

“Es verdad hay q matarlas a todas”: Online discourse surrounding “e” as gender-neutral morpheme in Spanish

by

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ABSTRACT

The gender-neutral 'e' morpheme in Spanish emerged in Latin America in 2018 (e.g., in Spanish, the gender-neutral form for *sibling* would be *hermane*, instead of *hermano* [brother] or *hermana* [sister]). Users claim that the 'e' is more inclusive towards gender nonconforming individuals and resolves what some see as the androcentric use of the default masculine 'o' morpheme (e.g., *hermanos* to refer to a group of siblings regardless of their gender identities). As popular media (i.e. social media and news media) has seen robust debate over the legitimacy of the 'e', it offers new opportunities to explore what is being said in these spaces, including why gender-inclusive language is so contentious and how broader social discourses may influence social media users' positions on the 'e'.

To explore these questions, this thesis utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA; Van Dijk, 2004) and Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation theories to analyze the first 12 months of comments from a popular YouTube video explaining the 'e' morpheme. In total, 1405 comments were downloaded and analyzed thematically.

Findings demonstrated that commenters draw upon a number of larger social discourses in order to criticize the use of the 'e' morpheme. Despite many commenters' argument that gender is static, commenters' tended to actively negotiate gender in their own comments. Moreover, the data revealed several shared ways in which commenters took up positions against the 'e,' in particular: gaslighting, social consolidation, and threats of violence.

This study has implications for evolving theories surrounding social media discourse.

Finally, the social implications of this study include insights into how conservative social media commenters respond to a perceived threat to status quo conditions.

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Spanish is a gendered language, with two categories (feminine and masculine) for nouns, adjectives, and determiners. The masculine is most often marked with an 'o' ending and the feminine with an 'a'. Mixed gender groups are also referred to using the 'o'.

However, a third, gender neutral option has now appeared, and it replaces the 'o' and 'a' endings with an 'e'. For example, "chicas" [girls] and "chicos" [boys, or a mixed gender group of children] could now be replaced by "chiques"¹. This form has met with controversy, and social media has provided a platform for emerging debates surrounding gender neutral language, in particular, the use of 'e'. While social media presence surrounding the gender-neutral form is highly active, there have so far been very few formal studies on how exactly this online discourse is being constructed.

For this thesis, I will be using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and VanLeeuwen's (2007) legitimation theories to examine the ways that commenters on social media platforms discuss the recent inception of the gender-neutral form 'e' in Spanish and the people associated with this form (e.g., gender non-conforming individuals, described below). Since language helps shape the way we think about the world around us and the people who inhabit it (Fairclough, 1995), the use of a gender-neutral form may signal the beginning of a new conceptualization of gender in society. Additionally, attitudes toward changes in established linguistic norms are revealed through discourse, and anonymous commenting and messaging on platforms such as Youtube and online news sources are a particularly fruitful venue for examining these.

¹ Spelling changes in order to retain the /k/ sound in front of the 'e'.

Key Terms and Definitions

The definition of a non-gender binary individual, according to the National LGBT Health Education Center, is “a person whose gender identity falls outside the traditional binary gender paradigm” (2016). This is related to, though slightly different from, the definition of gender fluid individuals “whose gender identity is not fixed. A person who is gender fluid may always feel like a mix of the two traditional genders but may feel more one gender some of the time, and another gender at other times” (Beemyn, p. 2). People may also identify as agender, meaning they do not identify as any gender at all (Keuroghlian, 2016).

There is also a distinction between biological sex and gender identity that needs to be identified. The definition of sex from the World Health Organization (2010) states that, “sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male. While these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, they tend to differentiate humans as males and females” (para. 3). Although sex and gender are often conflated, my view of gender identity is in line with Butler’s (1988) description, that gender is “a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (p. 520). In this way, gender identity is the individual’s alignment with characteristics traditionally defined as “masculine” or “feminine.” There are infinite possibilities for such an identity, with some people identifying strongly with one category or the other, and others identifying with a mixture or even an absence of such characteristics.

Due to the subject matter of this thesis, readers may wonder why I am using the term Latinx instead of Latine. The ‘x’ morpheme is another way to mark gender neutrality. It is particularly effective in writing, as well as more commonly used than the ‘e’ morpheme. The problem with the ‘x’, and one of the reasons for the emergence of the ‘e’ is that the ‘x’ is difficult to pronounce in Spanish.

Literature Review

Gender inclusive language is not a new phenomenon and using such language may be a factor in creating more gender inclusive societies. There is some evidence that written gender neutral language affects people's mental representations of actors in hypothetical situations. For instance, Koeser et. al. (2015) found that when presented with a German text using gender neutral pronouns, participants responded to questions on that text with more feminine and gender-neutral forms. In contrast, texts using masculine default forms resulted in participants referring to the actors in the text with the same masculine form. This points to the idea that exposure to gender neutral language is somewhat contagious and results in more feminine representation. If language shapes how people think and how they perceive reality, it is a powerful tool that has the possibility of changing or maintaining the world in which we live (Foucault, 1969). In other words, discourse reveals underlying truths about how society functions. Lavigne and González Martingo (2015) articulate the power that language has as “un gran institucionalizador de normas sociales” [a great institutionalizer of social norms] (p. 189), specifically as this pertains to the normalization of a rigid gender binary. They write,

“Siguiendo a exponentes de la performatividad, como por ejemplo Butler (2002) podríamos sostener que determinadas cuestiones, por ejemplo, la inequívoca existencia de dos sexos opuestos y complementarios, defendida a punta de espada, es, a través del lenguaje, nombrada, cristalizada e instituida, volviéndose la realidad” [Following exponents of performativity, such as Butler (2002), we could argue that certain issues, for example, the unequivocal existence of two opposite and complementary sexes, defended tooth and nail, is, through language, named, crystallized and instituted, becoming reality] (p. 189).

With language becoming increasingly understood as a tool to challenge or maintain social orders that serve to privilege and marginalize various communities, it is no surprise that new subversive uses are emerging as a way to challenge traditional hierarchies.

In the case of Spanish, the nature of the connection between grammatical gender and gender minority rights has led to more interest in the creation of a gender-neutral option to more accurately represent all speakers of the language and their gender identity. However, due to the recent birth of such forms, there is a very small number of academic publications dealing with the usefulness of an entirely separate gender-neutral form or the responses to it within Latinx cultures. In my review of the literature, the first mention of the gender neutral ‘e’ in Spanish is by Alvarado and Ramírez (2014). They refer to three types of perspectives language users may hold regarding the use of gendered language. The first group is the most conservative about language change and maintain that it is unnecessary to modify the norm because the masculine form, ‘o’, already doubles as a gender-neutral option. The second group is largely made up of feminist women who

claim that the masculine being used to refer to both men only and a mix of men and women is inherently unequal and sexist. Finally, the third, which is not mutually exclusive from the second, is concerned with the lack of inclusivity in the Spanish language for people who do not fit into the traditional gender binary. It is these latter two groups which support the use of the 'e' morpheme. The most conservative group, those who oppose any gender-neutral language changes will be explored later. For now, I will focus on these latter groups.

According to Alvarado and Ramírez (2014), the second group speaks of inclusive language in terms of balancing the use of masculine and feminine to adequately reflect and represent the presence of women. They believe that Spanish establishes a hierarchy of gender with the unmarked male representing the human experience in general, while the feminine experience is kept to the side. In other words, the female constructs the concept of the "other." This aligns with Spender (1980), who argues that with the language of gender

"there is only one standard, and those that are not are assigned to a category of deviation. Therefore, our fundamental classification scheme is one that divides humanity not into two equal parts but into those that are more men and those that are less men" (para. 9).

The hierarchy wherein masculinity is placed above femininity has an extensive history both reflected in and perpetrated by language traditions, in particular androcentric ones. As Alvarado and Ramirez (2014) state, "La semántica histórica de nuestra lengua, como de otras lenguas derivadas del Indoeuropeo, es innegablemente androcéntrica

porque así son las formas de vida históricamente predominantes” [The semantic history of our language, like other Indo-European languages, is undeniably androcentric because this is the historically dominant way of life] (p. 8). One definition of "androcentric" is proposed by the National Council of Culture and the Arts of Chile (2016), in their guide on how to use inclusive language, as the "repeated and / or exclusive use of the masculine generic to denominate the totality of social and cultural issues. There may also be an androcentric wording that only considers the experience of men, without taking into account the experience of women” (p. 10). Ideas like these call attention to the fact that current usages of gendered language were created under the assumption of a rigid and binary gender definition, while their continuous use helps to consolidate this status quo.

