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HYPOCORISMS MEET SOUND SYMBOLISM: A SOCIO-ONOMASTIC STUDY OF SPANISH HYPOCORISTIC FORMS OF PERSONAL NAMES IN -I

Abstract

The suffix *-i* has been regarded as a gender-neutral morpheme that communicates affection in Spanish. Previous studies have shown this diminutive morpheme to be more productive in relation to female hypocorisms. There are, however, many Spanish proper names for which there exist pairs of alternative hypocorisms (e.g. *Antonia* > *Toña/Toñi*; *Antonio* > *Toño/Toni*). This paper compares the potentiality of the suffix *-i* to build hypocorisms for both genders with its actual use by Spanish speakers over a four-generation time span from Baby Boomers to Generation Z. It explores the connections between its sound symbolism and its pragmatics in order to assess its alleged gender neutrality over time. The paper is organized as follows. First, the author considers previous literature on sound symbolism and gender, together with a description of the theoretical tools used in the present investigation. Second, the paper describes the methodological decisions adopted for the present research, which include the design of a survey to assess the gender neutrality of the actual use of the hypocorisms by Spanish speakers. The cohort of informants includes 30 men and 30 women from different generations (50% Baby Boomers / Generation X and 50% Millennials / Generation Z). Finally, the author reports and discusses the results of the survey. These point to a preference for hypocorisms in *-i* for female names. Differences also arise in the use of hypocorisms in *-i* in relation to the gender and age of the speakers, signalling an incipient diversion from the traditional use of hypocorisms in *-i* for female names in previous generations.

Keywords: hypocorisms; gender; pragmatics; Spanish; sound symbolism; onomastics; first name

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ГИПОКОРИСТИКИ И ФОНОСЕМАНТИКА: СОЦИОНОМАСТИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ИСПАНСКИХ ГИПОКОРИСТИЧЕСКИХ ЛИЧНЫХ ИМЕН НА *-I*

Аннотация

В испанском языке суффикс *-i* считается гендерно-нейтральной морфемой, служащей в том числе для образования уменьшительно-ласкательных форм личных имен. Предыдущие исследования показали, что эта морфема более продуктивна в отношении женских имен. Однако есть много испанских имен собственных, для которых существуют пары альтернативных уменьшительных форм (например, *Antonia > Toña / Toñi*; *Antonio > Toño / Toni*). В данной статье исследуется потенциал суффикса *-i* для создания уменьшительных форм имен, называющих людей обоих полов, а также его фактическое использование носителями континентального испанского языка, представляющими четыре поколения — от «бэби-бумеров» до «поколения Z». В статье анализируются связи между звуковым символизмом, выражаемым суффиксом, и его прагматикой, что позволяет оценить сохранение или изменение его предполагаемой гендерной нейтральности с течением времени. Статья организована следующим образом. Сначала дается обзор научной литературы, посвященной проблеме звукового символизма и гендерной маркированности личных имен, а также теоретические основания исследования. Затем описывается методология исследования, которая включает в себя разработку опроса для оценки гендерной нейтральности использования гипокористик с суффиксом *-i* носителями испанского языка. Информантами стали 30 мужчин и 30 женщин разных поколений (50 % — «бэби-бумеры» и «поколение X», другие 50 % — «миллениалы» и «поколение Z»). Полученным количественным данным дается качественная оценка. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о большей продуктивности суффикса *-i* применительно к женским именам, при этом отмечаются различия в использовании форм имен на *-i* в зависимости от пола и возраста говорящих, что сигнализирует о зарождающемся среди представителей молодого поколения отклонении от традиционной (характерной для предыдущих поколений) модели использования уменьшительных форм женских имен на *-i*.

