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# The Role of Age and Gender in CMC: The Case of English Borrowings by Spanish Speakers.

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## Abstract

The growing progress of language in CMC has become every time more noticeable in the past decades, which makes it easy to spread like wildfire. Thus, the effect towards diverse languages and cultures is quite common. The historical relationship that English and Spanish share is especially interesting, since both languages have received influence from each other. Spain in this case has borrowed several terms from English and has adapted to the Spanish speaker's daily communication. This paper aims to study how these speakers behave with borrowings from English in contexts of CMC, taking into account the age and gender of the participants.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Language change results from the differential propagation of linguistic variants distributed among the linguistic repertoires of communicatively interacting individuals in a given community” (Michael 2010, 1). Social changes affect not only language and therefore communication but also every other aspect of our lives. Neologisms are a clear consequence of these changes and developments in language (Ahmad 2000, 1). English, historically being one of the most influential languages of all, could not be an exception. Its enormous cultural variety as well as the great contact with different languages and communities that has had throughout history makes it the language that has undergone the most changes (Fraser 1975, 138).

The Spanish language, on the other hand, and due to the historical contact that has always had with the English culture and language, has received an enormous number of influences from this language, especially in communication (Pharies 2002, 226). If we consider the development of communicative sources that society has had in the last few

decades, it is easy to assume that those changes would have an effect on our daily disclosure (Onyedum 2012, 47). In this way, CMC takes a crucial role in the development of the language today, Internet and social networks have opened the door to multiple possibilities to create new variables. These platforms offer great expressive freedom and ease in generating user communities. It is with these new groups that new forms of language are created, and it is here where neologisms take on a very important role. In this case, the one of Spain, due to its close contact to the English language, has received and adapted words from that language, those being borrowings from English.

Studying how these borrowings behave in a conversation between Spanish speakers requires the interference of two main variables, the age and gender of the users. Feminism history, social changes and generational differences makes us inquire how these elements affect the development of CMC and overall language and communication (Jepson 2005, 85).

### **1.1. Research questions:**

This study presents the following research questions:

- Which borrowings from English are more popular in Spanish in CMC?
- How does age affect Spanish users when they use borrowings from English?
- How does gender affect Spanish users when they use borrowings from English?
- Are gender and age correlated? And if so, how?

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### **2.1.Linguistic change in social media**

Labov's study was a revolution in the understanding of language and its development at a social level, as well as the birth of modern sociolinguistics. This study gave us a new perspective on the nature of language, something that adapts and changes to the new trends that its own speakers incorporate (Trudgill 1974, 215). It is then understood how correlated social events and linguistic changes are, according to Michael (2010): “language change arises from the differential propagation of linguistic variants in a population, a process that ultimately reduces to a process of individual speaker selection of variants in particular communicative events” (Michael 2010, 4). An example of this is seen in the emerge of computer mediated communication (CMC), as stated by Jepson (2014): “Various accounts suggest that, as compared to face-to-face interaction, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has an equalizing effect on the quantity and quality of participation across gender, socioeconomic status, and age, because participants feel less anxious or shy” (Jepson 2014, 82).

Chat rooms, online video games and innovative streaming platforms make communication between speakers from all over the world possible. As could not be otherwise, the language used in these environments also changed to the extent that words and/or expressions were designed for specific contexts. Trudgill (1974) offers a view about how influential these changes were to understand the effects on society: “This turn has enabled us to achieve a clearer understanding of the nature of the relationship between language and various sociological parameters, and in- creased our knowledge about the social setting of linguistic change” (Trudgill 1974, 215).

