

**He or She? Gender in the Spanish Language**

It is human nature to categorize objects, be it by size, shape or color. We also do this in the languages we speak, classifying nouns by their *gender*. Languages can have *masculine*, *feminine* or *neuter* genders. While not all languages have gendered nouns, the Spanish Language has masculine and feminine nouns and Spanish language speakers need to know the gender of each of those nouns in order to speak the language comfortably. In this article we will discuss both why the Spanish language has gendered nouns and how to use those gendered nouns correctly.

**Are English Nouns Gendered?**

To a native English speaker it may seem strange to be told that every noun, from a table (*la mesa)* to the sky (*el cielo*), has a masculine or feminine gender in the Spanish language. But the English language does have some gendered nouns for people or animals, but just not for objects. These gendered nouns describe the physical sex of the person or animal, such as woman and man, or tiger and tigress.

For example:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Feminine** | **Masculine** | **Neutral** |
| *Woman* | *Man* | *Person*  |
| *Mother* | *Father* | *Parent* |
| *Waitress* | *Waiter* | *Server* |
| *Cow* | *Bull* |  |
| *Lioness* | *Lion* |  |

In the Spanish language all nouns have either a masculine or feminine gender, and there is no neutral gender. Like in English, nouns for people and animals are gendered based on biological sex, such as *la mujer (the woman)* and *el hombre (the man)* or *el león* (*the lion)* or *la leona* (*the lioness).* The gender of other nouns is often unrelated to the function of the object itself. If you were to guess the gender of the noun “*a dress*”, you would likely guess that it is feminine based on the almost exclusive use of *dresses* by women, however, in Spanish it is the masculine noun, “*el vestido”*. Similarly, the Spanish word for “*a tie”* is the feminine noun, “*la corbata”.*

**Why are Nouns Gendered?**

For the frustrated language learner, classifying nouns by gender may seem puzzling, but gendered nouns exist in many languages. The question of *why* they exist in any language is a bit more complicated and may not relate to biological sex at all. Many languages have multiple classification systems for nouns. These noun classes may have been created to denote important meaning in the past, but as languages (and cultures) change much of that initial meaning is lost while the language holds on to its history through grammar. Bantu languages used by people in Sub-Saharan Africa are an example of this. These languages can have as many as 16 different classifications for their nouns, some are easy to understand such as the noun class that is based on size, but other classes are arbitrary and nouns within them have no obvious connections.

In the Spanish language, the gender of nouns for people, such as *la mujer* and *el hombre*, are obviously connected to the gender (or biological sex) of the person but the gender of other nouns, such as *la mesa,* is not so obvious. Some people theorize that this is because in the past nouns were associated with a gender, they were either seen as having a feminine or masculine essence. Others theorize that all nouns were part of a larger classification system and biological sex fit within that. No matter what the historical reason, knowing the gender of each noun in the Spanish language, or any target language, is important for fluent use of the language.

**How to Tell the Gender of a Noun**

As mentioned above, there are some rules in the Spanish language that make it easier to know which gender a noun is. In general a noun ending with the letter -***a*** will be *feminine* and a noun ending in the letter -***o*** will be *masculine*. However, there are always exceptions such as the masculine noun “*el map****a*”** and the feminine noun “*la man****o***”. Other endings that generally denote *feminine* words are - ***sión***, -***ción***, -***dad***, -***tad***, -***tud***, and –***umbre***.

For example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***-sión*** | ***- ción*** | ***- dad*** | ***- tad*** | ***-tud*** | ***-umbre*** |
| la televisión | la educación | la ciudad | la libertad | la certitud | la certidumbre |
| la conversasión | la visualización | la Universidad | la lealtad | la gratitud | la costumbre |
| la diversión | la navegación | la imparcialidad | la mitad | la actitud | la legumbre |

**Using Correct Articles**

Because the gender of many nouns is arbitrary, language learners are often encouraged to learn the article with the noun to help them remember the gender of the noun. If the noun uses the article *la* or *una*, it is feminine; if it uses the article *el* or *un* it is masculine. There are many rules that help you remember the gender of the noun, and therefore which article to use, but there are also many exceptions. It is easier to memorize “*la ventana”* (*the* window) than to memorize the word *“ventana”* and then try to remember if it is masculine or feminine each time you use it.

Many Spanish language words for occupations end with –***ista*** for either men or women, for example ***un*** *dentist (a male dentist)* or ***una*** *dentist (a female dentist).* In these cases the article is important for denoting the gender of the person. For other nouns, however, the same word with a different article changes the meaning of the word altogether. For example, ***el*** *corte* is *the blade* or *the cut* but ***la*** *corte* is *the court of law.* These examples show the importance of knowing the gender of a noun and using the correct article to maintain the correct meaning of the word.

**Adjective Agreement**

Another very important reason that Spanish language speakers must know all the genders for nouns is that adjectives must “agree” with their noun. That means that the adjective will change, like the article did, depending on if the noun is masculine or feminine. If the noun is feminine the language speaker must also use the feminine form of the adjective; if the noun is masculine they must use the masculine form of the noun. Feminine adjectives generally end in –***a*** and masculine adjectives generally end in ***–o***.

For example:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Feminine | Masculine |
| La mujer es ***alta***. (The woman is tall) | El hombre es ***alto***. (The man is tall.) |
| La manzana ***roja*** está aquí. (The apple is red.) | El lápiz ***rojo*** está aquí. (The pen is red.) |
| La noche es ***fría.*** (The night is cold.) | El sol es ***caliente.*** (The sun is hot.) |
| La profesora está ***contenta.*** (The *female* teacher is happy) | El profesor está ***contento***. (The *male* teacher is happy.) |
| Es una falda ***blanca***. (It’s a white skirt.) | Es un vestido ***blanco.*** (It’s a white dress.) |

**The Importance of Knowing the Gender of Spanish Language Nouns**

For Spanish language speakers the gender of a noun is inherent and obvious. Native Spanish speakers learned the gender agreement of nouns as young children, so hearing a noun used with the incorrect article or adjective is an obvious mark of a non-native speaker. If Spanish language speakers read Spanish language materials that are not using the correct gender of nouns they will feel that the text is difficult and awkward to read. To prevent this discomfort, businesses and individuals should use Spanish translation and copy editing for all Spanish language materials. The Spanish language experts at ***Spanish with Style*** will ensure the proper agreement of all articles, adjectives and nouns throughout the text so that it reads like it was written by a native speaker.