




A Comprehensive State-of-the-Art Review of Gender-Neutral and Inclusive Language in English and Spanish: Historical Evolution, Sociolinguistic Perspectives, and Cultural Perceptions

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive review of the historical evolution and contemporary sociolinguistic perspectives on gender-neutral and inclusive language in English and Spanish. 32 articles are primarily synthesized from Scopus, ScienceDirect, Redalyc, SciELO, and other sources. Boolean operators (AND and OR) are used to combine search equations with keyword combinations: “gender-neutral language” and “English/Spanish”. The study does not present time restrictions to capture all relevant contributions. Significant findings reveal that the evolution of gender-neutral language in English is closely linked to social movements, specifically the use of the singular “they” as a third-person pronoun for indefinite referents. Spanish, on the other hand, faces greater challenges of structural change, adopting non-standard neologisms such as the suffixes “@” or “x” and non-binary morphemes like the “e” in “todes.” These strategies encounter constant resistance from institutions such as the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) and prescriptive grammarians, who classify them as illegitimate. It concludes that cultural and ideological factors influence attitudes toward the use of gender-neutral language and that language reflects social changes. The study identifies an important research gap in religious, conservative contexts such as Panama, where global English as a Foreign language trends converge with traditional linguistic norms.

Keyword: Gender-neutral Language

Introduction

The internationalization of education has promoted the mobility of learners of English as a foreign language. Learners from grammatical gendered backgrounds face adopted academic policies regarding the use of gender-neutral language (GNL) pronouns (they/them) in their daily educational practices. In addition to that, prioritizing inclusive language to avoid using gendered/sexist terms is an ongoing, increasing global debate (Andion, 2020; Kleiss and Waiguny, 2015). However, its implementation and acceptance vary across languages, particularly in those with or without grammatical gender. For instance, it may be considered that these nuances of language may bring certain confusion in learners with gendered language backgrounds like Spanish as their native tongue, because it has masculine generics or “he” and “him” pronouns as part of their entire communicative life. It may be a challenge to understand GNL in a teaching and learning academic context (Grey, 2015).

Connecting this topic to Panama, this country is a vibrant melting pot of cultures, but at its heart, it can be found a strong connection to its Spanish roots. It is observable that for society, family is everything. Historically, life in Panama came with some marked strict rules for men and women. Culturally, there is also a noticeable streak of machismo (male chauvinistic) among the men. (Marins, n.d., p. 96). Additionally, Catholicism was the heart of religion in Panama for a long time. According to the BTI Transformation Index Project (2024) 90% of Panamanian citizens identified as Catholic, and faith is being taught in public schools. Christian values are ingrained; they were even written into the Panamanian constitution “[i]t is recognized that the Catholic religion is practiced by the

majority of Panamanians” (Constitute Project, 2019). To illustrate, “Roman Catholic 48.6%, Evangelical 30.2%, other 4.7%, agnostic 0.2%, atheist 0.2%, none 12.3%, unspecified 3.7%” were the estimated percentages by 2018 in Panama (Index Mundi, 2021).

Spite of the fact of identified religious affiliations, a great part of the Panamanian society also manages a respectful environment regarding other people’s practices because “[a]ll religions may be professed and all forms of worship practiced freely, without any other limitation than respect for Christian morality and public order” (Constitute Project, 2019). However, one important aspect that Panamanians take into consideration at the moment of dating someone is knowing in advance about their religious affiliation, and Cordoba & Seitzer (2023) found that sensitive topics such as sex education generated debates where there was strong opposition from religious and pro-family groups. This posture reinforced what Muñoz (2017) and Nevache (2017) stated about how the church shapes public opinion, its engagement in political processes, and its impact on the cultural norms and daily lives of Panamanians.

While research has focused on looking for a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun in English proposing as one of the alternatives the use of the singular “they” as an epicene pronoun (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002), there is still a sociolinguistic gap regarding how gendered L1 EFL learners from conservative and religious backgrounds face these shifts in academic public university context. “For [the] Spanish language, many recommendations have been made concerning the use of GNL in [the] last three decades” (Saitua et al., 2018, p. 3). Similar studies in English GNL have been conducted in many countries, and in some of the Caribbean region, but most of them related to gender bias or stimulating cross-cultural dialogue on gender and feminist concerns (Caribbean Court of Justice, 2024; OLACEFS, 2023; Caribbean Studies Association, 2025). It shows a unique regional perspective and a need to support educators in addressing inclusive pedagogical practices. Considering this existing research gap, the study focuses on providing a comprehensive state-of-the-art analysis comparing the historical evolution of GNL in English and Spanish.

Objective. The main objective of this article is to explore and synthesize global research on gender-neutral language in English and Spanish, including sociolinguistic, cultural, and attitudinal perspectives. The specific objectives of the study are: SO1: To examine the historical evolution of GNL in English and Spanish. SO2: To identify the current academic debates and policies about GNL. SO3: To analyze how cultural and ideological factors shape attitudes toward GNL. Additionally, the study takes the following guiding questions: RQ1: How has GNL historically evolved in English and Spanish? RQ2: What are the current academic debates and policies about GNL? RQ3: How do cultural factors influence attitudes toward GNL? RQ4: What ideological factors shape perceptions of gender-neutral language? RQ5: How do sociolinguistic perspectives differ between English and Spanish regarding gender-neutral language?

Method

This article employs an exploratory systematic literature approach to provide an understanding of English gender-neutral language and its cultural perceptions (George, 2023). It combines bibliometric analysis with deductive thematic coding to synthesize existing information on gender-neutral language in English and Spanish. A search period was not established to find all scientific production on “gender-neutral language” and see the reasons that led to the gender shift to singular “they” and a revision of “English” on its historical overview-retrospective as a language. The Spanish language was also

searched to understand its influence on the speaking decisions (attitudes towards GNL) when studying English as an L2.

Search Strategy

To facilitate search equations with the Boolean operators for the literature review collection, related key terms to GNL were identified (Table 1), using Google Scholar on August 9, 2025.