In 1960, we already had a chat platform in real time that only authorised users could enjoy. It was not until 1988 that the Internet Relay Chat was created, the first online-chat platform (Cherry 2021). All these modern developments, however, began in the mid-20th century, with the onset of globalisation. Ahmad (2000) explains how influential global movements are in the development of our language are:

Global movements like the 1970's environmental awareness campaigns have contributed to the sanitization of goods, products and services which in their older forms may show a lack of sensitivity to environmental concerns but when prefixed with 'eco-' become okay: warriors became eco-warriors, and the disruptive tourists could go on eco-tours and help green the Third World. [...] Compilers of neology collections in a number of cases now seek to link the process of nonce formation and neologisms to catastrophic events and to global movements. (Ahmad 2000, 2)

Globalization, however, brought about improvements not only in transport, economics, and politics, but also in communication. To begin with, knowledge of language became much more accessible, since practically anyone could have access to it, significantly reducing the level of illiteracy and lack of schooling. In this way, the internet usage especially between 2005 and 2005 grew 160% worldwide and became a centre of congregation for people from all over the world, creating new communities, and as in any other community, new ways of communicating and new forms of language were devised (Spitzberg 2006, 631). From that moment on, future generations that were born and grew up with the internet and new technologies, also known as millennials, oversaw developing

and improving the platforms through which we communicate, until we reached the social networks we know today: WhatsApp, Instagram, twitter, Facebook, and so on.

## **2.2. Neologisms in CMC**

With the rising of social networks and the immense facilities that the keyboard provided when it came to writing and expressing oneself, the different communities that emerged on various platforms designed their own words, formed from abbreviations, shortenings, clippings, borrowings from other languages, or words combined. All these words and expressions are known as neologisms, which is, according to the Collins Dictionary, a new word or expression in a language, or a new meaning for an existing word or expression (Collins Dictionary 2021).

On numerous occasions the internet and especially social media have been labelled as harmful or degrading to language, according to Onyedum (2012) “As people observe language change, they usually react negatively, feeling that the language has gone downhill, that language change is functionally disadvantageous, in that it hinders communication” (Onyedum 2012, 18). Nothing could be further from the truth, since thanks to the enormous opportunity for socialisation that it offers, users have designed their own form of communication. But we must not forget that language has no hierarchies beyond those we ourselves create, language is the greatest form of communication that exists, and it is constantly changing and adapting, Khatib (1988) analyses this circumstance: “all linguistic variables were found to correlate closely with the social factors investigated, albeit to varying degrees. In all cases it was found that social motivation is an element that influences variation” (Khatib 1998, IV), it is argued too that the best way to study linguistic change is through its social context (349) . For

that reason, one should not consider this new language variety, the one created on the internet, as something degrading or vulgar, but as a new way of communicating, knowing, and learning, as well as facilitating contact with new cultures, religions, and ideals.

A neologism is understood by practically all users, as it can be formed through different processes. A word formed through compounding, for example, can be the combination of two bases that come from different languages, and yet have formed a new word with a new meaning that is understood by all speakers. This happens since neologisms are created in specific communities. Lehrer (2003) states: “neologicistic creations have become so common that speakers of English have developed strategies to process them quickly and automatically” (Lehrer 2003, 379). Neologisms are easily understood by members of the same community since most of them have an aesthetic goal of providing pleasure, amusement, and entertainment as well as meaning (380).

### **2.3.English Neologisms in Spanish speakers’ communication**

Despite the easy acceptance of neologisms on the Internet, there is an important factor that affects the usage of speakers: the language from which the neologisms originate. Every language creates its own neologisms, some of them, such as *lol*, become so popular that practically every user on the internet understands it, and others that are limited by the language in which they are created, which means that those are only understood by those speakers of the language the neologisms come from, such as *flipante* in Spanish (Enciclopedia de Neologismos, 2019).

Some borrowings are adapted to a different language. A perfect example is the Spanish language, due to the huge interaction that English and Spanish cultures have had since Colonialism, a time where English was the language of administration and Spanish



communities had to adapt to this new system (Fraser 1975, 139). In many cases, due to the popularity of some neologisms in English, Spanish has adapted those words to its language, we can see this effect with words like: *googlear* (from the verb *google*), *tuitear* (from the verb *tweet*) or *trolear* (from the verb *troll*) (Enciclopedia de Neologismos, 2019). On the other hand, there are cases of English neologisms that instead of being adapted to Spanish, are used in their original form. It is interesting in these specific cases to study how, in the language that uses the neologisms in question, in this case Spanish, there is no need for any kind of adaptation or modification of these words, a phenomenon that this study aims to analyse. Spanish speakers can understand and use these neologisms in context even if they keep the original English form. This also shows how English is reaching more and more people, becoming a global language little by little.

