That is, one, the other, or both members of the gender-divergent cognate pair have changed genders since its Latin attestation. The "both" possibility comes of course from the fact that the Latin neuters have had to change to masculine or feminine in each of these two daughter languages.

In our studies below, we first isolated and later eliminated the French-Spanish gender-divergent cognate pairs one, the other, or both of whose members' gender assignment is associated with derivational suffixation. We in fact counted and excluded not only the pairs whose Spanish member ends in *-or* or *-ión*, but also those in *-o* or *-a*. This is because we want to distinguish these major markers from less obvious indicators of gender and patterns of gender assignment for divergent pairs. These Spanish endings are clear and consistent indicators of gender, and in fact, on the whole, Spanish genders are more clearly marked than French genders. When we exclude derivational and inflectional endings, then, will there be any French-Spanish correspondence between cognate pairs that could serve as a heuristic for recognizing that the French member of the pair is feminine and the Spanish one masculine or vice versa? Could any semantic criteria, for example, serve to predict opposite gender assignments for a sub-set of noun pairs (cf. Zubin and Köpcke's 1986 study on German)?

Thus, although we, like Teschner (1987), had originally noted hundreds of gender-divergent cognate pairs from the dictionary cited above, we separated the "morphological cases" from what we will call the (morphologically) "gender-opaque" noun pairs. We will see below that in the latter sub-corpus, it is possible to find semantic subcategories with unusually high rates of gender divergence between their French and Spanish forms.

### 4. PREDICTABLE ENDINGS

Our corpus includes pairs whose Spanish member was simply inflected with the *-o* (m) or *-a* (f) suffix. Table III indicates the absolute and relative frequency of *-o* masculines and *-a* feminines in our Spanish data, and their great quantitative importance compared to other endings in that language. If the written language is used for the sake of clarity in French, which, as is well known, has undergone diachronic changes that have eliminated certain endings in the oral language, we can talk about another set of endings. For our corpus, Table IV shows that the vast majority of French nouns ending in a consonant plus a "mute *e*" are feminine. Similarly, a great majority of Spanish words ending in either a consonant or an *-e* are masculine. Combining these two facts, we see that nearly all the pairs matching the French ending *-C* + "mute *e*" with the Spanish endings *-C* or *-Ce* are feminine in French and masculine in Spanish.

### 5. SEMANTIC CATEGORIES AND GENDER CHANGE

As indicated above, we were also interested in the question whether specific semantic subcategories of nouns might be subject to gender change more than nouns in general. Noun subcategories whose individual members are rare words might well show higher rates of gender change (usually from that in Latin, in the case we are focussing on here) than high-frequency noun subcategories. This would be because rarity of occurrence might preclude

universal perfect mastery of the gender assignment of morphologically opaque nouns, which are what interest us most.

Given our corpus as restricted in the manner mentioned above, two semantic subcategories of nouns stood out in our data: names of plants and animals. It looked from inspection as though they were remarkably frequent among gender-divergent cognates. Searching in etymological dictionaries (Corominas, 1954; Dauzat *et al.*, 1993; Gaffiot, 1934; Glare, 1982; Real Academia Española, 1984), we found that 42 entries in our subcorpus of gender-divergent plant-and-animal-name pairs had a clear Latin etymology. Of those, most seem clearly to have changed gender from Latin to French and not Spanish. For example, 13 out of 16 present-day Spanish feminines were feminine in Latin, while of 23 French feminines with an attested Latin stage, 17 were not feminine in Latin.

## 6. FREQUENCY AND GENDER CHANGE

We then tried to explore the relation between frequency and gender change. Of our gender-divergent pairs, restricting the corpus as indicated above, what proportion figures among the frequent words in each of the languages? We quickly saw that in our plant-and-animal-name subcorpus, only *rat* and *serpent* figure among Juilland *et al.*'s (1970) frequent words in French. We then asked the question of the comparison between the frequency of plant and animal names in our gender-divergent corpus, on the one hand, and of plant and animal names, in general, on the other, among Juilland *et al.*'s (1964, 1970) Spanish and French lists of the 5024 and 5083 most frequent words, respectively. Table V indicates the absolute and relative frequency of plant and animal names in our gender-divergent corpus, and the absolute and relative frequency of plant and animal names in these lists. We see that gender divergence, here usually of course because of a gender change from Latin, has affected plant and animal names out of proportion to the frequency of these subcategories in these languages. Gender change appears then to have disproportionately affected individual rare nouns such as those that designate species of plants and animals. In the case studied here, these changes have been mainly within French, as we have mentioned, apparently facilitated by the morphological opacity imposed in that language by changes eroding and deleting endings. We conjecture that this opacity, combined with the relative rarity of the occurrence of individual plant and animal names, would preclude universal perfect mastery of their gender assignments. This in turn would facilitate gender change. If we look at the list of these gender-divergent plant and animal names in Table V, we can also conjecture that very few of them could possibly be "basic" categories or prototypical category members (in the sense of Rosch *et al.*, 1976) for speakers of French and Spanish. Rather, they would surely be "subordinate" subcategories in that framework.

