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CONFRONTING SEXIST COMMENTS: VERBAL (IM) POLITENESS IN SPANISH AND GERMAN

Enfrentarse a comentarios sexistas:
(Des)cortesía verbal en español y en alemán

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RESUMEN

This paper adopts a pragmatic perspective to examine the verbal responses to micro-sexist comments. The objective is to define and analyse the speech act «confronting sexist comments», focusing on the facework used among peers. The study was carried out with a Discourse Completion Task at the campus of the University Pablo de Olavide in Seville, involving Spanish students as well as German Erasmus students. The aim was to investigate how strategies of verbal (im)politeness, as defined by Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann (2003) and Bousfield (2008), vary based on the Spanish or German linguaculture and the gender of the speakers. Intercultural studies (Siebold & Busch, 2015) predict that Spanish speakers would utilise positive facework more frequently than German speakers, while feminist studies (Mills, 2005) suggest that women are expected to display more polite linguistic behaviour than men. The results indicate that negative assessments of sexist comments were more prevalent in Spanish culture and among female speakers, whereas German and male speakers more frequently avoided reacting to sexist comments. Furthermore, the findings suggest that «confronting sexist comments» may be a speech act where the gender bias is more significant than intercultural differences between Spanish and German students.

Keywords

Gender; Pragmatics; Impoliteness; Intercultural; Spanish-German.

RESUMEN

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Este artículo examina, desde el punto de vista pragmático, las reacciones verbales ante un comentario microsexista. El objetivo consiste en definir y analizar el acto de habla «enfrentarse a comentarios sexistas» centrándose en las estrategias de imagen social utilizado entre estudiantes. El estudio se ha llevado a cabo en la Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla, entre estudiantes españoles y Erasmus alemanes con ayuda de un Discourse Completion Task. El objetivo consiste en verificar cómo las estrategias de (des)cortesía verbal, definidas por Culpeper, Bousfield y Wichmann (2003) y Bousfield (2008) varían dependiendo, primero, de la lengua y la cultura española o alemana y, segundo, del género de los hablantes. Los estudios interculturales (Siebold y Busch, 2015) predicen que los hablantes españoles suelen hacer más uso de estrategias centradas en la imagen positiva que los alemanes, y las investigaciones feministas (Mills, 2005) indican que se espera un comportamiento lingüístico más cortés de las mujeres que de los hombres. Los resultados muestran que la valoración negativa del comentario sexista era más prevalente cuando se trataba de la cultura española y de hablantes mujeres, mientras los hablantes alemanes y los varones de ambas culturas evitaban más frecuentemente el enfrentamiento. Los resultados también apuntan a que «enfrentarse a comentarios sexistas» puede considerarse un acto de habla en el que las diferencias interculturales entre estudiantes españoles y alemanes son menos relevantes que las diferencias entre hablantes de un y otro género.

Palabras clave

Género; pragmática; descortesía; intercultural; español-alemán.

Sexist language and its handling continue to be of great concern within the field of feminist linguistics. While there is a consensus regarding the broader definition of sexism as the discriminatory use of language based on gender, divergent approaches exist in studying and addressing this issue. Some linguists concentrate on the internal logics involved in constructing the meaning of sexist utterances (Vetterling-Braggin, 1981; Hom, 2012), whereas others examine verbal sexism within the broader context of structural violence and gender inequality (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Holmes, 1995, 2007; Sunderland, 2007; Mills, 2008; Mills & Mullany, 2011). The latter argue that sexist speech, in fact, primarily targets girls and women, although they have moved away from the essentialist notions of victimised women and powerful men postulated during second wave feminism by the theory of androcentric language (Lakoff, [1975] 2004; Spender, 1980).

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the positive impact that feminist campaigns for gender-inclusive language have shown, Butler (2021: xv) asserts that «linguistic violence exists, as does linguistic vulnerability». She observes that sexist speech has even grown in the last few years. To elucidate the changes that have occurred in the 21st century, Mills (2008) introduces the categories of overt and indirect sexism. Overt sexism can be described using traditional linguistic features, such as the semantics of insults, while indirect sexism encompasses stereotypical beliefs embedded in discourse. Speakers may explicitly use misogynistic expressions to insult women or subtly allude to gender stereotypes that are not necessarily meant to be offensive. However, both the overt and the micro-sexist¹ comments pose challenges as they stem from a powerful discursive tradition that allows speakers to deflect responsibility.

The reason we say that sexism is a site for struggle is that when sexist language is used, it is extremely difficult to resist and to answer back. [...] It is not a view of women that the speaker or writer has invented, but rather just a body of ideas and phrases which others have expressed and which are presented as 'common sense'. Sexism has an agentless feel to it, and because of this, it achieves authority unless it is challenged. (Mills & Mullany, 2011: 144-145)

From a pragmatic standpoint, answering back to sexist language is arduous because it is based on presuppositions about women. Even if the hearer does not believe in gender stereotypes, they recognize and understand their meaning. The issue lies in the fact that presuppositions cannot be easily cancelled. They persist as a shared foundation for communication, even if denied or questioned. Christie (2000: 130) provides the example of «You think like a woman». Taken literally, this statement is not sexist, but pragmatically, it carries sexist implications by presupposing that women have a distinct (or inferior) way of thinking. One could respond with «No, I do not think like a woman», but this answer would reinforce the presupposition. Alternatively, one could say, «It is not true that women have a special (or deficient) way of thinking», but this would position the responder outside the shared cultural framework, creating a delicate situation.