Table 1
Identification of Key Terms to Gender-Neutral Language

Probe on Terms Related to Gender-Neutral Language in English and Spanish	
English	Spanish
gender- neutral language	lenguaje inclusivo
gender-Inclusive language	lenguaje no sexista
gender-fair language	lenguaje con perspectiva de genero
non-sexist language	lenguaje incluyente
inclusive writing	
gender-neutral writing	

Eligibility Criteria

A scoping of shorter 6 search equations written in the English language (including fields/filters such as: title/abstract/keywords/document type) verbatim referring to English/Spanish gender-neutral (Table 2), was first managed in Scopus. Then, 7 in ScienceDirect/Elsevier, on August 26, 2025, but later, 4 in Redalyc, and 4 in SciELO using terms with no synonym expansion in the Spanish language on August 28, 2025. It helped to identify suitable general search equations (Table 3) to find all the published in-topic articles. 392 records were found in general from the mentioned databases. Most of the search equations were requested independently using the Boolean operators “AND” or “OR”.

Table 2
Database-Specific Strings (Verbatim) with Fields/Filters (Title/Abstract/Keywords/DocType) and Others where Applicable

Search N°/ Database	Search Equations - Scopus/Elsevier	N° records
1	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender AND neutral AND language) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (English) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Spanish)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "Ch") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "cp"))	11
2	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender-inclusive AND language) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (English) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Spanish)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "Ch") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "cp"))	10
3	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender AND fair AND language) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (English) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Spanish))	6
4	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (non-sexist AND language) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (English) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Spanish))	4
5	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (inclusive AND writing) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (English) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Spanish))	12
6	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender neutral writing) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (English) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Spanish))	1
Search Equations - ScienceDirect/Elsevier		
1	ALL ("gender-neutral language" AND "English" AND "Spanish")	58
2	ALL ("gender-inclusive language" AND "English" AND "Spanish")	31
3	ALL ("gender-fair language" AND "English" AND "Spanish")	8
4	ALL ("non-sexist language" AND "English" AND "Spanish")	14
5	ALL ("inclusive writing" AND "English" AND "Spanish")	5
6	ALL ("gender-neutral writing" AND "English" AND "Spanish")	0
7	ALL ("gender-neutral writing" AND "English")	2
Search Equations - Redalyc		
1	"lenguaje inclusivo" AND "Inglés" AND "Español"	78
2	"lenguaje no sexista" AND "Inglés" AND "Español"	46
3	"lenguaje con perspectiva de género" AND "Inglés" AND "Español"	2
4	"lenguaje neutro" AND "Inglés" AND "Español"	23
Search Equations - SciELO		
1	(lenguaje inclusivo)	35
2	(lenguaje no sexista)	9
3	(lenguaje con perspectiva de género)	31
4	(lenguaje neutro)	6
Total		392

Table 3

General Search Equations with Keyword Combination and Filtering Selection Criteria per Databases

Database	Search General Equation on English/Spanish GNL	Records
Scopus/ Elsevier	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender AND neutral AND language) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender AND inclusive AND language) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (non AND sexist AND language) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender AND fair AND language) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (gender AND neutral AND writing) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (english) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (spanish)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "cp") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ch") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "re") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "cr")) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Gender") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Inclusive Language") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Spanish (language)") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Non-sexist Language") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Gender Inclusivity") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Gender Inclusive Language") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "English (language)")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English") OR LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "Spanish")))	15
ScienceDirect/ Elsevier	ALL ("gender-neutral language" OR "gender-inclusive language" OR "non-sexist language" OR "gender-fair language" OR "gender-neutral writing") AND "English" AND "Spanish"	29
Redalyc	"lenguaje de genero neutro" OR "lenguaje inclusivo" OR "lenguaje no sexista" AND "Inglés" AND "Español"	44
SciELO	(lenguaje inclusivo) OR (lenguaje no sexista) OR (lenguaje con perspectiva de género) OR (lenguaje neutro)	11
Total		99

A pilot first general search equation was formulated within filtering criteria for each database (Table 3). To meet the inclusion criteria documents had to a) be relevant to GNL in their title, abstracts, and keywords, in English and Spanish, b) publication types such as research articles, books, book series, conference papers, and review articles, as they are peer-reviewed and more credible (Table 3); and c) include evidence of GNL historical evolution in English and Spanish, GNL linguistic, cultural, ideological, and attitudinal perspectives. The researcher excluded studies that did not address a clear relation, nor significantly contribute to the GNL global debate.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 4

Aspects for Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria for Filtering Records in the Consulted Databases

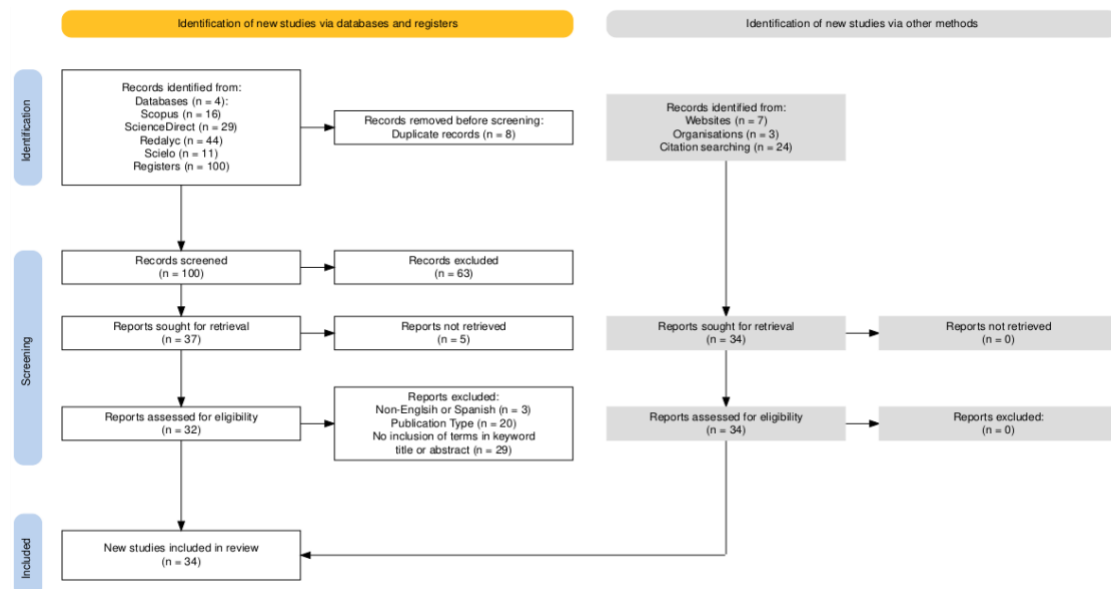
Items	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Language	English and Spanish	Not in English or Spanish Thesis Newspaper articles Book reviews Case reports Editorials Mini reviews Practice guidelines Short communications Encyclopedia
Publication Type	Research articles Books Book series Conference paper Review articles	
Subject areas	All	
Date of publication	All	
Key words	Language, Gender, Inclusive Language, Spanish language, Non-sexist Language, Gender Inclusivity, Gender Inclusive Language, English language.	
Access	Open access and open archive	