Ключевые слова: уменьшительно-ласкательные формы; гендер; прагматика; испанский язык; звуковой символизм; ономастика; личное имя

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1. Introduction

Hypocorisms or hypocoristics are colloquial variants of personal names used to show affection towards the person they name. They can take the form of a diminutive (e.g. *Izzy* for *Isabel*), but they can also be the result of clipping (e.g. *Tom* for *Thomas*; *Deb* for *Deborah*), suffixation (e.g. addition of *-y/-ie/-o* suffixes, as in *Annie* for *Ann*) or a combination of them (e.g. *Cassie* for *Cassandra*; *Davo* for *David*). The focus of this investigation is at the crossroads among one specific type of hypocorisms, namely those formed by the addition of the *-i* [i] suffix (with or without additional clipping), the sound symbolism of the suffix at work (*-i*), and its correlation with gender in a gender marked language such as Spanish.

According to Ackermann and Zimmer [2021: 1145] gender marking of personal names can obey to three different procedures: semantic (which assigns specific characteristics based on gender stereotypes, as in *Rose*, which is associated with beauty), formal (which overtly mark gender by means of morphemes, as in the Spanish names *Francisco* (male) and *Francisca* (female) which make use of the *-o/-a* gender suffixes respectively), and conventional (which assigns names to either gender by convention, as in *David* (male) and *Daenerys* (female)). In addition, evidence of correlations of name phonology and gender have also mounted over time [Cassidy et al. 1999; Oelkers 2003; Nübling 2009; Nübling et al. 2015].¹

More specifically, this paper contributes to the current interest in phonology, sound symbolism, and hypocorisms by offering a quantitative study of the pragmatics of the suffix *-i* in a Romance language such as Spanish which displays formal gender marking. In Spanish, gender is marked mainly through inflectional suffixes (*-o/-a*), and to a lesser extent by convention. The suffix *-i*, however, is gender neutral in Spanish [De Bruyne 1995; García-Page 2018]. As such, it is generally agreed that it has the potentiality to be used with both male and female names in the creation of hypocorisms that express affection. However, a closer look at the sound symbolic properties of this suffix in relation to name gender in actual use reveals interesting issues about its pragmatics, which lead to questioning its alleged gender neutrality.

This paper compares the potentiality of the suffix under consideration to build hypocorisms for both genders with its actual use. To this effect, a survey has been carried out on a total of 60 informants to specifically assess (1) the actual use of hypocorisms in *-i* for real male and female names, (2) the preferences in the use of the suffix *-i* by male and female speakers, and (3) whether these preferences have evolved over a four-generation time span. Since gender issues have experienced

¹ See also [Elsen 2016; Ackermann & Zimmer 2021] for two overviews in relation to English and German names, respectively.

a surge of social interest in the past few decades and Spanish society has at least moderately changed its view on this matter, the study investigates potential diachronic changes in the use of hypocorisms in *-i*. Informants have thus been selected to include members of different generations, with one group including representants of the Baby Boomers and Generation X (i.e. born between 1946 and 1980), and another including Millennials and members of the Generation Z (i.e. born between 1981 and 2010).

The paper is organized as follows. First, a brief state of the art on sound symbolism and hypocorisms is offered, simultaneously introducing the key theoretical notions on which this investigation hinges. Second, the methodology of the investigation is described, including aspects of the survey, informants, and the statistical analysis performed on the data. Third, the results of the study are reported and discussed. And finally, a conclusion is presented and potential aspects for further research are considered.

2. Sound Symbolism and Hypocorisms

2.1. Sound Symbolism and Naming

Sound symbolism refers to the existence of a direct association between the phonological form of a linguistic unit and a particular meaning or semantic property [Lockwood & Dingemanse 2015; Sidhu & Pexman 2018]. A well-known example is the *maluma/takete effect* [Köhler 1929] which states a correlation between the use of some phonemes and round/sharp shapes. The literature also reports on many other attested links between certain phonological patterns and particular semantic fields [Bolinger 1984; Crystal 1991; Napoli 1996; etc.]. By way of illustration, words beginning with the consonant cluster *gl-* are generally related to the concept of light (e.g. *glare, glimmer, glance*), and those starting with *fl-* represent quick movements (e.g. *flap, flee, flinch*). Sound symbolism is different from onomatopoeia or direct iconicity [Masuda 2007], where language is used to mimic sounds that already exist in the world (e.g. *splash* mimics the sound of an object that hits a liquid surface).