It is worth investigating the pragmatic strategies employed in face-to-face interactions to challenge sexism among peers. Comparing the verbal realisation of these strategies in two different languages, Spanish and German, can shed light on the importance of cultural differences in choosing one strategy over another. Thus, this paper addresses two research questions: First, how do students react to sexist comments made by their peers, and what speech acts do they commonly employ in response?

1. We relate the category of indirect sexism to the Spanish term *micromachismo* (Bonino, 1995; Sau, 2001), inspired by Foucault's idea of the micro-physics of power, and therefore we use the expression *micro-sexist language* in English.

Given that the interaction occurs between peers, we may expect face-saving measures to maintain community inclusion. This leads to the second question: What face-saving strategies are employed? By identifying pragmalinguistic politeness or impoliteness we can observe if there are intercultural differences, as well as, since we are talking about a gender-sensible context, there may be differences between the strategies used by female and male students.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the theoretical framework of politeness studies, establishing the speech act of «confronting sexist comments» as a form of face-threatening act (FTA). Chapter 2 outlines the experiment conducted in Seville, Spain, detailing the methodology employed to collect verbal reactions to sexist comments. The collected data is presented in Chapter 3, followed by a comprehensive discussion of the results in Chapter 4. This discussion primarily focuses on two aspects: the intercultural comparison of responses and the disparities observed between female and male speakers. Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the study's conclusions.

The act of «confronting sexist comments» does not have a standardised speech act label, but from a pragmatic perspective, it can be best described as an illocutionary act where the speaker reacts negatively to a previous statement. In pragmatics, illocutionary acts refer to the intended meaning behind an utterance, and in this case, the speaker's intention is to express disapproval of sexism. For an act of confronting sexist comments to occur, it is essential that the responder interprets the previous statement as sexist or at least containing elements of sexism. This interpretation forms the basis for their subsequent response. The responder's aim is to show their disapproval of sexism through their reaction.

We can further describe this illocutionary act in terms of facework, following Brown and Levinson (1987). In their theory of politeness, they describe face as a person's public self-image and positive face as the desire for social approval and connection. In their framework, a face-threatening act (FTA) is defined as a speech act that challenges the positive face of the hearer, for example, when «the speaker holds a negative evaluation of some aspects of the hearer's positive face» (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 66). Consequently, the act of confronting a sexist comment can be classified as a FTA, because it is not only the perlocutionary reaction to a face-threat (the sexist comment), but also involves expressing a negative evaluation of the hearer's positive face and challenges the hearer's social image (as being sexist) and the desire for positive social interaction.

CONFRONTING SEXIST COMMENTS AS A FACE-THREATENING ACT (FTA)

The speaker can employ politeness strategies or impoliteness strategies to manage the face threat. Politeness strategies aim to mitigate the face threat by maintaining a level of social harmony, while impoliteness strategies may escalate the face threat by causing offence or disrespect. In their seminal work, Brown and Levinson (1987) described politeness as the facework that speakers employ to maintain social harmony and personal relationships. Both politeness and impoliteness strategies can be broadly categorised into positive facework, and negative facework, which relates to the desire for «freedom of action» (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). They propose four politeness strategies: bald-on-record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness.

The first one, bald-on-record politeness, means that the speaker can express his or her intentions in a clear and direct way. This kind of politeness is typical for a social context where speaker and hearer are very familiar and close to each other. The second one, the positive politeness, addresses the positive face needs of the hearer, for example, by showing solidarity and attending the hearer's needs and interests. Conversely, the third type is called negative politeness because it seeks to maintain the hearer's negative face, avoiding any imposition from the speaker and therefore using indirect and distancing strategies. The fourth one, the off-record politeness, is completely indirect and the intended meaning of the speaker's utterance has to be conveyed by pragmatic means.

The most prominent model of impoliteness to date is the one introduced by Culpeper (1996). Initially, it was conceived as a parallel to the four superstrategies: bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and mock politeness or sarcasm. The fifth superstrategy involves withholding politeness, which refers to remaining silent when an answer or reaction in terms of politeness work is expected. In subsequent studies by Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann (2003) and Culpeper (2011), this model was further refined. The authors concluded that the five superstrategies of impoliteness can be categorised as offensive impoliteness, as they are intended to attack the face and, consequently, lead to social conflict and disharmony. Additionally, they outlined defensive strategies that aim to maintain face when face attack happens, but instead of responding with aggression, these strategies involve creating distance from the hearer. In the scheme of «response options to impoliteness» developed by Culpeper *et al.* (2003: 1576), recipients of a FTA have two options: to respond or not respond (although the exact implications in terms of facework when choosing silence or avoidance are not entirely clear). When choosing to respond, the recipient can either counter the face attack or accept it. For example, accepting it may involve admitting an error and offering an apology for something that occurred:

The alternative option, to counter the face attack, involves a set of strategies which can be considered in terms of whether they are *offensive* or *defensive*. Offensive strategies primarily counter face attack with face attack [...]. Defensive strategies primarily counter face attack by defending one's own face [...], such strategies seek to deflect, block or otherwise manage the face attack. (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562-1563).