#### **2.4. Neologisms' properties (word formation processes and origin)**

The influence and impact of a neologism on speakers of different languages depends very much on the formation process of these words. These processes are mainly morphological, and although we can find inflectional formations (a process in which the meaning is not affected, but the shape and part of speech of the word is), most of them are derivational (in these cases, the meaning does changes, the process creates a new word with a new meaning). Regarding the possibilities that can be take place among a derivational change, we can find: addition of affixes, which can be placed at the beginning (as in *unhappy*) called prefixes, or at the end (as in *normally*) called suffixes; we can also find minor word formation processes including initialisms (an acronym in which each letter is pronounced separately) such as *laser* or *radar*; clippings (an abbreviation of a word) like *ad* (from *advertisement*) or *lab* (from *laboratory*); and blends (a word formed

by joining together the beginning and the end of two other words) for example *brunch* (mix of *breakfast* and *lunch*). Apart from these, we can find some other types of processes like compounding (words formed by joining two or more words, for example *notebook*, formed with *note* and *book*) and conversions, in which a word of one grammatical form becomes a word of another grammatical form without any changes in spelling or pronunciation (a good example could be *email*, which changed from a noun to a verb) (Yousefi 2009).

### 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to analyse the elements that influence the use of English neologisms by Spanish speakers, that is, borrowings that are used in the Spanish language. Due to the immense development the internet has suffered during the past two decades, the variables are very broad. For this reason, I decided to study two main characteristics: age and gender. Precisely because of the fast evolution neologisms have on the internet, the different generation have grown up with a very different vocabulary, and in the same way gender works. Gender is also an important variable, especially if we consider the raising of feminism in the last years. Spitzberg (2006) refers to recent research which states the effects of mass communication and how it gave way to a more moderated paradigm, recognizing the importance of social and contextual forces in language and the fast development of mass communication (Spitzberg 2006, 630). Apart from that, depending on the meaning of the neologism, the formation process of it could be an aspect that affects its usage, fact that will be analyse during the project.

#### 4. METHOD

To proceed with this study, it has been created a survey and a data base table. Firstly, the data base table was filled with information about the neologisms that will be taken in the study, their formation process, examples from corpus, dictionary definition, year of creation, and so on. Secondly, the survey was designed to study the two principal variables of age and gender and how each participant related to the words of the study.

##### **4.1.Participants**

The participants, thus the people responding to the survey, were divided into 3 main groups depending on their age: the first group from 15 to 20 years old, the second group from 21 to 25 years old, and the third group from 26 to 30 years old. This classification was made with the intention of concentrating age groups that are more likely to be common users of the Internet and social networks, and therefore more likely to know and use the neologisms in the study.

Apart from age, the participants are also asked about their gender and other questions related to their English language knowledge, since all the participants are Spanish speakers. Questions about language included what kind of education they have received, how much do they use English in their everyday life, and others. The survey also includes a few questions about which social networks do they use more commonly, and they were asked to rate how much they used them.

##### **4.2.Materials**

The methodology adopted for this study involves two steps. In the first step, a selection of English neologisms was carried out, based on the word of the year (WotY) identified

by the American Dialect Society from 2009 to 2019. Table 1 below includes all the neologisms included in this study, their years of formation and a definition from Collins Dictionary, if possible (some of these neologisms have not yet been entered in an official dictionary). However, The Rice University Neologisms Database and the Urban Dictionary provides us with pretty accurate definitions:

