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## Women, Metaphors and the Legitimation of Gender Bias in Spanish Proverbs

By Benedicta Adokarley Lomotey<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the role of proverbs in the sustenance of gender violence within the Spanish context. As demonstrated by feminist linguistic activities, one of the avenues through which the status quo of both men and women are enacted and sustained is through language. However, given the complex nature of the relationship between gender and language, speakers often overlook the role of discourse on gender relations. The author investigates this inter-connection using a multidimensional approach which includes insights from Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of metaphor and Austin's (1965) Speech Act theory. This study confirms that quite a number of Spanish proverbs contain violent metaphors that can unconsciously shape speakers' perceptions and actions. Misogynous ideologies in Spanish proverbs should therefore continue to be exposed, criticised and eliminated through conscientization in order to sustain the campaign for gender equality.

*Keywords:* Proverbs, Speech Act Theory, Theory of Metaphor, Discourse Analysis, Gender Ideologies and Stereotypes

### Introduction

In recent years, feminists have devoted much attention to grammatical, lexical, and discursive aspects of language with the goal of clarifying and exposing how gender and language mutually shape and inform each other. Indeed, within the field of language and gender scholarship, the interdisciplinary investigation of the connexion between ideologies and discourse has emerged as a central and robust area of research. As Cameron (2003) affirms, "challenging established ideologies of language has been among the aims of many social and political movements, including feminism", which started to engage in "language ideologies" as far back as the nineteenth and twentieth-century, "long before that term was used in its present scholarly sense" (p. 448). Feminist linguistic activities over the past four decades have demonstrated that discourse is not merely a reflection of society, culture, and power but rather, it is their constantly replenished source. Feminist philosophy of language thus documents how the social world is produced and reproduced in great part through discourse (Bucholt, 2003; Cameron, 2003).

As it will be demonstrated in this paper, the claims of feminist philosophy of language are also evidenced by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980b) theory of conceptual metaphor which also adopts the position that language influences human thought and behaviour. These authors posit that metaphors are "pervasive in our ordinary everyday way of thinking, speaking, and acting" (Lakoff

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& Johnson, 1980a, p. 453) and thus, play a vital role in our conceptual system. They postulate that the human conceptual system is basically metaphorical. Consequently, these metaphors that frame and guide our thoughts are also reflected in language which in turn influences how we function and relate to others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980b).

Interestingly, speakers are normally unaware of this linkage between language, thought and behaviour. As Whorf (2003) affirms, “the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious” and “these patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language” (p. 252). Other scholars such as Boas (1966, p. 63) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980a, p. 454) have also pointed out the normally unnoticed relationship between thought, language and behaviour. Boas (1966) explains that primarily, linguistic phenomena and other ethnological phenomena are different, in that “the linguistic classifications never rise into consciousness, while in other ethnological phenomena, although the same unconscious origin prevails, these often rise into consciousness, and thus give rise to secondary reasoning and to re-interpretations” (p. 63).

Consequently, negative attitudes, such as sexism, may be effectively promulgated through putatively misogynous proverbs especially due to the subliminal and essential relationship between language, thought and behaviour.

## Objectives

Quite a number of studies have been carried out on androcentrism in Spanish proverbs (Calero Fernández, 1999; Fernández Poncela, 2002; Martínez Garrido, 2001; Molina Plaza, 2008). Yet, these studies offer predominantly qualitative analyses that provide descriptive details on the essentially androcentric ideologies inherent in these proverbs. In addition, while all these authors analyse how such discourses promote gender discrimination, it is only few authors such as Bosch, Ferrer & Alzamora (2006), Fernández Poncela (2012) and Martínez Garrido (2001) that examine how the verbal violence in these sayings could encourage physical violence against women.

In the Colombian situation, Tolton (2013) carried out research that provides quantitative data on violence in proverbs. She examines how proverbs promote wife abuse through critical discourse analysis. Using data collated from five online forums in *El Tiempo*, a Colombian newspaper, she concludes that proverbs are significant sociolinguistic contrivances for promoting dominant ideologies that legitimise violence against women. Other scholars such as Fernández Poncela (2010) have done likewise in the Mexican context.