For many, the goal of equality between men and women is no longer enough. Additional groups seek to redefine the concept of gender as self-identifiable, variable, and not correlated with the biological sex of a person. This line of thinking does not deny the existence of biological males and females, but it questions a false gender identity dichotomy and the use of sex to assume the nature, role, and/or characteristics of a person. In contrast, those who oppose language changes would argue that while there are natural characteristics that separate men and women, language itself does not discriminate, but that the attitudes, laws, and actions of the population itself have to change. Flores (2013), an Argentine lesbian activist, proposes another perspective, namely, that inclusive language has the power to “suspender algunas lógicas prescriptivas que se instalan silenciosa y poderosamente en los formatos educativos” [suspend some prescriptive logics that are installed silently and powerfully in educational formats] (p.

19) as well as “interferir los guiones hegemónicos del género binario, del régimen político de la heterosexualidad, de la blanquedad autoinvisibilizada, de los procesos de normalización de los sujetos” (p. 19) [interfere with the hegemonic scripts of the binary genre within the political regime of heterosexuality, the default status of “whiteness”, and the processes of normalization of such subjects].

Five years after Flores’ publication, Bahamondes (2018), the secretary of the Student Government Association at the University of Diego Portales in Santiago, shared the students’ similar reasoning behind using the gender neutral at her university with the Chilean news site emol.com saying,

“contamos con la presencia de estudiantes que son transexuales o bien que no se encasillan en ninguna de las dos opciones binarias del género masculino o femenino. Creemos importante que también ellos puedan manifestarse a través del lenguaje inclusivo entendiendo que éste apela a algo más allá de lo binario entre el hombre o la mujer”. [We are recognizing the presence of transgender students, as well as those who are not included in either binary option of male or female gender. We believe that it is also important for them to be able to express themselves through inclusive language understanding that this appeals to something beyond the binary between male and female] (para. 3).

Opposers of gender-neutral language continue to fight back against such allegations of discrimination. Perhaps the greatest opponent of inclusive language is the Real Academia Española. They have opposed inclusive language changes including the use of the @, x, and the duplication of the determinant or the noun, for example saying

el/la presidente [the president] when referring to someone of an unknown gender or saying “buenos días chicos y chicas [good morning boys and girls]” (Berkins, 2013). They have also responded to the use of neutral words on Twitter by saying, “el uso de la letra ‘e’ como supuesta marca de género es ajeno al sistema morfológico del español, además de ser innecesario, pues el masculino gramatical funciona como término inclusivo en referencia a colectivos mixtos, o en contextos genéricos o inespecíficos” [The use of the letter "e" as a supposed gender marker is foreign to the morphological system of Spanish, besides being unnecessary, since the masculine form functions as an inclusive term in reference to mixed collectives, or in generic or nonspecific contexts] (@RAEinforma, 2016). The most predominant criticism from the Real Academia Española and popular responses online is that Spanish already has a neutral option with the masculine form, an idea based on the assumption that grammatical gender is nothing more than a morphological characteristic and does not have a semantic element.

One of the precautions for both sides of the debate is suggested by Wagner (2004) from the Universidad Austral de Chile. He claims that we must be careful with our presentation of these words and the expectations of their reception. The changes have to come from society itself, he argues, and that to say that people have to speak in a specific way is the same strategy that the RAE has used. That is, it assumes that natural language follows prescriptive rules and can be controlled. The language guides and advice of the RAE can only affect natural language if people accept the propositions, and this is not

guaranteed in relation to the “e” (or other linguistic innovations), Wager (2004) warns.

Specifically, he reminds readers that

“luego de un tiempo se verá si ha triunfado la norma innovadora o se mantiene la arcaizante. Pero no es un derecho de ellos ni de nadie pretender obligar a otros a asumir sus innovaciones lingüísticas, porque la actualización del lenguaje, el hablar, como diría Coseriu, es, por definición, una actividad libre y creadora, no sujeta a imposiciones externas al lenguaje mismo.” [after a while it will be seen whether the innovative norm has prevailed or the archaic one remains. But it is not their right or that of anyone to force others to assume their linguistic innovations, because the updating of language, speaking, as Coseriu would say, is, by definition, a free and creative activity, not subject to external impositions of language itself] (para. 24).

In other words, no study or prescriptive rules can force language change. Wagner also discusses the possibility of becoming complacent by “creando la ilusión del cambio sin comprometerse en modificaciones fundamentales de un sistema causante de la desigualdad sexual, en el cual el problema del idioma es meramente sintomático” [creating the illusion of change without committing oneself to fundamental modifications of a system that causes sexual inequality, in which the language problem is merely symptomatic]. That is, discriminatory language is only one of the factors in the system of ‘machismo’ that has to be addressed.

With all the discussion surrounding the use of ‘e’ it can be difficult to narrow down who exactly is using it and why. Based on my informal review of public news outlets, most of the online debate stems from students studying in Argentine universities

first using the form, with fellow Argentine citizens and news outlets resisting its use.

According to Cardelli (2018), the most frequent users of this form have so far been those who use it to make a point about the markedness of the feminine form and its contribution to the invisibilization of femininity and those who identify as female.

Cardelli (2018) claims

“los estudiantes secundarios fueron uno de los sectores más activos en todas esas luchas y empezaron a visibilizar en los grandes medios de comunicación una práctica de lenguaje inclusivo que ya tenía bastante tiempo al interior de los ámbitos feministas: el uso de ‘e’ como morfema del masculino inclusivo, en remplazo de ‘o’” [secondary students were one of the most active sectors in all these struggles and began to make visible in the mass media an inclusive language practice that already existed for a time within feminist culture: the use of the morpheme 'e' to replace the masculine default of 'o'] (p. 100).

This may be unsurprising since Cardelli claims that within younger generations, ideas about gender and civil rights are generally more progressive. Cardelli's claims are backed by an avalanche of social media posts and YouTube videos from young women. For instance, evidence of youth leading the charge for the inclusion of gender-neutral forms was published in the Uruguayan newspaper, *El País*. The article, titled “Ahora ya no es ‘todxs’, es ‘todes’” [It is not ‘todxs’ anymore, it is ‘todes’], includes interviews with female students, aged 14 to 17, about their usage of the gender neutral ‘e’ form, along with their parents’ reactions to it. Several of the girls claimed that they used it with friends while texting and in person to start a conversation, but they did not always use it

or continue past initial introductions. Meanwhile, the mother of one of the 14-year-old girls shared that

"Me parece interesante que se hayan apropiado de esa forma del lenguaje, es una forma de revolución concreta, casi un manifiesto. Ahora, como una purista absoluta del español, me da escalofríos. Y si en los adolescentes me parece auténtico, en un adulto me hace mucho ruido" [I find it interesting that they have appropriated this form of language, it is a form of concrete revolution, almost a manifesto, and now, as an absolute purist of Spanish, it gives me the chills. In adolescents it seems authentic, in an adult it makes a lot of noise] (El País).

Online news media such as the one above did not receive very many comments following the article. However, in June of 2018, a video of a ten-year-old Argentine girl, who told her mother about a confrontation she had with her teacher on the importance of inclusive language, went viral. As of April 2019, the YouTube video has garnered over 6 thousand dislikes, and only two thousand likes, with approximately 140,000 views. The word in question was "todes" a modification of the word "todos" [all masculine]. For her teacher, this was a lexical error, but as the girl explains in the video, "todes" is a word that encapsulates non-binary as well as transgender individuals in the lexicon. She goes on to explain that while her classmates argue that she is making an issue out of a simple word, "no es una palabrita es un derecho" [it's not a little word, it's a right]. (La Resistencia Noticias, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHPtXe2E3RE>) This video proved to be very contentious, with several social media pages sharing it, resulting in more anger than support from commenters, as evidenced by the number of dislikes. The comments

were so brutal against the young child and her mother that in May of 2019 the channel deleted the comment section and suspended all further commentary. Another example of a young woman being ridiculed for her unorthodox use of the “e” form is Belén Valenzuela, a student at the National University of La Plata. She inspired viral memes making fun of her and her feminist university series, "Todes" (Video seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AbzMSKnZCc>) which also spurred controversy about the use of public funds for the program that many people have called misandrist (El Pais, 2018). Yet another student, Natalia Mira, the vice president of the Pellegrini school student center, one of the most prestigious schools in Buenos Aires, went viral and started a controversy when she responded with inclusive language during an interview just a few hours before a vote in June 2018 on a bill to legalize abortion. This video can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAFXkmztfEs> When asked by a reporter about the purpose of the student protest she said, “Hay poques diputades que están indecises. Queremos demostrarles que a nosotres no nos va a pasar por al lado que decidan que sigan muriendo mujeres” [There are some deputies who are undecided. We want to show them that we will not stand on the side that has decided that women will continue dying] (Mira as cited in El Pais, 2018). Like the other girls and women who used this ‘e’ form or advocated for it in some way, several memes and criticisms resulted from her use of the gender neutral. One of these appears in Appendix A.

