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Gender stereotypes and  
social normativity: Insights  
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## Gender stereotypes and social normativity: Insights from the Great Chain of Being metaphor in proverbs

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Recent studies (e.g., Caldas-Coulthard 2020) have shown that while feminist linguistic activities have been successful to some extent in mitigating gender discrimination in language, the successes achieved have been mainly at the lexical level whereas discursive practices that indicate underlying sexist beliefs continue to endure in most societies around the globe. Proverbs are an instance of discursive practices which, as the result of a sexist society, perpetuate harmful gender beliefs. Within the Spanish context, quite a number of them reflect gender-related stereo-

types and ideologies which were common not only in Spain, but also in many parts of medieval Europe (Garrido 2001; Crida Álvarez 2001). This paper seeks to examine how Spanish proverbs preserve gender stereotypes and influence social normativity using Lakoff and Turner's (1989) Great Chain Metaphor Theory, Glick and Fiske's (1997) Ambivalent Sexism Theory, and principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as proposed by Lazar (2005). Particular attention is paid to how ideals of masculinities and femininities are perpetuated through language use. The findings reveal that proverbs and other types of popular literature remain significant sources for gender ideologies and can serve as channels for institutionalizing sexism.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Proverbs are an interesting field of manifestation of gender stereotypes and worldviews that inform the attitudes and behaviors of a community. They are considered true reflections of morality or social thought. Such sayings are endowed with a great power of illustration of mental or conceptual representations and are usually precise and brief sources of advice that also serve to support, license, or authenticate one's own opinion.

This immense source of knowledge and 'wisdom' provides an unavoidable and inexhaustible pool of matter to study the history and culture of a given society (Poncela 2012). Spanish proverbs reveal the collective subconscious of medieval Spanish society (see Garrido 2001; also, Crida Álvarez 2001)—its mythical consciousness. According to Martínez Garrido (2001: 83), "the rhetorical and pragmatic effectiveness of proverbs [...] is due to its highly persuasive linguistic nature, halfway between oral

and written".<sup>2</sup> She adds that "[p]roverbs are persuasive texts, shared and known by an entire community, whose moral and behavioral content is proposed as a model of conduct" (Martínez Garrido 2001: 83). However, a critical analysis reveals that gender-related proverbs are often generalizations which serve as an effective tool for gender politics through the propagation of gender stereotypes and ideologies.

The objective of this paper is to examine how Spanish proverbs conserve gender stereotypes and influence social normativity. To do this, we draw on Lakoff and Turner's (1989) Great Chain Metaphor Theory, Glick and Fiske's (1997) Ambivalent Sexism Theory and principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as proposed by Lazar (2005). The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a review of pertinent existing literature and clarifies some key terms such as 'proverbs' and 'ideologies' while elucidating the connection between them. The data collection methods

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<sup>1</sup> The following paper is an adaptation of parts of my doctoral thesis entitled *El sexismo lingüístico e implicaciones reformistas para la lengua: una perspectiva crítica del español y un estudio colateral del ga* ([https://www.academia.edu/66338597/El\\_sexismo\\_ling%C3%BC%C3%ADstico\\_e\\_implicaciones\\_reformistas\\_para\\_la\\_lengua\\_una\\_perspectiva\\_cr%C3%ADtica\\_del\\_espa%C3%B1ol\\_y\\_un\\_estudio\\_colateral\\_del\\_ga](https://www.academia.edu/66338597/El_sexismo_ling%C3%BC%C3%ADstico_e_implicaciones_reformistas_para_la_lengua_una_perspectiva_cr%C3%ADtica_del_espa%C3%B1ol_y_un_estudio_colateral_del_ga), accessed December 2025).

<sup>2</sup> All translations mine except otherwise indicated.

and analytical frameworks as well as the theoretical background of the current study are explained in Section 3. The findings from the analysis of the sample proverbs are presented in Section 4. The paper ends with a conclusion in Section 5.

## 2 Proverbs and ideology

Most of the Spanish proverbs regarding women can be interpreted as possible weapons to control and subjugate them. As Schwarz points out, proverbs are “popular wisdom” that “reflect myths, beliefs and traditions that have been perpetuated in different cultures from generation to generation” and they are “pillars that have allowed inequality and discrimination between genders, as well as sexism, to be perpetuated in the same way” (Schwarz 2013: n.p.). It can be said that, with proverbs, a series of psychological and cognitive aspects come into play. Since society often accepts them as true, proverbs can have a strong psychic effect on language users—this is basically because they are convincing and persuasive tools.

In his contrastive studies on English and Kazakh folk proverbs, Syzdykov (2014: 318) describes folk proverbs and sayings as “an integral part of the spiritual treasures of the culture and language of the people, the age-old wisdom and skills used by them—an important part of the culture of human language” which “can artistically embody various aspects of life, social experience, outlook, the originality of artistic attitudes and tastes, mental and ethical and aesthetic values”. Indeed, proverbs are valued not only for being channels of ‘wisdom,’ but also for their aesthetic value. They have rhythmic characteristics due to their sentence

construction which usually involve the use of literary figures such as metaphor, repetition, rhyme, pun, and irony. It is because of these features that they become invaluable sources of entertainment as well as instruction. According to Ankra Nee-Adjabeng (1996: 3), “speeches without proverbs or elegant sayings are like soup without salt”. Additional evidence of how language users are affected psychologically as a result of using or hearing a proverb can be found in Yolanda Lastra de Suárez (1992: 405). She affirms:

Language acquisition is part of cultural acquisition and part of the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Language is the main means of transmitting other aspects of culture and is also a means of exploring and controlling the social context and establishing one’s status and role within relationships with other members of the group. Because of the different social contexts, learning to speak is also learning to be a man or a woman, rich or poor, Chinese, Buddhist or whatever.