However, in undertaking this research, the author was unable to find any discourse analytical study that examines from a pragmatic perspective, how Spanish misogynous proverbs can influence gender violence. It is important to bridge this gap in literature because as will be demonstrated in this paper, some misogynous proverbs are verbally abusive and may therefore promote the maltreatment of women by inciting physical violence. As Martínez Garrido indicates, “although currently, these misogynistic proverbs appear to be used less frequently, they are actually still used in the urban areas of Spain, often indirectly, in humorous, jocular and ironic contexts” (2001, p. 84). Thus, this paper seeks to:

- a) Examine the gender ideologies inherent in Spanish proverbs.
- b) Evaluate how these gender ideologies can enact and reinforce gender bias and violence.

## **Stereotypes, Ideologies and Power in Discourse**

The theories discussed above imply that proverbs, which form an important category of discourse<sup>2</sup>, can influence our day to day activities since they reflect sociocultural beliefs and values which are recycled and reinforced through language usage. Proverbs are generally used in social situations such as strengthening arguments, satirizing, rationalizing shortcomings, and generalizing (Mieder, 1993, p. 11). Specifically, they are cultural discourses which epitomise the ideology and worldview of a community of language speakers. Through them, aspects of a people's life and their perception of their environment and social relationships are culturally conditioned (Mele, 2013, p. 333).

Many scholars have analysed the relation between proverbs, metaphors and androcentrism in different languages such as English (López Rodríguez, 2009), Greek (Crida Álvarez, 2001), and Spanish (Calero, 1999). In relation to the Spanish language, it has been described as “androcentric” and “prone to misogynist overtones” due to its “long patriarchal tradition which it inherited from Latin” (Calero, 1999, p. 10). Indeed, as Martínez Garrido (2001) explains, misogyny in Spanish proverbs can be traced back to Judeo-Christian religious thought. These discourses were often used in ancient Romance didactic and narrative genres (Martinez Garrido, 2001, p. 89-92). They served as moral codes of conduct in the Middle-Ages and regulated social behaviour through the gender ideologies inherent in them. These moral codes (and similar variations of the corresponding proverbs) were common not only in Spain, but also in many parts of medieval Europe (see Garrido, 2001; also, Crida Alvarez, 2001).

Several compilations, classifications and published work on the linguistic analysis of Spanish proverbs have been made. That of Calero (1999) and Tirado Zarco (1987) for example, offer an interesting historical and linguistic analysis of these proverbs as examples of popular wisdom. More importantly, they provide essential statistical information. Calero (1999) points out that “almost one sixth of the totality of Spanish proverbs that exist or that have existed have women as their themes” (p. 131). Of the ten thousand, eight hundred and eighty-four proverbs (10,884) which she investigates, she identifies eighty-five foibles of women and only sixteen innate qualities (1999, p. 132). Tirado Zarco (1987) also identifies 5.56 % positive proverbs, 10% neutral ones and 76.79% negative ones about women.

As Talbot (2003) points out, stereotyping involves simplification, reduction and naturalization (p. 470). We “impose schemes of classification in order to make sense of the world—and the events, objects, and people in it” (Talbot, 2003, p. 470). However, this leads to “the ‘binding’ or bonding together of all of Us who are ‘normal’ into one ‘imagined community’; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them” (Hall, 1997, p. 258 as cited in Talbot, 2003, p. 471).

Stereotyping involves power plays, since “stereotypes tend to be directed at subordinate groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, women) and they play an important part in hegemonic struggle” (Talbot, 2003, p. 470). Additionally, by simplifying and reducing in an attempt to make sense of the world in this manner, ideologies also come into play. Gender stereotypes support gender ideologies given that they are powerful hegemonic constructs or ideological prescriptions for social behavior<sup>3</sup> (Talbot, 2003).

Proverbs are both overt and covert linguistic expressions of dominant and subordinate ideologies about gender and the social order. As mentioned in section 1, feminists have long been

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we will define discourse as ‘language in context: that is, language as it is put to use in social situations’ (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 44).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that men are also victims of gender stereotypes. An example is the image of Spanish-speaking men as abusers of women.

interested in the role of ideologies in maintaining gender imbalance. In analysing the political roots of feminists' interest in gender ideology, Phillips points out that the use of the term "ideology" during the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s had Marxist connotations. In gender studies, ideologies were identified as dominant views that serve "male interest in keeping women subordinated, without women necessarily recognizing that this was the case" (Phillips, 2003, p. 254). In other words, through ideologies, women are dominated by men in the way Marx had argued the working class was ideologically dominated by the bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century Europe. Subsequently, the power of gender ideologies in discourse has since been of interest to feminists because they maintain that "just as Marx had argued that an ideological critique of bourgeois ideology was needed to help the working class recognize that the present order was not necessarily in their interest and that they should resist it," so too was there a need for the "ideological critique of patriarchal ideology" in feminist activism (Phillips, 2003, p. 254).