The videos mentioned above, and reactions to them, demonstrate the intensity and popularity of the debate on the gender-neutral form ‘e’ in Spanish. These videos were the first examples of people publicly using the ‘e’ morpheme and brought the issue into the

public sphere. Each of the videos, however, contains elements that serve as a distraction to discerning the responses of commentators on their opinions of the linguistic form itself. The main reason for this is that each of these videos contains a person in the frame. As such, many of the responses to the video focus on the appearance or perceived character of the person speaking rather than the ‘e’ form. While these commentaries are fascinating and deserve attention, they are not the focus of this study. Instead I am choosing to analyze a video by Mundo TKM published September 19th, 2018, titled “¿Qué es el LENGUAJE INCLUSIVO? - TKM Explica” [What is inclusive language? - TKM explains]. The video does not contain people in the screen but rather simplistic paper symbols moving around for graphic aid while a narrator explains what inclusive language sets out to do and who uses it. This eliminates commentators focusing on the appearance of the speaker as well as any specific political contexts, such as the abortion debate in Argentina that other videos ground themselves in. It should however be noted that while there is not a person in the frame, the speaker does have a feminine voice which may affect the way that commentators respond and/or view the speaker’s authority.

Research Question

How do social media commentators legitimize and delegitimize the use of inclusive language in the comment section of a viral video on the popular social media site, YouTube?

Methods

Epistemological Foundations

This thesis is grounded in social constructionism, which argues that meaning is created by multiple people through interaction rather than by a single person (Burr, 2003). Moreover, since meaning must be created by humans, it rejects the idea that universal social truths exist outside of humans creating them (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Social constructionism takes “a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge (e.g., the gender binary); historical and cultural specificity of knowledge; ...knowledge (as) sustained by social processes; and knowledge and social action go together” (Burr, 2003, p. 2). These ideas are crucial to the theoretical underpinnings of this research because they point to the fact that even constructs that have been historically taken for granted--such as the gender binary--are subject to renegotiation. Astley (1985) applies this concept to research, arguing that reality cannot always be uncovered through positivistic scientific inquiry and there may in fact be several realities that are in competition for legitimacy.

Butler (1988) uses social constructionism to address the concept of gender. She is famous for popularizing the idea of gender as something one performs rather than possesses, arguing that social knowledge of gender is something that has been created by several culture-specific social processes, one such process being language. Therefore, since language not only reflects but constructs our reality, changes in language will inevitably affect the social knowledge surrounding gender. This points to the powerful impact that a single letter can impart on speakers’ culture. Spender (1980) adds to this perspective arguing that “in [language’s] structure and in its use, we bring our world into realization, and if it is inherently inaccurate, then we are misled. If the rules which underlie our language system, our symbolic order, are invalid, then we are daily

deceived” (para. 7). The debate surrounding the ‘e’ morpheme is therefore an argument over cultural dominance and whose view of ‘truth’ will become the cultural norm.

Research Design

I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to inform both theory and method. CDA is closely related to social constructionism in that they both hinge on the idea that social meaning is created through discursive actions. CDA as a theory shapes how I find meaning in social discourse. Fairclough (1995) maintains that discourse is more than just a reflection of society’s values; it is an arena where meaning is created and renegotiated. CDA is an approach to discourse analysis that focuses on how injustice, dominance, and power abuse are displayed, reinforced, and challenged by social discourse (Van Dijk, 2004, p. 352). CDA is useful in deconstructing the social forces at play by linking discourse itself with the nature of how power is created, legitimized, and reinforced (Patton, 2014).

Language not only reveals power distinctions in society, it can reinforce or challenge who has social dominance. Social dominance and power are complex to measure, but for my purposes, I used Van Dijk’s (1998) definition: the ability to “(more or less) control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups” (p. 255). When the dominance of one social group becomes the institutional norm in laws and culture it is a hegemony (p. 255). Van Dijk also points out that hegemony can be challenged, accepted, and even normalized by less powerful groups.

To help researchers unearth power divisions in language, Fairclough identifies three levels of discourse. The micro level focuses on the language itself, including aspects

like rhetorical strategies and fallacies. The next level, meso, situates the discourse with context related to its medium and its audience. Finally, the macro level, is the most abstract of the three because it deals with the broader context of discourse. It addresses issues mentioned above including the distribution of social power and the way it is legitimized, enforced, challenged etc. (Fairclough, 2013).

For this thesis, I undertook a qualitative discourse analysis using Van Leeuwen's approach to legitimation theory. Van Leeuwen (2007) lays out a framework of how discourse is used to both legitimate and delegitimize social actions and/or beliefs. He identifies four overarching approaches to this process: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis, all of which can be used in isolation or combination (p. 105).

Van Leeuwen (2007) further breaks down these groups into more specific methods of legitimation. Appeals to authority include relying on personal authority, expert authority, role models, an authority of tradition, or a collective authority. When authority is personal it relies on the influence of another person, for instance legitimizing a diet regime based on a doctor's recommendation, or it can be impersonal, such as actions becoming legitimized because they become law. Van Leeuwen's final example of an appeal to authority is the authority of conformity, in which people legitimize beliefs or actions based on the general trends in society. Moral evaluations on the other hand are made using an appeal to value systems. The next method, rationalization, is broken down into two types, instrumental and theoretical. Instrumental rationalization is concerned with whether a practice is efficient while theoretical rationalization focuses on whether a

practice falls in line with the “natural order” of things. The final category of legitimation, mythopoesis, uses narratives, true or otherwise, to legitimize social messages and actions (p. 113).

Data Collection

Using Van Leeuwen’s analytic framework described above, I analyzed the first 12 months of YouTube comments (and responses to original comments) for the video “¿Qué es el LENGUAJE INCLUSIVO? - TKM Explica” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHQVIsY3Wvs>, from September 2018 to September 2019. The comments were downloaded using the YouTube Comment Scraper program at <http://ytcomments.klostermann.ca/>. From there, the comments were put into an Excel spreadsheet for coding and analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data I first separated the comments into three main categories.

1. Category 1: “Pro”: These comments are in favor of the ‘e’ morpheme. This category also included comments of those who may tolerate the use of the form by others, even if they themselves are not entirely comfortable using it.
2. Category 2: “Con”: The ‘con’ comments included comments of those that are opposed to the use of the ‘e’ morpheme and/or its users.
3. Category 3: “Other”: All other comments, including those that are off-topic, incomprehensible, or lacking in a particular stance.

Once the comments were categorized into these three areas, I used Van Leeuwen’s legitimation theory to code comments in terms of /related to how the commentators

legitimize or delegitimize the use of the “e” morpheme and/or the binary system of gender in the comment section of the YouTube video — which explains in Spanish what the “e” morpheme does and why it was created.

It should be noted that one comment may contain more than one legitimization method, and that not every portion of every comment can be explained by Van Leeuwens’ framework. In those cases, I disregarded the portions that could not be explained. Finally, I moved from van Leeuwen’s categories into a thematic analysis of the data. An example of this analysis appears below in the section entitled, “Rigor and Trustworthiness.”

Rigor and Trustworthiness

This section demonstrates the analyses I undertook. I included these analyses in an effort to “transparently communicate the analysis process” thereby “enhancing trustworthiness and quality of discourse analysis” (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014, para. 10).

The first step in my process was coding. I coded each comment individually, first as “pro” (supporting the use of ‘e’) or “con” (not supporting the use of ‘e’). I then coded each comment according to Van Leeuwen’s framework, described above. The following is an example of this coding scheme. Commentator “Slime Ender17” posted an original comment to the video saying,

"No idiota... Las feministas son son una estupidez... Por que les preocupa eso? El castellano es un lenguaje hermoso, me parece una falta de respeto, como lo insultan de esa manera.”²

² The comments are downloaded directly from the comment section with no changes or corrections of grammar or spelling.

No idiot...The feminists are ridiculous...Why do they care about this?

