



The demands made to the RAE about sexism in the dictionary: The impact of media discourse

Las demandas a la RAE sobre el sexismo del diccionario: La repercusión del discurso mediático



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Abstract:

The press and social networks constitute the most recurrent platform for debate on the subject of “women and language”. The media discourse on this subject covers many aspects that have not yet been addressed in depth, including the discourse that is generated when the academic dictionary is taken as a point of reference. This article analyses sexism (or not) of some definitions in the dictionary through a press corpus obtained from the Hemeroteca Virtual de las Lenguas de España (HEVILE), which has allowed us, in the first place, to catalogue the words and definitions related to women which have been news in recent years and, therefore, the object of debate; secondly, to verify the beliefs and linguistic attitudes regarding the role of the Academy and its dictionary in society; and, finally, to decide what effects the debate generated (especially through social networks) on the latest changes carried out in some of these definitions.

Keywords:

Academic dictionary, sexist meanings, press, social networks, ideology.

Resumen:

La prensa y las redes sociales constituyen la plataforma más recurrente para el debate en torno al tema “mujer y lenguaje”. El discurso mediático a este respecto abarca múltiples facetas que no se han abordado en profundidad todavía, entre ellas, el discurso que se genera cuando se toma como punto de referencia el diccionario académico. El presente artículo analiza el sexismo (o no) de algunas acepciones del diccionario a través de un corpus de prensa obtenido de la Hemeroteca Virtual de las Lenguas de España (HEVILE), el cual nos ha permitido, en primer lugar, catalogar las palabras y definiciones relacionadas con las mujeres que han sido noticia en los últimos años y, por tanto, objeto de debate; en segundo lugar, constatar las creencias y actitudes lingüísticas sobre el papel de la Academia y su diccionario en la sociedad; y, por último, dirimir qué efectos ha tenido el debate generado (sobre todo a través de las redes sociales) sobre los últimos cambios llevados a cabo en algunas de estas acepciones.

Palabras clave:

Diccionario académico, acepciones sexistas, prensa, redes sociales, ideología.

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1. Introduction

The press is currently one of the media that gives the greatest dissemination to the spread of knowledge and ideologies (van Dijk, 2006: 59; Marimón and Santamaría, 2019), both from a discursive and metadiscursive point of view, (Cameron, 2003: 448; Johnson and Milani, 2010; Guerrero Salazar, 2019a and 2019b). The selection of news depends on the press which gives rise to the different evaluations provided, especially through opinion journalism, where linguistic attitudes are fundamentally manifested.

Through journalistic texts we can see that there are different perspectives between what language “should be” - according to the criteria established by the Academy - and what “it is” in a given social area (Fajardo Aguirre, 2011: 55), because in these texts linguistic uses are debated, the perception that speakers have about them and the society in which they are produced and received. In this way, different positions, individual or collective, are presented, especially in terms of acceptance or reprobation of certain usages or, as is the case at hand, dictionary definitions which affect women.

The press, therefore, in addition to spreading different attitudes towards linguistic aspects related to sexism (Llamas Saíz, 2013, 2015, Guerrero Salazar, 2019a), contributes to the creation of a certain imaginary about feminism and language, that is, a dominant discourse in this regard (Guerrero Salazar, 2019b). To this is added the fact that many of the texts published in the daily press convey expert knowledge about the language, which reaches a heterogeneous audience with varying degrees of instruction. From this point of view, they can be considered an example of epistemic discourse related to power and the transmission of values and ideas about language. They are, therefore, an essential instrument in ideological reproduction and in the creation of social representations (van Dijk, 2003; Pardo Abril, 2007: 94). Therefore, one of the keys is to determine who can access the creation and transmission of these journalistic discourses, to whom they are addressed, what they are about, when they appear, in what context, and who can participate in a certain communicative event by performing what roles (van Dijk, 1996: 86).

Although the press and the social networks constitute the most recurring platform for the debate on the topic of “women and language”, the media discourse in this regard encompasses multiple facets that have not yet been addressed in depth, including the discourse that is generated when the academic dictionary is taken as a reference point, an aspect that will be analysed in this article.

The dictionary has been chosen as the object of debate in the digital media because it is, at the same time, a reflection of a reality and a model of the reality it conveys (Forgas Berdet, 1999). If language is the main shaping vehicle of ideology, the dictionary becomes the recipient of that ideology, which can be analysed both by the macrostructure (the compendium that binds the choice and selection of terms together) and by the microstructure (the definitions and the labels and examples that accompany the linguistic units). As Rodríguez Barcia (2012: 140) pointed out: “The lexicographical repertoire continues to represent a reference as a work that gathers much of the knowledge of its time from the codifications of reality”, one of whose most relevant implications is “the communication of ideological knowledge”.

The fact that the academic dictionary is considered an authority for the majority of language users explains the interest that certain groups have in influencing it through varied demands to the Academy requesting changes in certain definitions that are felt to be discriminatory, derogatory or offensive. The press echoes the pressures that the RAE is receiving in this

regard and does so, following Charaudeau's terminology (2013: 189) through *referred facts* (the news), which become *commented facts* (opinion journalism comments the why and how of the event, offering analysis and diverse points of view) and in *provoked facts* (the press provokes the confrontation of ideas that contribute to social deliberation)¹.