Stereotypes, ideologies, power and discourse are thus intricately related in that proverbs are gnomic discourses which are "powerful mechanisms of ideological canalization, homologation and manipulation" (Martínez Garrido, 2001, p. 82). Through proverbs, prevailing dominant gender ideologies can be reproduced, sustained, and (potentially) contested. They have significant rhetoric and pragmatic functions which make them manipulative. They are normally endowed with internal cohesion and brief rhythmic structure that condense what is generally considered as collective conceptual awareness. Their syntactic structure makes them easy to retain and creatively affords semantic visibility to the key words. They are thus idealised cognitive modules that, based on their value as eternal truths, reinforce the ideological substratum of the community: things are this way because they have always been this way and they will continue to be this way (Martínez Garrido, 2001, p. 84). This makes them adequate tools for supporting, licensing or authenticating social and individual beliefs. For this reason, Fernández Poncela (2012) describes them as the "thermometer of the society" (p. 191). Guzman Diaz (2002) points out the following:

The "refrán"<sup>4</sup> is an idiom. Due to its anonymous character ... it makes a point of view to be accepted and diminishes the author's responsibility about what is said. In this manner, when there are ideological points of view in a series of "refranes" —which support a certain power— the power receives the support of the unquestioned establishment. This is the case of the "refranes" about women. They support an ideology of "machismo", which is also supported by the way Spanish language conceives certain linguistic oppositions which express the historical path of male control over language. (p. 1)

Proverbs thus offer an interesting channel for the analysis of the discursive reproduction of power; specifically, the manner in which stereotyping becomes reinforced through discourse and enhances ideologies which lead to discrimination. Interestingly, psychologists such as Pelechano (1990) have pointed out the importance of analyzing metaphors in proverbs in studies on psychology. He notes that proverbs reflect the psychological underpinnings that guide the lives and interpersonal relationships of the members of each culture (Pelechano Barberá, 1990). Consequently, language becomes of political and social relevance in research on gender as it throws light on the patriarchal gender ideologies that provide justification for men's domination of women.

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<sup>4</sup> proverb

## Method

A multifaceted approach was used in the attempt to linguistically characterize and understand the nature of patriarchy. Discourse analysis “allows for empirical documentation of the production of gender ideologies, and can reveal in detail how these ideologies are grounded and ordered in discourse” (Philips, 2003, p. 272). The gender ideologies inherent in Spanish proverbs will therefore be analysed with insight from discourse analysis. Through the lenses of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of metaphor and Austin (1965) and Searle’s (1969/1976) speech act theory, we will also examine how these gender ideologies enact and reinforce gender bias and violence.

### *Materials and Procedure*

As Sanauddin (2015) notes, most previous research on the construction of gender relations in proverbs draw upon second hand selection of proverbs from published sources due to time and resource constraints. The present study shares in the methodological similarity of previous research on gender aspects in proverbs in that, the author draws on sample proverbs previously collected by others (Calero Fernández, 1999; Fernández Poncela, 2012; Martínez Garrido, 2001). Internet sources were also consulted. This method was chosen because an abundance of compilations and classifications of Spanish proverbs already exist. While new collections would not have been superfluous, the chosen method was considered appropriate since the focus of the study was on the linguistic analysis of these proverbs rather than the collation of unreported proverb samples. The sources mentioned above from which the proverbs were culled were thus chosen based on their relevance to the goals of this research.

The criteria for determining the relevance of the selected proverbs were based on Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter’s (1995) old-fashioned sexism theory (OFST) and Glick and Fiske’s (1996) ambivalent sexism theory (AST). These theories on sexism were important for the present study because they both offer insightful definitions of gender discrimination as well as explanations on the role of tradition and culture in maintaining gender inequity. Swim et al.’s (1995) OFST describes sexism as characterized by the endorsement of traditional gender roles, differential treatment of women and men, and stereotypes about lesser female competence. On their part, Glick and Fiske’s (1996) AST demonstrates the effects of traditional gender roles in justifying and maintaining patriarchal social structures. The sample was then categorised through the lenses of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of metaphor. These theories will be discussed further in the course of the analysis of the sample.