<b>Neologism</b>	<b>Year of formation</b>	<b>Dictionary Entry</b>
<i>Ghosting</i>	2015	The act or an instance of ending a romantic relationship by not responding to attempts to communicate by the other party (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Catfish</i>	2013	To partake in romantic activities online with somebody under a false identity. A person can “catfish” another person by creating a profile with a false identity online and then partaking... (The Rice University Neologisms Database, 2008)
<i>Fail</i>	2009	An internet meme that summarizes any bad situation that is also humorous. (A meme is a unit of cultural information; in the case of an internet meme, it is spread through online blogs...) (The Rice University Neologisms Database, 2008)
<i>Bae</i>	2014	Your bae is someone you are romantically involved with or in love with. (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Twerk</i>	2013	If someone twerks, they dance by bending their knees, sticking their bottom out and moving or shaking it quickly. (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Podcast</i>	2006	A podcast is an audio file similar to a radio broadcast, that can be downloaded and listened to on a computer or MP3 player. (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Trend</i>	2010	To set a trend means to do something that becomes accepted or fashionable, and that a lot of other people copy. (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Belieber</i>	2010	(Blending of 'believe' and the clipping of Bieber from Justin Bieber) obsessive fan of young U.S. pop artist, Justin Bieber = “I am a Belieber because I respect Justin Bieber” (The Rice University Neologisms Database, 2008)

<i>YOLO</i>	2012	YOLO is the written and sometimes spoken abbreviation for 'you only live once', used to say that people should do exciting things and enjoy life. (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Boomer</i>	2019	A short for baby-boomer. (Collins Dictionary 2021)
<i>Karen</i>	2019	A middle-aged woman, who has shortened, straight, dyed blond hair, very likely a mother, who is a very difficult customer. (The Rice University Neologisms Database, 2008)
<i>Fuckboy</i>	2015	A boy who is a player and is only in a relationship for sex (Urban Dictionary, 2021)

Table 1: Neologisms of the Study, year of formation and dictionary definition.

The second methodological step taken in this study is an online survey that aims at identifying the degree of knowledge of English neologisms that have been borrowed into Spanish as a result of CMC. Since the participants are Spanish speakers, and to avoid any confusion, the survey is written in Spanish. It is divided in two main sections, the first one and shortest includes questions about the participant (age, gender, English knowledge, social media usage and activities in their daily lives that they do in English), and a second section in which each neologism gets several questions, those being:

1. If the participant recognizes the neologism in the example given.
2. If they know what it means.
3. If they have ever used it in social media or social networks.
4. They are asked to rate from 1 to 5 how much do they use that word.
5. If they remember having seen that word written on social networks.

Apart from that, the survey counts with examples of each neologism. In order to verify the statement of this study, which relates to Spanish speakers using English neologisms in their everyday communication, each neologism in the survey includes an example from Twitter showing a Spanish speaker using an English neologism in a completely informal context, all in Spanish. These examples were included not only to show the existence of

this phenomenon, but also to guide the participants for them to understand better the questions.

### **4.3.Procedure**

To proceed with this study, the survey was first shared multiple times in order to reach as many participants as possible. Once the survey had sufficient responses, the results were compared according to, first, the age group to which the participants belonged and, second, their gender.

To have a better view of the results, two charts were created showing the specific amount of people who recognized or knew each neologism, the first chart regarding the three age groups and the second one reflecting on their gender. Based on these tables, two graphs were designed showing the results, which can be found in the next section.

Following the purpose of this study, these results are to be analysed and compared, to understand the responses or to find a pattern.

## **5. RESULTS**

In order to properly analyse the results of this study, we had a total of 184 responses to the survey. As expected, more responses were received from users between 21 and 25 years of age, as this is the most active group on social networks. Even so, a good number of responses were obtained from each group, as well as a good balance between male and female responses, even though women seemed dominant in the results of the survey. The following chart shows the exact number of participants of each gender and age. It is important to mention that, since in the survey was included an undetermined option for sex, there is a column including the 3 participants who choose that option. In addition,

there was an answer that decided not to choose any option, neither male or female nor indeterminate.