The distinction between offensive and defensive strategies is not a strict opposition but should be viewed as a continuum where offending the speaker of the original utterance and

defending the face of the responder may be secondary goals to some extent. The impoliteness theory, which is based on an inversion of politeness, has faced criticism, particularly from Bousfield (2008), who introduces the concept of impoliteness as a mismatch of appropriate behaviour in a specific social and communicative context. Bousfield's concept is highly valuable in providing a pragmatic description of what occurs when a speaker makes a comment that is perceived as sexist by the hearer. The micro-sexist comments under study are not intended as direct aggression but rather aim to strengthen the bonds between the speaker and the listener, as is the case with sexist jokes (Mills, 2005; Sunderland, 2007; Koch, 2015). That is why sexist by-the-way comments are so challenging: they are not intentional provocations, as overt sexism would be, yet they can still be perceived as offensive. Consequently, our focus is on the perlocutionary counter strategies employed to address micro-sexist comments within a community of young peers at the university, where there is a mismatch and the hearer considers such comments inappropriate.

Studies in intercultural pragmatics utilise this framework to describe the cultural differences of linguistic interaction. For instance, Siebold (2008) examined Spanish and German intercultural differences in speech acts such as requests, thanks or compliments, and more threatening speech acts like apologies. The analysis of refusals as a FTA by Siebold and Busch (2015) revealed that Spanish speakers tend to employ indirect refusals more frequently, while German speakers prioritise direct, clear, and explicit answers. Spanish culture has been recognized for its tendency towards strategies seeking recognition and solidarity (Haverkate, 2004), while German culture places a higher emphasis on distance and respect (Contreras, 2020). In pragmalinguistic terms, this implies that Spanish linguaculture tends to employ positive facework in managing FTAs, whereas German speakers predominantly rely on negative politeness strategies and direct responses (Siebold, 2008: 173).

A similar distinction has been observed in the field of Gender Studies, specifically when analysing the speech patterns of women. According to Lakoff (1989), women's more polite and formal communication style is attributed to their social status. Consequently, women tend to employ mitigation strategies such as apologies more frequently, while men tend to utilise aggravating moves such as insults (Geluykens & Kraft, 2007). However, this traditional view of women showing a more cooperative style of communicating has been challenged by Mills (2005). She highlights that politeness is an unstable category that has to be negotiated in communication as it depends on power dynamics between interactants. This may explain why assertive behaviour in women is often labelled as impolite. Therefore, it is important to recognise that while women's linguistic behaviour is not necessarily inherently more polite, there may still be an expectation for women to demonstrate more cooperative tendencies, while masculinity is traditionally associated with negative facework.

THE STUDY

This research utilises controlled-elicitation data, employing a methodology known as the Discourse Completion Task (DCT), which is suitable for both intercultural politeness studies (Spencer-Oatey, 2000) and feminist linguistic studies (Mills & Mullany, 2011). The DCT simulates face-to-face interactions by eliciting one dialogue turn, and the study participants are asked to provide a written response representing what they would likely say in the given situation. The DCT was well-suited for our research as it provided a means to gather data on oral communication between peers, because it «is a half-way house between working with recorded data and using interviews and questionnaires» (Mills & Mullany, 2011: 105-106).

Undoubtedly, the DCT has some disadvantages, such as representing oral speech in written form. However, it also offers several advantages. The primary advantage is its ability to provide high control over situational variables, allowing for the collection of comparable data sets, especially when examining different languages and gender-related issues. In our research, we aimed to collect samples that were comparable in terms of the social roles of the speakers and the communicative setting of the dialogue. The participants had to be university students and native Spanish or German speakers. Additionally, we sought to create scenarios with controlled interactions within a homogeneous communicative structure. Each scenario begins with a micro-sexist comment and ends with an appeasement of the interlocutor, showing that the elicited dialogue turn may still maintain the social boundaries between peers. The participants' responses provided valuable insights into the pragmalinguistic strategies employed among students. However, it should be noted that the DCT methodology, by its nature, did not capture elements such as prosody and further interactions between the speakers, leaving room for exploration in future research projects.

Given the absence of available realization patterns for the speech act of «confronting sexist comments», we designed a specific DCT based on the type of sexism defined as indirect by Mills (2008). Our DCT presented four scenarios where a student encounters a comment based on sexist assumptions: firstly, a comment about gender stereotypes associated with romantic comedies or racing movies; secondly, a cliché about male and female roles in helping with a party, such as buying drinks or providing food; thirdly, a sexist comment about a typical mum or dad role; and fourthly, the telling of a macho-joke about blondes.

Additionally, the test required both a female and a male version to capture reactions to highly gendered comments. For example, requests for help with cooking («that is what you girls are better at») or drinks («that is what your boys are better at»). To maintain authenticity and reflect spontaneous verbal reactions, we avoided using dual forms such as «cooking/

drinks» or «boys/girls», as they could lead to confusion and would be contrary to spontaneous verbal reaction. In order to make these two versions of our DCT suitable for intercultural research, i.e. Spanish and German speaking study subjects, we also had to translate them, creating a Spanish and a German version. As a result, there are four versions of the test: female Spanish, male Spanish, female German, and male German. These versions formed the basis for analysing the responses in four distinct categories.