### *Analytical Framework*

The speech act theory was relevant in the analysis of the promulgation of misogynous beliefs. Language is the primordial resource for human communication. However, as the speech act theory (Austin, 1965; Searle, 1969; Searle, 1976) stipulates, we do not only make pronouncements with language but also, we initiate actions. That is, we make things happen through language. Thus, it is not only the statements that matter but also, the effect on the behaviour of the listener.

Speech acts are normally guided by cultural conventions. An illocutionary act is an example of a culturally defined speech act type. As Austin (1965) observes, the “illocutionary act is an act, which is uttered by the speaker with intention, by keeping motive in mind” (p. 98). In an illocutionary act, the speaker asks or answers a question, gives information, a warning, announces a verdict or an intention, pronounces a sentence, appoints, appeals, criticizes or describes (Austin,

1965, p. 98). By making an utterance, a speaker may legitimate attitudes and behaviours, present new conventions and even amend a society's worldview. The 'intuition' or 'motive' behind an illocutionary act is termed an illocutionary force. Searle (1976) distinguishes five illocutionary acts which highlight the basic types of illocutionary force and the potential effect of the perlocutionary act<sup>5</sup> on the hearer:

1. Assertives or representatives: they commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition; e.g. asserting, affirming, concluding, denying, reporting.
2. Directives: they are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something; e.g. requests, commands, entreating and advice.
3. Commissive: speech acts that make future commitments; e.g. promises and oaths.
4. Expressives: speech acts that state the speaker's attitudes and emotions; e.g. congratulations, excuses and thanks.
5. Declaratives: speech acts that change the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration; e.g. baptisms, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband and wife.

Writers such as Langton (2012) and Bianchi (2014), have produced interesting research on discrimination by drawing on Austin's framework. Basing her arguments on derogatory expressions, Langton (2012) offers another interesting distinction between illocutions:

1. Assault-like speech acts: they directly attack the target (a group or an individual) by persecution and demeaning.
2. Propaganda-like speech acts: they incite and promote discrimination, hate and violence.
3. Authoritative subordinating speech acts: they legitimize a system of discrimination.

She affirms that pornographic works can be perceived as speech acts that *subordinate* and *silence* women (Langton, 1993). Subsequently, works of pornography can be understood as:

- Perlocutionary acts that cause subordination, and produce changes in attitudes and behaviours, including discrimination, oppression and violence;
- Illocutionary acts that can in themselves subordinate women, legitimate attitudes and behaviours of discrimination, advocate oppression and violence. (Langton, 1993 as cited in Bianchi, 2014, p. 471)

Similar to Langton's (1993) work on pornography, androcentric proverbs may then be perceived as speech acts in two ways:

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<sup>5</sup> The perlocutionary act corresponds to the effects brought about by performing an illocutionary act, to its consequences (intentional or non-intentional) on the feelings, thoughts or actions of the participants (Bianchi, 2014, p. 470).

- As perlocutionary acts that *cause* gender discrimination
- As illocutionary acts that *constitute* gender discrimination

In this paper, I will examine the selected proverbs as illocutionary acts of subordination that persecute women and promote gender violence by enacting a system of discrimination. I will also analyse the sample proverbs as perlocutionary acts that cause changes in attitudes and behaviours, including oppression and violence.

## Findings

Following the analysis of the cognitive role played by metaphors in the semantic categorization of phenomena vis-a-vis gender issues, four metaphorical categories were identified:

### *Women as Animals*

Some Spanish proverbs juxtapose or draw behavioural analogies between women and animals. By doing so, they automatically debase and dehumanise women. In a number of these discourses, it will be noted that there is a vital trend in the animals chosen to describe women. They are normally animals that are used for hard labour such as *asno* or *burro* ('donkey'). Additionally, the word *gallina* (literally 'hen') is used figuratively to denote 'fearful', not to mention the opportunistic connotation of 'sexual plunder'.