Each language is an instrument shaped by its history and patterns of use. In language learning, verbalization is only one part. Acquisition has to do with the language heard, the interaction situation, the variety or register used in a communicative event, the language itself, and the social structure within which the interaction takes place. Proverbs are linguistic structures which constitute an important aspect of cultural interaction and continuity within a social structure. As Pavlopoulos, Louridas, and Filos (2024: n.p.) observe, proverbs (paroemia), which are “popular sayings” do not only offer “general advice or wisdom” but

additionally, they have “been guiding social interactions of people for thousands of years” and “continue to do so today”. Indeed, by being “passed as expressions of wisdom and truth from generation to generation” (Hrisztova-Gotthardt & Varga 2014: 1), proverbs are able to serve valuable didactic, communicative as well as gender hegemonic purposes by projecting stereotypes and ideologies. This makes them central to gender normativity. Proverbs are usually interpreted according to the sociological and pragmatic context in which they appear.

Spain has a rich paremiological culture—a large number of which deal with women. In fact, Fernández (1999: 131) argues that “almost a sixth of all Spanish proverbs that exist or have existed take as a proverbial motif the female gender”. In her seminal work *Sexismo lingüístico: Análisis y propuestas ante la discriminación sexual en el lenguaje*, Fernández (1999) maintains that, of all the proverbs on women that she has gathered (i.e., 10,884), eighty-five defects of women are referred to and only sixteen positive qualities are mentioned—a detail that turns out to be striking. She also points out that in these proverbs women are usually associated with clerics and Jews—that is, groups that are also frequently stereotyped negatively in Spain. It is worth pointing out that this pattern is not unique to Spain. Kochman-Haladyj (2020: 73) observes that “[b]eyond any conceivable doubt, the female image emerges more precisely [in proverbs], since women’s roles and status constitute the core subject of many proverbs, re-

grettably of negatively-coloured perception, both at a European and a universal level”.

Through the analysis of proverbs, the function of ideology in achieving and maintaining this gender imbalance is revealed. According to Fairclough (2003: 9), ideologies are “representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation”. He states that “language is a material form of ideology, and language is invested by ideology” (Fairclough 2010: 59). Sexism in proverbs is thus a clear means of achieving hegemony, i.e., when a powerful group succeeds in oppressing another group with its consent (Gramsci 1971).

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Data collection

44 proverbs that manifest sexism in the Spanish language were gathered from Martínez Kleiser’s *Refranero General ideológico Español* (1978)<sup>3</sup>, Fernández (1999) and other existing literature. Relevant data were identified for the analysis by searching for specific keywords such as ‘woman,’ ‘man,’ ‘wife,’ ‘husband,’ and other lexical manifestations of gender. The purpose of the current study was to examine the manner in which the convergence of culture and tradition in patriarchal systems constructs and defends the gender *status quo*. It is worthy to note that the aim was not to examine whether the proverb samples are still being used in contemporary society,

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<sup>3</sup> First published in 1953.

but rather to analyse the ideologies they convey.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the objective, as indicated in Section 1 above, was threefold and can be explicated as follows:

- i. To analyse gender stereotypes and ideologies in Spanish proverbs.
- ii. To examine the construction and sustenance of masculinities and femininities within and through proverbs; and
- iii. To discuss the connection between masculinities, femininities, and social normativity.

### 3.2 Analytical frameworks

The contributions of Lakoff and Turner (1989), considered as two highly influential figures in cognitive linguistics (Buljan & Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013), were instrumental in the examination of the cultural as well as the cognitive aspects of proverbs, i.e., their psychological functions. Lakoff and Turner's (1989) cognitivist theory of metaphor interpretation—the Great Chain Metaphor (henceforth GCM) — was employed as an analytical framework for the selected proverbs (see also Lakoff 1987, Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Specifically, four cognitive tools subsumed in this paremiological theory (GCM) were applied, namely, 1) the naive theory of the Nature of Things; 2) the Great Chain of Being metaphor, which is qualified as a cultural model; 3) the “Generic Is Specific” metaphor; and 4) the Maxim of Quantity.

The naive theory of the Nature of Things holds that our perception of ourselves and the world we inhabit is shaped by a collection of

beliefs embodied in the cultural model of the Great Chain of Being (GCB). In other words, The Great Chain of Being Metaphor and language users' practical knowledge about “the nature of things,” enable them to develop theories on how the world operates.

The Great Chain of Being has its origins in medieval Christianity. This hierarchical structure was thought to have been ordained by God. On the hierarchical scales of the GCB metaphor are God, angels, human, animal, plant, and inorganic objects. It is characterized by higher beings possessing the properties of lower levels. Kieltyka (2015: 313) describes the GCB as

a model of the organization and perception of the surrounding reality which is deeply rooted in the European tradition and which relies on the fact that all the material/physical and spiritual entities create a hierarchy ranked from the lowest entities/beings to those occupying the highest level of the hierarchy.