This is what has happened with certain demands that have transcended public opinion thanks to the communication media, such as the derogatory definitions of the words *gallego* (a person from Galicia), *rural*, *judiada* (Jewish behaviour), *gypsy* or *charro* (a person from Salamanca) that we see in the following headlines:

1. The BNG (The Galician Nationalist Bloc) requests that the RAE withdraw the definitions of "*Gallego*" (person from Galicia) to mean "silly" and "stammering" in its latest dictionary (Libertaddigital.com, 16-IV-06).
2. The rural community mobilise to demand that the RAE does not associate '*rural*' as 'uncultured' (elmundo.es 4-V-11).
3. Jews ask the RAE to change the word '*judiada*' (Jewish behaviour) in the dictionary. They believe the term to be 'offensive'. The Academy refuses because it was used by Baroja or Galdós (elmundo.es, 22-VII-12).
4. The provincial Council unanimously approves requesting that the RAE review the term gypsy in the dictionary (20minutos.es, 19-XII-14).
5. PP and PSOE join forces for '*charro*' (a person from Salamanca) to cease to mean 'in bad taste'. A joint motion will be approved for the Royal Academy of Language to eliminate the third meaning of *gentilicio* (gentilic) (la gaceta de salamanca.es, 5-III-15).

From news of this kind a debate arises that is accompanied by linguistic assessments both explicit and implicit, individual or collective. Linguistic assessment is according to Cavaredo Barrios (2013: 46-47), the qualifying expression that can be applied to a particular linguistic phenomenon of any kind, that is, the verbalization of disapproving or approving judgments on the object of observation, which in the case at hand are certain academic dictionary definitions. The same assessments, as we will see, are extended, in many cases, to the Academy and its representatives.

The actions undertaken to change the definitions of a word, although a priori are harmless, could have consequences in shaping social processes, as concluded by van Dijk (1999:25) on analysing the relationship between action and process². In fact, they have been criticised on numerous occasions, by Martínez (2008:58) among others, who considered them to be a "siege on the dictionary":

[...] Thus a siege on the dictionary has begun, which is hardly more than a photograph of the lexicon of a language. In this way, gradually, the focus has been shifted from the social reality that had to be changed, to the linguistic expression that names it, and from this to the image that the dictionaries give of the language, and, firstly, the Dictionary par excellence : the DRAE (The Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy).

This seeks to put the high prestige and influence of the institution and its most popular work at the service of the cause. This is, once again to achieve power; power more symbolic than effective, because neither is the dictionary directly involved in the use and transformation of language.

1 This same terminology is adopted by Llamas Saíz (2013) and Méndez García de Paredes (2019).

2 Let us consider the changes requested by society regarding words like *marriage* (García Gallego 2015).

Different studies have analysed the sexist bias of the academic dictionary, among them the comprehensive study of Lledo Cunill, Calero Fernández and Forgas Berdet (2004) was highlighted, who analysed the ideological features of the twenty-second edition of the academic dictionary (published in 2001), showing the sexist and androcentric uses present in the work³. Subsequently, Cabeza Pereiro and Rodríguez Barcia (2013:24) observed the lack of visibility, the absence of morphological pairs and the maintenance of obsolete definitions in the dictionary, which led to a process of *minimizing women*.

From different groups (associations, trade unions, Women's Institute, Parliament ...) certain words or definitions which appear in the academic dictionary as pejorative for women were also denounced. These kinds of demands began in the 1980s, when the issue of feminisation of language took centre stage in Spanish society, the result of academic work, but, above all, feminist revendications that began with the Transition and were publicised through the press (Guerrero Salazar, 2019b).

The starting hypothesis for this work is that the debate and demands for change regarding sexism in the academic dictionary, which are currently generated on social networks, from where they become press news- have influenced in the latest variations produced in certain definitions. To corroborate this hypothesis, the following objectives were set: Firstly, to determine when in Spain feminist demands on the dictionary began, that is, those involving a change in words or definitions that were felt to be discriminatory towards women; Secondly, to analyse the main demands made in recent years (who carried them out, what arguments and counterarguments were used, what beliefs and attitudes were revealed); thirdly, to assess what effects the debate generated has had (especially through social networks) on the latest changes carried out in some definitions in the academic dictionary.

2. Methodology

An exploratory analytical work is presented that focuses on a corpus taken from the *Virtual Library of the Languages of Spain* (HEVILE)⁴, a digital tool that gathers news from various communication media, regional, national and international, related to linguistic issues. The texts are tagged, and parameterized searches can be made. Via the tag "academic dictionary" 80 texts were selected which focused on words and definitions that have been the subject of media debate in recent years for their sexist nature and have produced demands, collective or individual, demanding their change or elimination.

The analysis of the texts has allowed us, first of all, to determine which words have been the most relevant: in 2013 the adjective *feminine* ('weak or feeble'), in 2016 the noun *jueza* ('female judge') ('judge's wife'), in 2017 the syntagma *the weaker sex* ('women in general') and *public woman* ('prostitute') and in 2018 the words *easy* ('referring especially to a woman: who is freely available to have sexual relations') and *mop* ('a maid serving and cleaning in the kitchen'; 'uncouth and uncultured woman').

3 In 2000, the very Academy commissioned a report with the idea of updating the DRAE in the 2001 edition and free it from, as far as possible, any sexist inheritance; but, as in the end, the work hardly took into account the revision, the philologists decided to publish the entire work.

4 The virtual library is a tool created on the website Language and Press (<http://www.lenguayprensa.uma.es>), a project of the research group HUM 046 *Analysis of the Dissemination of Linguistic News, The Languages of Spain and its varieties*.

Subsequently, we have compiled a data collection file focusing on who is involved in the debate (both in favour of changes in the dictionary and those who are against) and on the lexicon and on the arguments used in the debate by both sides.