The data collection was carried out by graduate students from the University Pablo de Olavide, a public university in Seville, Spain. These students were enthusiastic about collaborating on this study as they wanted to apply the knowledge they had gained from a pragmalinguistics course offered by the Faculty of Humanities. Among the group, some students were local Spanish students, while others were exchange students from Germany participating in the Erasmus program, spending their academic year in Spain. The study participants were fellow students whom the researchers approached on our campus or contacted at their home universities in Germany. This explains the imbalance in the number of Spanish and German study subjects, as it was more challenging to establish contact with German students. For instance, the researchers had to carry copies of the test to Germany during their Christmas holidays and retrieve them in January. The DCT was conducted with a total of 34 study subjects, comprising 16 female Spanish students, 6 male Spanish students, 8 female German students, and 4 male German students.

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It is crucial to highlight that the research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. The students enrolled in the pragmalinguistic course and the study participants did not receive any academic or financial incentives for their involvement in the study. Clear and explicit information was provided to the study subjects, informing them that their responses would be used for research purposes and could potentially be presented at scientific conferences and published, ensuring the preservation of their anonymity. Factors such as age, faculty, or academic background of the informants were not taken into consideration during the study. The test included an email address that the participants could contact if they required further information or wished to be informed about the results of the study.

Once the data from the tests was collected, the responses were entered into an Excel table for further analysis. Each answer was carefully examined to identify the type of illocution and the verbal expression of facework strategies. The categorisation of the data allowed for a comprehensive overview of the different speech acts employed in the overall study and within the four specific groups, namely (1) Spanish female students, (2) Spanish male students, (3) German female students, and (4) German male students.

RESULTS

Firstly, the design of the DCT had to be assessed to determine the validity of the four scenarios presented. To that aim the answers were grouped according to the four items of the test and it could be observed if there was any remarkable tendency, as if one item triggered mainly the same speech act or one speech act was eventually absent from one of the items. In doing so, it was possible to detect if any of the four situations (an invitation to see a romantic comedy or a racing movie; a request to help with drinks or cooking; a comment about typical mum or dad roles; a joke about blondes) were interpreted as an extremely aggressive sexist comment or, in contrast, as a fully acceptable comment without sexist connotations. The results showed that, indeed, some completions did not see the comment as sexist at all. In a few cases the study subjects even made an observation to state that they did not want to react to the micro-sexist aspect implicated in the first intervention (see the completion from a Spanish man in example 1).

- (1) Una compañera de clase te pide ayuda con la preparación de una fiesta. «¿Por qué no te encargas tú de comprar la bebida? Eso se os da mejor a los chicos.»

Flama, pero no voy a poner yo todo el dinero. Primero que me pague la gente, vaya abuso. (obviaría el comentario de los tíos)

«Vale, hombre, no te pongas así.»

[A female classmate asks for your help with some party prep. «Why don't you just handle buying the booze? That is what you boys are better at.»

Cool, but I am not going to put up all the money. Let the people pay me first, how rude. (I would skip the comment about guys)

«Okay, man, don't be like that.»²

When quantifying the cases where sexism was ignored in this way, we noticed that the absence of negative assessment did not only occur in the context of party preparations, but was spread over the four items; besides it did occur in a very low percentage. Most definitely, every item of the DCT showed a variety of answers and, as expected, no one had a positive assessment or a significant high percentage of lacking negative assessment. So it was possible to validate each one of the four situations: stereotypes in choosing romantic or action movies, helping by buying drinks or cooking, taking on the mum's role, jokes about blondes.

We categorised the data into different speech acts, beginning with the above mentioned absence of negative assessment, when the participants did not confront the sexist comment at all, but went ahead with the dialogue in a neutral way (example 1). It is not immediately clear whether the

2. The examples reproduce one item of the DCT and, in bold letters, the response of one study subject. The tests were formulated in Spanish and German, and we translated the examples into English for this paper.

lack of negative assessment means that the study subjects did not find the comment sexist or preferred not to react for any other reason. Since it happened through every one of the four situations and it could be found as well within every one of the four groups, Spanish and German, female and male, we considered it a variable that had to be taken into consideration. We therefore modified the pattern proposed by Culpeper *et al.* (2003: 1563) and, instead of counter or acceptance, we worked with the variables: counter or avoidance.