In proverbs, these properties of lower-level beings are captured as metaphoric properties and they flow up the hierarchy, not down, meaning they are unidirectional. For instance, it is alright to say “Dela is a fox” but not “This fox is a Dela”.

The “generic is specific” metaphor enables proverb users and interpreters to apply their understanding of the specific scenario depicted in the proverb to comprehend various analogous situations that share a common generic structure. Finally, the principle of verbal economy (Maxim of Quantity) asserts

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<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that quite a number of these misogynistic sayings are no longer in use. Yet, the ideologies they convey persist in current times.

that when a specific entity is referred to, the speaker is assumed to be alluding to its top-level characteristics, unless additional information suggests otherwise (also, see Buljan & Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013). For example, lions are associated with courage, dogs are associated with loyalty, and foxes are associated with cleverness (also, see Krikmann 2007).

These cognitive tools reveal the “conceptual architecture” of proverbs, that is, “the specific imagery behind the proverbs’ linguistic form” (Buljan & Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013: 68). They show not only how proverbs are interpreted but also how language users are affected psychologically as a result of using or hearing a proverb being used. In other words, they reinforce language users’ acknowledgement of “the nature of things”. Kieltyka (2015: 313) points out the following in relation to the prevalence of the GCB:

The theoretical bases of the concept of the Great Chain of Being were developed in Antiquity by such ancient philosophers as Plato and Aristotle (cf. Nisbet 1982: 35), and it is worth mentioning that the GCB has not merely survived into our times but—more importantly—elements of its mechanism are reflected in various evolutionary theories and, recently, also in semantic investigations of natural languages.

As Kieltyka (2015: 314) further explains, this model (GCB) “is rooted in the consciousness of language users as a cultural model indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language”. It thus provides deep insights on the metaphorical construction of the gender order in proverbs and its prevalence.

The selected proverbs in the current study were also analyzed using the various indices of Glick and Fiske’s (1996/1997) Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST), namely dominative paternalism, protective paternalism, competitive gender differentiation, complementary gender differentiation, heterosexual hostility, and heterosexual intimacy. Glick and Fiske (1996/1997) categorize these sexist attitudes into ‘hostile’ and ‘benevolent’ sexism. Dominative paternalism, competitive gender differentiation, and heterosexual hostility fall within the category of hostile sexism, whereas protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and intimate heterosexuality belong to benevolent sexism. Glick and Fiske (2001: 109) explain the connection between hostile and benevolent sexism as follows:

Hostile sexism is an adversarial view of gender relations in which women are perceived as seeking to control men, whether through sexuality or feminist ideology. Although benevolent sexism may sound oxymoronic, this term recognizes that some forms of sexism are, for the perpetrator, subjectively benevolent, characterizing women as pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored and whose love is necessary to make a man complete [...] Despite the greater social acceptability of benevolent sexism, our research suggests that it serves as a crucial complement to hostile sexism that helps to pacify women’s resistance to societal gender inequality.

Sexist stereotypes and ideologies were also analysed from the perspective of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which seeks to critique unequal gender relations (Lazar 2007). FCDA argues that “issues of



gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly more complex and subtle" (Lazar 2007: 141).

FCDA was a useful analytical approach because it provides an effective lens for the scrutiny of the subtle manifestation of power and control in language. Proverbs are examples of discourse which are complex and subtle since they are often indirect and thus can be a means for the sustenance of the gender order. FCDA is an extension of CDA and, as Fairclough (1993) explains, discourse analysis involves a "critical" element which can reveal hidden links and sources within texts (as cited in Rasul 2015). The AST was also considered appropriate for the current study because it provides a comprehensive analytical tool for the examination of the nature of sexism.

Although the GCB has been the subject of extensive debates among cognitive linguists, philosophers, and other scholars (see Krikmann 1996), we bypass these discussions since the main interest of this paper is how the GCB applies to metaphors and proverbs, not the GCB itself. Certainly, the GCM provides a lens for the exploration of cognitive-psychological explanations of the effects of proverbs on human behaviour, i.e., how the figurative use of language in proverbs affects our worldview and actions. Additionally, the GCM provides evidence for Talbot's (2003: 470) description of ideologies as "the result of stereotypes that involve simplification, reduction and naturalization". The figurative use of language in proverbs, especially metaphors, enhances the simplification, reduction, and naturalization of characteristics associated with men and women and consequently, the birth of ideologies which play a key role in making proverbs channels of power control.