For the analysis, the methodological proposals from van Dijk's Critical Analysis speech (1996, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2006, 2010a and 2010b) of the theory of argumentation (Fuentes and Alcaide, 2007; Plantin, 2015 and 2016; Amossy, 2016) and the concept of linguistic ideology (Del Valle, 2007; Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity, 2012; Marimón and Santamaría, 2019) have been used, following the line undertaken in other previous studies that study the theme of the feminisation of language in the press (Llamas Saíz, 2013 and 2015; Guerrero Salazar, 2012, 2019a and 2019b), which have shown that many journalistic texts dealing with "language and women" play an important role in the transmission of knowledge, values, attitudes and norms about language in relation to their specific social and ideological contexts; in them modes of expression are rejected, questioned, assessed, justified or stigmatized –usage of language– which, finally, always involves some type of rupture of the dominant linguistic and social norm (Castillo Lluch, 2001). They thus manifest, an ideological positioning on the language that, in many cases, arises in terms of transgression of the rules of language correction, but also social, since certain definitions are considered reprehensible in that they are felt to be discriminatory towards women.

3. Analysis of the corpus

3.1. The press as the first disseminating channel of feminist demands

The first demand recorded in the press against sexism in the academic dictionary had to do with the non-legal proposal published in the *Official Gazette of the General Courts* on 12th November, 1985⁵, to whom two renowned columnists (the Marquis of Tamarón⁶ and Lázaro Carreter⁷) were referred to at the time of the events and, almost five years later, Humberto Hernández (1999)⁸.

Although from time to time the press reported some demand of this kind, in recent years the news has increased considerably, and, above all, the debate generated around them, as can be observed in HEVILE. Thus in 2013 the press echoed that *feminine* is defined in the dictionary as 'weak' and 'feeble' whereas *masculine* as 'manly' and 'energetic'. These

5 This dating has been made possible by the database in construction by the METAPRES Project par excellence: *The metalinguistic discourse in the Spanish press (1940-present). Multidimensional analysis and characterization*, of which I am a member (FFI2015-65917-P).

6 Marquis of Tamarón writes his articles on ABC (1985-1988), in a space entitled "*El habla nacional*" ("National Speech"), which are recompiled in Mora-Figueroa and Williams (2005). It refers to the non-legal proposal in a column called "*Diestros y siniestros*" (Left, Right and Centre) (*ABC/Sevilla*, 28th February 1987).

7 Lázaro Carreter writes articles of language correction that the EFE Agency distributes to different newspapers in Spain and America under the title "*El dardo en el palabra*" ("The dart in the word"), the name of the compilation book that compiles the columns from 1975 to 1996 (Lazaro Carreter 1997). It refers to the non-legal proposition in a column called "*Lenguaje depurado*", ("Purified Language") (1986).

8 Humberto Hernández publishes his articles in the newspaper *El Día* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife), under the title "*Una palabra ganada*", of the compilation book (Hernández 2002 and 2009 [second corrected and amplified edition]). It alludes to the non-legal proposition in the column called, "*El cibergénero*", ("The Cybergender") (1999).

definitions outraged a group of philologists, parliamentarians and experts in equality who requested that the institution rectify this in the 2014 edition, as “it validated a stereotype and consolidated an unreal vision of the world”:

6. Experts demand that the RAE rectify the sexist definitions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (europapress.es, 7-XI-13)

In this case voice was given to three women: Teresa San Segundo, director of the Centre for Gender Studies at UNED, who considered these definitions to be “disgraceful” because of the importance that the dictionary of the Royal Academy, the highest authority in the Spanish language, had; Carmen Quintanilla, president of the Equality Commission in the Congress of Deputies, who said “the Royal Academy had to consider drafting another definition much more in line with the social reality of women today in Spain”; and Yolanda Besteiro, president of the Federation of Associations of Progressive Women, who explained that “the danger” was that “through language, thought was being defined” and “stereotypes defined what a woman and a man are” so that if the RAE “defined what each one should be with a stereotype” it would contribute to “making this a reality”.

The news, which referred to a fact (the demand made to the RAE to change these definitions), involved a series of *commented facts*, that is, a set of newspaper articles that delved into the reason for the issue through diverse points of view, as happened in the following article.

7. Is the RAE dictionary sexist? (20Minutos.com. 14-XI-13).

Different voices of authority came face to face in it. Those who denied sexism in the dictionary, namely four male voices: firstly, the academic Pedro Alvarez de Miranda, who justified the definitions because of the anachronism of the dictionary, heritage of the *Dictionary of Authorities* (the problem “is not what is missing, but what is superfluous”). Secondly, Jesús Riquelme (doctor of Hispanic Philology and honorary academic at the International Academy of Sciences, Technology, Education and Humanities), who in addition to the anachronism of the dictionary, argued that it merely collected usages. Thirdly, the Fundéu (Foundation of Urgent Spanish), which believed that “mutilating” the dictionary by claiming sexist or biased intentions was “not serious”, because by “changing one term involved changing many others” since the words in the *Dictionary* “are interrelated”; what the dictionary had to do was to “label the words more efficiently”. Finally, the RAE defended itself against the accusation of being sexist by alluding to the modification of the definitions to be carried out; what’s more, it added: “The Academy doesn’t set fashions and trends, it only collects what is being used. [...] Because the Academy removes a word or a concept, this doesn’t mean that its usage is going to disappear”.

The feminist philologist Eulàlia Lledó, who defended that the dictionary maintain a sexist ideological bias intervened by stating that “academics were in favour of this way of defining. They found these definitions adequate, correct”.