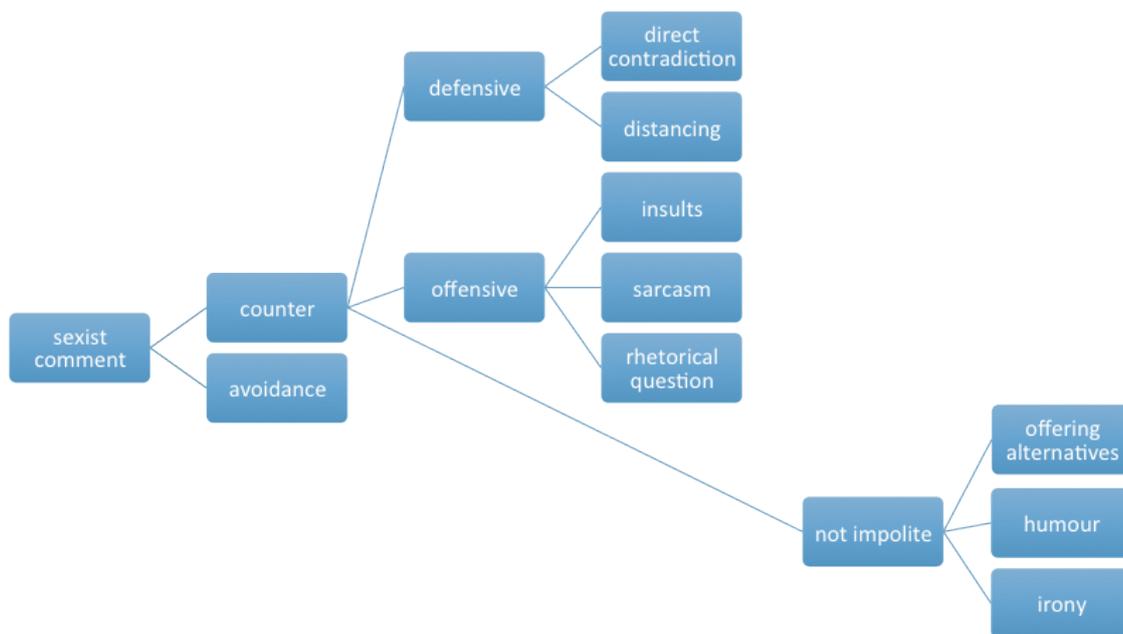


Figure 1: Response options for a sexist comment

In respect to the counter responses, we noticed that there were three other variables, as shown in Figure 1: offensive impoliteness, defensive impoliteness, and a third one, which did not match the given categories and therefore deserves a closer look. The offensive impoliteness strategies were the most obvious ones and, as described by Culpeper (1996), they consisted of direct insults to the hearer (this is, positive impoliteness), sarcasm, like «haha, very funny» (which would be off record impoliteness) and rhetorical questions like «Do you think this is funny?» (what could be categorised as negative impoliteness). In example 2 there is a case of impoliteness strategy used by a Spanish woman to attack the positive face of the hearer.

- (2) Un compañero cuenta un chiste de rubias y los demás compañeros se ríen. Pero a ti no te ha gustado. ¿Qué le dices?
Me parece que el único gilipollas eres tú.
 «Chiquilla, era broma...»
 [A classmate tells a blonde joke and the other classmates laugh at it. But you did not like it. What do you say to him?
I think you are the only blond idiot.
 «Come on, it was a joke/I was just kidding...»]

There were also FTA with defensive counter strategies, like direct contradictions and abrogations (Culpeper *et al.*, 2003; Culpeper, 2011). The statement «This is just a stereotype», for example, can be considered a direct contradiction to the sexist stereotype and it is a strategy to save the speaker's positive face. An abrogation of personal responsibility, like «Pff, I don't mind if you get ill», was found to be a defensive strategy to protect the speaker's negative face and to increase the distance between the interactants. In example 3 we have the completion of a male German student who reacted in a defensive way.

(3) Ein Kumpel macht einen Blondinenwitz und die Anderen lachen darüber. Dir hat der Witz jedoch nicht gefallen. Was sagst du?

Also, das war jetzt aber nicht mein Humor. Das ist sexistisch.

«Hey, war doch bloß ein Witz.»

[A mate tells a blonde joke and the others laugh at it. But you did not like the joke. What do you say?

Well, that was not my kind of humour. That's sexist.

«Come on, it was just a joke...»]

But after classifying the offensive and defensive answers, we noticed that, surprisingly, there were some responses that clearly implicated a negative assessment but could not be categorised as impoliteness strategies at all. They do not fit in the category of avoidance, since the speaker evaluated the sexist comment negatively, but neither are they clearly offensive or defensive and, in some cases, the negative assessment speech act is followed by another –polite and co-operative– one. We interpreted this data as the use of mitigation strategies in order to soften the face threat of confronting a sexist comment. In example 4, the reaction of a Spanish woman is a complex speech act that begins with an indirect critique of the sexist comment and ends up with the proposition to see a film together with the fellow student who made the sexist comment.

(4) Un compañero de clase te propone ir al cine junto con otros amigos. «Queremos ver *Last Christmas*. Esa te tiene que encantar. La típica comedia romántica que os encanta a las tías.»

«Las comedias románticas me parecen un insulto a este mundo y a lo que se considera artes audiovisuales. Déjate de gilipolleces y vamos a ver una de terror.»

«Bueno, bueno, no te pongas así.»

[A classmate suggests going to the movies with some friends. «We want to see *Last Christmas*. You have got to love that one. The typical romantic comedy that you girls love.»

«Romantic comedies strike me as an insult to this world and to what is considered audiovisual arts. Quit the bullshit and let's go see a horror movie.»

«Well, well, don't be like that.»]

The study subject is offering an alternative that can be considered what we are calling the third way, because the horror film does not correspond to neither a female nor a male stereotype. In Lakoff's (1989) terms, this fulfils the politeness rule of giving options. The insulting part of the completion («déjate de gilipolleces» [quit the bullshit]) is immediately counteracted by offering alternatives

that shorten the distance between the peers. Another type of mitigation is a kind of humour, achieved by word-play or exaggeration of the sexist stereotypes the speaker wants to assess negatively (Bill & Naus, 1992), as one can see in the performance of a German woman in example 5.