In the field of onomastics, associations have been established between gender and certain phonological features or structures of names in some languages. Thus, by way of illustration, English and German female names have been attested to favour endings in unstressed schwa [Lieberson & Bell 1992], vocalic sounds [Slater & Feinman 1985], and specifically front vowels like [i] and [i:] [Klink 2000]. On the contrary, male names in those languages tend to include final fricatives, affricates or plosives [Barry & Harper 1995] or back vowels [Klink 2000]. Aloufi [2022] has also attested associations between female first names and

sonorant consonants and male names and voiceless obstruent consonants in four different languages (Arabic, English, French, and Japanese). Sidhu and Pexman [2015; 2017] and Sidhu, Pexman, and Saint-Aubin [2016] found that English and French informants tend to pair names containing round-sounding consonants with round-edged silhouettes and names including sharp-sounding consonants with a sharp-edged silhouette. They called this the *Bob-Kirk Effect* [Sidhu & Pexman 2015], which revealed that the sound-symbolic associations of phonemes can have an effect even in the context of words with associated information, like proper names.² Further studies have also found associations of phonemes with higher-order abstract properties [Auracher 2017; Tzeng et al. 2017], such as personality traits. These associations have also been shown to correlate with gender stereotypes about women as warm, expressive, and emotional, and men as assertive, competent, and rational [Broverman et al. 1972; Spence & Helmreich 1979]; or in more recent studies, women as easy-going and friendly; and men as determined and rigid [Sidhu & Pexman 2018].

More recently, Ackermann and Zimmer [2021] have investigated the correlation of name phonology and gender from a broader crosslinguistic perspective, considering name-giving practices in several linguistically disparate countries. Their study shows that there is one phonological variable that correlates with gender throughout different languages (i.e. the number of palatal vowels — excluding final sound), but it also reveals that most attested correlations between certain phonological features and the gender of the name bearer are limited to certain regions/languages. This substantiates Nübling's [2018] claim that no sound as such is male or female and that specific correlations can be explained with reference to the diachrony of individual languages or language families and to cultural aspects. Cases of conventional (culture-dependent) sound symbolism are shown to outnumber those of synesthetic (universal) sound symbolism. In this regard, Ackerman and Zimmer [2021: 1166] highlight the importance of carrying out further studies to uncover means of onymic gender marking that have not been considered yet because they are language (family) specific.

2.2. Sound symbolism of front vowels and gender marking of hypocorisms

A well-known case of sound symbolism is the so-called *Mil/Mal effect*, which consists in an association between high-front vowels [i] or [e] and the notion of *smallness*, and between low-back vowels [a], [o] or [u] and *largeness* [Sapir 1929; Newman 1933; Parise & Spence 2012; Ohtake & Haryu 2013].

² See also [Barton & Halberstadt 2018] for a study matching sharp and round-sounding consonants with face shapes of name bearers with similar results.

Several studies have revealed that female names are significantly more likely to contain the stressed high-front [i] sound in English [Cutler et al. 1990; De Klerk & Bosch 1997; Pitcher, Mesoudi & McElligott 2013]. Cutler et al. [1990: 480] further hypothesize that the significantly higher rate of occurrence of the diminutive-forming [i] suffix in female than male nicknames (at a rate higher than that found in English nouns as a whole) may well be related to the associations of the vowel with the concepts *small*, *sharp*, and *bright*: "...if smallness is a concept associated with feminine characteristics rather than with masculine, then it may be that /i/ sounds will occur more often in female than in male names, not only in diminutive-forming suffixes, but in stressed syllable nuclei as well" [Cutler et al. 1990: 478].