In the following sections we will examine, using the GCM, AST, and FCDA, the misogynistic substratum of systemic gender prejudices—sometimes burning or corrosive—concealed within these linguistic practices. Before proceeding, it is worth adding that the GCB allows for a cognitive-linguistic perspective, the AST is a socio-psychological theory, whereas FCDA offers a sociolinguistic lens for the examination of gender-related issues of power in discourse.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Androcentrism and paternalism in proverbs**

Many gender-related proverbs in Spanish manifest androcentric and paternalistic ideologies. Androcentrism involves the perpetuation of male-centered worldviews whereas paternalism entails promoting male dominance or belief systems that encourage men to undermine women's autonomy. These can be analysed in light of Glick and Fiske's (1996/1997) dominative paternalism paradigm. According to these authors, dominative paternalism is the belief that women are not adequately competent and consequently need to be controlled by men. This category of proverbs reflects the belief that men have control and authority, and they also project a general androcentric perspective. They suggest that there is a differential hierarchy between women and men and that it is of utmost importance to maintain this social structure. In line with this, some Spanish proverbs such as the following highlight the image of the female figure as not adequately competent and, hence, that needs



a man as a superior male figure (Glick & Fiske 1997):

- (1) Cada hombre es un mundo. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'Every man is a world.'
- (2) A la mujer, el hombre la ha de hacer. (Fernández 1999: 187)  
'It is men who make women who they are.'
- (3) La mujer y el huerto, no quieren más que un dueño. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'The woman and the garden only need a master.'
- (4) Hijo de viuda, bien consentido y mal criado. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'The child of a widow is over pampered and badly brought up.'

The proverb "Cada hombre es un mundo", for example, presents an androcentric perspective which supports dominative paternalism. Likewise, proverbs 2-4 also illustrate the ideology that the world revolves around men, that they must be in control, and that the course of a woman's life depends on the influence of a man. These proverbs suggest that the female figure lacks autonomy and agency and consequently, in the absence of a man's authority cannot be efficient. This is signaled by the use of the words "viuda" and "mal criado" in proverb 4.

An analysis of proverbs demonstrates how these ideologies force men and women to shape the roles and functions that society dictates to them according to the "asymmetrical meaning of 'man' and 'woman'" (Lazar 2008: 90). These proverbs confirm Lazar's (2005) contention that the discursive construction of gender is an ideological structure that can foster the gender *status quo*. For instance, in proverb 4, femininity

is associated with incompetence whereas masculinity is associated with capability in the family domain. Ideologies are thus constructed, maintained, and perpetuated across generations; and through proverbs, one observes how the transfer of such ideologies are negotiated between individuals in a society. Since ideologies arise as a result of social interaction, beliefs of dominative paternalism are easily propagated and, unfortunately, may encourage and lead to domestic violence (Lomotey 2019; Martínez Garrido 2001) since women are placed on a lower level of the GCB human scale, one that is subordinate to men.

Another aspect of paternalism, as identified in the AST, is protective paternalism. According to Glick and Fiske (1996/1997), protective paternalism reflects the belief that men should protect and care for women, since the former have more authority, power, and physical strength. It is an assumption that, logically, implies that women, being the 'weaker sex,' must depend on men (the 'stronger sex') and this can also be observed in proverbs.

- (5) Quien mujer no tiene, a palos la muele; pero quien la tiene, bien la cuida y defiende. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'The one who has no wife, beats her; but the one who has one, takes good care of her and defends her.'
- (6) El hombre ha de tener tres cosas codiciadas: su mujer, su caballo y su espada. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'Man must have three coveted things: his wife, his horse and his sword.'

Proverb 5 is an interesting example of a discourse which conveys both hostile and benevolent sexism. While it appears to transmit

positive beliefs because it criticizes hostile sexism, specifically violence against women, it projects ideas of benevolent sexism by presenting an image of women as the weaker sex. As Glick and Fiske (2001: 109) point out, the “idealization of women” through benevolent sexism “simultaneously implies that they are weak and best suited for conventional gender roles; being put on a pedestal is confining, yet the man who places a woman there is likely to interpret this as cherishing, rather than restricting her (and many women may agree)”.

In contrast, proverb 6 promotes the ideology of women as possessions through the imagery of chivalry. Men are presented with authority, power, and physical strength symbolized by the word “*espada*”. These samples depict the image of men as the stronger sex, ‘macho’ and reflect male dominance through violence (“*a palos la muele*”) or protective paternalism (“*bien la cuida y defiende*”). From an FCDA and GCM perspective, they demonstrate the subtlety and complexity of sexism in proverbs. Lakoff and Turner (1989: xi) explain how this subtleness is achieved through metaphors as follows:

Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it. It is omnipresent: metaphor suffuses our thoughts, no matter what we are thinking about. It is accessible to everyone: as children, we automatically, as a matter of course, acquire a mastery of everyday metaphor. It is conventional: metaphor is an integral part of our ordinary everyday thought and language. And it is irreplaceable: metaphor allows us to understand our selves and our world in ways that no other modes of thought can. Far from being merely a mat-

ter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought—all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason.

The discriminatory undertones in some gender-related proverbs are taken as “ordinary” due to the metaphorically created “conceptual architecture” of images of women and men in proverbs. For instance, in proverb 6, an automatic connection is made between the sword, which is normally used as a metonymical representation of weapons, and men, since they have traditionally been associated with it. Consequently, bravery is understood as a characteristic of men whereas, by placing women in the same semantic camp as “*espada*” and “*caballo*”, women become “*cosas*”, that is, belonging to a lower scale than men on the GCB. Through the lens of FCDA and GCM, we observe the diverse forms in which power relations are exercised and maintained.