Castilian is a beautiful language, to me it's disrespectful, the way they insult it like this

First I categorized this as a “con” comment based on the negative reaction to the video’s speaker and the commentator’s opinion that the “e” is disrespectful. Next, I compared the comment to Van Leeuwen’s list of legitimation methods and determined that “Slime Ender17” uses the following strategies: Attack on personal authority, Appeal to authority of tradition, and Appeal to impersonal authority. Specifically, the first part of the comment uses attacks on personal authority by denouncing, firstly, the video’s speaker’s intelligence, and secondly, the intelligence and rationality of the broader community of feminists who supposedly are the ‘e’ form’s supporters. The commentator next utilizes another aspect of authorization, an appeal to tradition, by referring to the beauty of the current way Spanish is spoken implying that the current or traditional form is therefore “better”. Moreover, it is worth noting that the commentator uses the word Castellano, which is the term usually reserved for describing the dialect of Spanish from Spain, as opposed to varieties of Spanish used in Latin America. This again points to the commenter valuing older or more traditional language forms, Authority of tradition. Finally, the last part of the comment makes another appeal to authority, this time impersonal authority. By accusing supporters of the ‘e’ of being disrespectful, the commentator assumes a certain level of respect is naturally owed to the status quo due to the inherent authority held by current grammatical norms. In addition to the implication that “standard” language holds impersonal authority, there is an element of moral

evaluation from the commentator's expressed belief that it is disrespectful and therefore wrong to not follow "standard" language usage.

After coding, I used writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to arrange the (de)legitimation strategies I observed in the data into categories and then themes. In other words, writing about the kinds of strategies that I observed during coding helped me to gain insight into how similarities between strategies/codes could be grouped into categories which, in turn, laid the foundation for generating themes that exemplify the broader implications of what was happening throughout the data. In other words, analyses of multiple comments using van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies (such as the one exemplified in the previous paragraph) allowed me to identify trends in how these strategies were being used collectively amongst the commenters. These trends then became the thematic framework for which to present my findings.

Researcher Positionality and Ethics

Feminist epistemology warns researchers to be aware of their own social identities and positions and how those may shape research topics, data collection, and analysis (Naples & Sachs, 2000). Gorelick (1991), for example, discusses the potential dangers of privileged women making broad generalizations about all women that do not account for intersections of ability, class, race, et cetera, and therefore may reinforce existing unequal privilege systems. She argues that social identities such as class and race may impact women researching other women if the researchers are not aware of their (unintentional) participation in oppressive social systems.

With these ideas in mind, I will strive to examine my own privilege when conductive analyses of comments provided by Spanish-speaking individuals. Since my dominant language is not Spanish and I do not live in a Spanish speaking country, I will strive to avoid placing my own cultural expectations and values on the commentators. This is especially important when analyzing online comments, since the intertwining identities of race, age, social class, and abilities or disabilities of the commentators are often not discernible.

Limitations

While the purpose of this thesis is to provide insight on the ways that certain YouTube commentators legitimize their viewpoints, the video I am looking at only represents a small portion of the worldwide community of Spanish speakers, and as such, findings should not be taken to represent the ideas or legitimation strategies of the entire population. The purpose of studying one video is to provide depth rather than breadth of information about this phenomenon, with the idea that it may shed light on some of the ways that ideas are represented and defended through online discourse.

Moreover, the digital format that the comments come in can be considered both a strength and a limitation in that they present a unique and relevant perspective into social discourse as a whole, while also presenting several challenges that do not apply to non-digital communication. The first of these challenges is the difficulty of keeping track of “multiple people with complex interactions involving multiple actions, and aims simultaneously” (Beaulieu et al., 2015, p. 3). This is to say that the topic of conversation in online discourse is not as straightforward to follow as in face to face discourse.

“Disjointed sequences and multiple conversations occurring at once” (Beaulieu et al. 2015, p. 2) present a challenge in collecting and analyzing data because it can be difficult to decipher who the commentators are responding to and what kind of context the comments were written in. Moreover, users can delete their comments. For this reason, some of the comments written as responses to other deleted posts cannot be analyzed because the thread of the conversation has broken down.

Finally, as Wang et al. (2014) point out, online discourse has very little gatekeeping. This means that practically anyone with access to a computer and internet access can contribute to the conversation. Unlike in spoken conversation, power imbalances are flattened out when no context of age, race, gender, etc. are given. This again means that the findings in this study cannot be applied to all kinds of discourse across all sections of the population since the participants and the context in which they interact are distinct from other forms of discourse. The results of this study are meant to instead provide a snapshot of online discourse as different although equally valuable as face to face discourse in deciphering first, what people think, and second, how they think about the ‘e’ morpheme and populations associated with it (e.g., individuals who identify outside rigid gender binaries).

Findings and Discussion

Overall, the data demonstrates that while the fluidity of gender was explicitly rejected by most commenters, gender was, in fact, constantly being renegotiated and redefined throughout the comment section. Furthermore, defensive strategies taken up by each commenter to legitimize and protect each commenter’s unique construction of

gender are revealed in the negative reactions to the video and the 'e' morpheme. To these aims, several of Van Leeuwen's categories were used to legitimize their positions. Many commenters used multiple different legitimation tactics simultaneously, a phenomenon that will be further explored in the conclusion section

Commenters' Negotiation of Gender

Several comments respond to the video's description of gender fluidity with attempts to pin down the conception of gender as immutable. The example below does so with the employment of all capital letters, illustrative of a high level of emotional investment against the 'e' morpheme (Masullo Chen, & Lu, 2017)

Jo Se: "EL ERROR MAS GRANDE ES RECATEGORIZAR AL SER HUMANO EXISTEN DOS GÉNEROS . FEMENINO Y MASCULINO , QUE TANTO JODER LOS DEMÁS SON ATROFIADOS MENTALES QUE NO ACEPTAN SU PROPIA PERSONALIDAD Y SE AUTO DEFINEN DE SEXO DIFERENTES... BASTA DE ESTUPIDECES Y LLAMEMOS A LAS COSAS POR SUS NOMBRE EL NEGRO, ES NEGRO Y EL BLANCO ES , BLANCO..."

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE IS TO RECATEGORIZE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN TWO GENDERS EXIST. FEMININE AND MASCULINE, AND FUCK THE REST OF THE MENTALLY DAMAGED PEOPLE WHO DON'T ACCEPT THIER OWN PERSONALITY AND SELF IDENTIFY AS DIFFERENT SEXES...

*STOP BEING STUPID AND LET'S CALL THINGS FOR WHAT THEY
ARE BLACK, IS BLACK AND WHITE IS, WHITE...*

This comment is an example of an attempt to delegitimize the 'e' morpheme by primarily addressing the underlying social shifts in the constructions of gender that caused the 'e' morpheme to gain popularity in the first place. The commenter does not explicitly define their perception of gender, but they nonetheless express a belief in the existence of definite gender categories, "existen dos géneros" [Two genders exist]. Their analogy of genders to colors, "el negro, es negro y el blanco es, blanco" [Black is black and white is white], provides more insight into how this commenter in particular pictures gender constructions. By equating the ease of deciphering black from white with the ease of defining gender, the commenter presents their imagination of gender to be two contrasting mutually exclusive categories. This analogy is *one* construction of gender, presented from the commenter's perspective as *the* construction of gender.

Furthermore, the commenter above presents their own 'valid' construction of gender in contrast to what they see as illegitimate, those who "se auto definen de sexo diferentes" [self-identity as different sexes]. Aside from conflating gender as sex, the commenter openly reveals the true threat being felt by the 'e' morpheme: A rise in the popularity of the 'e' reflects growing recognition for self-constructions of gender, and with it, the diminishing of hierarchal social structures wherein the power to define social constructs, such as gender, traditionally resides. Despite the commenter's claims to the contrary, the argument they are engaging in is not over whether gender is negotiated. It is ultimately over who has the social power to claim their negotiation as legitimate.

This struggle over who has the power to control the construction of gender is again presented in the following comment, this time presented in a mocking tone.

Sr. Incógnito: “"Me oprimen porque no me mencionan aunque realmente sí pero no quiero sentirme identificado con los únicos 2 géneros existentes y prefiero identificarme con otro que no existe pero para mí y la bola de idiotas a la que pertenezco" el resumen del vídeo”

“They oppress me because they don't mention me even though really they do but because I don't want to feel identified with the only 2 existing genders and I prefer to self-identify with another gender that doesn't exist except for me and the group of idiots I belong to” the video's summary.