In view of the debate generated, a collection of news items that announced changes in the 2014 edition appeared in the press and, from the headlines, already revealed an ideological standpoint, since they took sexism in the dictionary for granted, as happened in the following example:

8. Less sexism in the new Dictionary. The Royal Spanish Academy suppresses definitions contested for its sexism in 2014 (elpais.com, 24-XI-13).

The two sources of authority confronted were Pedro Álvarez de Miranda (as a representative of the Academy) and Eulàlia Lledó (as a representative of feminism). The philologist insisted that the Academy “was reluctant to incorporate

egalitarian uses that were out on the street”, that the dictionary “was light years away from society”, that “it dragged an inertia that they seemed to fancy” and that “androcentrism and sexism were topics that contravened reality”. For his part, the academic stated that it was about “the improvement of the Dictionary, not about being less sexist”, that is, “that it state the truth “; explaining that the changes produced had nothing to do with the protests: “What one cannot endeavour to do is to change reality through the Dictionary. If society is sexist, the Dictionary will reflect this. When society changes, the Dictionary changes”. This is limited to reflecting reality taking note of what is happening, but the process cannot be accelerated.

Along the same lines, the statement of the then director of the RAE pointed out:

9. Blecua: “You cannot blame the Dictionary for the sexist use society makes of language” (20minutos.es, 13-XII-13).

However, when one year later (2014) the new version of the dictionary was released, the statements of both the director of the Academy (José Manuel Blecua, e.g. 10) and his secretary (Dario Villanueva e.g. 11) revealed, explicitly that the RAE had tried to avoid sexism. Blecua admitted that “extreme care to avoid the possible sexist nature of some definitions,” had been taken, that “all articles involving women” had been revised, and they had endeavoured to make sure that “there were no very serious elements that could be denounced immediately” and “it had been meticulously revised to include male and female professions wherever there was a possibility of a woman performing them”:

10. Blecua: “The RAE has avoided, as far as possible, sexism in the Dictionary” (heraldo.es, 16-X-14).
11. The Academy has taken “special care” in reviewing entries related to politics, religion, feminism and sexism to prevent definitions, which “coming from a former era and still maintained, are shocking for contemporary sensitivity”, the secretary declared (abc.es, 17-X-14).

Indeed, in the 2014 edition, the controversial definitions of the adjectives *feminine* and *masculine* were suppressed, a fact which also became news:

12. Feminine no longer means “weak and feeble” nor “manly” is masculine in the new RAE dictionary (Nación.com, 16-X-14).

In 2016, the press echoed a new demand, this time by of the Association of Women Judges in Spain (AMJE), which sent a statement to the director of the RAE, Dario Villanueva, requesting the removal of the definition of ‘judge’s wife’ that appeared for the word *jueza* (female judge). This was a passionate argument, as the collective felt attacked and considered the definition to be an “anachronism” that “perpetuated sexist stereotypes incompatible with an egalitarian society” and was “disrespectful to the dignity of judges in general”. Moreover, it went against Article 14 of Law 3/2007 on Equality, which states that among the general criteria of behaviour of public authorities is the implementation of “non-sexist language at administrative level and its promotion in all social, cultural and artistic relations”. The judges extended their request to other definitions employed by the RAE in other professions (such as *fiscalía* (female district attorney), *zapatera* (female shoemaker), *médica* (female medical doctor) or *peluquera* (female hairdresser), which also appeared defined as ‘the wife of’). The press reported that the RAE had responded assuring them that this would be studied for possible inclusion in the twenty-fourth edition of the Dictionary. The verbs used in the headlines were of great interest, as the descriptive ones (ask, denounce) contrasted with the evaluative ones (rebel, want, correct):

13. Spanish magistrates ask the RAE to eliminate the definition of *jueza* (female judge) as “the judge’s wife” (Publico.es, 9-X-16).

14. “*jueza*”, “female judge” is “ the judge’s wife” according to the RAE: an association denounces this (eldiario.es9-X-16).
15. “*jueza*”; “female judge” judge’s wife” ... The judges rebel against the RAE (vozpopuli.com, 11-X-16).
16. Judges seek to correct the meaning of the word *jueza* (female judge) in the RAE (Libertaddigital.com, 9-X-16).

This demand showed a bias in the academic dictionary pointed out by, among others, Cabeza Pereiro and Rodríguez Barcia (2013):

[...] one of the most interesting aspects of the academic repertoire is the presence of the obsolete definition “X(male)’s wife” in a multitude of expressions specific to gender and in other expressions with motions -entries that distinguish inflections of grammatical gender based on the referent’s sex-which normally refer to professions and positions traditionally held by men. Of course, the opposite does not happen, that is, in no case will we find “Y(female)’s husband” when defining the masculine form of a profession or position that refers to professional activities traditionally performed by women (for example, midwife).

3.2. Social networks as the main channel for current demands

In recent years, social networks have become the main platform to denounce or make demands to the academic dictionary, which pass from there to the traditional media, and are then disseminated as news. Therefore, the so-called “raids” of the “*Golondrinas de la RAE*”, (“Swallows of the RAE”) are of great interest, an informative campaign of equality specialists carried out from 2012 through social networks, whose purpose was to make the “sexism” of the Academy visible. A team of volunteers joined the promoters, Mary Martin and Carlos de la Fe, gathering material over twelve months, analysing the dictionary, the CORPE and the activities of the Royal Academy of Language. Twice a year (in April and September), the sexist aspects they had found were diffused on social networks and were sent to the institution⁹.