## 4.2 Gender differentiation in proverbs

In addition to the subordinate position of women on the GCB hierarchy, there are other indices of gender differentiation in proverbs that show how the GCM has metaphorically constructed the gender-related “conceptual architecture” not only of Spaniards but also of many other European societies. Glick and Fiske (1996/1997) identify two types of gender differentiation—competitive and complementary gender differentiation (see section 3.2). Competitive gender differentiation is the belief that men “are better than the other half of the population” (Glick & Fiske 1997: 122)

whereas complementary gender differentiation is the belief that women should conform to traditional gender roles which are complementary to those of men.

These beliefs on gender differentiation are reflected in the Great Chain of Being which, as explained in Section 3.2, was believed to have been decreed by God. Indeed, an analysis of gender-related proverbs shows how religion, tradition, and nature function as the authorities that dictate the superiority of men and the subordination of women. Examples of such proverbs are:

- (7) Dios se hizo hombre, y no mujer. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'God made himself a man, and not a woman.'
- (8) Dios, que es el *non plus ultra* del saber, se hizo hombre, y no mujer. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'God, who is the wisest, made himself a man, and not a woman.'
- (9) Dios, que, como Dios, pudo escoger, quiso hacerse hombre, y no mujer.  
'God, who, being God, could choose, wanted to become a man, not a woman.'
- (10) Antes que Dios se hiciese hombre, el diablo se había hecho mujer. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'Before God became a man, the devil had become a woman.'
- (11) Dos hijas y una madre, tres diablos para un padre. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'Two daughters and a mother, three devils for a father.'
- (12) Matrimonio de buena fortuna: siete varones y de hembras sólo una.  
'A marriage of good fortune: seven males and only one female.'

By making references to the supernatural and divine, proverbs 7-10 project gender imbalance, and consequently gender discrimination, as providential, incontestable, and inevitable. In other words, they project the gender order as arranged by God or a spiritual power and suggest that women are destined to be inferior to men. These ideologies, which are based on religion, attribute the positive to males and the negative to females.

Such beliefs are metaphorically captured in proverbs through the GCB metaphor because within the category of 'human' on the GCB scale, distinctions are made between women and men, and the latter is hierarchically placed above the former. As Krikmann (2007: 1) clarifies, the Great Chain of Being was believed to have "[t]he highest level [...] occupied by God, [...] followed by the angels, *various classes of people, animals etc*" (my emphasis). Additional evidence can be found in the observation that kings and princes are given prominence on the chain, this is not the case for queens and princesses. The Encyclopædia Britannica Online notes that the chain "had a pervasive influence on Western thought, particularly through the ancient Greek Neoplatonists and derivative philosophies during the European Renaissance and the 17th and early 18th centuries" (as cited in Krikmann 2007: 22). This sociohistorical "notion" which, as Krikmann (2007: 22) observes, "died out in the 19th century but was given renewed currency in the 20th by Arthur O. Lovejoy" throws light on the gender order. The perception of women as inferior to men permeates human thought and successfully influences language users' behaviour because it has largely been accepted as "the nature of things".

On the one hand, proverbs 7-10 epitomize man as close to God by separating man from

woman (within the GCB) and thus striking some kind of an affinity between God and man. This contrast between man and woman can be seen especially in proverbs 7-9 with the negation 'no' ("hombre, y no mujer") which sets man apart from woman and makes him competitively distinctive and superior. On the other hand, proverb 11 degrades women in this category, makes her subhuman, and additionally, places her on the same rank as the devil. Man and woman are thus juxtaposed with the supernatural categories God and devil respectively. It is worth mentioning that demons (including fallen/renegade angels, and by implication the devil) are placed on a higher level than humans on the chain. Yet, the asymmetry between women and men lies in the competitive juxtaposition between good, derived from an association with God, and evil, derived from an association with the devil, for men and women respectively. Consequently, through the power of religion, the authority of the dominant group (males) over the subordinate group (females) is rationalized.

The justification of how things are done in a particular social order and the acceptance of such explanations as legitimate are defined by Fairclough (2003) as 'legitimation' (cf. the cognitive tool "Nature of Things" in the GCM). As Fairclough points out, legitimation is done by rationalization, which is to make mention of the "utility of institutionalized action, and to the knowledges society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity" (Fairclough 2003: 98). Rationalization serves as a justification for social stratification between women and men (Fairclough 2003). From the AST perspective, the above proverbs are also a reflection of competitive gender differentiation. This perception is captured numerically in proverb 12 which

suggests that males are seven times better than females ("siete varones y de hembras sólo una").

An observation of Lakoff and Turner's (1989) cognitive theory of metaphor interpretation—the Great Chain Metaphor—reveals the foundations of this belief, as well as the basis of the rationalization that serves to justify social stratification between women and men. In other words, the Great Chain of Being can be identified as the background of magnification and devaluation metaphors in gender-related proverbs.

