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Why Do Spanish Speakers Say *el arte* but *las artes*?

*The Value of Studying the History of Spanish*

Lead-in Question

1-1 Certain questions about the Spanish language have probably come to mind since you began speaking it, like the question in this chapter’s title. As an example, here are two questions you might have about English: Why is *mice* the plural of *mouse*, but *houses* is the plural of *house*? Why do similar words in English and Spanish have different meanings, like *embarrassed* and *embarazada*? Please write down two questions – or as many as you can think of – about the Spanish language. Be sure they are questions that really interest you.

In order to start you on the path to learning about the history of Spanish, this chapter presents some interesting questions about the Spanish language that you will be able to answer after learning about its history. One such question, explored in this chapter, is why the noun *arte* can be either masculine or feminine in Spanish, as in *el arte abstracto*, where it is masculine, and *las bellas artes*, where it is feminine. The answer to this question illustrates how understanding its history can increase your understanding of Spanish today.
1.1 Why Study the History of Spanish?

If you are interested in learning about the history of the Spanish language, then it is likely that you have developed some proficiency in Spanish. You may have studied it in a classroom or on your own, or you may have grown up speaking Spanish with your family or in your community. Your ability to communicate in Spanish means that you have an understanding of how Spanish is spoken today by a particular group of people in a particular place. You know, for example, that the letters *ue* are pronounced [we] and that this diphthong occurs in *duermo* but not *dormimos*. You also know that the letters *ch* are pronounced [ʃ] and that this sound occurs in the noun *noche* but not in the adjective *nocturno*. You know the different forms for nouns, like the plural *tamales* and the singular *tamal*; pronoun forms, like *sin mí* and *conmigo*; and irregular verb forms like *soy, quepo, pongo*, and *tuviste*. You also know that the words *fábrica* and *carpeta* have different meanings from English *fabric* and *carpet*. Your knowledge of Spanish as it is spoken now allows you to use the language and to describe how you use it. You are able to provide what linguists call a *synchronic description* (*una descripción sincrónica*) of Spanish, a description of the language at one point in time. But you have probably asked yourself questions about Spanish that a synchronic description could not answer. And, if you teach Spanish, then your students have no doubt generated further questions that you might not have been able to answer. You may have asked or heard questions such as:

- Why do some speakers pronounce *caza* like *catha* [ˈka-tha], whereas others pronounce it like *casa* [ˈka-sa]?  
- Why are all nouns in Spanish either masculine or feminine?  
- Why are there so many irregular verbs in Spanish?  
- Why does Spanish have two ways of expressing the future: *iré* and *voy a ir*?  
- Why do a lot of words that look the same in Spanish and English not mean the same thing, like *exit* and *éxito*?  
- Is the English word *cotton* related to the Spanish word *algodón*?

The goal of this book is to answer these questions about the Spanish language and many more by offering a *diachronic description* (*una descripción* diacrónica) of Spanish.
diacrónica), or even a diachronic analysis, that compares Spanish at two or more points in time. By comparing the features of Spanish over time, a diachronic analysis can explain the changes that have resulted in the many varieties of Spanish spoken in the world today.

1.2 Why Do Spanish Speakers Say *el arte* but *las artes*?

The title question for this chapter can illustrate how understanding the history of the language can provide a deeper understanding of contemporary Spanish. One possible answer is that the noun *arte* is masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural. Another possibility is that *arte* is always feminine, both in the singular and the plural, like *el agua/las aguas* because the noun begins with a stressed /a/. In order to determine which description is more accurate, we can look at examples where *arte* is modified by an adjective. If a feminine adjective is used with *arte*, as in *el arte poética*, then we can conclude that *arte* is feminine in these cases, but if a masculine adjective is used, as in *el arte poético*, then we can conclude that *arte* is masculine in these examples. The results of a search on www.google.es of *arte* accompanied by the adjectives *abstracto, poético, plástico*, and *mecánico* are shown in Table 1.1.

