**PIROPOS¹ AS METAPHORS FOR GENDER ROLES IN SPANISH SPEAKING CULTURES**

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**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the *piropo* in Spanish discourse as a speech event and as cognitive metaphor. This form of indirect speech act represents a Spanish discourse tradition that is still present in today's discourse practices of Spanish-speaking cultures. These *piropos* are seen as reflections in language of the traditional roles of men and women in Spanish speaking cultures. The roles of men and women as depicted in the analysis of *piropos* shows a very defined place for each sex in these societies. Women are constructed as passive recipients and reactive, men as active producers and initiators.

**Keywords:** *piropos*, cognitive metaphors, metaphor, gender roles.

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**1. Introduction**

A woman walks down the street during daylight hours in a populated area of town. She passes by a man and he makes a remark to her. The woman blushes and continues walking. The man does not say anything else. The incident ends. This type of interaction between members of different sexes depicts a discourse practice that occurs and has occurred for some time in Spanish speaking cultures. *Piropos* are a discourse practice part of a cultural tradition that originated around the XIX century as a way of polite address from men to women in Spanish speaking cultures.¹ In contrast with other cultures, such as the Anglo-Saxon where this type of discursive practice is interpreted as a form of sexual harassment (Arveda Kissling 1991), in Spanish speaking cultures women have traditionally interpreted *piropos* as compliments (however this is currently changing; see Achugar in press). This

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¹ *Piropos* are compliments with an amorous or sexual expressive tone, usually said by men to women. The setting is usually the street where the participants do not know each other and can remain anonymous. Participants are anonymous to their interlocutors but they usually perform for an audience of peers.

² I would like to thank Maria Manoent on following this topic and for her useful comments.

³ The dictionary of the Real Academia Española defines *piropo* as a “lisonja o requiebro”[1068] [form of compliment]. According to the etymological dictionary of Cornominas the meaning of *piropo* as a form of compliment comes from the use of the word in the sense of a precious stone addressed to a woman.(564) This dictionary also suggests that the word used with this meaning could have appeared in some of Quevedo’s verses from the XVII century.
paper analyzes piropos as a discursive practice which points to social and cultural beliefs and attitudes regarding gender in Spanish speaking cultures.

The corpus of this paper consists of examples of piropos from different Spanish speaking countries collected in three anthologies and through interviews with Latin American men. The source of the corpus is a written collection due to the difficulty of capturing a natural realization of this discursive practice. In addition, basing the analysis on these written sources allows for incorporating piropos from several Spanish speaking countries as well as from different epochs. The written piropos selected for this investigation were later checked with men and women from these linguistic communities in order to establish their validity as cultural representatives.

Meanings do not circulate equally in a speech community and as a result there are always exceptions or differences within a group. However, this difference within the group does not preclude us from identifying the meanings that have developed through a common history and shared experience of groups of people. In the case of Spanish speaking communities there is a historical bond which is reflected in linguistic and other cultural similarities between the communities. It is our claim here that there is historical basis to justify the study of cultural concepts as they are reflected in the language of the groups that share a common past.

2. Gender roles in Spanish speaking cultures

“If Latin American men do not recognize the reality of women’s oppression, if they do not admit that they are promoters or accomplices of the ideology of machismo that permeates our culture, if they do not realize how great the riches that are lost to society due to the marginalization of women, if they do not move from theoretical conviction to liberating practice, if they do not join in solidarity with women in their struggle, the path of the feminist movement in Latin America will be longer, the progress slower and often more bitter, with more frustrations than joys.” (Elsa Tamez 1986: vii, in Against Machismo)

In Hispanic culture - as well as in other cultures - there is an overwhelming dominance of the masculine, machismo (Labarca & Halty-Pfaff 1991). Machismo is based on the idea of the superiority of men and the cult of virility. There is a need to affirm the macho’s independence from the woman and to display publicly men’s power over women. The machismo of Spanish speaking communities is evidenced in the alienation of women on many levels of life: Social, political and economic. Women are always considered in relationship and connection to the home, the private sphere. In the public sphere there is not much space for women.