What about our reduced corpus of 214 gender-opaque noun pairs more generally though? Not all are rare words: Table VI lists the 31 pairs both of whose members are found in Juilland *et al.*'s lists (1970, 1964) for French and Spanish. These nouns, unlike the letters of the alphabet, which are all masculine in French and feminine in Spanish, and unlike the plant and animal names just examined, are semantically disparate. We therefore cannot invoke the rarity of occurrence that facilitates gender change. Nor can we hope to find the semantic unity that characterizes the alphabet letter class, insuring language-internal uniformity of gender assignment to all exemplars, as a partial explanation for these individual nouns' gender assignments.



Furthermore, our search here concerned, as we said, only 31 pairs (Table VI) of French-Spanish gender-divergent cognates, the high frequency ones as defined above. At first glance, at least, our results would seem to comfort the "every word has its own history" school of thought. A few pairs even turned out to be based on participial or adjectival Latin forms, and therefore had no gender in Latin, another kind of case in which gender assignment was not inherited from the parent language. One modest observation, in this connection, is that the absorption of the Latin neuters among these nouns was more often effected by the masculine in French and the feminine in Spanish. That is, among the words which are masculine in Spanish, only 2 come from Latin neuters, while among those that are masculine in French, 4 seem clearly to come from Latin neuters, and 2 to have competing etymologies, including a neuter one.

One interesting correlate of the relatively high frequency of these words in both these languages is their native status: that is, they are native Latin words, as opposed to loanwords from Greek, which was the case of many of the gender-divergent pairs of (often exotic) plant and animal names that we examined above (see Table V). On the other hand, first and second declension feminines and masculines, respectively, are rare on this list. The consequent absence of prototypical gender marking from most of these nouns may have encouraged the opposite absorption of the neuters and, to a lesser extent, the gender changes, in one or the other language, that characterize these pairs. Thus the modest conjecture inspired by the frequency and etymological study of these very limited subcorpora is that low frequency (and perhaps the accompanying lack of semantic prototypicality) appears to encourage gender change, and that nouns from types of declensions that are neither typically masculine nor typically feminine can easily end up in either gender, through masculine → feminine change, or, especially, opposite absorption of neuters.

## 7. CONCLUSION

At this stage of our research, we have identified morphological and semantic sub-types of gender-divergent cognate pairs in French and Spanish. Different (and gender-opposite) derivational suffixes account for a great proportion of such pairs among formally similar bilingual dictionary equivalents.

Here, however, we have been more interested in less obvious sources of gender divergence such as opposite assignment to new, non-derived (borrowed) words whose form is opaque with respect to gender. The role of semantic classes in assignment was of great interest since, for example, the names of the letters of alphabets are all masculine in French and feminine in Spanish.

We have discovered that the sub-class of plant and animal names shows a remarkably high rate of gender divergence in French-Spanish cognate pairs. Since these gender-opposites were often borrowed names of exotic species, we became interested in the role of frequency in gender divergence, and in fact showed that very few gender-opposite nouns figured in frequency dictionaries of these two languages. Thus we conclude that infrequency precludes universal and complete mastery of gender assignment for formally opaque nouns, and thus plays a major role in gender change.

Table I: The Corpus

	N	%
Gender-divergent cognate pairs	623	100
Pairs feminine in French : masculine in Spanish	280	45
Pairs masculine in French : feminine in Spanish	343	55

Table II: Opposite gender assignment for pairs whose stem and derivational suffix are cognate

French	Spanish	French	Spanish
-at (m)	-ía (f)	tutorat notariat	tutoría notaría
-auté (f)	-ado (m)	papauté principauté	papado principado
-ier (m)	-era (f)	vinaigrier moutardier saladier mûrier sardinier poudrier verrier sablier	vinagrera mostacera ensaladera morera sardinera polvera vasera salvadera
-eur (f)	-or (m)	vigueur verdeur tumeur torpeur splendeur valeur stupeur rougeur rumeur rigueur vapeur pudeur saveur	vigor verdor tumor torpor esplendo valor estupor rubor rumor rigor vapor pudor sabor