Let us look more closely at the information in Table 1.1. The number in parentheses in each cell of the table shows the number of tokens (*las ocurrencias*) found in the search on www.google.es of *arte* with a particular adjective form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>m. sg. in -o</th>
<th>f. sg. in -a</th>
<th>m. pl. in -os</th>
<th>f. pl. in -as</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abstracto</td>
<td>71% (321,000)</td>
<td>29% (129,000)</td>
<td>49% (3510)</td>
<td>51% (3700)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poético</td>
<td>66% (25,000)</td>
<td>34% (13,000)</td>
<td>0% (10)</td>
<td>100% (5650)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plástico</td>
<td>41% (2620)</td>
<td>59% (3820)</td>
<td>13% (26,700)</td>
<td>87% (186,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mecánico</td>
<td>6% (3290)</td>
<td>94% (48,400)</td>
<td>1% (221)</td>
<td>99% (43500)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

m. = masculine, f. = feminine, sg. = singular, pl. = plural
Since we want to know whether *arte* is being used as a masculine or feminine noun, we want to compare the number of tokens of *arte* with masculine and feminine adjectives. We look at both singular and plural adjectives to see whether the differences in gender are the same in the singular or plural. Therefore, each column across the top shows whether the adjective modifying *arte* is masculine singular, feminine singular, masculine plural, or feminine plural. If we look at the first row of the table, we see the number of tokens of *arte* with the adjective *abstracto*. The numbers in the cell to the left show that we found 321,000 tokens of *arte* with *abstracto*, as in *el arte abstracto*, and in the next cell to the right we see that we found only 129,000 tokens of *arte* with *abstracta*, as in *el arte abstracta*. Then we calculate the percentage of masculine and feminine tokens in the singular by adding together the total number of tokens (321,000 + 129,000 = 450,000) and then dividing the number of tokens for *abstracto* by the total number (321,000/450,000 = 71%) and the number of tokens for the feminine *abstracta* by the total number (129,000/450,000 = 29%). We see then that in the singular, the masculine *el arte abstracto* is far more frequent than *el arte abstracta*. But we also observe that we find large numbers of tokens for both genders. If you continue looking at the numbers of tokens and percentages for the other adjectives in Table 1.1, you will detect other patterns regarding the use of *arte* as a masculine or feminine noun.

One conclusion we can draw from these results is that *arte* is an exceptional word that can be either gender. It can be either masculine or feminine in the singular and is usually feminine in the plural, as confirmed by the results of our internet search and also by its entry in the *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas*. This dictionary states that *arte* can be used in both genders, but that it is most often masculine in the singular. However, it is feminine when it refers to “el conjunto de normas y principios para hacer bien algo” ‘the set of norms and principles for doing something well,’ so that one speaks of *arte amatoria* ‘the art of love’ and *arte poética* ‘poetic art.’ Our internet search does not bear this out, though. The noun *arte* occurs more often with *poético* than with *poética*, even though this refers to a set of principles. On the other hand, *arte* occurs more often with the feminine adjectives *plástica* and *mecánica*, which do not refer to a set of norms. In the plural, *arte* is most often feminine, especially with the adjectives *poéticas, mecánicas*, and *plásticas*, but less often with *abstractas.*
1.3 How Does the History of Spanish Explain the Two Genders of arte?

We can begin by observing that the Latin noun ARS ‘art,’ whose accusative form ARTEM changed into Spanish arte, was feminine. If arte was originally a feminine noun, how then might it have become masculine in some of its uses? The most likely reason is its use in the singular with the definite article el. You are no doubt aware that el is used before feminine nouns in Modern Spanish that begin with a stressed /a/, like el agua ‘the water,’ el águila ‘the eagle,’ and el hacha ‘the ax.’ But you probably were not aware that el is historically a feminine definite article, as well as a masculine definite article. The feminine definite article el came from the first syllable of the Latin feminine singular demonstrative adjective ILLAM, meaning ‘that’ or ‘yon.’ Latin ILLAM first changed to ela through regular sound changes. Before feminine nouns beginning with a consonant, the form ela lost its initial vowel to become la so that ela mesa became la mesa. However, before feminine nouns beginning with a vowel, the final vowel of ela could merge with the initial vowel of the following noun, so that the first syllable of ela was kept. Thus, the feminine definite article el came about through the following process:

ILLAM ARTEM [i-l-lam-ˈar-tem] > [e-la-ˈar-te] > [e-ˈlar-te] > el arte

Historically then, el is a feminine form of the definite article as well as a masculine form.