- (5) Ein Kommilitone bittet dich darum, bei der Vorbereitung einer Party mitzuhelfen. «Warum kümmerst du dich nicht ums Essen? Da kennt ihr Mädels euch ja besser aus.»
«Ja, wahrscheinlich wegen der Herd-Anziehungskraft.»
 «Mensch, war doch nicht so gemeint.»
 [A classmate asks for your help with some party prep. «Why don't you do the food? That is what you girls are better at.»
«Yes, probably because of the kitchen-magnetism.»
 «Hey, I did not mean it that way.»]

Sometimes the study subjects noted that in such a situation they would just start laughing, and apparently these humorous answers and the laughter have in common that they are an invitation to laugh together. In fact, we consider that this kind of humour is different from sarcasm, because the speaker is showing that the sexist comment is so absolutely inappropriate that every single member of the students' community shares this opinion and even the one who expressed the micro-sexist comment has the chance to join the common ground of non-sexist behaviour. For the same reason we do consider the responses with irony separately from the sarcastic ones. There is no off-record impoliteness at statements like example 6 from a female Spanish student:

- (6) Un compañero de clase va contigo a la cafetería de la Universidad. Hace frío y le sugieres que se ponga la chaqueta, a lo que te contesta: «Sí, mamá.»
«Y ya que estás, ponte con los deberes, ordena tu cuarto, cena, dúchate y a la cama. Que mañana tienes cole.»
 «Bueno, vale, no es para tanto.»
 [A classmate goes with you to the campus cafeteria. It is cold and you suggest that he should put on his jacket, to which he replies: «Yes, mom.»
«And while you're at it, get your homework done, tidy your room, eat dinner, take a shower and go to bed. You have school tomorrow.»
 «Well, okay, it's not that big of a deal.»]

This kind of irony is closer to off-record politeness than to impoliteness, because it definitely is no insulting face attack and the irony based on exaggeration seems to seek harmony, laughing and a speaker-to-speaker proximity. Instead of offending the positive face of the hearer or defending the own negative face by distance, the response leaves open the possibility of co-operating in one way or another during the future interaction. The clue is that in examples 4, 5 and 6 the students are addressing the social face needs of both interactants within the community of peers, showing the unacceptability of indirect sexism and, at the same time, negotiating what would be appropriate behaviour on campus. This is why the mitigation strategies based on humour and irony and the offering of possible alternatives are not considered part of the impoliteness strategies.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The first research question that guided this study was about how students react to sexist comments made by fellow students and what speech acts they commonly perform when responding. As shown in Figure 1, the students reacted by avoidance or a negative assessment, using defensive, offensive, or not impolite strategies. The most frequent option was the offensive one, with 48 of the 136 responses, whereas avoidance was the less common option (26 out of 136). The expectation that students would use (not impolite) facework in order to maintain community inclusion was actually met 29 times, as there were 29 answers where the three more polite strategies, humour, irony and offering alternatives, were used. This means that sexist comments were more likely to be confronted with impoliteness than with avoidance or politeness. When adding up the 48 offensive and the 33 defensive answers, it results in a total of 81 impolite answers, which is 60 % of the overall 136 responses of the study.

The second research question was about the differences between German and Spanish speakers as well as between women and men. Beginning with the avoidance responses, the less common option, as shown in the first question, the discrepancies are very pronounced. In the group of German men, 50 % of the answers were avoidance, which means that they only confronted the sexist comment half of the time. In contrast, the group of Spanish women only avoided confronting in 5 % of their responses (3 out of 64 responses) and 95 % meant a negative assessment in a more or less offensive, defensive or mitigated way.

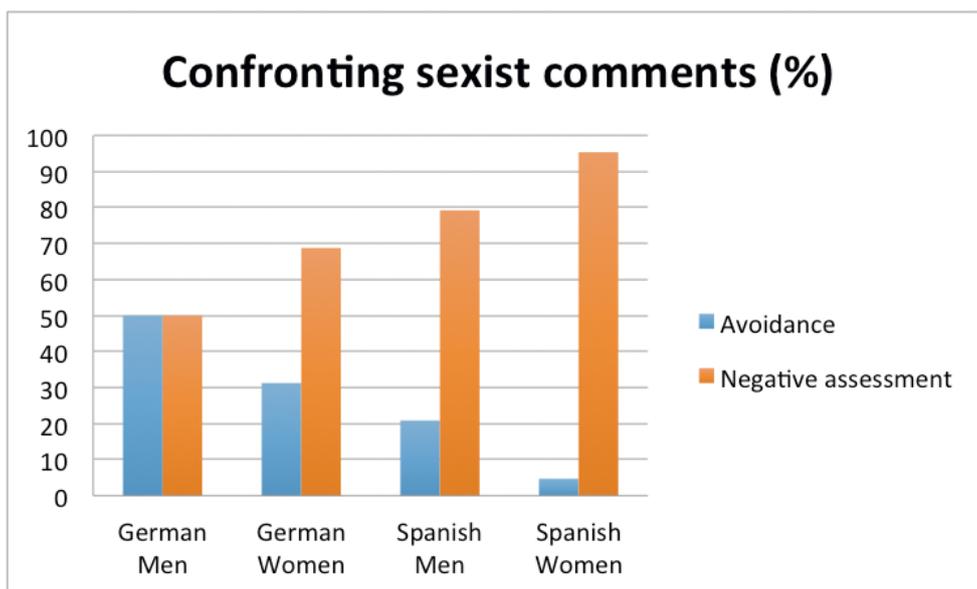


Figure 2: Confronting sexist comments (in %)