The press reported the raids of this movement, which, in the article entitled “Feminist swallows invade the RAE” (eldiario.es, 25-IV-16), was considered a kind of “*escrache*”, (public harassment) towards the Academy. It is not really known if it was these or other campaigns which influenced the latest changes carried out in some areas considered discriminatory for women, but the truth is that the DLE, as we shall see, changed them after the media denunciations, and so manifested Mary Martin in her interview:

17. During any of the six raids did the RAE pay any attention to them? “In the first raid it just so happened that their web page was down after announcing it for a while on the social media”, she comments. “If we look now the words which were asked about in the first raids, we note that some definitions have been changed over these years” (eldiario.es, 25-IV-16).

Since 2017 there have been feminist demands made to the dictionary through change.org a social pressure platform, which although it did not replace popular legislative initiatives (since their petitions have no legal validity), when the number of petitions was very high or when the petition went viral through other social networks, it became news in the traditional media. Thus, in March 2017, the press reported the petition (*#Yonosoyelsexodébil*) (*#Iamnottheweakersex*),

9 Using the hashtag #GolondrinasALaRAE. Their tasks are: to search for slogans, definitions and sexist examples and ask the RAE, through its social networks, the reason for maintaining the definition; make official consultations through its website and propose amendments; investigate the historical trajectory of some slogans to discover when they took their current form and whether the reasons still remain; point out the sexism of many of the examples used in the DRAE and propose reasonable changes to non-sexist examples; propose that women fill vacant seats, or to occupy them when they exist; respond to enquiries within 24 hours about certain definitions, the use of inclusive language, how to appoint women; provide answers to arguments against non-sexist language (see <https://especialistaenigualdad.blogspot.com.es/2017/09/golondrinas-la-rae-episodio-x.html>).

presented via the platform by Sara Flores, a marketing student, with the purpose of achieving the elimination of the expressions *the fair sex* and *the weaker sex*, defined in the dictionary as ‘women in general’. The press took it for granted that this revendication was responsible for the Academy’s revision of the definition:

18. Thousands of signatures oblige the RAE to revise the definition of “the weaker sex” when referring to women (publico.es, 3-III-17).

However, the RAE denied in other news, published on the same day in another newspaper, that the reason was the pressure of the social networks, as the modification of the entry of *the weaker sex* had already been approved in 2015, waiting to be incorporated into the next revision. It was explained that the modification would involve adding a label to indicate that it was a “derogatory or discriminatory” expression; likewise, the entry *the stronger sex* (‘men in general’) would include a label “in an ironic sense”. Under no circumstances did the Academy intend to eliminate the meaning, because it was documented both in everyday use and in written texts: “The RAE does not go into whether or not an expression is appropriate”. On this occasion, it was the writer and academic Soledad Puértolas who confirmed to the newspaper the change that would take place.

19. The RAE will review the definition of ‘the weaker sex’. The modification will be made in December in the digital version of the ‘Dictionary’ (elpais.com, 3-III-17).

The same academic was taken as an authority in the following article, where reference was made to the fact that the controversy unleashed in the networks, forced the RAE to publicly enter into the debate and give an answer. Puértolas manifested to be against the elimination of the definition and defended adding a label “One cannot and should not erase what does not appeal to us. The memory of history cannot be erased, if it could be, it would seem as if we had arrived here by waving a magic wand “:

20. The weaker sex? Public woman? The controversy over the “sexist” terms which still exist in the dictionary of the Royal Academy (bbc.com, 8-III-17).

The following article showed, from the headlines, a clear positioning regarding the sexism of the Academy; providing, as an argument from authority, the statements of three academics whose commitment to equality was manifest:

RAE academics wish to give “some feminist splendour” to the language

21. Soledad Puértolas, Carme Riera and Inés Fernández Ordóñez are three academics who advocate eliminating the sexist meaning of words (eldiario.es, 6-IV-17).

In the body of the text, the words of the journalist were very explicit when referring to the misogyny of the Academy (“The misogynistic tradition of the RAE has once again occupied the front page and with it, the consequences it could bring for the language”) and its slowness (“the sluggish progress reflected its slow internal regeneration”). About the three academics it was added:

22. [...] None of them wins the merit of changing the Academy from within, but they admit to having planted a seed among their male colleagues. Although their priorities vary, they do not complain about Ana Maria Matute’s male replacement because all agree that the RAE is moving towards parity without any impositions. But there is a change which to them does seem imperative: to eliminate the misogynistic heritage of words.

The selected opinions of two of the academics were very relevant, since both assume “the misogynistic tradition”. Carme Riera declared: “My ideal project within the RAE would be to clean up and give a much more feminist splendour to the language”, “to eliminate the misogynistic heritage of the language should be one of the priorities of the Academy”, “It cannot be said that the RAE is misogynistic at this time”, “The revision of sexist terms would then help to demonstrate that we defend a modern language, far from the twelfth century”. She also believed that was a priority extensible to the eight academics: “We are more aware because we are women and we put our feelers out to everything that has to do with linguistic sexism”.

Soledad Puértolas, in addition to admitting the misogynistic inheritance of the dictionary (“There are some men who are more interested in eliminating the misogynistic heritage of the RAE than some women”), made a criticism against the institution, “which has always remained quite apart from society” which turns it into “an archaic and elitist temple”.