The underlying threat that the ‘e’ presents is revealed through this commenter’s mocking of those who abide by their own constructions of gender, which contradict socially dominant perceptions of gender, called the “norm.” In addition, this comment draws on the legitimation tactic of attacks on personal authority. This approach is woven throughout the data and attempts to delegitimize the ‘e’ morpheme itself by delegitimizing the supposed supporters of the ‘e’ through attacks on their personal authority. The comment appears to refer to non-gender conforming individuals as the subject of abuse, and clearly states their assumed lack of intelligence as a reason for discounting non-gender conforming perspectives on gender and language inclusion. Both the nature of such attacks, and who the attacks are directed toward give insight into the commenter’s beliefs on who has a legitimate voice and who does not. In addition to revealing each commenter’s personal constructions of gender, the comments above show

attempts to personally delegitimize individuals whose gender identity diverges from the commenters' own constructions as abnormal, mentally ill, and/or intellectually challenged.

Attacks on the Personal Authority of Women.

This section will look at how and why women are the group most frequently attacked in commenters' negotiation of gender. In general, commenters who attacked women attach what they perceive as unfavorable characteristics to those they assume are associated with the 'e'. Van Leeuwen's framework deals with the use of personal authority to legitimize but not to delegitimize, nor does it address what the reversal of this tactic accomplishes or reveals. Delegitimizing a person, group, idea, etc. is primarily used as a responsive or defensive move, since an initial real or imagined stance must be taken in order for it to be attacked. The data presented in this subsection show that the video's stance, which was to support the use of the 'e', resulted in many defensive reactions from commenters. Among these, the prolific use of ad hominem against supposed supporters of the 'e' is interesting beyond the fallacy in reasoning they display. We will see in the data below that the kind of characteristics commenters chose to associate their subject³ with reveal underlying societal power structures reflected and negotiated within the comment section. For instance, characteristics related to femininity were prolifically used to attack the supposed supporters of the 'e,' rather than attacking the position held by those supporters. Some of the comments refer specifically to the woman speaking in the video,

³ I will refer to the person or people being discussed in the comment as the 'subject(s)'

while others refer to more hazily defined female subjects, which the commenters presume support the ‘e’.

The following comments, which appear to refer to the woman narrating the video, denounce her personal authority due to her perceived gender.

s13 corea: “When, el vídeo lo hace una mujer xd”

When a woman makes a video xd

KAIVAN SanMar: “Calle de y vayan a la cocina a prepararme un sándwich”

Shut up and go to the kitchen to make me a sandwich

Both of these comments make reference to the illegitimacy of women’s public voices. In each case, the public creation and distribution of a woman’s expression is mocked. Specifically, the first case accomplishes this by implying that the quality of a female created video is inevitably lower than a male created video. In the second case, the commenter’s use of verbs’ command forms (i.e., “callar” [shut up/be quiet] and “ir” [go]) attempts to put women back into a space of domesticity. The comments imply similar constructions of what a woman should be and do by revealing a construction of femininity in which the narrator does not fit, making her illegitimate as a woman and as a speaker.

Domesticity and the expectations of servitude that accompany it constitute only one aspect of womanhood that commenters construct, and judge based on. In the following, a commenter attempts to delegitimize the video’s female speaker based on an assumption of her social beliefs,

Sergio N: “Que pendejada es esta pinche vieja feminazi, es como decirle al sol “sel” o a la luna ponerle lune porque es mujer. Soy mexicano y la neta esta vieja esta bien ponche loca baboza.”

What an idiot this fucking feminazi is. It's like saying el sol (sun) is 'sel' or making la luna lune because it's feminine. I am Mexican and the truth is she is an old fucking crazy idiot

‘Feminist’, ‘crazy’ and ‘stupid’ are the characteristics the commenter assigns to the video’s speaker. Insulting the speaker by using what the commenter perceives to be negative characteristics can be understood as an attempt to delegitimize the argument that she is making based on the traits she holds. This comment, despite its inaccuracies regarding the implementation of the gender neutral ‘e’, associates constructs of feminism with women who are unstable and illegitimate.

Commenters also attacked the poorly defined people or groups they presumed to be supportive of the ‘e’ rather than a concrete individual. Since the video in question used symbols and non-descriptive drawings to represent people, the recipients of the commenters’ attacks had to be imagined and constructed by the commenters’ own perceptions of those involved with the use of the ‘e’ morpheme. For example, in the following quote, the commenter refers to ‘esta generación de mujeres’ [this generation of women] and ‘feminazis’ as illegitimate, which notably, are different groups entirely than those whom they classify as ‘true women.’

ANDRESLE PRISONG: “...Hablando de esta generación estúpida de 'mujeres'... Aclaro feminazis, porque amo las mujeres 😊❤️”

Speaking of this stupid generation of 'women'...I'll clarify feminazis,

because I love women 😊😍.

There is no mention of who qualifies as 'this generation' or 'feminazis'. As such, these attacks on personal authority are guided by the commenter's own perception of what puts a woman into the camp of 'younger' or 'feminist'. These constructions are juxtaposed with an equally hazy construction of the non-feminist woman, which the commenter implies by default to be the 'real' woman. In contrast to the young feminists the commenter refers to, the 'real' woman is ultimately the only legitimate expression of womanhood because she brings pleasure to the commenter (see drooling and heart eyes emojis). Under this method of categorization, a woman becomes a feminazi once she no longer pleases the individual doing the categorizing. The dynamic use of the label feminazi is recurrent throughout the data, and its further implications will be addressed in the conclusion.

The underlying assumption in the above example is that those involved in the support of the 'e' morpheme are un-female or 'unwomen' and therefore unworthy of consideration. Similarly, the following comment delegitimizes the 'e' morpheme by accusing its supporters of being the wrong kind of woman.

Juan Acosta: "Por eso las mujeres no deben de estar en internet, de tan chismosas y metiches que son hasta quieren cambiar el lenguaje. Y hay mujeres hermosas e inteligentes que son grandes doctoras, científicas, psicólogas, etc. Pero nooo tiene que haber pendejas que nunca fueron

cogidas haciendo su desmadre, nunca las pelaron? Por feas y neuróticas ala vrg.”

For this reason, women shouldn't be on the Internet since they're such gossips and so nosy up to the point that they want to change the language. And there are beautiful and intelligent women who are great doctors, scientists, physiologists, etc. But nooo there has to be idiot cunts that were never fucked and making a disaster? Because they're ugly and neurotic go to hell.

Once again, this comment relies on a binary conception of womanhood, commonly known as the Madonna-whore complex (Wolf, 1997). This commenter's particular requirements for being a 'good' woman are found in the opposite of what the commenter lists: to be reserved, sexually available to men, attractive, and to use one's intelligence for 'respectable' purposes such as a doctor or scientist. A 'good' woman is defined here by how she can serve the person who defines her.

This subsection focused on the victimization of women as a method of delegitimizing the 'e' morpheme. While women are not the only people who identify with, or may benefit from the use of the 'e' morpheme, commenters who associated the 'e' with women instead of non-gender binary or transgender individuals have the benefit of situating their arguments within long-existing social Discourses on women's supportive role to men (Hayat, Lesser, & Samuel-Azran, 2017). Through shielding their argument in this type of Discourse, each commenter assumes a position of power that 'permits the construction of their own definition of what it means to be the 'correct' kind

of woman. It then becomes exceedingly easy for commenters to deem illegitimate the authority of women who do not follow their guidelines, and by extension the ‘e’ morpheme they support.

Whether the commenters utilized attacks on the personal authority of non-gender binary individuals, women, or feminists, comments revealed constant reconstructing of what it means to be a woman by putting forth their own definitions for how the ‘proper’ woman acts. The data that appeared in this subsection along with the claim that gender is simple and immutable present an inherent contradiction with the variation and fluidity of gender constructions shared amongst the comments. Overall, then, the comments explored above illustrate the debate over the ‘e’ morpheme as ultimately being a struggle over who gets to hold the controls when negotiating gender constructs.

Commenters’ Defensive Strategies

In response to such an ideological battle over who gets to define gender, commenters collectively took up several defensive methods which can be roughly grouped and labeled as gaslighting, consolidating social pressure, and violence. None of these strategies were mutually exclusive from the others, nor did the categories present themselves in any sequence. So, while these categories are presented below in separate subsections, they should be understood as having elements of multiple different strategies.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a psychological tactic used to make an individual or group question the sanity of their own observations, perceptions, or conclusions (Abramson, 2014). This

kind of manipulation can be employed in various ways, some more subtle than others. Determining whether a comment should be interpreted as gaslighting or not becomes difficult in social media since there is some uncertainty over who the intended audience for each comment is. Commenters may refer to gender non-conforming individuals, women, or another group as the subject of their comment, but their audience—or who they are trying to convince—could be anyone. Exploring whether a commenter was “speaking to” the targeted group, other commenters, or someone else is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I will focus on how commenters attempt to portray the people they are discussing in the comment as unreliable perspectives, even if that argument is intended for a broader audience.