Women’s situation in the public sphere in Spanish speaking countries has improved over the past years since the resurgence of feminist movements. Though we see machismo eroding in the public sphere through women’s entrance into the political arena, the job market and through their burgeoning economic independence, machismo is still prevalent

4 In Latin America feminist movements relate gender issues to politically-ideological premises. These movements define themselves as opposed to a specific order, the patriarchal, capitalist-imperialist and colonialist. They pretend to transform the relations of power of one sex over the other, of one class over another and of one race over another. (V Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe, 1990).
in these societies. The *piropo* is a vestige of the machismo ideology which is still prevalent even though gender roles in the public sphere are changing.

3. **Piropos as metaphors**

Metaphors create a link between cognitive models and culture. Conceptual metaphors have physical or cultural experiential basis. “Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like.” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 3) This paper analyzes the *piropo* in Spanish discourse as cognitive and linguistic metaphors. Implicit in these linguistic expressions are conceptual models of love and romantic relationships between men and women as well as a model of the roles men and women have in these communities. In order to understand the concept of love and the roles of men and women, other more clearly delineated concepts are used.

Metaphors have a descriptive value and as such they serve as mediators between cognitive models and the culture in which they are produced. There is an experiential basis for metaphors; they are grounded in our reality and shape our understanding of things. *Piropos* operate as metaphors of culture and as a discursive practice they represent socio-cultural frameworks. The production and reception of these metaphors involve sociocognitive processes. These processes are reflected in presuppositions and in schema and they operate as foundations for our social cognition. By inquiring about the characteristics of *piropos* as discursive practice and as conceptual metaphors, some of the processes Spanish speakers employ in making sense of events can be revealed.

The linguistic choices that Spanish speaking men make when making *piropos* reflect their underlying beliefs and system of ideas about women and their relationship with them. Metaphor is the linguistic device most commonly used in *piropos*. The speaker does not usually refer directly to the person to whom he is directing the enunciation and he relies on their mutually shared background information to make it understandable. Following Bühler’s characterization of metaphor as a “process of ‘covering’ and ‘emphasizing’ or ‘highlighting’ [by which] two ‘conceptual spheres’ become united.”(Burkhardt 1990: 313), the corpus will be analyzed to see what is foregrounded.

4. **Analysis of piropos**

4.1. **Piropos as a discourse practice**

In *piropos* we can see a traditional Spanish discourse practice that reflects the social roles of men and women in the Spanish speaking culture. *Piropos* are representatives of a discourse practice that utilizes grace and wit with words at an opportune time. They should not be confused with insults or with other degrading forms of speech because the difference between *piropos*, a form of complementing and other street remarks given from men to women, is that the latter are rituals that attribute creative and original features to women.

*Piropos* are part of a very conventional and easily recognizable discourse practice. There is a formulaic characteristic to *piropos*. They can be repeated and performed by a
variety of speakers in different contexts. However, there are also certain contextual restrictions to the performance of a successful *piropo*. These 'felicity' conditions relate to the socially ascribed roles and status of speakers and hearers, and they are implicated in the maintenance of power relationships (Fowler 1985). The speaker has to make a remark connecting the hearers characteristics to some other thing or experience, the hearer is not expected to reply or answer in any direct way though there may be extra or para linguistic responses. The other necessary requirement is that the speaker and the hearer share a common cultural background in order to be able to make sense of or work out the relationships established in the *piropo*.

*Piropos* do not require any kind of interaction between the speaker and the hearer, the mere presence of the hearer is enough to set the process in motion. The speaker expresses his views and that is the end of the exchange. Considering *piropos* as a speech act, we could categorize them as utterances with an expressive force. According to Jakobson, the expressive function of language is centered on the speaker. *Piropos* then point to a direct expression of the attitude of the speaker in relation to that which he is talking about: The woman.

Metaphor is the linguistic device most commonly used in *piropos*. As a consequence it could be said that *piropos* also represent the poetic function of language. The emphasis of *piropos* is on the message itself, the speaker tries to use signs as best he can to relate them with objects or activities present in the culture. This creative aspect of *piropos* gives the man an opportunity to display his artistic qualities for his audience whether it be his peers or the other people present on the scene. The speaker relies on the hearer's effort to make sense of the utterance using her background knowledge and her capacity to make inferences. The motivation for using an indirect form is not only politeness, but also a need to demonstrate the speaker's creativity and mastery of language. The metaphor creates similarities between the community’s experience and the specific characteristic the speaker wants to highlight. These new metaphors have entailments that include older metaphors and literal statements that relate to previous experiences.