	Woman	Men	Undetermined	Total
15-20	25	11	1	37
21-25	73	21	0	94
26-30	28	22	2	52
Total	126	54	3	184

Table 2. Number of participants

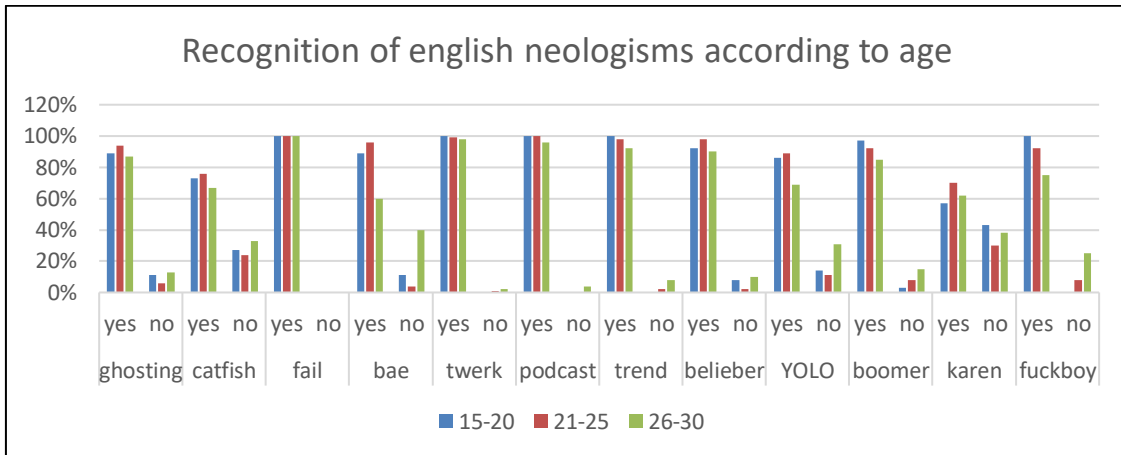
Before starting to analyse the results regarding the age group to which each participant belonged, I would like to comment on one extreme found in the study: the neologism *fail*. This Neologism seems to have been a blast among users in social networks, since according to the results of the survey as can be seen in graphs 1 and 3, 100% of the participants knew and recognized this neologism. Both variables (gender and age) showed unanimity with the neologism *fail*.

Apart from this one, we can also find surprising results with the neologisms *twerk*, and *podcast*. Though these do not show unanimity of 100% of the participants, they do reflect high percentages of knowledge among the participants: *twerk* was recognized by the 98-100% of the participants no matter age and gender, and *podcast* was known by, at least, 96% of the participants regarding age, and 98% regarding gender.

### **5.1.Results related to age.**

As it was mentioned before, age was no exception regarding the results of the neologism *fail*, the three age groups recognized this neologism, which can make much more sense

when we observe that this is one of the youngest neologisms, created in 2009. In the following graph are illustrated the results regarding each age group:



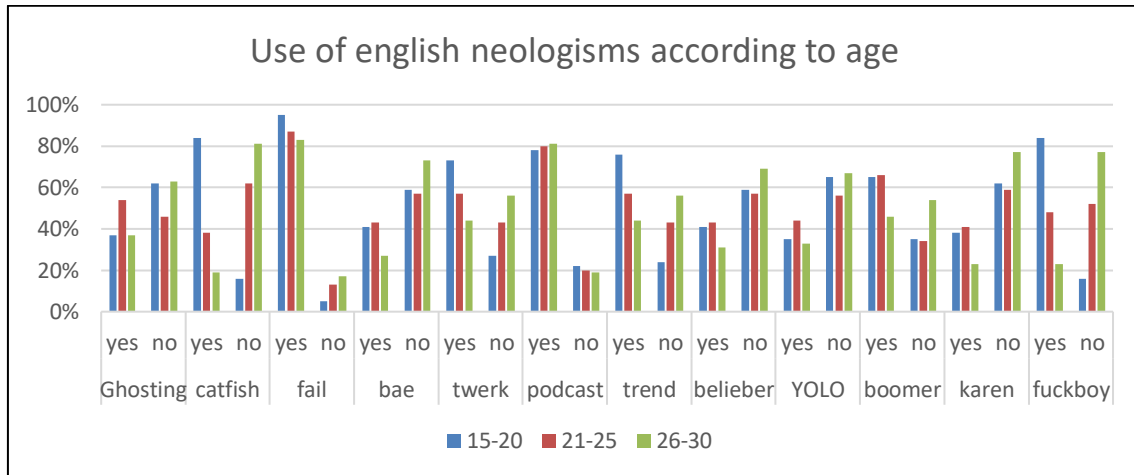
Graph 1: Recognition of English Neologisms According to Age