For the thematic analysis, four (4) databases: Scopus, ScienceDirect, Redalyc, and SciELO were consulted on August 30, 2025, applying the exclusion and inclusion criteria (Table 4). Some other known journal sites were excluded because only relevant peer-reviewed records were prioritized. The found records were exported in BibTeX and CSV formats and later downloaded and stored in WinRaR were deduplicated. The final assessed records were imported to ATLAS.ti to codify and analyze qualitative data. A second search of records was made by applying specific general search equations with inclusion/exclusion criteria (previous Tables 3 and 4), finding 16 peer-reviewed records displayed in Scopus, 29 in ScienceDirect, 44 in Redalyc, and 11 in SciELO, having a total of 100 found records.

Included Studies for Data Analysis. After the second screening of the articles of the 100 records that were assessed for eligibility, 63 were excluded. Of these, eight (8) were duplicated, two (3) were not in English or Spanish, and 52 did not include the key terms in their title, abstract, keywords, or did not provide significant contributions to the research topic. It finally scored 37 eligible records, but eight (5) were inaccessible, so finally, 32 records were eligible for the thematic analysis. Of those, only 13 from Scopus and ScienceDirect could be included in the bibliometric analysis due to the bibliometric software constraints (specific databases allowance).

Other records were included in the review from websites (7), organizations (3), and citation searching (24) to support argumentation. The selection process is reported in Figure 1 through Haddaway et al. (2022) PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) Flow Diagram R package and Shiny app for ensuring transparency.

Figure 1
Data Selection Process



Source: Adapted from PRISMA Flow Diagram Created in R package and Shiny app Haddaway et al. (2022) https://estech.shinyapps.io/prisma_flowdiagram/

Data Extraction and Analytical Tools

A pilot extraction of the qualitative data was made in Gemini AI to facilitate data compilation. It included the characteristics of the studies, such as titles, authors, years of publication, objectives, focus of the studies, methodology, and main findings. It was revised and scored in Excel (Find the link to this data in the appendix section of this article).

Data extraction from the included records was assessed and coded in ATLAS.ti GPT large language model (LLM) by OpenAI for thematic analysis data processing. The codebook development shows (9) stages of the coding process due to the length of the qualitative data. The thematic analysis was performed by following a deductive approach addressing the research questions of the study.

The Codebook development reports five research questions (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, and RQ5) that served as the primary guidance for the extraction of relevant data for the analysis. Relevant sections were coded into themes according to the research question

they addressed (Table 5). Inter-coder agreement was not applicable, as the analysis was made by a single coder. Themes were mapped to the included articles by connecting significant findings and discussions found in the studies to the research questions.

Additionally, Bibliometrix software in RStudio (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017) was employed to analyze the metrics obtained from the records assessed. It supported identifying publication trends (Global Growth of GNL Research in English vs Spanish or both, global leading countries and authors' institutions, most frequent keywords, and co-occurrence networks).

Limitations. While the study presents a detailed synthesis, the thematic analysis was made by a single coder. Lack of access to Web of Science from the author's institution may omit important bibliometric data. Data processing in ATLAS.ti qualitative data software had to be divided into separate stages, so it took longer than expected.

Results

Qualitative Data Findings

To determine what aspects of GNL were emerging from the data treatment, five categorical themes were set: A) language evolution; B) academic debates; C) cultural influence; D) ideological factors; and E) sociolinguistic perspectives. (See figures of the process in the appendix section).

Table 5
Codebook Development - Themes and Sub-Themes Summary

Gender-Neutral and Inclusive Language in English and Spanish

Guiding Research Questions	Categorical Codes (Themes)	Sub-themes
RQ 1: How has GNL historically evolved in English and Spanish?	Language Evolution	Gender-neutral pronouns Structural Challenges of Spanish as a Gendered Language Gender Construction Behavior in Spanish. Key Inclusive Strategies in Spanish.
RQ2: What are the current academic debates and policies about GNL?	Language Policies and Academic Debates	Acceptance and Usage Resistance to GNL and Inclusive Language Policing Prescriptivist vs Descriptivist Positions
RQ3: How do cultural factors influence attitudes toward GNL?	Cultural Influence	Gender and Education Identity and Social Media Institutional Influence
RQ4: What ideological factors shape perceptions of gender-neutral language?	Ideological Factors	Academia Attitude Toward GNL Language and Social Identity
RQ5: How do sociolinguistic perspectives differ between English and Spanish regarding gender-neutral language?	Sociolinguistic Perspectives	Grammatical Gender Vs Social Gender Comparative Analysis: English vs Spanish

Note. The table shows the general themes and sub-themes coded in ATLAS.ti. General codebook outcomes of processed data (first coding stage) were downloaded in Excel format and accessible in Google Drive (Find it in the Appendix section of this article).

Gender-Neutral Language (GNL) Contextualization

The European Parliament defines Gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language as “a generic term covering the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language or gender-fair language” (European Parliament, 2008; 2018, p. 3). On the same line, Thesaurus (2021) defined it as “[g]ender-neutral language is speech or writing that uses words that don't reference gender.” GNL is also defined as “[t]he referential gender will agree with the 'natural' gender of the referent” (Hekanaho, 2015, p. 14). i.e., most nouns or pronouns as the singular “they” can refer to both men and women. Others defined it as “the name given to language that refers to both sexes, does not foment inequality between men and women” (Kabba, 2011).

Historical Evolution: English Vs Spanish. According to the revised documents, most of them described some evidence of the evolution of GNL. It showed its close relation to academic discourse and social movements.

GNL in English

The GNL evolution in English, the beginning of a social shift toward inclusive language, was marked by the entrance of the term “Politically Correct” (PC) to the public lexicon in the late 1970s (Mañoso and Sanchez, 2024, p. 88). Feminist movements and LGTBQ+ collective claims clearly influenced GNL evolution, particularly since global feminists marched in 2018 (Rodríguez and González, 2020, p. 158). In contrast, Spanish shows a more recent intention of institutionalization, frequently sensitive to the “androcentric” feature of the language.