Lakoff and Johnson analyze metaphors as "ways of partially structuring one experience in terms of another" (1980: 5). This way of structuring experience and analyzing it is what makes it possible to understand it as a coherent experience. The practice of *piropos* is structured as a conversation between strangers in which polite remarks are exchanged. That structure is what gives coherence to this practice, the participants experience it and interpret it within this framework. Following Lakoff & Johnson’s model these metaphors will be analyzed as part of a conversational structure in which one of the participants remains silent. The dimensions of *piropos* as a conversational structure are:

**Participants:** A man (speaker) and a woman (hearer)

**Parts:** The utterance

  Ignoring utterance

**Stages:**

  **Initial conditions:** Participants meet by chance or just meet. One wants to compliment or make a polite remark about the other. The other participant is not expecting the utterance.

  **Beginning:** One participant makes a remark about the other.
Middle: The hearer ignores the remark. (blushing, smiling back, glancing, expressing anger)

End: End of the exchange.

**Linear Sequence**: Expression of a thought about the hearer. Avoidance or disregard of the remark expressed by the speaker.

**Causation**: Expression of the remark results in the end of the interaction.

**Purpose**: Expression of delight in beauty or seductive remarks.

These are the generic dimensions of *piropos* analyzed as conversational structures. These generic dimensions of the structure of *piropos* provide the context in which to analyze this discursive practice.

Investigating *piropos* in Spanish discourse as a speech event, implies considering *piropos* as utterances produced in a specific context by a speaker with a certain intention towards the hearer. In the following selection of *piropos* the utterances are analyzed in order to explore the concepts and linguistic resources utilized in this discourse practice. The roles of speaker and hearer are also examined to see how gender affects these roles.

### 4.2. Conceptual metaphors in piropos

Metaphors take some features of an object and transfer them to another; which features one chooses to transfer is subjective. However, individual choices are shaped by the way the community the individual belongs to sees the world. Analyzing the corpus to see what is foregrounded helps us to unveil the features chosen by the Spanish-speaking community to represent the relations between men and women. In these *piropos* we can see the concepts of food, movement, chivalry and divinity highlighted. They all make references to the taste of food, to cooking or to feelings related to movement, courage or religious experiences.

Metaphors are used to paint a picture of reality. These statements of reality can be grouped with a certain coherence according to the topic they refer to. In order to do this grouping we need to employ cultural understandings of what constitutes a topic. These metaphors have to be interpreted using categories and beliefs that exist in Spanish speaking cultures. There were 4 possible categorizations in this small pool of *piropos* that relate to beliefs or understandings relevant to Spanish speaking cultures: ‘Women are like food’, ‘women are like cars’, ‘women are divine creatures’ and ‘women are rewards for men’s courage’.

#### 4.2.1. ‘Women are like food’

1. "Vete por la sombra porque lo dulce al sol se derrite" (Spain)
   (Walk in the shade because sweets melt in the sun)
The similarities between some traits of women and food are emphasized in
metaphors 1-9. There is an interaction between the woman’s qualities and those of food or
its preparation. The sweetness, seasoning quality and delight to the palate are symbols of
sexuality as a culinary pleasure. In these piropos women are characterized as the objects
undergoing processes carried out by men. The man tells the woman what to do or he tells
her what he will do with/to her. The language used is specific, concrete and native to the
region. There are direct references to women as 'sweet', 'delicate' objects that become a
temptation to the palate. The format used is complex, relying mostly on subordination.
These format expresses a hierarchical relationship between the feelings or reactions of men
and the characteristics men attribute to women.

4.2.2. ‘Women are like cars’

10. "¡Tus curvas me marean!" (River Plate area)
    (Your curves make me dizzy!)

11. "¡Qué curvas y yo sin frenos!" (El Salvador)
    (What curves and I without brakes!)

12. "Nunca manejes porque tus ojos encandilan" (River Plate area)
    (Never drive because your eyes blind!)