As a general view, we can observe a clear pattern between the three groups of participants. Most of the words given are more popular among teenagers between 15 and 20 years of age, less popular between young adults from 21 to 25 years old and not that common between adults from 26 to 30 years old. This pattern is clearly followed in the words *trend*, *boomer*, *fuckboy* and very slightly with *twerk*. Another pattern that can be observed in the graph shows that the age group from 21 to 25 years old is dominant in some cases. This group is especially interesting since it is probably the one with more active users on social networks. We can see this pattern in the words *ghosting*, *catfish*, *bae*, *belieber*, *YOLO* and *karen*. Thus, knowing the existence of these two patterns in the graph, dominance by the second age group (21-26 years old) seems more common in the recognition of English neologisms.

However, the overall results show an interesting difference between people recognizing English neologism and, from those who knew them, people using those



words on social media. In the next graph it is shown the results regarding the usage of English neologisms in social media of each age group.



Graph 2: Use of English Neologisms According to Age.

As we can see in the graph, there is a huge difference if we compare it with the previous graph, where we saw a clear dominance of people knowing the words. On the other hand, in this graph, the results are much more balanced, which means that there is a notable amount of people who do understand these neologisms but do not use them.

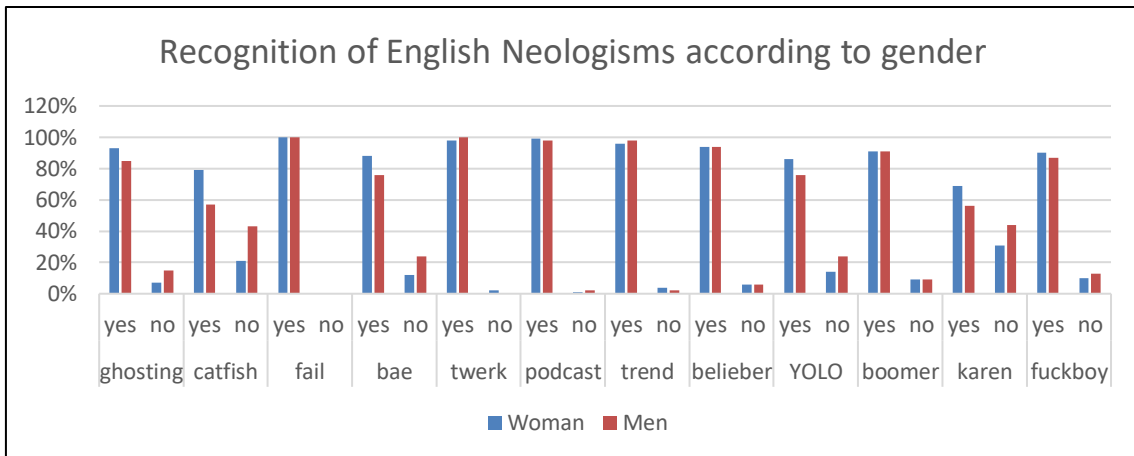
*Catfish*, for example, is a perfect example of a common pattern that these results follow. With *catfish*, there is a clear descendent usage, when 84% of users from 15 to 20 years old use this word, 38% of users from 21 to 25 years old, and only 19% of users from 26 to 30 years old. This is a predictable pattern since it shows how the younger the user is, the more he/she continues to use neologisms on the Internet. This pattern is also seen with the words *twerk*, *trend* and *fuckboy*.