- (1) Para el labrador, vaca, oveja y mujer que no paren, poco valen. (For the farmer, the cow, the sheep and the woman who do not give birth are of little value.)<sup>6</sup>
- (2) La mujer y la gallina buenos gallos acoquinan. (The woman and the hen are subdued by good fowls.)
- (3) Hijos, gallinas, curas y mujeres, nunca dicen "basta". (Children, hens, priests, and women never say "enough".)
- (4) Una buena mujer y una mala bestia, dos bestias de mala carga. (A good woman and a bad beast, two beasts of bad burden.)

In the above series, hens, cows, sheep, and beasts of burden are paraded and arraigned with women in illocutionary sequences. In the first part of proverb 4, an analogy is made between women and beasts with the conjunction 'y' while in the second part which comes after a coma, women are clearly declared as 'beasts of burden'. Moreover, proverb 2 insinuates violence by promoting the 'male-macho' vs 'female-weak' imagery of the sexes. Through the use of apposition ('gallina' and 'gallo'), the stereotypical traits assigned to women ('gallina' connotes cowardice) and men ('gallo' connotes bravery) are juxtaposed. These proverbs do not animalize only women, but humanity as a whole as they prescribe norms for masculine/ feminine gender identity and behaviour.

In other proverbs, an analogy is made between certain parts of the female anatomy and animal parts: e.g. "*la mujer en la casa y con la pata quebrada*" (the woman in the house and with a broken leg). Here, the word *pata*, 'animal feet,' is a metonymic reference which, once more, equates the woman to an animal. As with most proverbs, this proverb also comes in two parts which are joined with the conjunction "y" (and). The first part gives information on where women

<sup>6</sup> Translations of proverbs and of quotes from other scholars were done by the author.



belong (in the home) through the use of the preposition “en”. It resonates the “domestic/ private sphere for women” vs “public/ social sphere for men” dichotomy that has historically supported patriarchal ideologies and reinforced ideas of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, the expression “with broken feet” which appears in the second part of the proverb, implies enforcing spatial limitations (for women) through incapacitation. The entire proverb therefore prescribes the usage of violence (*quebrada* ‘broken’) for restraining women to ‘their space’ (i.e. domestication. See López Rodríguez, 2009).

Consequently, through the image of ‘women as animals’ metaphors, these proverbs legitimise and license the treatment of women as second grade, subservient beings. Animals need to be whipped and controlled to ensure they are put to the uses their owners require of them and this conceptual imagery is projected onto women:

- (5) La mujer es animal que gusta de castigo. (Women are animals who like punishment)
- (6) Al asno y a la mujer, a palos se han de vencer. (Donkeys and women need to be tamed by flogging.)
- (7) La mujer y la gallina, tuércele el cuello y date a la vida. (Twist the necks of women and chicken, and enjoy life.)
- (8) La mujer que no pare ni empreña, darle de golpes, cárgala de leña. (The woman who neither gives birth nor gets pregnant should be beaten and given firewood to carry.)

These discourses place women, animals and physical violence in the same metaphorical category and by so doing, function as a discursive strategy that sustains the power of the dominant group over the dominated group.

### *Women as Objects*

Women are also classified as objects owned by men. They are essentially stripped of their existential value as independent human beings who are equal to men and are rather presented as stooges and lackeys at the whimsical pleasure of their ‘owners’.

- (9) Nave sin timón es mujer sin varón. (A ship without a rudder is like a woman without a man)
- (10) El que tiene mujer bella, le pone tranca a la puerta. (He who has a beautiful wife must put a crossbar behind his door)
- (11) La mujer y el huerto, no quieren más que un dueño. (Women and gardens only need one master.)
- (12) Reloj, caballo y mujer, tener bueno o no tener. (A watch, a horse and a woman, better to have a good one or none at all.)

The use of words of this semantic field of serfdom such as *tener* ‘to have’, *sin* ‘without’, and *dueño* ‘master’ are examples of old-fashioned sexism and portray domination by the masculine gender. They endorse the belief that women are not sufficiently competent and thus need to be controlled by men, at best, with paternalistic benevolence (see Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Females are also depicted as in need of a male partner in order to feel complete. This legitimates the belief that men are endowed with greater authority, power, and physical strength,

and should therefore protect and provide for the women who depend on them (see Glick & Fiske, 1996).