As a counterpoint, articles were published in which male academics defended the dictionary. The most repeated argument was that the Academy “cannot be politically correct” (e.g. 48-52.) because, if so, as the Mexican writer and academic González Cerolio commented, it would fall into an “unscientific and not very rigorous imposition”; to criticize the Academy for including in their dictionary meanings considered deplorable “is like blaming Mr. Richter for earthquakes”. If speakers use the expression *the weaker sex*, the Academy cannot remove it for reasons of political correctness, “because this would be an attack on scientific rigour which would have to be applied to any academic work”. The Academy “records what the true owners of the language say and consider normal”, that is, what is “usual, somewhat natural, customary”:

23. Gonzalo Celorio says that the Academy “cannot be politically correct” (EFE México, 21-IV-17).

In any case, the campaign about *the weaker sex* not only passed from the social networks to the communication media and became a pan-Hispanic issue but also caused alarms to go off in the political arena and some parties took action; in fact, the proceedings for a draft resolution were initiated so that the Government asked both the Institut d’Estudis Catalans (IEC) and the RAE to withdraw the controversial definition.

24. Parliament asked the RAE and the IEC to withdraw ‘the weaker sex’ from their dictionaries. (*Lavanguardia.com*, 15-V-17).

In any case, there is no doubt about the determining role of the social networks in this matter, as six months later, the change.org campaign once again became news because of the signatures that continued to add up¹⁰:

25. The campaign to change the definition of ‘the weaker sex’ exceeds 159,000 signatures. The petition, promoted in February by a young woman from Huelva reaches an average of 4,600 applications in the last few days (*Elpais.com*, 28-XI-17).

On 24th March 2017, Maria Montero, presenter of the radio programme *el Quinto Elemento* (Tenerife) started another Equality campaign (*#Yosoyunamujerpública*) (*#Iamapublicwoman*), in change.org, requesting signatures for the RAE to modify the dictionary meaning of public women as a “prostitute” and equate it with a *public man* ‘presence and influence

¹⁰ On 24th May the total was 195866.

in society'. Although this demand had been made since the eighties¹¹ and the campaign became viral on Twitter, the number of signatures obtained was irrelevant¹² and the definition, until today, still remains intact¹³:

26. The RAE resists using gender language . They demand changing the term *public woman*, as a prostitute, and equating the term public woman with public man in the dictionary (diario16.com, 25-III-17).
27. Equality Campaign #Yosoyunamujerpública, (#Iamapublicwoman). Yesterday the campaign began by asking the RAE to equate the term public woman to public man in the Dictionary of the Spanish Language (diario16.com, 26-III-17).
28. Nativel Preciado: I'm joining the campaign #Yosoyunamujerpública (diario16.com, 9-IV-17).

On 25th January, 2018 the controversy over the fifth definition of the adjective *easy* took a leap from the social networks to the press, echoing the attitude of the Academy, which immediately manifested that it would not suppress it, but, at most, would add some explanatory label; to justify this fact, it argues that the dictionary has to record what speakers use and also what appears in written texts, in order to decipher them:

29. Easy according to the RAE: a definition that has raised hackles in social networks (elmundo.es, 25-I-18).
30. The RAE "will not censor" the definition of 'easy' woman but does not rule out adding an explanatory label (europapress.es, 25-I-18).
31. The RAE refuses to eliminate the controversial definition of "easy woman". The dictionary includes in the adjective "easy" a definition referring to "especially a woman who is freely available to have sexual relations" (abc.es, 26-I-18).

The news which was published the following day alluded to the fact that the complaint came from a Twitter user who had gathered together many followers (including well-known personalities who had amplified the demand¹⁴), who, outraged, qualified the term as being "shameful" and "surprising":

32. A new sexist controversy in the RAE dictionary: the definition of "easy women" is maintained (lavozdeg Galicia.es, 26-I-18)
33. A woman from Gijón indignant with the RAE definition (sexist) of the word "easy" (Lne.es/Gijon, 26-I-18).

The media also echoed the controversy raised by Pérez Reverte, a defender of the definition, on Twitter:

34. Pérez-Reverte causes a riot by defending the definition of "easy woman" in the RAE. (elespanol.com, 9-II-18).

However, after several petitions in change.org, the denunciation of different groups and a campaign from a high school in Tenerife (#HazloFácilRAE)¹⁵, The Academy, contradicting its initial standpoint, modifies the word:

35. The RAE rectifies and eliminates the sexist meaning of 'easy woman'. The cultural institution modifies the fifth definition of the adjective in the digital version: "Said of a person: Someone who is freely available to have sexual relations" (publico.es, 12-III-18).

11 The Demand is not new, as it was echoed in the press in the eighties through renowned personalities such as the Marquis of Tamarón (vide Note 6), Lázaro Carreter (vide Note 7) or Emilio Lorenzo in the column called "woman and language" (ABC, 17-X-1985).

12 On 16th June 2017 only 116 signatures had been collected.

13 Consultation carried out on 19th July 2019 (<https://dle.rae.es/>).

14 Such as Laura Escanes, Risto Mejide's wife.

15 The campaign driven by students from First of BUP from IES Manuel González Pérez high school (La Orotava, Santa Cruz de Tenerife) It includes a video addressed to the Interactive Dictionary Unit (UNIDRAE) where several students declare "I'm not easy" and give their names. Colleagues added: "If she is easy, then, I am easy." Young people end up shouting: "We are not easy, we are free".

36. The RAE eliminates the “easy” definition referring to a woman who “is freely available to have sexual relations”. Although the modifications to the Online Dictionary are made annually every December, the institution decided on 8th March not to wait and to immediately incorporate this reform (abc.es, 15-III-18).