Gender-neutral pronouns. Both English and Spanish use gendered pronouns; for instance, he, she, him, her, his, himself, herself in English and *él* (he), *ella* (she), *suyo/suya* (his/hers), *lo/la* (him/her) in Spanish. However, English mostly uses singular pronouns when referring to someone in the third person singular (he/she) (Akan, et al., 2025). The rest of the pronouns, I, you, it, we, they, and us, are gender neutral. From all of them, the pronoun “they” has been taught to be a third-person plural pronoun in most English grammar classes. However, “they” has also been a third-person singular pronoun for centuries. “Lexicographers have determined that as far back as the 1300s...” (Thesaurus, 2020, para. 6) to refer to indefinite referents (unspecified/unknown person). For instance,

S: I gave the instructions to my **student**, and **they** did understand.

Notice that the pronoun “they” in the second independent clause acts as a singular pronoun to refer, without identifying gender, to its antecedent in the first independent clause, “student.”

Table 6
Exemplar Extracts from Revised Literature Related to Historical Evolution of GNL

Source	Type of Study	Theme	Exemplar Extracts
(Mañoso and Pacheco, 2024)	Cross-sectional/ Descriptive	Historical Evolution	“in the late '70s, the term Politically Correct (PC) entered the public lexicon” with the purpose of not offending any social group with language or behaviour.”
(Akan, et al., 2025).	Literature/ Descriptive and Comparative		<p>“To be more specific, English does not have any grammatical genders like some other languages, such as Spanish, French, German, or Arabic as English nouns do not need to agree with adjectives and/or determiners. However, English does use gender-specific pronouns like ‘he’ and ‘she’ when referring to people or animals, this is based on sex which is not a grammatical gender, rather a biological gender.”</p> <p>“For example, English has some male/female distinctions in personal pronouns, such as he/she/it, and him/her/it and in possessive adjectives, such as his/her/its which is not grammatical but biological gender as they do not function grammatically. These are used for sex reference.”</p>

It was found that after the increasing feminist currents, the English language witnessed a rise in the utilization of “they” as a singular, gender-neutral personal pronoun (Paterson, 2014) to encourage more inclusive language, avoiding the use of the masculine gender generic forms “He/She” for addressing men and women with the desire to treat all genders equally. However, it was also reported that it was Baron in 1986 who examined

the search for an epicene pronoun throughout the history of grammarians in his publication entitled “Grammar and Gender”.

On the other hand, in Spanish, it was showed a more recent effort to formalize GNL institutional policies. One of the studies described a pre-policy historical context for the academic debate by discussing Spanish “linguistic sexism” from ideological, grammatical, and lexical perspectives, highlighting the androcentric nature of the language (Cabeza and Rodríguez, 2013).

Structural Challenges of Spanish as a Gendered Language

Spanish is characterized by possessing a pervasive grammatical gender system: rigid binary feminine (ends in –a) and masculine (ends in –o) noun classification; nouns, adjectives, and determiners morphosyntactically agree. e.g. *el/la manicurista*. In contrast to English, it was found that it is a greater structural challenge. In the morphological category of gender in the Spanish language, there may be a two-way opposition (Saporta, 1962). i.e., the nouns *niña/niño* “girl/boy” (f/m), *maestro/maestra* “teacher” (m/f), or as in the adjectives *roja/rojo* “red” (f/m), *malo/mala* “bad” (m/f). In addition, the masculine generic “los padres” and other terms that include all genders remain a debate.

Table 7
Main GNL Challenges and Strategies English vs Spanish

Language	Primary GNL Strategy	Key Challenge
English	Singular “they”. (Oxford, 2025)	Discrepancies about plural/singular agreement (Puterbaugh, 2025).
Spanish	Suffixes “-e”, “@”, “x” as in “tod@s”, todxs, “todes” (Ampudia, et al., 2023; Luque, 2023; Núñez, 2023; Palma et al., 2024;).	Resistance from RAE (structural) (Real Academia Española, 2020).

This specific aspect of gender construction in monolinguals of Spanish, surprisingly, has also been found in bilingual speakers of Spanish and another language (Aaron, 2015). It shows a clear perspective of how L1 language construction, Spanish (gendered language), may influence L2 processes as English (natural language), and adapted to GNL pronoun usage.

Language Policies and Academic Debates

Acceptance and Usage

GNL adoption or implementation is not just a random idea. Most of the studies reflect that GNL is the product of planning and language policing. Reviewed material showed acceptance and intentional efforts of several organizations to make it possible, as presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Some Findings on the Acceptance and Implementation of English GNL Policies

Findings	Institution/ Organization/ Countries	Author Reference
1. Focus on using non-sexist language in the translation of their documents	United Nations	(Lessinger, 2020)
2. Change binary structures in their classrooms	First-grade teachers in the United States	(Dougherty, 2022)
3. Suggestion to caregivers on the use of the plural masculine form	Community review board	(McCarty, 2024)
4. Implementation of gender-inclusive planning policies	University of Costa Rica (UCR)	(Martínez and Rivera, 2019)
5. Consideration of the analysis of the use of inclusive language (officialization and acculturation)	Catholic church in the U.S.	(Medina, 2012).
6. Revision of gender equality in national education policies, curricula, and gender-related attitudes and interactions	UNESCO -Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the 2030	(UNESCO, 2016; Durrani et al., 2022).
7. Inclusion of the singular “they”	Oxford Dictionary	(Oxford, 2025)

8. Creation of guidelines for GNL use	American Psychological Association (APA)	(American Psychological Association, 2025)
9. Translation of feminist art, resolutions, etc.	Universities in Argentina	García and Hall, 2020; Rossetti, 2023; Díaz-Millón, et al., 2024).

Institutional Policies

Governments, public institutions, corporations, academic journals, and universities are creating and implementing resolutions and language guides for GNL and inclusive language use. Studies highlighted actions that show some individual efforts for formalizing GNL policies within juridical translation (Favila, 2020), administrative legal context (Rodríguez and González, 2021), and scientific publishing as a normal linguistic practice, as seen in Table 8.

Regarding Spanish, authors say that Latin American countries like Argentina marked a growing adoption of the GNL (Lambert and Scribner, 2021, p. 235). Another finding detailed a “non-sexist and inclusive language” policy (Resolution N° 662, 2019) at the National University of Rosario, Argentina (Rossetti, 2023), and the “Commission on Gender, Human Rights, and Intersectionality” from the University of Costa Rica to address gender issues through institutional ways (Piedra, 2022).