In FCDA, a key point is the examination of ways through which legitimation is achieved. Legitimation structures and strategies of dominance are maintained by the creation of some perceptions generally accepted as 'truth' or 'facts' to perpetuate control. The GCB is an avenue par excellence for establishing the 'truth' about the superiority of man. Indeed, ancient 'civilization' is one of the various factors that have been the initiators and perpetuators of sexism (through education, history, and religion). There are some important classical scholars, with their doctrine often imbued with the sexist views of their time, who have influenced the history of the human race. One observes countless sexist patterns in the works of some Greek philosophers. These include statements such as the following: 'If a man was not just in this life, he would be a woman in the next reincarnation'; 'I thank God that I was not born a woman, but a man, that I was not born a slave but free' (Plato); 'To do great things one must be as superior as man is to woman, father to children, and master to slaves' (Aristotle, in Sardá 2012). Aristotle is also quoted as saying in his *Politics* "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (cited in Smith

1983: 467). The difficulty in solving the problem of sexism is explained by the fact that most people have come to terms with these assertions, accepting it as a natural occurrence.

In the above proverbs, the belief that men are superior to women is presented as a truth—a fact—and legitimized by the pairing of men with God versus the equation of women with the devil. This crafting of gender-related ‘truths,’ ‘facts,’ and ‘norms’ can lead to the acceptance of gender differentiation as natural and demonstrates the complexity of gender and power relations. As Lazar (2008: 91) argues, “the effectiveness of modern power (as with hegemony) is that it is mostly cognitive [...], based on an internalization of gendered norms and acted out routinely and ‘naturally’ in the texts and talk of everyday life”.

In line with the construction of superiority vs. inferiority as a strategy of dominance, some Spanish proverbs tend to equate women with animals and objects (cf. the GCB), describing them as being at the disposal of men, and this favors and invites the maltreatment of women. Some examples of such proverbs in Spanish are the following:

- (13) La mujer es animal que gusta del castigo.  
(Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
‘The woman is an animal who likes punishment.’
- (14) A la mujer y a la burra cada día una zurra.  
(Fernández 1999: 187)  
‘Women and donkeys are to be given a spanking each day.’
- (15) La mujer y el raso, o prensado, o acuchillado. (Martínez Kleiser 1978: 489)

‘Women and satin, pressed, or stabbed.’

- (16) La nuez y la mujer, a golpes se han de vencer. (Martínez Kleiser 1978: 489)  
‘Walnuts and women, are conquered through beating.’
- (17) Al papel y a la mujer, sin miedo de romper. (Martínez Kleiser 1978: 489)  
‘Papers and women, break them without fear.’
- (18) Asnos y mujeres, por la fuerza entienden. (Martínez Kleiser 1978: 489)  
‘Donkeys and women, understand through force.’

The above proverbs relate to the maltreatment of women because they trivialize females, present them as subhuman, and lead to their marginalization. A critical discourse analysis reveals that some of the words that have been used to express these concepts are ‘animal’ (‘burra,’ ‘asno’), and these, as well as other vocabulary objectify women by equating them to items such as ‘raso,’ ‘nuez,’ and ‘papel’. Along the same lines, it is interesting to note that some proverbs reflect the idea that women belong to men.

- (19) ¿De qué ciudad sois? De la de mi marido. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
‘What city are you from? From that of my husband.’<sup>5</sup>

This perception of ‘belonging’ in proverb 19 reflects the idea that women belong to men, and it dates back to the time when women were part of their fathers’ or husbands’ possessions. In that era women were infantilized,

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<sup>5</sup> See also proverb 6 in relation to the use of the verb ‘tener’ to express possession. Here, women are actually referred to as ‘things’: tres cosas codiciadas.

and a woman was perceived as under the care of her husband if married (thus, the adoption of the husband's surname), her father, if she had no husband, or her son(s). Thus, many of these proverbs belong to a period which predates the onset of feminism. They reflect the ideologies of those times, namely, the medieval period. In Spain, these ideologies were reinforced during the Franquismo, i.e., the rule of Francisco Franco. Fernández (2022: 78) describes the period of Franco's regime as "a time during which a specific worldview was imposed on society" and proverbs "might have helped legitimate the government's stance with regards to certain issues, in this case, the position that women were expected to occupy in society". Although feminist activities have been successful to some extent in mitigating gender discrimination, notions of male superiority, the perception of men as the centre, societal expectations regarding gender roles and male power continues to persist (Freed 2020).

It is worth noting that such notions are not always outright 'hostile,' to use the words of Glick and Fiske (1996/1997). As explained above, gender differentiation does also have a benevolent component (i.e., Complementary gender differentiation). This belief was observed in the data. Two main imageries about women which are related to the division of labour were identified, namely, women as caregivers and women as child bearers. The image of the good woman and/or mother emphasizes the belief that it is women who must take care of the home. Smith (1983: 467) provides invaluable information on the historical development of this belief by explaining how Aristotle, in his *Politics*, "returns women to their traditional roles in the home, subserving men". Additionally, the ideal proto-

type of the female figure, according to the expectations of society, is that she must be a virgin and chaste, or wife and mother. These ideas are reflected in the following Spanish proverbs:

- (20) Para casta, con un hombre basta. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'A married woman needs only her husband.'
- (21) La mujer y la sartén, en la cocina están bien. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'The woman and the frying pan are fine in the kitchen.'
- (22) Gatos y mujeres, en la casa; perros y hombres, en la plaza. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'Cats and women, in the house; dogs and men, in the square.'
- (23) Para el labrador, vaca, oveja y mujer que no paren, poco valen. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'For the farmer, cows, sheep and women who do not give birth are of little value.'
- (24) Mujer infiel: puta; hombre infiel: héroe.  
'Unfaithful woman: whore; unfaithful man: hero.'