Finally, on 7th May, 2018 a new request was made to the RAE by a high school from Malaga: to change the fourth and fifth definition of the word *mop*; as explained in the example, the petition mimics the initiative of the high school in Tenerife, which is credited with the success of the change of the definition of the adjective *easy*:

37. High school students ask the RAE to change the definition of *mop* which states “uncouth and uncultured woman; maid who serves in the kitchen”. Students of the Los Manantiales high school, in Torremolinos, demand a change in the definition of ‘*mop*’ in the RAE. To do this, several high school students made a video in which they declare they are not mops, and they affirm: “If they are mops, then we are all mops” (antena3.com, 7-V-18)
38. Why can *mop* only be female and not male?. Students from a Torremolinos high school call for the RAE to modify the derogatory meaning of the term and use the neutral gender. [...] This “microsexism” has been tracked by students in the subject *Social and Gender Change* in two courses of 3rd ESO in the educational centre in Malaga, who worked during the course in search for words with negative definitions for women. “Teacher, have you seen the definition of the word *mop*?”, they told the teacher, Francisca Escorza, who teaches the subject, a few weeks ago. The teacher had spoken in class of the triumph of the 1^o BUP students of the La Orotava institute in the Canary Islands, who in just one month thanks to a video, got the Royal Academy to modify the fifth definition of the word *easy*, so that it no longer refers to women, but to a person who “is freely available to have sexual relations”

The low impact on the press of this demand was striking, which was related to the lack of follow-up it had on social networks¹⁶, possibly because it is about definitions that –unlike those demanded on previous occasions– were already labelled as derogatory in the DLE.

3.3. Arguments and attitudes towards the petitioned definitions

The description of the actors involved in the analysed texts lead us to an ideological polarization (van Dijk, 2010a: 26) that confronts the Academy with “feminist” groups or individuals. The media debate is fundamentally hindered by experts from both sides, who argue, or counter argue, because, as van Dijk (2010b) pointed out, speech is more credible if accompanied by quotations and references, which are the proof and evidence that legitimise knowledge.

In the polarization established between the advocates of feminism and the advocates of the Academy, the former suggested that the prescriptive authority was the Academy; however, it was felt that the imposition came from “the others”, referred to in the following example as a “certain opinion group”, in reference to feminism:

39. In this the Academy has a “totally open” standpoint, although it is not going to withdraw from the dictionary any “controversial terms related to unpleasant situations, especially for a certain opinion group.” “This will never be done”, added Villanueva “(Abc.es, 17-X-14).

16 In May 2018 only 36 people have signed the petition. There are two requests about the same terminology with 140 and 272 respectively (consultation carried out on 29 May).

Dysphemisms used by both parties expressed disparaging attitudes towards the other side; thus Javier Marias called the people who requested that certain definitions or words be removed from the dictionary, “current inquisitors” and “francoists” whose characters are “intolerable and censorious “and their demands are “fussy demands”(e.g. 54).Pérez-Reverte called them “cheeky” and “illiterate and arrogant” that the only thing they did was “to behave ridiculously”:

40. Pérez-Reverte calls those who denounce that ‘ easy woman’ is featured in the RAE “illiterate” and “cheeky” (Publico.es, 9-II-18).

Advocates of feminism labelled the Academy sexist, misogynist, anachronistic, refractory, elitist ... the result of which the dictionary definitions and, by extension, the dictionary, were evaluated by adjectives such as *as male chauwinistic, sexist, androcentric, disrespectful, impertinent, shameful, surprising, obsolete* and even *dangerous*:

41. “Sexist” dictionary of the language (elpais.com, 10-XI-04).
42. Impertinent dictionary (elpais.com, 25-VI-06).
43. Sexism persists in the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (prensalibre.com, 6-III-17).

In view of the assessments expressed in the examples, we agree with Llamas Saiz (2015: 208-209) in that “the humiliation and offense are presented in the press as attitudes that certain groups feel towards the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy DRAE) and, therefore, to those who make up the institution which compiled it”. These assessments are not only derived from the nouns and adjectives, but the verbs used denote very strong attitudes. Thus, the advocates of the Academy believed that the others (feminism) intended to *correct, censor or mutilate* the dictionary. The defenders of feminism *rebelled* (e.g. 15) against the Academy to which they demanded the change of definitions (e.g. 6 and 26). The verb *lash out* was used by both parties.

In the denunciations of sexist biases in dictionaries, the arguments used are very relevant. As van Dijk (2010b: 182) pointed out: “The discursive structures of an argumentative kind -those that are organized around the defence of certain points of view- include not only opinions but also biased (partisan)representations of reality, that is to say, knowledge.

The Academy, as an institution, almost always through its director, reiterated mainly two arguments. The first was that the dictionary is a neutral product that merely reproduces the uses:

44. “The Dictionary cannot be blamed for the uses that society makes” (20minutos.es, 13-XII-13, José Manuel Blecua).
45. “[...] and the Dictionary, as it is a reflection of a society, contains social visions that are inevitable, that form part of our history” (Heraldo.es, 16-X-14, José Manuel Blecua).
46. “[...] it is a mere neutral record of what speakers say and write or said and wrote in the past” (elpais.com, 11-VI-17, Javier Marías).

Therefore, the dictionary has no ideology and cannot be “politically correct” (an expression reiterated by different academics and in different years):

47. “It is reality that shapes the new dictionary, the RAE does not create ideology” Professor and academic Salvador Gutiérrez explains the criteria that has illuminated the work of the Academy (diariodeleon.es, 26-X-14).
48. The RAE “The Dictionary cannot be politically correct, language serves to love and insult” (20minutos.es, 31-VII-11).
49. The director of the RAE does not believe in “a politically correct dictionary” (Diariovasco.com, 14-III-12).