Looking at Figure 2, the avoidance option moves on a scale that goes from 50 % of German men (8 out of 16 responses) to the above-mentioned 5 % of Spanish women (3 out of 64 responses), but it is also more likely to occur in German than in Spanish culture and, in each culture, it is more frequent among men than among women. From the intercultural point of view these results may be linked to the insights gained from Siebold's (2008) theory that in German culture distance and respect are more important than in Spanish verbal interaction. To ignore a sexist comment instead of assessing it negatively certainly can be interpreted as a communicative strategy of distancing and respecting, in the sense that the study subject does not bother about another student's sexism in the same way she or he would not mind –or at least not criticise overtly– if this student showed, for example, a lack of manners or of personal hygiene. Micro-sexist comments would thus be tolerated in 50 % (German men) or 31 % (German women) of the answers as something that is not of their concern, since 10 out of 32 female responses avoided the FTA.

96 For a gender-relevant interpretation, we can give two reasons to explain why women do counter sexist comments more frequently than men: first, because sexism is above all misogynist and thus an act of offensive impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996, 2011) towards the female hearer. So, women may interpret it as a FTA and react with another FTA in a very high percentage (60 out of 63, i.e. 95 % of the Spanish, and 22 out of 32, i.e. 69 % of the German answers). Second, the fact that women of both cultures had a relatively high rate of negative assessment may also be related to the power relations between the interactants, as the work of Mills (2005) suggests. It seems that in a university context female students are in a situation of equal, or at least not very unequal, power relations when dealing with peers.³ But maybe the fact that the study was carried out with a written DCT might have been a factor that increased their power in comparison to real life situations.

In order to make a quantitative comparison between the strategies employed by the different groups to counter a sexist comment, we considered all of the counter answers given by each group, i.e. without the avoidance data, to be the 100 %. The percentage of defensive, offensive and not impolite responses given by German men, German women, Spanish men and Spanish women is reflected in Figure 3.

Although the tendencies within the negative assessment strategies are not so obvious as in Figure 2, the most interesting fact in Figure 3 is the similarity between the statistics of German and Spanish men, on one side, and between German and Spanish women, on the other. When we compare the responses on a gender bias, we see that German men prefer the defensive strategy (8 out of 16 answers, i.e. 50 %) and so do Spanish men (11 out of 24 answers, i.e. 46 %), while German women mainly use the offensive strategy

3. The university context may be different from another social space with a more conservative setting: «Thus, if women within a particularly conservative Community of Practice draw on masculine speech norms, they may be interpreted as using inappropriate behaviour, and hence being impolite» (Mills, 2005: 274). See Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) on Communities of Practice.

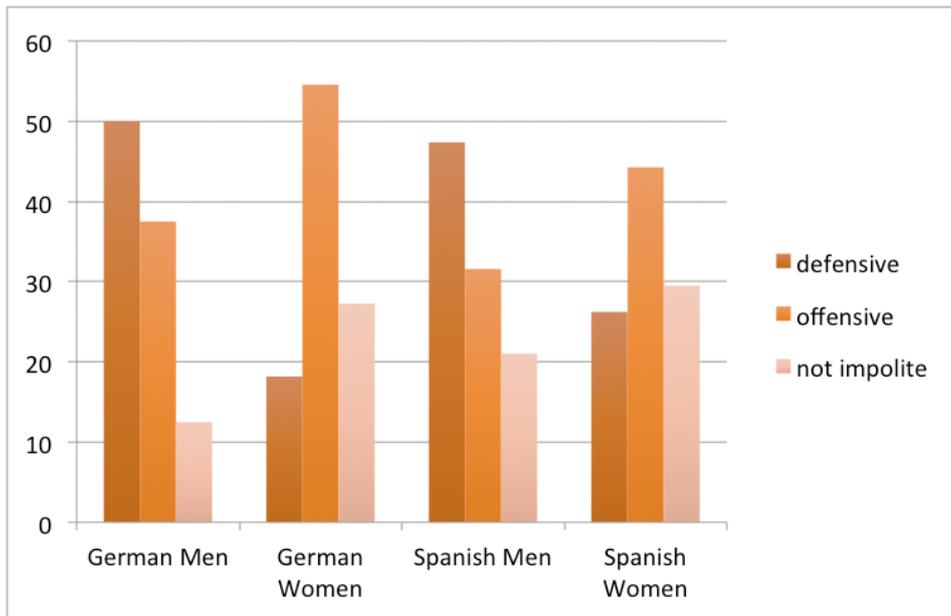


Figure 3: Negative assessment strategies in confronting a sexist comment (in %)

(18 out of 32 answers, i.e. 56 %) and so do Spanish women (28 out of 64 answers, i.e. 44 %). This fact leads to the conclusion that in male performance the most frequent strategy is the defensive one, while female subjects prefer offensive strategies. Looking for an explanation for this verbal behaviour, it could be related, on the one hand, to the above mentioned misogynist character of sexist comments, which makes it more threatening for the positive face of women than for men, as psychology studies suggest (Wang & Dovidio, 2017). Female students therefore would not only confront the sexist comment in 95 % of the cases, but also use the somehow most aggressive option, the offensive confrontation, in a relatively high percentage. On the other hand, it is possible that men want to distance themselves from the macho role and feel that sexist comments are threatening for their negative face. Consequently they counter the FTA with defensive strategies.