Table 9
Exemplar Extracts from Revised Literature Related to Language Policies and Academic Debates

Author(s)	Type of Study	Theme	Exemplar Extracts
(Medina, 2012)	Qualitative/ Descriptive	Language Policing and Academic Debates – Acceptance and Usage, Resistance to GNL and Inclusive Language Policing	“...the Catholic Church has already made that step in order to maintain the unity and diversity of the institution, establishing language policies that respond to the needs of churchgoers.” “The inclusive language movement seems to have had a major effect in English.” “Many of the changes proposed by the inclusive language movement are easily adopted in English, with its minimal gender marks in comparison to Spanish.”
(Lambert and Scribner, 2021).	Comparative/ Descriptive		“In Argentina, advocates use the Constitution to legitimize their claims, and the language of constitutional rights and equality is frequently used in debates, the text of the law, and court decisions.”

Resistance to GNL and Inclusive Language Policing

GNL alternative strategies in politics or progressive trends received strong institutional resistance (Centenera, 2012) in Spanish-speaking regions. According to some authors, the most prominent rejection of these neologisms comes from the Real Academia Española (RAE), considering they violate grammatical rules in Spanish, and it already has inclusive resources (Barrera, 2021; Urtubey, 2023). Instead, the RAE suggests the use of grammatical masculine, periphrasis, or collective nouns, e.g., *la persona*, *el estudiantado* (Real Academia Española, 2020). On the contrary and interestingly, the English institutions APA and Oxford English Dictionary formally incorporated the singular “they” are demonstrating a positive attitude regarding the use of GNL.

Prescriptivist vs Descriptivist Positions. There are also differing views and criticism on the implementation of “they” as a GNL pronoun, causing an effervescent debate among prescriptivist grammarians, scholars, and practitioners. Authors say GNL is found “illegitimate” and used to “police” social identities (Puterbaugh, 2025). Prescriptivists find its plural number an ambiguity generator in discourse, requiring cultural sensitivity for gendered languages as being potential issue in translation by influencing the original balanced portrayal of genders in the text (Hassen, 2011) and relevant considered grammatical correction infraction.

On the contrary, studies show that the descriptivist perspective finds GNL as an observable evolution of language as expressed through the creation of new inclusive

language terms (non-binary morphemes –e in Spanish) (Lessinger, 2020); GNL is seen crucial for achieving social change (Rubio, 2016). Reviewed data also suggests that new linguistic forms are not just grammatical decisions but rather a reflection of societal changes seeking equity, power dynamics, and diversity (Mañoso and Sanchez, 2024).

Figure 2

Uses of GNL singular “They” in the Oxford English Dictionary.

1.2.b. With an antecedent referring to an individual generically or indefinitely (e.g. *someone, a person, the student*), used esp. so as to make a general reference to such an individual without specifying gender. Cf. **he** *pron.* A.1.2b. a1450–

In the 21st century, other *th*- pronouns (and the possessive adjective *their*) are sometimes used to refer to a named individual, so as to avoid revealing or making an assumption about that person's gender; cf. sense A.1.2c, and quotes. 2008 at **their** *adj.* A.1.2b, 2009 at **them** *pron.* A.1.4b, 2009 at **themselves** *pron.* 1.2b.

a1450 If þou sall lofe, þe person fyrste, I rede, þou proue Whether þat they be fals or lele.
in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* (1948) vol. 49 154 (Middle English Dictionary) ...

1526 If..a psalme scape any person, or a lesson, or els y^e they omyt one verse or twayne.
W. Bonde, *Pylgrimage of Perfection* iii. sig. IIIIIII^r ...

1653 If any one of them so elected members die, the part which they serve for, have liberty to chuse and present another.
Mercurius Pragmaticus No. 8. 61 ...

1759 If a person is born of a..gloomy temper..they cannot help it.
Lord Chesterfield, *Letter* 27 April (1932) (modernized text) vol. V. 2350 ...

Source: Oxford English Dictionary (2025).

Figure 3

APA Guideline for Singular “They” Use.

APA STYLE

STYLE AND GRAMMAR GUIDELINES ▾

PRODUCTS ▾

Home > Style and Grammar Guidelines > Grammar >

Forms of the singular “they”

Use following forms of the singular “they”:

Form	Example
they	Casey is a gender-fluid person. They are from Texas and enjoy tacos.
them	Every client got a care package delivered to them.
their	Each child played with their parent.
theirs	The cup of coffee is theirs.
themselves (or themself)	A private person usually keeps to themselves [or themself].

Here are some tips to help you use the proper forms:

- Use a plural verb form with the singular pronoun “they” (i.e., write “they are” not “they is”).
- Use a singular verb form with a singular noun (i.e., write “Casey is” or “a person is,” not

Source: American Psychological Association (2025).

Cultural Influence

Identity and Social Media

A revised study emphasized that the impact of an inclusive language policy depends on existing cultural tendencies of the target population (Rossetti, 2023). Another study highlights how on social media, the Spanish and “Latino” identity challenges the construction of gender-inclusive terms such as “Latinx” and “Latine”. Users position themselves against these labels and policy other user’s language by codeswitching between English and Spanish. “Speakers also engaged in aggressive othering strategies to attribute Latinx/e to socially progressive imagined communities” (Puterbaugh, 2025).

This shows how language ideology and cultural identity are used as harmful defenses in debates. Additionally, another study showed how the term “Latine” emerged in health studies to address Hispanic or Latino origin individuals, reflecting how identity is culturally constructed (Anunziata et al., 2024)

Gender and Education

Authors found that gender and university degree are influential factors that shape attitudes toward GNL. Female participants showed more acceptance of GNL use for academic purposes (Mañoso & Cabrero, 2024).

Institutional Influence

Some revised studies showed that cultural goals in an institution, such as considering a more inclusive environment, can shape language policies, as the example of a Catholic Church in the U.S. (Medina, 2012).