50. The RAE believes that a “politically correct” dictionary is inadmissible (Laopinioncoruna.es, 22-XII-13).
51. Villanueva: “The RAE will never make a politically correct Dictionary (larazon.es, 23-I-15).
52. Darío Villanueva: “The dictionary will never be politically correct, because neither is language” (vozpopuli.com, 23-IV-17).

The second argument is that the RAE has no power, as argued by the academic Javier Marías in the following column:

53. *Andanadas contra el diccionario* (Reprimands against the dictionary) The Spanish Royal Academy receives requests to suppress definitions or terms in its ‘Dictionary’, but lacks the authority to prohibit anything (elpais.com, 11-VI-17).

It is agreed that in the articles in which academics (or other persons of recognized linguistic authority) gave their opinion in a personal capacity, discursive strategies distanced themselves from the rational to influence the emotional, so that the rhetorical resources used were practically the same: the use of the *ad hominem* argument, dysphemisms, irony (“The DLE would be very complete and very useful if all the fussy demands were taken heed of”), hyperbole and use of apocalyptic language (supported, frequently, in the fallacy of the domino or slippery slope effect):

54. [...] the truth is that the current inquisitors wish for expunged versions of the Dictionary. Imagine if they were obeyed: some would want it without any obscenities and swearing, others without sacrileges or irreverences, others without male chauvinism and “sexisms”, others of terms such as “lame” or “crippled”. Others of “fat” and “short”, not to mention “dwarf” and “giant”. Others of “blind”, “deaf” and “lame”. Very complete and useful the DLE was going to be if all these fussy demands were heeded (elpais.com, 11-VI-17).

5. Conclusions

Since the early 80s, the Academy has been receiving pressure from various groups which denounce the appearance of certain words or definitions in the academic dictionary that they consider pejorative. Much of the criticism that the academic dictionary has received has to do with definitions considered sexist. Although from time to time the press reported some demand of this kind, in recent years the news in this regard has increased considerably, and, above all, the debate generated around them; This is due to the fact that online versions facilitate dictionary queries, but, above all, the phenomenon of social networks, which makes controversies become viral, a fact that makes them newsworthy.

Traditionally, the demands made to the academic dictionary had come from groups (associations, political parties, etc.) who alerted through the communication media the definitions they felt to be discriminatory, so it has been with the definitions of *feminine* (‘weak or feeble’) and *jueza* (‘female judge’) (‘judge’s wife’); However, in 2017, the two denouncements with the greatest impact (*the weaker sex*, ‘women in general’, and *public woman*, ‘prostitute’) were private, carried out through the social networks and anonymously, whose demands became viral; In 2018, added to the controversy on the networks, were the campaigns carried out by secondary schools that denounced the definitions of *easy* and *mop* that disparagingly referred to women.

The news of these demands (*referred facts*) sparked a debate in the press (*commented facts*) in which a clear ideological opposition between the Academy and feminism was shown. Both groups, through argumentation and lexicon, adopted a fundamentally emotional attitude with which they tried to provoke an empathetic response in the reader, through which to achieve an ideological agreement.

The Academy, as an institution (usually through the director or the secretary), defended itself against the demands by reiterating rational arguments: the RAE (and, therefore, its dictionary) has no ideology or power, therefore, it is limited to register the usages, acting in a scientific way (and not politically correct). However, when the defenders of the Academy or its members take the initiative in the press in a private capacity, they usually resort to emotional strategies, where dysphemisms, rhetorical figures (fundamentally irony, metaphors and hyperbole) prevail, the *ad hominem* argument (to disqualify the adversary, especially as ignorant and censorious), precipitous generalizations and the fallacy of the domino or slippery slope effect (to warn us of the dangers that could befall the dictionary if certain definitions were eliminated).

The discourse from the other side, feminism, is fundamentally emotional; stemming from a feeling of offense and bases its argument on assessments and judgments towards the RAE and its dictionary, mixing assessments of people with the object evaluated, that is, the dictionary, which is branded as *androcentric, male chauvinistic and sexist* (the three adjectives most repeated). Some academics, such as Soledad Puértolas or Carme Riera, take both sides, because, on the one hand, they defend the permanence of the definitions denounced in the dictionary (as historical testimony and usage), but explicitly recognize the sexist (even misogynist) heritage they drag along with it.

A relevant fact is how feminist revendications born and disseminated in networks end up becoming news on the press, which accommodates other discursive instances, allowing the intervention of new actors, unknown people who acquire certain authority, diminishing, at least for a sector of the population, that of the Academy, which has changed the most controversial definitions and those with the most impact on the networks in the digital version of its dictionary (those affecting the adjectives *feminine* and *easy*), even though, in the beginning they stated that they would not do so.

Although the RAE defended itself by saying that the dictionary cannot be politically correct or be ideologised, however, the fact that in 2011 a unit was created to channel criticism and proposals related to the academic dictionary and the changes that had been carried out in recent editions, some of which came about right after the media campaigns, revealing that the Academy is not indifferent to criticism and that, to a lesser or greater extent, it took note of them.

Therefore, we believe it is proven that the texts analysed, where the academic dictionary is debated, can be considered manifestations of what are called linguistic ideologies, and have tremendous value as living testimonies to the evolution of society and of the influence of the social media, as well as the assumption of equality by a public (partly anonymous) who demands that the Academy, through its main work (the academic dictionary), make changes that reveal that the institution is adapting to the times.

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