Gaslighting, as a defensive strategy, can be seen within the comments shown in the previous subsection. As a whole, those comments claim that gender cannot be changed while simultaneously constructing various gender ideals and definitions. This presents readers with a contradiction where, despite commenters presenting their own gender constructions/negotiations, any observations of gender negation by other commenters either in broader society or the comment section itself are labeled inaccurate and deranged. In other words, gaslighting in those comments is reflected in the ways that commenters participate in a phenomenon (i.e., negotiating gender) while denying the very existence of that phenomenon. In the broader data set, other uses of gaslighting in the comment section target individuals’ identities and personhood as being unnatural. By denying or questioning the very natural existence of groups of people, the commenters

ultimately make the argument that their victims' own perceptions and self-identity are unfounded or crazy.

Subnormales. The adjective 'subnormal' was applied to supposed supporters of the 'e' morpheme 12 separate times in the data, a reflection of a larger discussion on the 'normal'. Van Leeuwen's framework for legitimation accounts for this strategy in his discussion on theoretical rationalization, which is concerned with discourse strategies that aim to preserve the 'natural' order of the word. Theoretical rationalization is often intertwined with other strategies to legitimize or delegitimize arguments, ultimately making them more robust. The following comment attempts to delegitimize the 'e' morpheme through both theoretical rationalization and authority of conformity (i.e., the authority that comes with belonging to a majority).

David Brand: "Realmente me parece una estupidez. Desde los 80' jodiendo con esto... Y siguen un grupo de subnormales que creyendo en que si se independizan y sacan su propio lenguaje que los cubra van a ser mejor aceptados socialmente. La aceptación comienza por nosotros mismos y es algo de todos llevar a la sociedad al respeto y a la tolerancia no sacar esta burrada."

This really seems so stupid. We've been fucking around with this since the 80s...and still a group of subnormals who think that if they are more independent and make their own language that they will be more socially accepted. Acceptance starts within oneself and it's something we bring to society with respect and tolerance not using this stupidity

This commenter presents an interesting contradiction in their argument. They argue that only tolerance and respect will lead to acceptance of others: a language change will not. However, they also refer to ‘e’ supporters as subnormal in order to delegitimize their supposed desire to be socially accepted. This line of thinking leaves potential supporters or users of the ‘e’ with no viable path toward social acceptance. The commenter communicates that only tolerance and respect are able to change public acceptance, while withholding these very things from those who use the ‘e’. There is an underlying assumption here that the power to make language and social changes still resides with the dominant majority, not the minority, that is ‘e’ supporters. As such, the commenter argues that measures taken by minority groups, such as the ‘e’ proposal, will not amount to anything because it is up to the dominant group whether they will accept ‘e’ users’ identities as valid. Ultimately, the commenter’s message amounts to gaslighting: they reject the need for the ‘e’ by presenting their own solution of tolerance and respect, while simultaneously cutting off access to that very solution.

As described above, gaslighting essentially attempts to portray people or groups as illogical and unreliable, thus inevitably linking the strategy with attacks on personal authority. Combining attacks on personal authority with attempts to reframe information to refute the victim’s credibility is a way to disorient and delegitimize the self-perceptions of the person or people targeted. In the following data excerpt, the commenter makes a vague reference to linguistics, implying that there is no support for the ‘e’’s legitimacy in the field.

Alejandro B: “¿Qué es el lenguaje inclusivo?”

RE: La mayor subnormalidad y estupidez de los millennials pendejos que no saben ni puta mierda de lingüística.” [What is inclusive language? RE: The biggest abnormality and stupidity from asshole millennials that don’t know shit about linguistics.]

This comment attempts to address the ‘e’ supporters as inept and illegitimate commenters on language in general. The commenter presents linguistics (or those in the field) as a scientific authority on the legitimacy of language usage, however, there is no explanation for what the commenter believes these linguistic consensuses to be. Instead, the reference to linguistics is used as a façade to build a narrative to counters the ‘e’ supporters’ argument out of what appears to be “fact”. There is also an implication that one must meet a certain threshold of formal education in order to use language for self- expression. All of this together helps present the 'e' as “wrong" in the same way a simple algebraic equation could be wrong, ultimately negating any impact of perspective or self-identity on the debate.

Consolidating Social Pressure

Several comments in the data attempt to draw on “power in numbers” to defend against the ‘e’ morpheme and the social movements it reflects. Some of these comments directly referenced the large number of people who are against the ‘e’ movement in order to delegitimize it. Van Luuewen’s strategy of instrumental rationalization was also used to criticize the ‘e’’s lack of practical use for the majority of society. Both of these approaches attempt in some way to legitimize what commenters see as the collective good over the needs of the individual.

Authority of Conformity. As the name suggests, appeals to this type of authority rely on the idea that the more people who agree with a position, the more credible that position is (van Leeuwen, 2007). The comment below is an example of this thinking.

Daniel Quirco "Por suerte tiene 3 veces más dislikes que likes... Fe en la humanidad restaurada"

Luckily it has 3 times more dislikes than likes...Faith in humanity restored.

The commenter's expression of relief that their position is shared by a large majority of viewers, and the fact that they connect this to how humanity as a whole is faring, implies that commenters such as this view the like/dislike function on YouTube as a direct reflection of the legitimacy of what is presented there. Interestingly, this feature points to a multitude of ways that Truth may be negotiated through online discourse. Specifically, not only may commenters refer to Truth as under construction by majority rule (e.g., three times as many likes on a video equates to truth about societal views about gender), here, the commenter implies that Truth is able to be altered and rebuilt by novel social media tools, such as like/dislike counts. By associating the highly variable metric of public opinion with the legitimacy of a position (for instance a binary perception of gender), it follows logically that the position is not naturally immutable, but fluid and subject to negotiation.

The idea that social conformity is indicative of a more legitimate argument is further exemplified in the following comment. A commenter who is supposedly not a member of either group, calls on women and members of the LGBTQ community to utilize the dislike function of YouTube to show condemnation for the 'e'.

josesito 12 “Todas las mujeres o gente que forme parte del grupo LGBT+ utilizan mi botón de like cómo botón para decir que no les molesta el lenguaje normal y que lo aceptan”

All the women or people who are a part of the LGBT+ group use my like button to say that normal language doesn't bother you and that you accept it.

This commenter notably adds another layer of authority to their appeal to conformity by calling on groups whom they believe add an element of personal authority to the majority position against the ‘e’. Through the appeal to groups that are supposedly affected by the use of the ‘e’, the commenter ultimately attempts to create a smaller scale demonstration of the authority of conformity amongst subpopulations of personally credible individuals. Like in the comment presented directly prior, this approach implies that his approach implies that the majority opinion – simply by the fact that they are more numerous – has the power to delegitimize the positions of the minority whether it is on a large or small scale.

A final example of this strategy displays the same reliance on ‘majority rules’ thinking in reference to comment section trends and feminism.

you tube “Diganme cuantos comentarios hay a favor del feminismo jajajajajaj”

Tell me how many comments are in favor of feminism hahahaha

Rather than addressing the support, or lack thereof, for the ‘e’ morpheme, this commenter applies the same strategy of referencing the like/dislike bar to YouTube’s other feedback

function, comments. The fact that negative comments outnumber positive comments may give commenters the impression that their contributions have some level of influence in the debate over underlying social movements and the resulting 'e'. In the case of the comment above, the commenter revels in the comment section's lack of support for feminism, representing it as a direct hit to the legitimacy of the 'e' movement as a whole. By pointing out the comment section's lack of support for feminism, the commenter effectively exposes the underlying purpose of liking, disliking, and commenting on social media: contributing to the ongoing constructions of gender, feminism, and other social constructs.

Instrumental Rationalization. Instrumental rationalization can be compared to utilitarian logic. Similar to the authority of conformity, instrumental rationalization is generally concerned with what benefits the largest amount of people possible. Where instrumental rationalization differs from authority of conformity, is in its focus on issues of practicality and saving resources. In the following comments, the commenters both focus on the 'e's effect on the resource of time.