Table 10
Exemplar Extracts from Revised Literature Related to Cultural Influence

Source	Type of Study	Theme	Exemplar Extracts
(Puterbaugh, 2025)	Qualitative/ Descriptive	Cultural Influence – Identity and Social Media, Gender and Education, Institutional Influence	“...The study’s findings indicate that most users responded negatively to the terms, in many cases reproducing harmful language ideologies. Through careful epistemic management, these users constructed identities as “legitimate” members of the “Latino” speech community. One of the primary discourse strategies identified for doing so was codeswitching between English and Spanish.”
(Roman et al., 2025)	Quantitative/ Experimental		“Gender diversity beliefs affect the ease pronouns with –x and –e is processed.”

Ideological Factors

Academia’s Attitude Toward GNL

Data reveal that attitudes toward GNL in academia are influenced by ideological factors, especially in Spanish-speaking countries. One example highlighted in a study finds that a significant part of teachers in Bogotá showed negative attitudes toward inclusive language, describing it as unnecessary (Mahecha, 2022). Another study explains that this kind of attitude is shaped by social and ideological perspectives, when some consider inclusive language as a “grammatical and stylistic barbarism” others may see it as a change to avoid sexism (Cabeza and Rodríguez, 2013); as the example given in the study about the positive and cautious attitude teachers in Spain have toward inclusive language, recognizing its social importance (Mahecha, 2022), but authors say it is still challenging significant practical application (Savoldi et al., 2025).

Language and Social Identities

Authors find GNL has been a subject of study in the academic world, reflecting growing on social and ideological matters (Mañoso and Sanchez, 2024, p. 87). Findings show that feminist movements have influenced the use of linguistic inclusive mechanisms in translation (Brufau, 2011; Rodríguez, 2024, p. 122). In addition, the shift toward GNL is taken as an ideological issue that goes beyond simple linguistic rules because of constant resistance (Mañoso and Sanchez, 2024). Two of the studies described that terms like *Latinx* and *Latine* are currently debated on social media; it shows how language polishes social identities (Puterbaugh, 2025). It is inferred that language choices are the consequences of personal and group ideologies; GNL reflects social equity, power dynamics, and diversity.

Table 11
Exemplar Extracts from Revised Literature Related to Ideological Factors

Source	Type of Study	Theme	Exemplar Extracts
(Rodríguez, 2024)	Qualitative/ Descriptive	Ideological Factors – Language and Social Identities	“La intervención feminista en el trasvase interlingüístico es la que permitirá identificar los sesgos sexistas del original y eliminarlos en la reescritura del mismo o recrear fielmente aquellos que denuncian la infrarrepresentación de la mujer a través del uso de un lenguaje inclusivo.” [Feminist intervention in interlingual translation will allow us to identify the sexist biases of the original and eliminate them in its rewriting, or to faithfully recreate those that denounce the underrepresentation of women using inclusive language.]

Sociolinguistic Perspectives

Grammatical Gender vs Social Gender

In this field, authors say that aspects such as educational adoption, public attitudes, and media representation have been explored in Spanish-speaking contexts, finding ideological debates and controversies. For instance, the sociolinguistic debate described in a study on the need for GNL to position women in discourse (González and Delgado, 2016). Three of the revised studies highlighted the distinction between grammatical gender (linguistic feature) and social gender (construct of identity). The speaker's cognition and perception can be influenced by the grammatical gender of a language (Scotto and Pérez, 2020). Meanwhile, two of those studies emphasize the conflict when the masculine grammatical form is used as generic to refer to both genders, leading to semantic and ideological issues (Cabeza and Rodríguez, 2013; González and Delgado, 2016). Overall, studies have referred to the evolution of the English language and the recent changes in the history of English regarding language inclusion in different countries and how it is subtle and perpetuated through social interactions (Piedra, 2022).

Comparative Analysis Discussion: English vs Spanish

GNL in English and Spanish presents similarities and significant differences. It would be explained in the following contexts:

- **Linguistic dimension.** GNL accommodates through pronoun shifts because of its less gendered grammatical structure. On the other hand, Spanish requires elemental changes to word endings. It would be perceived as more radical. Both languages possess linguistic mechanisms for inclusive language (Rodríguez and González, 2021). In addition, studies suggest that GNL can even be potentialized by monitoring AI translation tools, but they still present a gender gap that should be fixed (Gutiérrez and Ruiz, 2025).
- **Sociocultural dimension.** In both contexts (English and Spanish), GNL has been boosted mainly by feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. However, public opinion differs as being shaped and influenced by specific ideological forces (Múñoz, 2017; Nevache, 2017).
- **Educational impact.** GNL seems to be more complex to learn for Spanish speakers learning English as a second language, as it is a different system of gender expression for them (Diaz et al., 2022).
- **Policy differences.** English-speaking countries are more open to accepting GNL use for diverse purposes (academic, legal, medicine, etc.), while Spanish-speaking countries seem to show stronger resistance to its usage (RAE, 2020), but GNL use and inclusive language are also growing positive attitude in academia, especially among non-religious and lower sexist individuals (Alonso et al., 2024).

Bibliometric Analysis Findings

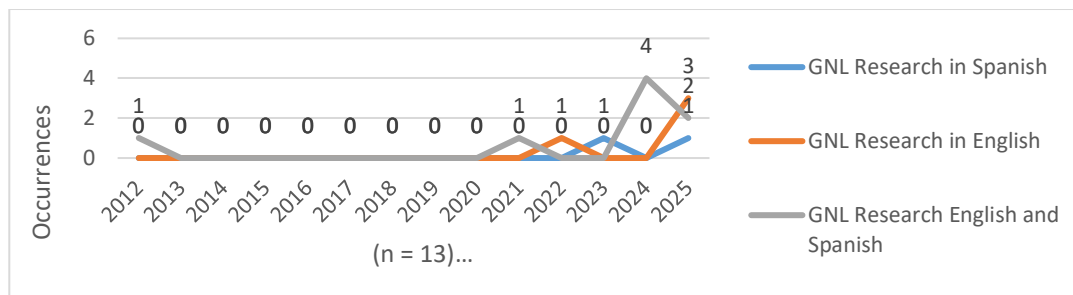
These Bibliometric Analysis findings are based on the assessed records in Scopus and Science Direct. The whole package of the analysis results can be shared in Excel format by contacting the authors if interested.