13. “Quisiera ser engranaje para hacerte andar maquinón.”(River Plate area)
    (I would like to be the gear that makes your machine run)

14. “Con su parachoques me estrellaría encantado”. (Chile)
    (I would willingly crash into your fenders)
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15. “Qué camión y yo con poca carga” (Chile)
    (What a truck and I with a little load)

In piropos 10-15 where women’s bodies are compared to those of cars or experiences with cars, the relation established between the two components emphasizes man as driver/conductor of women/cars. Movement and the freedom or lack of freedom to control that movement are in the foreground of these examples. There is a focus on the effect the woman has on the man. The relevant experience is the one undergone by the man as a result of the contact with the woman. There is an indirect address of women by resorting to ellipsis. There are no direct words that refer to women overtly, there are implications that require the solidarity of the listener to be understood.

4.2.3. ‘Women are divine creatures’

16. “¿De qué estrella te caíste?” (River Plate area)
    (What star did you fall from?)

17. “Las trigueñas hizo Dios y las rubias un chapucero. ¡Prefiero las que hizo Dios!”
    (Puerto Rico)
    (‘Trigueñas were made by God and blondes by a someone who does a job half way. I prefer what was made by God!’)

18. "Con usted voy a ser bueno para irme a la gloria” (Andalucía, Spain)
    (With you I'll be good in order to go to Glory/heaven)

19. "Bendita sea la divinidad que sale a la calle sin custodia” (Andalucía, Spain)
    (Blessed be the divinity that goes out without an escort/bodyguard)

20. "Vaya usted con Dios, terroncito de gloria” (Andalucía, Spain)
    (Go with God little piece of glory)

21. “¡Hubo un terremoto en el cielo y un angel se cayó!” (El Salvador)
    (There was an earthquake in Heaven and an angel fell!!)

In metaphors 16-21 women are substituted for angels. This could be a reflection of the dual portrayal of women as saints/mothers/wives(Mary) and as objects of desire (Magdalene/prostitute). Women are seen as divinities who deserve to be worshipped, they belong to a superior class. They are depicted as belonging to a different group or category. There is a focus on women as weak divinities that need protection. Women are the objects that fall, are created by others or can not walk by themselves on the street. Women are the undergoers of experiences they can not control and men are the agents that choose among the available objects.

4.2.4. ‘Women are the reward for men’s courage’

22. “¡Por un beso tuyo metería los dedos en el enchufe!” (River Plate area)
    (For one of your kisses I would stick my fingers in the socket!)

23. “El corazón todo entero por usted” (Andalucía, Spain)
    (My complete heart for you)
24. “¡Por vos cruzaría la Antártica en alpargatas!” (River Plate area)
(I would cross the Antarctic in espadrille shoes for you!)

25. “Al infierno me fuera de buena gana, si la luz de tus ojos fueran las llamas” (Andalucía, Spain)
(To Hell I’d go willingly if the light of your eyes were the flames)

26. “Por unos ojos azules alma y vida diera yo, por unos ojitos negros alma, vida y corazón”.
(Andalucía, Spain)
(For blue eyes I’d give my soul and life, for a little pair of dark eyes I’d give my soul, my life and my heart)

27. “Si tan sólo me miraras, yo me atrevería a caminar descalzo entre las brasas”. (Chile)
(If only you would look at me I would dare to walk barefoot on a bed of hot coals)

The fourth group of piropos, 22-27, reveals the willingness of the speaker to give up a body part or even their life in order to enjoy or share the listener's space/body. The speakers' words are an expression of their interest in the listener. By offering some of the most valuable things they possess (life and body) they express their devotion to the other person. The focus is on man's sacrifice or courage. In most of the examples, the sequencing prioritizes what a man would do. Women are considered as body parts not as whole persons. They are characterized as exchangeable goods.

The linguistic choices that Spanish speaking men make when making piropos reflect their underlying beliefs and system of ideas about women. Ideological content is expressed in the selections made by the speaker and the content and context of the utterance. If metaphors reveal beliefs of a culture, then we could conclude that food, cars, courage and religion are important elements for the male participants in Spanish speaking cultures.

The basis of these metaphors are common or conventional prejudices/beliefs and associations. As Black (Burkhardt 1990: 315) says in metaphor there might not be a direct transfer of semantic features of one object to the other, but instead an activation of a “system of associated common places”. These piropos are constructed through the ‘activation’ of a system of associated common places that reflect the shared beliefs of the culture.