Cogli fakers: "Esto es una perdida de tiempo"

This is a waste of time

Jose Mejia: "Que pérdida de tiempo ver esta tontería no sirve para nada"

What a waste of time to see this nonsense that doesn't do anything

Commenters who value the resource of time over the video's content or the potential benefits of the 'e' morpheme show a preference toward group convenience over individual feelings. There are a couple implications to this approach, first, it frames the

legitimacy of the ‘e’ morpheme through its effects on the majority. Second, it frames time as a valuable resource under threat. One conclusion is that the minority of ‘e’ morpheme users are actively harming the majority by taking away from their time. This helps reverse the narrative of victimization between the minority and the majority. In the video, a minority exposes their systematic exclusion in language and society and unveils measures for empowerment. In the two comments immediately above, they are in turn framed as a threat to the majority’s well-being.

Evidence of commenters reversing the victim/perpetrator roles continues throughout data. Those who present the minority as a threat to the majority furthermore link the well-being of the majority with the health of traditional ideologies.

LiquidPublic: “que estupidez, Dios creó a los humanos HOMBRES y MUJERES. Si hay personas con trastornos mentales que no se identifican de esa forma, por qué imponerle al resto de las personas un cambio en el lenguaje establecido? si son ellos la minoría que tiene que adaptarse al mundo, no el mundo a ellos.”

what idiocy, God created human MEN and WOMEN. If some people with mental delays don't identify in that way, why should everyone else have to deal with a change in established language? If they are the minority they have to adapt to the world, not the other way around

This commenter’s utilitarian argument centers on the belief that divergent conceptions of gender negatively affect a larger number of people than the number of people negatively affected by binary conceptions of gender. This comment most clearly illustrates another

perspective common to comments explored in this section: in relying on instrumental rationalization, their arguments hinge on the need for a choice between the freedom of the majority or the freedom of the minority. Presenting the issue in terms of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ is a potentially powerful way to garner support through fear. However, underlying such fears is the belief that the introduction of divergent social constructions signifies not only danger to existing constructions, but to the very way of life those existing constructions make possible. Under this assumption, there is no room for coexistence between non-binary constructions of gender and dominant binary images of gender.

Commenters also present the ‘e’ morpheme and the social movement toward expanding constructions of gender as an immediate threat to both society at large and specific ‘more deserving’ groups, as the data below demonstrate. Those who want the status quo to remain and those who support the ‘e’ are evaluated using comparisons of usefulness. For example, the following commenter still uses elements of instrumental rationalization through their focus on assessing what is actually needed by whom; however, they also delegitimize the ‘e’ by comparing its usefulness with what they claim is a different, more practical kind of inclusive language.

Ainhoa Ramos: “El masculino genérico/despectivo ya incluye a todos los generos existentes y no se refiere al masculino propiamente dicho. El verdadero lenguaje inclusivo es usado para la gente que tiene alguna discapacidad.”

The masculine generic already includes all the existing genders and doesn't refer to the masculine exclusively. True inclusive language is used for people who have some kind of disability

By outlining a conflict between 'real' and 'fake' need, the commenter frames social support as a kind of finite resource: only so many people can be helped through inclusive language. In this case the commenter attempts to direct attention toward the "truly deserving", in this case people with disabilities and away from the "undeserving" 'e' supporters. This attempt to deflect attention implies that supporters of the 'e' morpheme are draining compassion, attention, efforts, etc. away from those who need it more. Thus, commenters once again situate 'e' supporters as a threat, just as we saw with the other commenters in this subsection. However, this time the supposed threat is toward individuals with disabilities, that is, the population the commenter presents as the *truly* vulnerable members of society, thus painting 'e' supporters as interlopers and particularly villainous.

Sympathy, like all resources can be allocated in different ways. It can be directed to those with the most need as the commenter above argues, or it can be directed toward those who are deemed most deserving as exemplified in the following comment.

Shiloh Dynasty: "Esas feministas, deberían agradecer a los hombres que mueren en las guerras todo por defender a su familias(esto incluye a los hijos y las mujeres y sus respectivos familiares.)"

These feminists should be grateful to the men who died in wars to defend their families (this includes kids and women and their respective family members)

This commenter presents feminists as ungrateful towards those who “provide” more for society. Under the commenter’s logic, feminists are presented as diverting attention away from the people who do the most good for the general community. However, this comment interestingly takes a slightly different approach than the comments previously explored in this section. Instead of making the argument that ‘e’ supporters are *taking* sympathy or attention they do not deserve, the commenter argues that ‘e’ supporters are not *giving* the attention that some men deserve. This has the effect of expanding the ways that feminists can be harmful to the well-being of society: not only do they leech resources from the “deserving”, they don’t even give their own “respect” to the “deserving”. It is the lack of gratefulness towards those that the commenter sees as most useful to society that the commenter is particularly offended by. The sacrifices invoked by mentioning men who go to war portray them as socially useful, while in contrast, the opposing feminists are not useful. It is this usefulness that the commenter implies entitles a group to respect. In this case, the commenter makes the leap that respecting the men who go to war is achieved by adhering to the status quo.

The comments exemplified in this section show the commenters decreeing who deserves attention and who does not on the basis of what they provide for society. Each comment presents an incompatibility between the wishes of ‘e’ supporters and the wishes of another group, either society at large or a specific group (e.g., people with disabilities

or men who have gone to war). Furthermore, each comment implies that something valuable is on the table between the two groups (e.g., productivity, convenience, compassion, appreciation). Ultimately, a false choice is presented in which realizing the wishes of ‘e’ supporters’ would result in depriving some resource (or combination of resources) from another group.

In sum, when divergent voices begin to encroach upon dominant voices and constructions of gender, social consolidation against new voices can amplify the voices of those in power. Commenters equate the majority opinion with legitimate ‘Truth’ as part of their defense against supporters of the ‘e’. They also recognize that public opinion, including the comment section and the like/dislike bar, are still up for negotiation. The push toward consolidating public opinion in opposition to the emerging ‘e’ morpheme is therefore crucial in maintaining control over which constructions of gender are ‘True’.

Suggestions of Violence to Protect the Status Quo.

The most disturbing responses to the ‘e’ morpheme in the data were the comments advocating for physical violence against people who use the ‘e’ or against people the commenters presumed support it. Threatening violence is not a mutually exclusive approach from the ones discussed above. Both attacks on personal authority and attempts to coerce social consolidation underlie such threats. The comment below easily demonstrates the combination of these approaches.

Luis Uchiha: “habla bien idiota!!! , habla bien o te mato!!!! xD”

Speak right idiot!!! , speak right or I’ll kill you!!! xD

This commenter ended their death threat with an element of humor (xD)⁴ perhaps in an attempt to make the extremity of the comment more palatable. Nonetheless, threats to kill those who do not comply with social norms underscore how increasing tensions progress between users or supporters of the ‘e’ and those who oppose it. This comment relies on the kinds of existing discursive patterns that have been explored in previous sections. Conclusions on both the personal authority and worth of ‘e’ supporters, as well as assumptions on the level of threat the ‘e’ presents, underlie this commenter’s decision to utilize such an extreme threat. In sum, threats of violence are born from a progression of less extreme discourse, which serve to justify increasingly extreme measures.

Death as the ultimate threat toward those who go against the dominant social constructions of gender reflects the intensity with which some commenters feel they must defend these traditional constructions. Looking at more extreme comments reveals the variety of more common and seemingly tamer delegitimation tactics that lurk under the surface.

Juan A.K.A Hoffer: “Soy el unico al que le gustaria que Hittler estuviera vivo y matara a todas estas personas pendejas..?”

Am I the only one who would like Hittler (sic) to be alive and kill all of these idiots...?

The comment above builds off of similar discourse on instrumental rationalization used in other comments. The positive reference to Hitler implies the commenter’s support for a kind of ‘social cleansing’. In this case, they refer to “estas personas pendejas” [these

⁴ xD represents a laughing face in online discourse

idiots] or the 'e' supporters as those who should be removed from society. This implies that the commenter's justification for why certain people should be killed originates at least in part from the utilitarian idea that even the most extreme measures should be taken against a minority in order to protect the majority. The argument for death as a legitimate consequence for not conforming to social norms is repeated in the following comment:

MonitosChinos. exe: "Este comentario tiene razón si naces hombre
NACES HOMBRE si naces mujer NACES MUJER y si no te gusta
matate :D"

*This comment is right if you are born a man you are a MAN if you are
born a woman you are a WOMAN and if you don't like it kill yourself :D*

In this comment, the group of individuals who the commenter says should kill themselves is more clearly defined as gender nonconforming people. The same general opposing groups are however still created: those whose identities follow binary constructions of gender and those whose do not. Being in the latter category disrupts the dominance of binary gender constructions and threatens the social privilege of those who belong to it. Faced with such a threat, this commenter, while not outright threatening the subject(s) of their comment, appears to use a grinning face (:D) to casually instruct non-gender conforming individuals to kill themselves. Once again, this reveals the extreme length some commenters feel is justified to protect the status quo.