Proverb 23 is another example of how women are equated with animals, and it also reflects female traditional gender roles (e.g., child-bearing) which are complementary to those of men. Here, women are equated to animals which enhance the financial status of their owners through procreation. Moreover, the words 'casta' in proverb 20 and 'puta' in proverb 24 reflect the sexual decorum expected of women whereas words such as 'sartén' and 'cocina' reinforce the stereotypical role of women as caregivers. As Lazar warns, it is difficult for women to 'articulate and challenge' the discontent they suffer as a result of societal expectations. They are forced to sacrifice their



well-being to care for their husbands and children in “the labor of love” (Lazar 2008: 97). The above proverbs suggest that this societal expectation of women reflects, and may encourage, an unfair division of labour. Friedan’s (1962) study about middle-class Americans between 1950 and 1960 shows that this tendency was not germane to Spain alone. Indeed, these beliefs are rooted in patriarchal ideologies and practices that have spread with religion, so that we can find them all over Europe and the colonized world. Women around the world are forced to obey the “voices of tradition” (Friedan 1962) and to submit to this hegemonic social order. This social order, thanks to the Great Chain of Being, is hegemonic “since it seems natural and complementary, and innocuous and consensual, mystifying the current hierarchical relations of power” (Lazar 2008: 91). Women endure and suffer from this unfair dichotomy of a socio-cultural order hierarchically determined by gender.

On the other hand, many proverbs referring to men reflect the quality of courage that traditionally typifies virility. This is reflected in proverb 22, which equates women to a domestic animal (cat) which is relatively docile as compared to ‘dog’ which is aggressive and generally perceived as reflecting the bravery of men. As Kochman-Haľadyj and Kieľtyka (2023) explain citing Diez Velasco (2001), the “generic structure of the source domain of a metaphor” is understood as “consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain” (as cited in Kochman-Haľadyj & Kieľtyka 2023: 72). Additionally, in relation to masculinities, philandering is represented as a positive desired characteristic of men. This is achieved through the use of the word “h  roe” which is contrasted

with a word that has negative connotations (“puta”) for females in proverb 24.

Another aspect of gender roles is the fact that playing the roles typically performed by the other sex is severely criticized. It is interesting to note that this ‘infringement’ is even more abominable and degrading when it is a man who assumes the roles associated with women. Although in current times, this stereotypical attitude has evolved positively to a certain extent thanks to modernity, this cultural presumption persists. Being tough and rejecting the roles or behaviors associated with femininity continues to be a crucial manifestation of masculinity (Rice et al. 2021). Deviation from these social conventions leads to negative evaluations. For instance, assuming the gestures and attitudes of the other sex would lead to one being branded with derogatory labels—e.g., ‘maricas,’ ‘mariposas,’ ‘julandr  n / julandras,’ (used to refer to effeminate men or homosexuals) and ‘hembrimacho’ (a female who behaves like a male) among others (Garc  a Meseguer 1984). Similarly, women who assume the behaviors of men are rebuked in the following proverbs:

- (25) Mujeres con voz hombruna, nunca me fi   de ninguna. (Mart  nez Kleiser 1978)  
‘Women with a masculine voice, I never trusted any.’
- (26) Mujer que silba y mea en pie, hembrimachoes. (Mart  nez Kleiser 1978)  
‘A female who whistles and pees while standing, is a female male.’
- (27) Mujer que fuma, jura y orina en pie, no ser   hombre, pero no es mujer. (Mart  nez Kleiser 1978)



'A woman who smokes, swears and urinates while standing will not be a man, but she is not a woman.'

- (28) A la mujer que fuma o bebe, el diablo se la lleve; y si además mea en pie, libera nos, Domine. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'May the devil take away the woman who smokes or drinks, and if she also pees on her feet, set us free, Domine.'

As Hellinger and Bußmann (2001: 16) point out, proverbs, as well as metaphors and idioms, are "frozen expressions" with "the implicit discursive negotiation of gender"—thus they serve to constantly reiterate gender stereotypes and ideologies.

#### **4.3 Heteronormativity: an element of social normativity for homologating sexism**

Heteronormativity, the privileging of heterosexuality as natural, forms a central component of social normativity in many countries around the world. It therefore constitutes a scale for judging or criticizing others and, regarding gender relations, provides an avenue for discrimination. Glick and Fiske (1997), for example, identify heterosexual intimacy as a component of the Ambivalent Sexism Theory. Indices of heterosexual intimacy – "viewing a female romantic partner as necessary for a man to be 'complete'" (Glick & Fiske 1997: 122) – were identified in the proverbs analyzed for this study. Indeed, quite a number of proverbs project heterosexual intimacy as exigent for men as well as women. The implication of the following examples is that an individual's successes matter little, as one cannot consider himself or herself an accomplished person without having a partner of the opposite sex.

These ideologies are demonstrated in the following Spanish proverbs:

- (29) Sin una mujer al lado, el hombre es un desdichado. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'Without a woman by his side, a man is wretched.'
- (30) Quedarse para vestir santos. (Pérez Moreno 2016)  
'Remain a spinster to dress saints.'
- (31) Nave sin timón es mujer sin varón. (Fernández 1999: 18)  
'A woman without a man is a ship without a rudder.'
- (32) En la vida, la mujer, tres salidas ha de hacer: al bautismo, al casamiento y a la sepultura o monumento. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'In life, the woman must make three departures: to baptism, to marriage and to burial or monument.'