- (13) Mujer sin varón, ojal sin botón. (A woman without a man is a buttonhole without a button.)
- (14) Los hombres son demonios, eso dicen las mujeres; pero todas están deseando que el demonio se las lleve. (Men are demons, as women say; but each one of them desires that the demon takes them away.)
- (15) Casada deseada, de su marido despreciada. (A married woman who is desired [by others] is despised by her husband.)
- (16) San Pascual Bailón, patrón de la mar, si me das un novio, me pongo a bailar. (Saint Pascal Bailón, if you give me a boyfriend, I will dance.)
- (17) El hombre se casa cuando quiere y la mujer cuando puede. (Men marry when they want to. Women marry when they can.)

The perception that the woman is an object authenticates the sexual objectification of women:

- (18) Mujer que al andar culea, bien sé yo lo que desea (I very well know the desire of women who shake their buttocks whilst walking.)
- (19) Huertas, molinos y mujeres, uso continuo requieren (Gardens, mills and women need continuous usage).

In Whorf's (1956) terms, through the conceptually stilted prism of these proverbs, we may appreciate the "culturally ordained ... forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness" (p. 252). Such discourses demonstrate the data base of the unconscious processes that subtly provide the building blocks of the collective perception and shared value systems; the fundamental guiding principles of any meaningful interpersonal social existence.

The metaphorical image of women as animals and objects which is portrayed in these utterances may serve as catalysts of actual social situations, including the reinforcement of gender violence. Ferrer Pérez and Bosch Fiol point out the connexion between such ideologies and gender violence by asserting that "the majority of perpetrators in domestic violence cases are traditional men who believe in stereotyped gender roles, that is, in the supremacy of men and the inferiority of women" (as cited in Crida Alvarez, 2001, p. 109)<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, as Fairclough asserts, such discourses "can build and negotiate realities by creating connections between the linguistic and the social aspects of a society" (as cited in Mele, 2013, p. 333).

### *Women as Evil*

Other proverbs warn society against trusting women. Women are likened to danger, instability and unpredictability through metaphorical equivalence to entities like the wind, wine

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Crida Alvarez (2001, p. 109) reports that on May 2001, a man of about 60 years who had killed his wife was interviewed in a documentary (shown on International Spanish Television) on violence against women in Spain. During the interview, the interviewee used proverbs on two occasions to substantiate his arguments.

and Lucifer. As demonstrated in the following proverbs, they are classified as dangerous, deceptive and evil:

- (20) De la mala mujer guárdate y de la buena, no te fíes nada (Stay away from the bad woman and do not trust the good woman either.)
- (21) Ira de mujer, ira de Lucifer (A woman's anger, Lucifer's anger.)
- (22) Guárdeme Dios de las malas mujeres, que de las buenas ya me guardaré yo (Lord keep me from bad women; from the good ones, I shall keep myself.)
- (23) De la mujer, del tiempo y la mar, poco hay que fiar (With women, the weather and the sea, very little has to be believed.)
- (24) No hubiera malos hombres, si no hubiera malas mujeres. (There would be no bad men if there were no bad women.)

Among these proverbs, one can identify certain ideologies that promote a differential treatment of women and men by overtly making analogies between women and the devil on the one hand, and men and God on the other hand:

- (25) Cuando Dios hizo al hombre, ya el diablo había hecho a la mujer (When God created man, the devil had already created woman.)
- (26) El hombre propone, Dios dispone y la mujer todo lo descompone (Man proposes, God disposes, and woman messes everything up.)
- (27) Dios y hombre, mujer y tusa. (God and man, woman and corn cob)

A varied metaphorical tapestry of a denigrating catalogue of female dignity is observed here. Women are the epitome of evil and men are the archetypes of goodness. As Lakoff (1992) points out, this suggests that the masculine conquers the feminine, just as goodness conquers evil (as cited in Martínez Garrido, 2001, p. 86). As such, some of these proverbs justify the elimination of women: "*la mujer sólo es buena después de muerta*" (women are good only after death).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), our "conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of" since "in most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines" (p. 454). These metaphorical representations can thus unconsciously predetermine society's behaviour. As will be demonstrated in the following section, one way women gain redemption from these straight-jacket denunciations is when they comply with what society believes to be the prototypical image of the good woman: chaste, sexually inhibited, loyal, subservient and motherly.

#### *Women as Homemakers*

With certain proverbs, women are seen to have positive traits if they conform to the traditional views which assign them with traditional gender roles (e.g., wife, mother), complementary to those of traditional men. In order for women to be valued positively, they are obliged to comply with this stereotype which helps to reinforce their secondary role to men by acquiescing to male monopoly.