Table III: Some endings of Spanish words in our corpus

	N	%
Feminine with -a	212	34
Masculine with -o	159	25
Masculine with -or	35	6
Masculine with -a	19	3
Feminine with -ión	6	1
Feminine with -o	2 words : <i>autoradio</i> et <i>modelo</i> (epicene)	
Feminine with -or	2 words : <i>coliflor</i> et <i>labor</i>	
Masculine with --ión	1 word : <i>aluvión</i>	

Table IV: French -C + "mute e" &amp; Spanish -C or -e

	N	fem.	%	masc.	%
Fr. words: -C+"mute e"	240 :	180	75	60	25
Sp. words : -C or -e	223 :	61	27	162	73

Gender-divergent cognate pairs: Fr. -C+"mute e" : Sp. -C or -Ce

Fr. fem. : Sp. masc.		Fr. masc. : Sp. fem.	
N	%	N	%
91	86	15	14

Table V: Plant and animal names in our corpus vs.  
plant and animal names in lists of frequent words

Plants					
Pairs in corpus (/623)		Names in Juilland et al. 1970 (/5083) in Fr.		Names in Juilland & Rodriguez (/5024) in Sp.	
N	%	N	%	N	%
48	7.7	26	.5	13	.26

Animals					
Pairs in corpus (/623)		Names in Juilland et al. 1970 (/5083) in Fr.		Names in Juilland & Rodriguez (/5024) in Sp.	
N	%	N	%	N	%
33	5.3	40	.8	17	.34

## Plant names in our corpus

Fr. fem. :	Sp. masc.	Fr. masc. :	Sp. fem.
absinthe	absintis	acacia	acacia
acanthé	acanto	arec	areca
asperge	espárrago	camélia	camelia
cacahouète	cacahuete	catalpa	catalpa
carde	cardo	cep	cepa
céréale	cereal	chou-fleur	coliflor
échalote	chalote	coca	coca
euphorbe	euforbio	cola	cola
figue	higo	colza	colza
jacinthe	jacinto	curcum	cúrcuma
mangue	mango	figuier	higuera
myrtille	mirtillo	gardénia	gardenia
narcisse	narciso	hortensia	hortensia
pistache	pistache	lampyre	lampírida
réglisse	regaliz	lilas	lila
rhubarbe	ruibarbo	magnolia	magnolia
serpenteaire	serpentario	manioc	mandioca
tomate	tomate	mimosa	minmosa
		mûrier	morera
		pétunia	petunia
		plantain	plantaina
		quiquina	quiquina
		raphia	rafia
		réséda	reseda
		séquoia	secoya
		te(c)k	teca
		thallophytes	talofitas
		thuya	tuya
		tilleul	tila
		yucca	yuca

## Animal names in our corpus

Fr. fem. :	Sp. masc.	Fr. masc. :	Sp. fem.
annélides	anélidos	aigle	águila
antilope	antílope	alpaga	alpaca
balane	bálano	anaconda	anaconda
bonite	bonito	barracuda	barracuda
gerboise	gerbo	cacatoès	cacatúa
hermine	armiño	chinchilla	chinchilla
licorne	unicornio	cobra	cobra
nacre	nácar	doryphore	dorífor
paramécie	paramecio	iguane	iguana
pieuvre	pulpo	lama	llama
renoncule	ranúnculo	lièvre	liebre
		marsouin	marsopa
		merlu	merluza
		naja	naja
		onagre	onagra
		phoque	foca
		phylloxera	filoxera
		rat	rata
		serpent	serpiente
		sphinx	esfinge
		ténia	tenia
		zèbre	cebra

Table VI: Gender-divergent pairs both of whose members are frequent words: = in Juilland and Rodriguez' (1964) list for Spanish and Juilland *et al.*'s (1970) list for French:

Masc. in Fr. : fem. in Sp.	Fem. in Fr. : masc. in Sp.
art : arte	ambiance : ambiente
chou-fleur : coliflor	analyse : análisis
courant : corriente	attaque : ataque
labeur : labor	automobile : automóvil
lait : leche	dent : diente
miel : miel	énigme : enigma
modèle : modelo	fin : fin
moral : moral	limite : límite
nez : nariz	marge : margen
ordre : orden	mer : mar
sang : sangre	origine : origen
serpent : serpiente	paire : par
siège : sede	planète : planeta
signal : señal	taille : talle
sort : suerte	vallée : valle
pair : par	

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