5. Conceptual metaphor of love

Cognitive metaphors represent the culturally determined ideas that frame our interpretation of reality. An analysis of this corpus following Lakoff and Johnson's idea of metaphors as cognitive representations, relates these piropos to an underlying metaphor about love. These authors state that for English-speaking cultures love is conceived as war, as a physical force, as a patient, or as madness. The metaphor, “love is war”, entails a battle among equals who fight over control. In the physical conception of love there is a lack of control of the participants in the experience. And in the health oriented view of love (as a patient or as madness) the experience is represented as an illness. These representations of
the romantic experience reveal a view of the participants of this event as equally active or passive agents.

On the other hand, traditional views of male-female communication in Spanish culture are based on continual erotic tension (Bierbach 1997). There are polarized gender relations as exhibited through popular myths such as Don Juan or Carmen (see Bierbach 1997 for further elaboration on this). In Latin cultures love would be understood as hunting. The metaphor, “Love is hunting” (Manoliu 1997 in conversation, and Bierbach 1997) entails a hunter and a prey. The speaker would be the hunter and the hearer the prey. The man would try to create metaphors that enhance the similarities between the hearer and a prey who will be chased and tasted. The references to movement and food or taste are connected to the underlying structure that exists in Spanish cultures of conceiving love as an unequal power relationship. Men would have the active role of chasing and women would be left to continue walking or fleeing. This analysis could explain why women don't respond to piropos.

Other representations of love that seem to come out of these discursive practices are “love is a culinary experience”, “love is a divine experience” and “love is a task that demands courage”. These conceptual categorizations of love reveal a view of the relationship between genders as one characterized by the objectification of women and their association with the private sphere, e.g. the kitchen. There is also a significant appearance of male dominated institutions like the church which have an important role in Spanish speaking communities. The reference to men’s courage in relation to love coincides with the ideology of machismo that emphasizes the importance of men’s power over women and their display of power in public.

6. Conclusions

Discourse plays a role in the reproduction and transformation of meaning; it both facilitates and limits what can be said, who says it, where, when and to whom. (Parker 1992) As discourse practices piropos reveal the links between a culture and its ideology. Because of their discursive nature piropos are also affected by the cultural dynamics that change language.

The roles of men and women as depicted in the previous analysis of piropos show a very defined place for each sex in society. Women are passive recipients and reactive, men are active producers and initiators. The female participant in the piropos triggers an automatic process just like a machine or a natural element would. Women are generally constructed as non-animate or non-agentive participants while men’s participant role is mostly that of agent. These are the reflections through metaphor of the traditional roles of men and women in Spanish speaking cultures.

However, there is a possibility of changing the metaphors in our conventional conceptual system. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 139) “[...] metaphors that are imaginative and creative [...] are capable of giving us a new understanding of our experience.” In the case of this discourse practice there is evidence of the opposite change happening. The changes traditional piropos are undergoing represent a simplification of the linguistic metaphoric process. The play on words, and the use of linguistic metaphor that characterized traditional piropos have been replaced by a more direct expression. This
Direct expression has lost its poetic function. Typical modern piropos are: e.g.: ¡Ay mamacita! (Oh, little mamma/baby!) or ¡Qué ojos! (What eyes!). Is this a sign of a new understanding on the part of men of the experience of gender relationships? Or is it only a simplification of the linguistic elements used to express these conceptual metaphors?

At least there seem to be conceptual changes in the ways women understand the experience of gender relations in the public sphere. There is a change in the way women interpret and react to piropos. Nowadays, women are less likely to consider this discourse practice as a polite form. On the streets of some of these countries and on the internet pages on piropos younger women are starting to give piropos also.

These changes in the linguistic structure of piropos and in their interpretation by women could be the result of a more direct expression of the power differences between men and women in these communities. Now that women are reclaiming a voice in the public sphere indirect forms of marking men’s power may not be as effective as they used to be. These two forms of piropos - the indirect and the direct one - coexist today. As a consequence it is possible to question if the practice of piropos as originally used can continue to exist in societies where the roles of men and women are changing.

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