- (28) El amor entra por la cocina. (Food is the way to the heart.)
- (29) Lo que valga una mujer, en su casa y en sus hijos se ha de ver. (A woman's worth is seen at home and in her children.)

- (30) La mujer buena y leal es tesoro natural (A good and faithful woman is a natural treasure.)
- (31) Mujer que guisa, se casa aprisa (A woman who knows how to cook easily earns herself a husband.)

In parallel to Swim et al.'s (1995) distinction between modern sexism<sup>8</sup> and old-fashioned sexism, Glick and Fiske (1996) define the concept of 'hostile' sexism, in contrast to 'benevolent' sexism. The authors identify hostile sexism and benevolent sexism as two different but interrelated components of their ambivalent sexism theory. The first (hostile sexism), which coincides with Allport's (1954) classic definition of prejudice as antipathy, refers to negative attitudes and intolerance towards women. The authors define the second (benevolent sexism) as "a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver)" (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491).

Interestingly, the sexist tenors prevalent in the proverbs studied were in the majority examples of old-fashioned sexism which is a form of hostile sexism which incites violence. The 'women as homemakers category' are examples of the relatively few examples of benevolent sexism that were found in this study. Women are often considered as primary caregivers because they are characterised as having the necessary biological qualities since they are 'naturally emotional and caring'. As Cameron points out, the role of ideologies "is to make the relationship of women and men in a given society appear natural and legitimate rather than merely arbitrary and unjust" (Cameron, 2003, p. 453).

### **Promulgation and Homologation of Misogynous Beliefs**

Based on the Speech Acts theory, the sample proverbs in this paper can be classified as assertives, declaratives, or directives. Proverbs that are examples of assertive illocutionary acts convey information on gender relations. Among others, these proverbs may assert, report, conclude, affirm, and express belief or denial. Following Langston's (1993) outline, such proverbs also fall within the assault-like speech acts category. They directly attack the target (in this case, mostly women) by persecuting and demeaning them. Thus, the proverb "la mujer es el piojo del hombre (women are lice that parasite on men)" is not only an assertion. It is an illocutionary speech act of subjugation which demeans and threatens females. Such speech acts might be conceived as "weapons of verbal abuse" (Richard, 2008).

Still following Langston's classification, proverbs that are assertives can also be perceived as propaganda-like speech acts. They incite and promote discrimination, hatred, physical and reactive verbal violence and its ripple resonances. Here, the focus is not on targets but rather "prospective haters" (Langston, Haslanger & Anderson, 2012, p. 758). Such proverbs may be regarded as utterances that incite and promote gender oppression. They are thus acts of propaganda that provide advice in moments of indecision, irrespective of their truth value.

On the other hand, the greater number of proverbs studied are directives. Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something. It is an illocutionary force that gets things done by the addressee. Proverbs in this group order, request, challenge, command, dare, invite, insist, etc. Structurally they are often imperatives that call for action. The speech acts

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<sup>8</sup> It is characterised by the denial that women are still discriminated against and the disapproval of policies promoting gender equality (Swim et al., 1995)

directives thus fall into imperative sentence type. We find the use of the imperative (e.g. *tuércele el cuello*) in the call for violence against women. The imperative is used here to give orders and to make requests. A proverb such as “*al asno y a la mujer, a palos se han de vencer*” overtly directs members of the society to ‘conquer’ women. They suggest violence as the *modus operandi* par excellence in society’s dealings with women.

Certain proverbs can also be classified as declaratives. Declarations create a new state of affairs. As Searle (1976) affirms, they “bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred-to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed” (p. 14). Proverbs such as “*gatos y mujeres en la casa; perros y hombres, en la plaza*” (cats and women at home; dogs and men at the plaza) can be conceived as declaratives. They are used to classify women as inferior, to legitimate gender discrimination and to deprive females of powers and rights. It is worth noting that proverbs which fall within the directive and the declarative categories are also authoritative subordinating speech acts since they enact a system of discrimination.