## 5.2. Results related to gender.

Regarding the results according to male and female participants, there is a special phenomenon that should be commented on. Not only *fail* is, again, the only extreme of

the survey with 100% of effectivity, but it is along with the words *belieber* and *boomer*, words that resulted into equal percentages of recognition.

Next it will be presented the graph with complete results of the study according to gender:

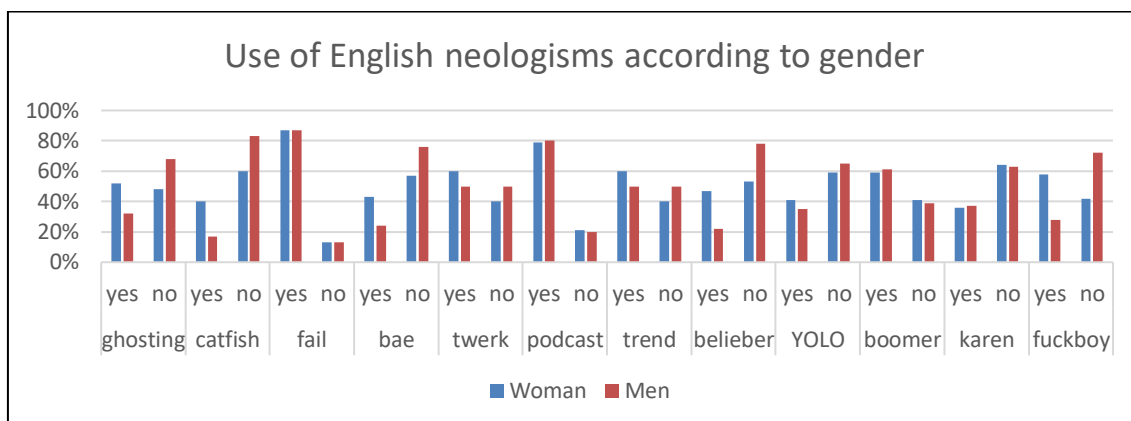


Graph 3: Recognition of English Neologisms According to Gender.

As we can observe, the neologisms *fail*, *belieber* and *boomer* show perfect equality in the results, meaning that both men and woman coincide with these words. Regardless of the gender, 100% of the participants knew the word *fail*, 94% knew *belieber*, and 91% knew *boomer*.

However, women users are much more active with English neologisms. In the majority of cases women show dominance understanding and recognizing these words. This can be seen with the words *ghosting*, *catfish*, *bae*, *YOLO*, *karen* and *fuckboy*.

In the following graph we can see the results regarding usage between men and women:



Graph 4: Use of English Neologisms According to Gender

Just like in the results regarding age, with gender we can also see a clear difference, since usage between men and women are much more balanced than recognition. In this case, even though the results are more equal, women participants show dominance in usage, just like in the results about recognition. The only words in which men show dominance are *podcast*, *boomer* and *karen*, and even in these cases the difference is of 1-2%.

Once all these results have been revised, we can assume that Spanish women participants between 21 to 25 years old are the most active in social network and the ones who know and use the majority of English neologisms.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The results of the survey reveal vastly compelling patterns that could help us understand how age and gender affect Spanish speakers when using English borrowings. These two variables have shown to be highly influential in the responses of the users.

On the one hand, graphs 1 and 2 determine the very different behaviour of the three age groups. As shown in the results, the 21-25 age group was the most active in both recognizing neologisms and using them in social networks, and the 26-30 age group was

the most distant from the other two, showing that they were much less accustomed to the use of these words. On the other hand, graphs 3 and 4 determine the differences between men and women participants, showing in both cases (recognition and usage) women leadership over men.