Publication Trends

According to the records found, data show (Figure 4) that scientific research on GNL, after 2012, experienced eight years of possible dormancy (from 2013 to 2020) until 2021, when this debate started to gain more presence. In addition, notice that most of the articles focus on the study of GNL in both languages; however, it is also visible that publications have been slightly more active on GNL English than in Spanish in these databases. It is also marked that after being sparse in both languages until 2023, GNL studies have increased and remained active until 2025. The peak publications were 2024-2025 for English and Spanish. These findings suggest that research in English GNL has been historically present, but the discussion on Spanish GNL experiences a significant growth in the scientific world as an attempt to find suitable adaptations of the language to satisfy new social policies in the countries where it is spoken.

Figure 4

GNL Research Production over Time according to the Included Articles from Scopus and ScienceDirect in the Bibliometric Analysis.



Source: Biblioshiny Report 30/08/2025. Bibliometrix (2025).

Keywords Analysis

Tables 5 and 6 show the analysis of the ten most frequent words and their possible co-occurrence networks from the Bibliometrix report. It reveals a significant emphasis on **inclusive language**, specifically in the context of **gender**. The findings suggest a prominent discussion on this topic but placing close attention to the **Spanish language**. Notice that **inclusive language**, **language**, and **Spanish (language)** are the most frequent terms in the analyzed data, each appearing 3 times. It indicates that research is centered on the concept of language and its struggles with inclusiveness within the Spanish language more than English. In addition, the rest of the words: English (language), equity, gender identity, gender inclusive language, gender inclusivity, non-sexist language, and Spain marked a frequency of 2. It supports the trend of language focus, specifically on the practical applications of inclusive principles in language, often related to gender.

According to the co-occurrence results, **gender inclusive language** received the highest betweenness centrality score (1953.04). It indicates its critical link between the other words and the discussion on gender and the Spanish language. The PageRank centrality of this same term **gender inclusive language** (0.0115) suggests a slightly more influential node than "gender inclusivity" (0.00861). Moreover, its low closeness

centrality (0.005) does not show a direct connection to many other terms from the whole information in the network, but it indicates that it is discussed in a more focused context in relation to the Spanish language more than English.

Table 12

Most frequent Words in the Analyzed Records in Bibliometrix.

Words	Occurrences
inclusive language	3
language	3
spanish (language)	3
english (language)	2
equity	2
gender identity	2
gender inclusive language	2
gender inclusivity	2
non-sexist language	2
spain	2

Source: Biblioshiny Report 30/08/2025. Bibliometrix (2025).

Table 13

Co-occurrence Networks

Occurrences	Words	Cluster	Cluster_Label	btw_centrality	clos_centrality	pagerank_centrality
2	gender inclusive language	2	spanish	1953.043478	0.005128205	0.011595273
2	gender inclusivity	3	gender inclusivity	657	0.003759398	0.008614485

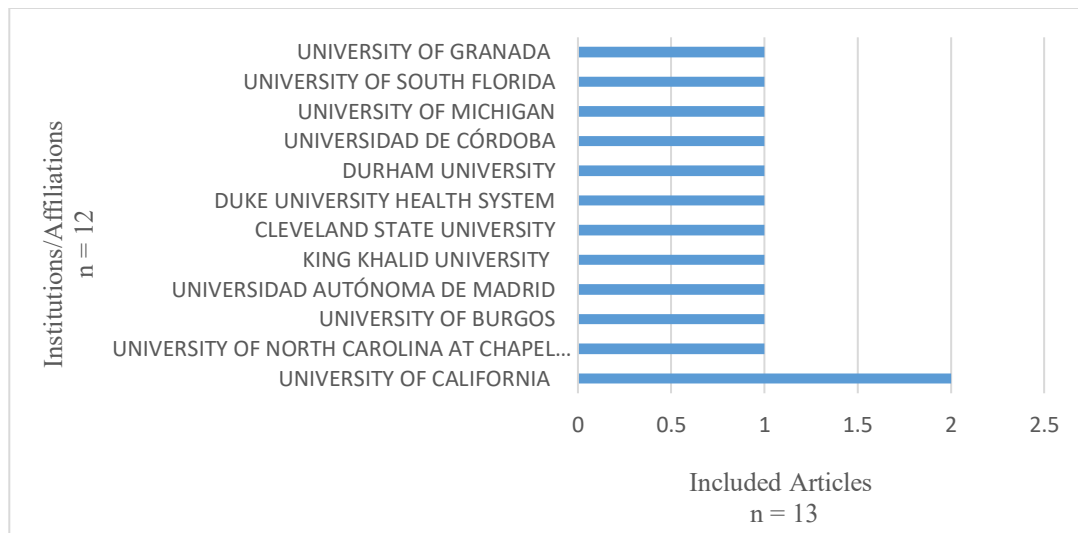
Source: Biblioshiny Report 30/08/2025. Bibliometrix (2025).

Country and Author Distribution

Figure 5 shows the global leading and relevant authors' institutions/affiliations in GNL research metrics analyzed in Bibliometrix among the articles assessed. It suggests the University of California is in the highest position, possessing 2 published relevant articles in GNL. In addition, Figure 6 shows the leading countries in GNL research. It is observed that the U.S.A. and Spain present both a prominent frequency of 5 over Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and Finland, with a frequency of 1 each.

Figure 5

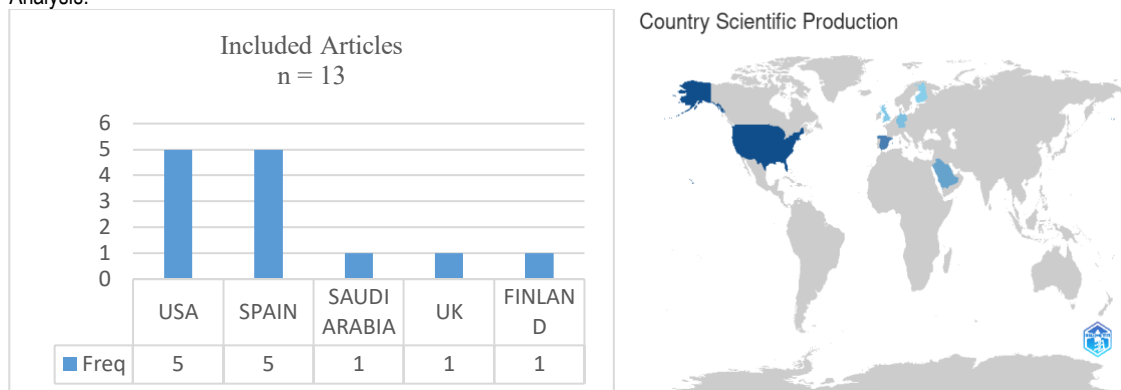
Global Leading Relevant Institutions/Affiliations in GNL Research according to the Included Articles from Scopus and ScienceDirect in the Bibliometric Analysis.