The feminine definite article el was limited in its use, though, compared to the more widespread la, which came from the second syllable of ILLAM. At first, feminine el was used with feminine nouns beginning with any vowel, as in el entrada ‘the entrance,’ el obra ‘the work,’ and el imagen ‘the image,’ first attested in 1196, 1256, and 1444, respectively, according to the Corpus diacrónico del español (CORDE) ‘Diachronic corpus of Spanish’ of the Real Academia Española (RAE) ‘Royal Spanish Academy.’ You can also see an example in the Appendix of Old Spanish texts: sobre’ll oreia ‘sobre la oreja’ ‘over the ear’ (Appendix C, line 59, henceforth Appendix C59). Later, feminine el was further limited to nouns beginning only with a stressed /a/, as is true today. Since the masculine definite article el was used with all
masculine nouns, masculine el was far more widespread in its use than feminine el. Therefore, speakers came to consider el and any noun used with it to be masculine, and so in this way arte came to be considered masculine by some speakers and writers. This association may have been further encouraged by the fact that the noun arte does not have a distinctive feminine ending in /a/, like agua and águila, for example.

The same association of el with masculine gender still occurs today. Many native speakers of Spanish will readily say, when asked, that el agua is masculine, but they are then at a loss to explain the plural form las aguas and their use of a feminine adjective in el agua está fría. The explanation, of course, is that agua is a feminine noun, but the feminine definite article el is used before feminine nouns beginning with a stressed /a/.

1.4 Chapter Summary

- By studying the history of the Spanish language, you will be able to find answers to many of your questions about Spanish which will lead you to a deeper understanding of this language.
- You are probably able to describe many aspects of Spanish as it is spoken now, such as the alternation between the stems of duermo and dormimos. Thus, you can provide a synchronic description of Spanish, one which describes Spanish at one point in time.
- A diachronic description, one which compares the language in at least two different points in time, can increase your understanding of Spanish.
- The changing gender of the noun arte provided an example of the value of adding historical information to your understanding of Spanish.
- A Google search of the noun arte followed by the adjectives abstracto, poético, plástico, and mecánico provided the synchronic description that arte can be either masculine or feminine in Modern Spanish. One finds people writing, for example, el arte abstracto or el arte abstracta in the singular and los artes abstractos or las artes abstractas in the plural. If we consider only Modern Spanish, we are unable to explain why arte is sometimes masculine and sometimes feminine.
A study of the history of Spanish offers an answer. The noun *arte* was originally feminine in Latin. However, the definite article *el* was used with *arte*, since the Latin feminine definite article *ILLAM* became *el* before any noun beginning with a vowel in Old Spanish. In Modern Spanish, the feminine article *el* was kept only before nouns beginning with a stressed /a/, like *arte*. Some speakers then interpreted the article *el*, which was originally feminine, to be a masculine article and so they assumed that *arte* was masculine. Thus, one finds *arte* used as either masculine or feminine because some speakers assume that *arte* is masculine because it takes the article *el*, while others continue to consider it to be a feminine noun.

Complete Activities 1-1 to 1-5 below.

**Activities**

**Activity 1-1**
After reading this chapter, write down any additional questions that have come to mind about the Spanish language. For at least one of the questions you wrote here or in answer to the Lead-in question, check the index to this book to see whether it will provide an answer to your question. If so, make a note of the chapter or page number. If not, ask your professor to answer this question or send your questions to the authors at the email addresses listed in the preface.

**Activity 1-2**
What are your first impressions of the importance of written records, such as the documents containing examples like *el entrada* and *el arte poético*, to the study of the history of the Spanish language?
Why Do Spanish Speakers Say *el arte* but *las artes*?

Activity 1–3

If a friend asks you why Spanish speakers say *el arte* but *las artes*, what do you say? Give as simple and concise an answer as you can.

Activity 1–4

Corpus Search

We mentioned that Spanish speakers gradually came to consider the definite article, *el*, to be masculine and so certain feminine nouns used with *el* came to be perceived as masculine. This was especially true of feminine nouns that did not end in /a/, like *arte*. But do speakers also consider some feminine words ending in /a/ to be masculine? Do your own search on google.es with the following combinations of words in italics. How do the results for *agua* compare to those for *arte* in Table 1.1?

- *el agua fría*  
- *el agua frío*  
- *las aguas frías*  
- *los aguas fríos*

Activity 1–5

Question for Thought

Many people think that language change is bad. For example, you may have heard someone say “young people don’t know how to speak properly anymore.” What are your thoughts on this? What are some of the ways that the English language has changed for the better or for the worse, in your opinion? This question and others will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Further Reading

- blog.oxforddictionaries.com: a great site for answers to your linguistic questions about English
- udep.edu.pe/castellanoactual/seccion/dudas/: a site in Spanish in Piura, Peru, where you can send questions and find answers about questions of use in Spanish