The above proverbs maintain the importance of marriage. They stress that one must marry to avoid contempt from society. Marriage and childbirth turn out to be the decisive milestones that define the relevance of the prototypical woman in many societies.

Another facet of heteronormativity that promotes sexism as postulated by Glick and Fiske (1996/1997) is heterosexual hostility. Heterosexual hostility refers to the merging of sex and power, the sexual objectification of women, and the belief that feminine sexuality enables women to gain control over men. In Spanish there are many proverbs that reproach women for their sexual behavior, whether decorous or liberated. Women are expected to be young and beautiful but very demure, and female sexual activity is reproached.

- (33) Mujer que al andar culea, bien sé yo lo que desea. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'A woman who shakes her backside when she walks, I very well know what she wants.'
- (34) Mujer que al andar culea, cartel en el culo lleva. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'A woman who sways her backside while walking, carries a signpost on her backside.'
- (35) Una mujer hizo a un obispo cerner. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'A woman made a bishop fall.'
- (36) La mujer puede tanto que hace pecar a un santo. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'A woman is so powerful that she can make even a saint sin.'
- (41) A la mujer, el diablo le dio el saber. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'The devil gave woman knowledge.'
- (42) Donde mujer no hay, el diablo la trae. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'Where there is no woman, the devil brings one.'
- (43) Naipes, mujeres y vino, mal camino. (Fernández 1999: 185)  
'Cards, women and wine, bad path.'
- (44) La mujer da dos días buenos: el de su boda y el de su entierro.  
'The woman gives two good days: her wedding day and her burial day.'

These proverbs may negatively influence the social order by encouraging aggression against women since they emphasize the 'threats' women pose with their sexuality.

- (37) No hay mejor cuchillada que a la mujer y al fraile dada. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'There is no better stab than that given to the woman and the friar.'
- (38) A las mujeres, o matarlas o dejarlas. (Martínez Kleiser 1978)  
'Women should either be killed or left alone.'
- (39) Mujer que llora, judío que jura y zorra que duerme, malicia tienen. (Fernández 1999: 187)  
'A crying woman, a swearing jew, and a sleeping vixen are malicious.'
- (40) Los enemigos del hombre son tres: tabaco, vino y mujer. (Fernández 1999: 188)  
'The enemies of man are three: tobacco, wine and women.'

As in the examples provided in Section 4.2, in the above proverbs, an association is made between women and the devil (proverbs 41 and 42). They are thus depicted as deceitful (proverbs 39 and 43) and synonymous with temptation (proverb 43). By associating women with items or habits that cause addiction ('naipes', 'vino'), proverb 43 advises men to be wary of women in order not to lose control of their lives. Reference to feminine sexuality as destructive—a means used by women to deceive and gain control over men—can be observed in proverbs 35 and 36. Women are therefore described as men's enemies (40) and violence is encouraged (proverbs 37, 38 and 44) as a means of overcoming the 'deceits and malicious' influence of women.

## 5 Conclusion

Using the GCM, AST and FCDA, the current study set out to i) analyse gender stereotypes and ideologies in Spanish proverbs; ii) examine the construction and sustenance of masculinities and femininities within and through

proverbs; and iii) discuss the connection between masculinities, femininities, and social normativity. The findings show that gender-related stereotypes and ideologies that can be identified in these “frozen expressions” (Hellingner and Bußmann 2001: 16) are not always hostile. For instance, paternalism as reflected in the samples is sometimes dominative (hostile)—suggesting that women need to be controlled by men—and other times protective (benevolent)—built on the weaker vs. stronger sex dichotomy. Gender differentiation, or polarization as Bem (1993) puts it, is mostly competitive, projecting women as inferior and men as superior (hostile). On the other hand, instances of complementary gender differentiation also exist whereby women are seen to have positive traits when they conform to traditional gender roles such as mother or wife (benevolent). The heteronormative basis of ambivalent sexism was also uncovered in the proverb samples. Some of the proverbs showed heterosexual hostility which entails the sexual objectification of women and the belief that women are dangerous since they use their sexuality to gain control over men. In contrast, other proverbs also dictate the necessity of heterosexual intimacy (benevolent). This study has also shown that the antecedents of such chauvinist beliefs can be traced to the Great Chain of Being which, thanks to the “omnipresent, accessible, conventional” and “irreplaceable” (Lakoff and Turner 1989: xi) nature of metaphor, have permeated into our times.

These findings reveal that proverbs, as containers and reflectors par excellence of gendered ideologies, can police gender conformity and social normativity. This is achieved fundamentally through 1) advising generations on what it means to be a man or a woman,

2) persuading society on the legitimacy and justification of the gender order, 3) rebuking and ridiculing people who step outside their boundaries, and 4) reinforcing the assumptions and ideology that gender polarization is natural and necessary.

However, as the current study has shown, gender stereotypes are often inaccurate generalizations that have possible adverse social consequences. It is for this reason that gender activism through language analysis is needed in order to create an awareness of the powerful effects of gender ideologies and curtail their deleterious ramifications in society.

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