Source: Biblioshiny Report 30/08/2025. Bibliometrix (2025).

Figure 6

Global Leading Countries in GNL Research according to the Included Articles from Scopus and ScienceDirect in the Bibliometric Analysis.



Source: Biblioshiny Report 30/08/2025. Bibliometrix (2025).

Cultural Perceptions and Attitudes

Case study: Panama and Caribbean Perspective. GNL cultural perceptions and attitudes are commonly interlaced with religious, political, and gender ideologies. Public opinion in English and Spanish-speaking countries commonly differs, and they significantly reflect cultural debates on linguistic authority, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights (Puterbaugh, 2025).

While Costa Rica which is a boarder country of Panama, also part of the Caribbean region, has presented some research on attitudes over inclusive language, in the case of Panama, there does not seem to be much literature that explains this linguistic debate on other linguistic intersections, i.e. attitudes that conservatory or religious-affiliated people (as the majority of the Panamanian population appears to be) take if they are exposed to context-related to English as a gender-neutral language mostly in a gendered L1 language speakers as Spanish that is "...a grammatically gendered language which requires identification of people and things as either female or male." (Díaz et al., 2022, p. 2). To find some responses about how Panamanians think about the use of GNL pronouns, specifically in public university contexts, challenges or opportunities, it is necessary to first explore this unique scenario, but it will be introduced in a further publication.

Discussion

This comprehensive State of the Art review has focused on developing the research questions of the study, placing close attention to the evolution, current debates, and the cultural and ideological factors that surround the use of gender-neutral language in English and Spanish. The evolution of the English GNL is related to its flexible structure and social movements. It started with the creation of "Political Correctness" in the late 1970s. Literature revealed that the singular "they" is not a recent structure. It has been studied and applied for decades, but it took relevance with the significant rise of feminist and institutional policies movements. In contrast, the Spanish GNL historical attempt is more recent and contentious, as this language presents a strong grammatical gender system. It has mainly been potentiated by political and social movements. Some practical alternatives (new morphological structures) have been suggested, but they are still receiving institutional opposition. In addition, English language institutions have focused on creating policies and guidelines on the use of English GNL. However, in Spanish, the

debate is still ongoing, witnessing a division between institutions and social movements. La Real Academia Española (RAE) still rejects neologisms “x”, “@”, and “todes” and keeps advocating for traditional gender inclusive constructions. Findings also revealed that language rooted in cultural identity and linguistic changes are perceived as a negative intrusion into that identity. English language culture is more receptive to the inclusive linguistic change, but in the Spanish one, while some progressive communities positively accepted GNL, conservative or religious communities find it unnecessary and violate cultural norms. Under the same line, ideological factors play an important role in the construction of GNL attitudes. A close relation was found between political and social ideologies and attitudes toward the use of GNL. While some see it as social justice and equity for diversity, others find GNL as “political correctness”. In conclusion, in English, GNL change relies on a modification of existing linguistic practice to satisfy new social needs; meanwhile, in Spanish, GNL introduces new structures, challenging its fundamental structure, causing resistance and sociolinguistic conflict among Spanish speakers. This finally confirms that GNL adoption is conditioned on the unique, diverse language systems and sociopolitical historical contexts. The study emphasizes the sociolinguistic gap for researching EFL in conservative contexts like Panama in the use of GNL.

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Anexos

Figure 7

Exemplar Extracts of the Coding Process of the Qualitative Data in ATLAS.ti

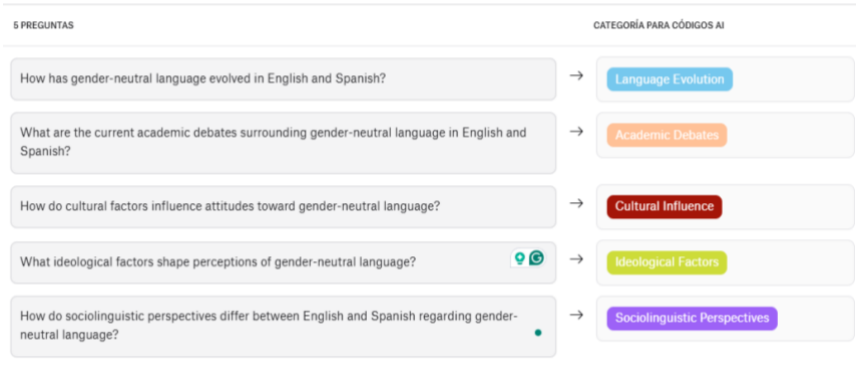
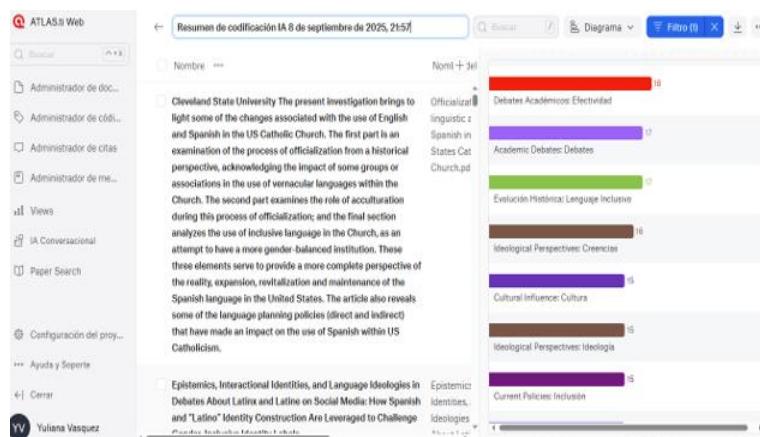


Figure 8

Exemplar Extracts of the Coding Process of the Qualitative Data in ATLAS.ti



Source: ATLAS.ti (2025).

- Characteristics of the studies found in the pilot extraction of the qualitative data: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1WOXjgkCh7V5WxQt4MKAmLh0veShvQB18/edit?usp=drive_link&oid=101462670005276523590&rtpof=true&sd=true
- General themes and sub-themes coded in ATLAS.ti. General codebook outcomes of processed data (first coding stage): https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1qvogNTGpr0xpX7UtiRquVV_PfpKEpyi7?usp=drive_link