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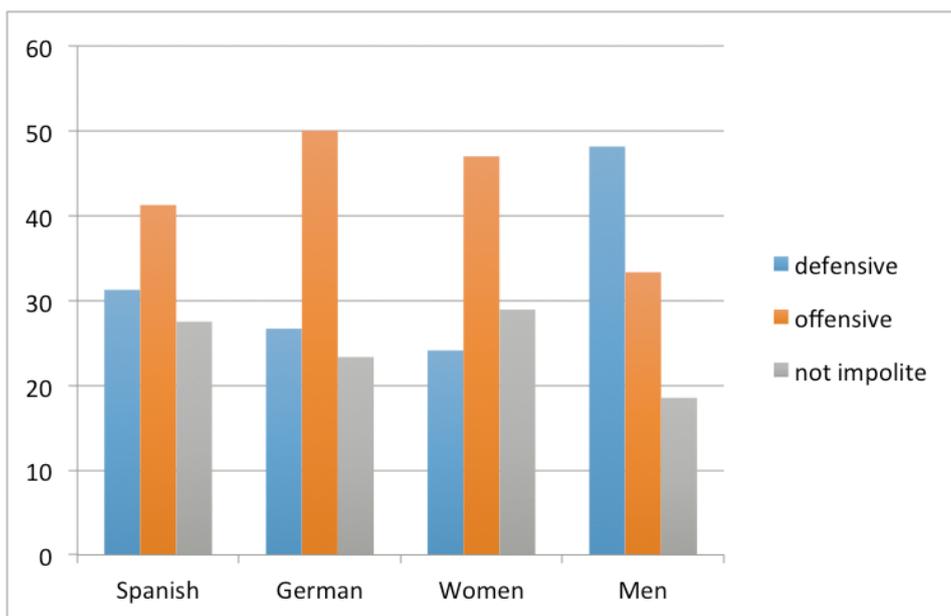


Figure 4: Negative assessment strategies (crossover in %)

In Figure 4, one can see the sum of the female answers altogether in contrast to the male ones. Looking at the overall preferences, it shows that 47 % (45 out of 96) of their reactions are based on offensive strategies, while 48 % (19 out of 40) of the men's answers are defensive. Another data that can be related to gender is the occurrence of the reactions that we categorised as not impolite or mitigated negative assessments. They are used more often by women (28 out of 96 answers, i.e. 29 %) than by men (7 out of 40 answers, i.e. 18 %), for whom it is the less preferred option. This may be surprising, at first, because women also show more offensive reactions than men. But we think that the defensive FTA can be associated with avoidance, as well as the offensive FTA possibly being linked to mitigation. In fact, the offering of alternatives or of a humorous solution for the conflict sometimes appears in the second part of a really offensive speech act, as in example 4 above: «Déjate de gilipolleces y vamos a ver una de terror» [Quit the bullshit and let's go see a horror movie].

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If one focuses on the intercultural comparison, the Spanish and German statistics, as shown in Figure 4, have the same preference order, going from offensive to defensive and, finally, not impolite. But the fact that the gender differences are more pronounced does not mean that the cross-cultural results should be ignored. The German questionnaires have a higher percentage of offensive responses (24 out of 48 answers, i.e. 50 %) than the Spanish ones (36 out of 88, i.e. 41 %), in contrast to the defensive and not impolite reactions, where the Spanish responses are about 5 % higher. Nevertheless, what emerges from this research is that the pragmatic options for confronting sexist comments do not depend primarily on cultural but on gender factors.

This study reveals that when faced with a micro-sexist comment from a fellow student, the majority of students surveyed chose to confront the comment by displaying a face-threatening negative assessment. After the analysis of the 136 answers given in the DCT, we found that «confronting sexist comments» can be defined as a speech act that encompasses three distinct strategies, extending beyond the offensive and defensive impoliteness strategies outlined by Culpeper (1996). The third way involves countering the sexist comment through the use of mitigation techniques, such as humour, irony, or offering alternative options that are free from sexism. This typology of strategies for confronting sexist comments holds true across different types of students in the specific context of peer communication.

The differences emerge when we compare the occurrence of every strategy between Spanish and German, female and male students. Surprisingly, cross-cultural differences were not highly pronounced. The only clear intercultural finding was that avoidance is more prevalent in German lin-

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guaculture compared to Spanish linguaculture, thus corroborating Siebold's (2008) theory on the significance of distance in German culture. On the other hand, notable differences were observed between women and men. Women tended to employ offensive impoliteness strategies most frequently, with defensive impoliteness being the last preferred option. In contrast, men exhibited a preference for defensive impoliteness as their primary strategy. The fact that nearly 50 % of Spanish and German female answers show offensive strategies, such as insults, sarcasm and rhetorical questions, may be interpreted in two ways: firstly, it suggests that micro-sexist comments are more face-threatening for women than for men, and secondly, considering Mill's (2005) insights on gender and impoliteness, it can be inferred that women use aggressive communication strategies, traditionally associated with male language, more frequently than men, at least within the university context where power relations between peers are relatively equal.

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