To begin with, Peersman (2016) introduces the concept of Adolescent Peak Principle, which explains the growing use of social networks and the Internet in general, as well as their linguistic development, especially among the 13 to 15 years old teenagers and older (Peersman et al. 2016, 18). This principle explains why the results of the survey show an increase in the recognition and the use of English neologisms in the first and second age groups (from 15 to 20 and from 21 to 25). But age not only affects differently in language depending on the age group, but also social contexts. Spitzberg (2006) states: “teenagers have been found to react to CMC usage somewhat differently from adults [...] as Internet use increased, teenagers increased their available social support and family communication, whereas adults increased their FtF interactions with friends and family and their closeness with distant relatives” (Spitzberg 2006, 16).

Regarding the neologisms’ properties, it is interesting to comment on two specific cases: *bae* and *fuckboy*. These two examples show the biggest difference in recognition between the three age groups, especially with the oldest one (from 26 to 30 years old) and curiously enough, they were created on very similar dates, *bae* in 2014 and *fuckboy* in 2015. Knowing this one could argue that older users are not accustomed to the newest neologisms from social networks, since this groups are the least common users of these platforms. This could be explained with the idea of the “decreasing language”. As Onyedum (2012) states: “Such neologisms are sometimes also negatively evaluated by socially dominant groups. You never seem to hear older people commenting that the

language of the younger generation has improved compared to the language of their own youth” (Onyedum 2012, 18-19).

Regarding gender, however, the analysis gets wider. As we saw previously in the results, female participants show dominance in the innovation of neologisms in social media, Herring (2000) suggests that women participate more actively specially in environments where norms of interaction are controlled by an individual to maintain order and focus (Herring 2000, 4). Despite that, it must be taken into account the behaviour that men and women develop when they are raised, which is quite different, as Hilte (2017) states: “While accepting the responsibilities of adulthood, girls converge towards mainstream societal norms, whereas boys more strongly insist on their autonomy” (Hilte et al. 2017, 13). This proves that the difference between male and female participants in the results are affected not only by their social media behaviour but also their social contexts.

There are several characteristics in which men and women differ. Women, for example, tend to be more dramatic and to use unusual terms, very different from men’s language customs, both groups use different words to say the same thing (Mworia 2015, 71). Despite these differences, linguistic change record still shows female dominance, also known as the curvilinear principle, as explained by Michael (2010):

The curvilinear principle identifies the central sections of the socioeconomic hierarchy (for Labov, the ‘upper working class’) as the social position of leaders of sound changes in progress, and in situations in which there is gender-based differentiation, it is women who typically lead changes from below. (Michael 2010, 17-18)

Our survey's results about women leadership are perfectly explained with the curvilinear principle. Michael argues that "women's use of the relevant innovative variant tends to remain comparatively high, with this higher frequency tending to be acquired by their children through transmission" (18).

Therefore, understanding the Adolescent Peak and the curvilinear principles, we find a pattern that clarifies the effects of neologisms depending on age and gender. Female users during their teenager stage are the more influential participants in the development of language in CMC, Michael argues on this in a very precise way: "older girls and adolescent women tend to increment at considerably higher rates than their male counterparts, with the result that women tend to lead linguistic change" (18).

## 7. CONCLUSION

All things considered, this paper has examined at multiple situations to understand how borrowings from English work with Spanish speakers. Though we could find some limitations of the study, such as the social backgrounds of each participant or the amount of responses received, several system and patterns were found, letting us finally know that female teenager speakers are the ones usually provoking linguistic changes.

In this study we have carefully observed at the effect of neologisms in CMC, focusing on how age and gender determines their usage and recognition. Though it has been shown an apparent system, there are a vast number of causes why this phenomenon takes place, not only how easily English neologisms are borrowed into Spanish but also the reasons why age and gender are highly influential in this matter. For further studies, to go into the reasons why women in communication suffer very different situations than men and how this affects language in general can be very interesting, Herring's (2000)

would be a great starting point to investigate about sexism and the sexualization of women in CMC: “the former environments show greater inequity in terms of amount of participation, while the latter show greater objectification of women in sexual terms” (Herring 2000, 6). On the other hand, further studies could be used to understand in depth the socio-cultural causes that affect the age in linguistic development, especially in adolescence when this development is greatly enhanced by the context of each person.

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