Additionally, the speech act of asserting generally comes under declarative sentence type whose function is also to convey information. In this category, assertion is used to make declaration. Declarative proverbs (e.g. “*Dios y hombre, mujer y tusa*”) may be true or false. Nonetheless, proverbs have certain characteristics which facilitate their influence on human behaviour: they are considered as easy-to-recall unquestionable truths. Through them, stereotypes about women and men are given factual status. Thus, due to the taken-for-granted idea that the beliefs expressed in proverbs are genuine truths, these misogynous ideologies appear more factual than subjective.

While the assertive speech acts generally carry implicit gender biased ideologies, the directives and declaratives are often explicitly gender discriminatory. Langston’s (1993) outline of illocutionary acts into assault-like, propaganda-like and authoritative subordinating speech acts exposes the potential perlocutionary effect of these sayings which are examples of verbal abuse on the hearer. They are violent in nature. As mentioned earlier, they generate disdain and rejection for a certain section of society and this may incite physical abuse. The power behind the ideologies in these proverbs lies in the fact that they are age-old anonymous assertions for which no author can be identified. They are considered as the voice of society; authoritative messages that seek to guide a society’s present and future thoughts and behaviour based on lessons from past experiences.

In sum, the proverbs examined in this paper, like many others from around the world<sup>9</sup>, may be conceived as illocutionary acts of subordination and manipulation that generate and legitimate beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of discrimination, and directly or subtly advocate oppression and violence towards women. They are also perlocutionary acts that ensure the promulgation and homologation of misogynous beliefs.

## Conclusion

Proverbs sustain hegemonic male dominance and female subordination. They offer an interesting avenue for the feminist concern of identifying “patriarchal gender ideologies in order to ameliorate them and enhance the development of gender ideologies that offer and encourage positive experiences for women” (Philips, 2003, p. 272). This paper thus sought to contribute to linguistic and social change in gender relations by investigating the role of language in the

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<sup>9</sup> See Schipper (2003)

promulgation and homologation of misogynous beliefs and violence towards women. It demonstrated that the gender ideologies in these proverbs are built on metaphorical schemas that guide and influence speakers' perceptions and behaviour.

They are illocutionary acts of subjugation that constitute gender discrimination by creating analogies between women on the one hand, and animals, objects and evil on the other hand. Moreover, females are generally classified as homemakers and primary caregivers as they are expected to have certain qualities such as tenderness, humility and submissiveness.

Such metaphors shape individuals' perceptions and actions once they are registered in the subconscious of speakers who make mental maps of the metaphorical schemas captured in them. Unfortunately, language users hardly ever notice them. Consequently, they become perlocutionary acts that endorse and reinforce a system of gender discrimination. They enact permissibility conditions that subordinate women because they (i) unjustly categorise women as having inferior worth (ii) legitimate discrimination towards women and (iii) create a polarization of male power vs. female powerlessness.

While it might seem the use of misogynous proverbs has been curtailed by an awareness of gender inequity and public aversion and criticism<sup>10</sup>, new and less distasteful ones are creatively metaphorised and popularly adopted (e.g. *esposa con blog no hace comida* "a blogger wife does not cook"; *la esposa con chat, el marido a Pizza Hut* "the woman chatting on her phone, her husband at *Pizza Hut*"). Such proverbs, nonetheless, continue to propagate age-old stereotypes. As Talbot (2003) notes, the "trouble is that traditional sexist stereotypes are so resilient and so well entrenched that they may be contested repeatedly without undermining their commonsensical status" (p. 480). However, as Cameron asserts, "if enough people can be induced to doubt that the status quo is natural or legitimate, a climate is created in which demands for change are much harder for their opponents to resist" (Cameron, 2003, p. 453).

It would be interesting to carry out a study that would collate and analyse newly emerging gender related proverbs and probably, compare them to the putatively outmoded ones. It would be especially important to examine if any of these new discourses promote gender equity. Additionally, it would be beneficial to adopt strategies of subverting negative gender ideologies through creative appropriation or production of new positive discourses. It must be noted that no such proverb was found in this study and if gender relations have truly evolved, then one good evidence would be the introduction of some gender equality proverbs among the immense number of androcentric ones.

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<sup>10</sup> In February 2014, the government speaker for the district town council of Jaén (Spain) made headlines in several Spanish newspapers (*el diario, europapress, 20 minutos*, etc.) for using the proverb '*a la mujer y al papel, hasta el culo se ha de ver* (women and papers need to be scrutinized thoroughly)' while on official duty. Subsequently, he faced severe criticism and was compelled to make a public apology.

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