Within the realm of physical violence, some commenters also utilized threats of sexual violence towards women whom they saw as supportive to the 'e'. Rape threats toward women are another piece of larger discourses which attempt to delegitimize the

‘e’ by connecting it to women and femininity. As discussed in the previous section addressing attacks on women, femininity is constantly under renegotiation and under attack by commenters, as an alternative to addressing the ‘e’ itself. Threatening sexual violence is one of the ways in which commenters can attempt to portray their side of the ‘e’ debate and, by extension, their constructions of gender, as more powerful. The following exchange between commenters demonstrates the use of such threats:

Érika Antúnez: “Entonces dejalos hablar como quieran y deja de quejarte por tonteras.”

So let them speak how they want and stop complaining about stupid things

Espartano A: “bueno, entonces vos déjame violarte y matarte como yo quiera.”

Ok, then you let me rape and kill you how I want

The first commenter is one of the pro comments and argues that using the ‘e’ is a matter of personal choice. The second commenter responds by firstly, reinforcing the gender binary through addressing the original commenter as a woman while making clear he is a man. Secondly, by implying sexual dominance over the first commenter, he furthermore attempts to cement not only a binary conception of gender but a hierarchal gender structure as well. This exchange is perhaps the most extreme example of how commenters attempt to pushback against social progress by further entrenching themselves in discourse that supports gender hierarchies.

The ‘e’ morpheme poses a threat to the dominance of strictly binary conceptions of gender and the inherent privilege it provides cisgender individuals. As demonstrated in

earlier sections, the constant renegotiation of gender by commenters on both sides of the argument indicates that the controversy surrounding the 'e' is not about whether gender is a social construct, but rather over who has the power to claim their construction as legitimate., but over who has the power to claim their construction as legitimate. This battle for legitimacy is seen throughout the comment section through attacks of varying degree. Threats of violence are simply another way to delegitimize the opposing side. Legitimacy in this case is equated with physical dominance. Rape threats in particular attempt to express a form of total dominance by communicating the ability and willingness to force both physical and emotional control over an individual. Moreover, comments such as

juan alfaró: "Quiero cogerte"

I want to fuck you

exemplify how commenters who sexually objectify a woman in place of addressing her argument (in this case the video narrator's argument) attempt to reassert the insignificance of a female voice, ultimately delegitimizing her argument. While the argument surrounding the 'e' is not explicitly addressed in this comment, the commenter's choice to ignore it nonetheless sends a message that the narrator's message is not worth addressing. Instead, the unsolicited sexual advance attempts to portray her as an object for gratification rather than a legitimate voice. Ultimately, comments such as these reveal that commenters push back against the potential restructuring of gender with increasingly extreme attempts to further maintain the power imbalances being threatened.

In sum, commenters who threaten or advocate for violence in response to the use of the ‘e’ morpheme often validate their positions by threatening to harm those who they imply “deserve” it. The majority of their victims are women, despite the ‘e’ morpheme functionality for all genders. Commenters nonetheless address their comments to women who they imagine support the ‘e’ morpheme and the deconstruction the gender binary. Several of the comments discussed in this section and the section discussing personal attacks against women reveal an underlying assumption that there are ‘good’ women and ‘bad’ women. Commenters continued to build on that idea in their responses to the video, with some following it to the most extreme conclusion, that women who fall into the wrong category of women deserve to be raped and/or killed.

Conclusion

The overwhelmingly negative reaction to the video advocating for the use of the ‘e’ morpheme reveals patterns in how commenters attempt to delegitimize what they feel threatened by. Much of the opposition against the ‘e’ stems from the argument that gender is immutable, and that language should reflect that. This idea reoccurs in various ways throughout the data, from utilitarian commenters who claim that the ‘e’ is unnecessary because gendered language represents everybody, to commenters who attack the personal authority of gender non-conforming individuals by claiming they are mentally unstable. Despite such arguments, the data ultimately revealed underlying evidence of continuous and simultaneous negotiation of gender construction carried out by commenters. This can be seen in the numerous definitions of gender roles and womanhood that commenters held. Not only did the constructions of gender differ between comments, gender

constructs were subject to change within individual comments as well. In other words, oftentimes a commenter's very own definition of a 'real' woman was variable and based on the commenter's personal perception of what was useful to them. This contradiction unveils one of the most important findings of this thesis: the controversy over the 'e' is ultimately not about whether gender exists as a fixed state but over who has the social standing or legitimacy to define gender. The comment section is a battlefield for this conflict to play out.

This thesis explored specific tactics taken up by those opposed to the 'e' morpheme. Commenters' defensive strategies included gaslighting, social consolidation, and threats of physical and sexual violence. These categories were not mutually exclusive, and the comments that were explored in each section often demonstrated elements of multiple strategies, which served to make each individual strategy more robust. For example, attacks on personal authority pave the way for more effective appeals to instrumental rationalization (utilitarianism) by helping to make the argument that resources, such as time, should be saved for "better" people than 'e' supporters.

Theoretical Implications

This thesis demonstrates that multiple strategies are often used in combination to achieve specific goals: gaslighting, social consolidation, and calls to violence. Van Leeuwen's framework, while useful as a preliminary method of analysis and categorization, did not however account for all the nuances of this study. Where my study's findings branch out from van Leeuwen's original framework is twofold: first, in the exploration of how individual legitimation tactics interact with each other to achieve

broader goals within the comment section as a whole, in this case several reactionary strategies to delegitimize the ‘e’ morpheme. And second, my thesis explores van Leeuwen’s struggles of legitimation as they apply to popular online discourse. It is this latter category that I believe is most ripe for further exploration.

Although van Leeuwen’s categorization of legitimization tactics are clearly still relevant, since much of the data from this study reflected his earlier findings, it does not account potential differences in social media communication. An online platform, like YouTube, presents new considerations in the field of discourse analysis. Take for instance the like/dislike bars, which may heighten the power that public opinion has on legitimizing a position or argument. Findings from this study, such as the potential effect of likes on the perceived legitimation of the ‘e’, only scratch the surface of how online discourse may present different considerations than traditional discourse (e.g. speeches, face to face communication). The argument for assessing the applicability of pre-internet discourse theories in newer online discourse spaces has been made by Blommaert (2019) as well. Blommaert (2019) claims that online spaces present a largely unexplored area for discourse analysis and such spaces may give us more insight into how social constructions are being uniquely crafted through social media communication.

Social Implications

Overall, this thesis exposes strategies used in one online discourse space to delegitimize and marginalize gender non-conforming individuals and others assumed to support the ‘e’ morpheme in Spanish (e.g., feminists, millennials). The data allowed for a closer look at how online commenters construct the ‘e’ morpheme and the people they

associate with it as threats. Looking at the data as a whole, commenters overwhelmingly constructed two opposing groups—those who are positively associated with the ‘e’, and those who oppose the ‘e’. There seemed to be no consensus on who the first group was exactly. Some commenters constructed the pro ‘e’ group as gender non-conforming, some targeted transgender individuals, some focused on women, while others targeted broader movements of social progressiveness as the threat. Nonetheless, despite inconstancy regarding who precisely made up the group responsible for the ‘e’ morpheme, commenters generally situated their arguments into discourses of ‘us vs them’. The tactics discussed in the *Findings and Discussion* of gaslighting, social consolidation, and threats of violence can be seen as reactive or defensive in nature. The video provided the stimulus, which was the threat of social change wrapped up in the potential success of the ‘e’ morpheme.

Commenters’ responses to the video as stimulus were aimed at defending the status quo in both language and society. Such an approach toward the ‘opposing side’ provides novel insight into how non-gender conforming individuals may be constructed within online platforms. There are two aspects here that deserve further study: first, with non-gender conforming individuals’ visibility increasing in society, researchers have the opportunity to explore how gender fluidity is being received and renegotiated in online discourse. This knowledge could allow us to respond more critically to patterns of discourse (such as the ones discussed in this thesis) that attempt to further marginalize and delegitimize gender minorities. The more we know about how online discourse reacts

to changing notions of gender, the better able we are to support, organize, and advocate for the empowerment of gender minorities.

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APPENDIX A



I don't think it will hurt the baby.

15 years later

"Todes les diputades"