There is an existing controversy about the essence of the attested correlation between prosodic-phonological structures and gender marking, with conflicting evidence about their synesthetic or conventional nature [Ackermann & Zimmer 2021]. Authors such as Oelkers [2003], Slepian & Galinsky [2016], among others, point to certain phonological properties (e.g. the sound [i] corresponding to the *-y/-ie/-i* suffix, euphony, or a higher number of vowels) as being aurally metaphorically associated through sound symbolism to certain semantic traits (i.e. smallness) that are congruent with female gender stereotypes. Thus, according to these authors, the phonology of given names does much more than signalling the gender of a name. It also conveys stereotypical ideas of gender and does so across languages. By contrast, Cutler et al. [1990], Whissell [2001], Oelkers [2003], Pitcher et al. [2013], and Nübling [2018], among others, while accepting the existence of correlations between phonological structures and gender marking, reject their synesthetic/sound symbolic nature and argue in favour of an approach based on language-specific conventions.

This ongoing debate invites reflection on the functions of the suffix *-i* in those languages which already have gender marking specific morphemes, such as Spanish. Previous studies have attested the use of the high front vowel [i] in the gender marking of names in English and other languages by taking advantage of the sound symbolic association of this suffix with female stereotypical features (i.e. smallness). The present research investigates the use of the suffix *-i* in relation to Spanish hypocorisms. Spanish is a gender marked language. The male *vs* female distinction is linguistically expressed by means of the masculine and feminine suffixes (*-o/-a*). The suffix *-i* has not traditionally been considered a gender mark in Spanish [De Bruyne 1995; García Page 2018]. In fact, this suffix can be used in the creation of both male and female hypocorisms (e.g. *Javier* > *Javi*; *Laura* > *Lauri*). Semantically, it has been analysed as an affection marker in Spanish, conveying feelings of endearment, familiarity, and fondness [De Bruyne 1995: 73–102]. As pointed out by García-Page [2018: 229], the suffix *-i* is highly productive in Spanish in colloquial and

familiarity settings and has very few restrictions of use. As a result, this language displays a rich collection of traditional and newly coined hypocorisms in *-i* which are formed mostly through apocope (*Cecilia* > *Ceci*) and, to a lesser extent, through substitution (*Paula* > *Pauli*), addition (*Flor* > *Flori*) or acronymy (*María Pilar* > *Mapi*) (see [García-Page 2018] for an exhaustive description of the formation mechanisms of hypocorisms in *-i* in Spanish).

3. Objectives and Methodology

Studies on the sound symbolism of high front vowels have offered ground for the consideration of the suffix *-i* as yet another linguistic tool for marking gender of proper names. This has been attested in languages such as English which do not have an inflectional gender marking suffix (see previous section). The general objective of the present research is to analyse the use of the morpheme under consideration in a language which already enjoys an inflectional morphology for gender marking. Spanish makes use of the suffixes *-o/-a* for this purpose, which frees the suffix *-i* from a gender signalling role and endows it with a primarily affective meaning. Nevertheless, given the sound symbolic properties of this suffix (i.e. smallness) and their association with female stereotypes (i.e. women as small, delicate, fragile beings), it is not unreasonable to consider whether the actual use of hypocorisms in *-i* in Spanish is limited to the communication of affection or it may be more gendered tinted than traditional literature suggests. From this general objective stem the following specific research questions and hypotheses that will guide the present study:

Research Question 1: Are hypocorisms in *-i* used as often for male and female names in Spanish? In other words, for those Spanish hypocorisms which display a form in *-i* and others in a gender marked suffix (*-o/-a*) or a clipping (e.g. *Antonia* > *Toña/Toñi*, *Antonio* > *Toño/Toni*), which one is preferred in actual use for male vs female names?

Hypothesis 1: Since the suffix *-i* is not gender marked in Spanish and simply expresses affection, informants are expected to show no preference for its use in relation to the gender of the name under consideration.

Research Question 2: Do men and women make a similar use of hypocorisms in *-i*?

Hypothesis 2: Since *-i* is not gender marked in Spanish and simply expresses affection towards the addressee, informants are expected to make a balanced use of hypocorisms in *-i* for male and female names, regardless of the speakers' gender.

Research Question 3: Does the age of the speakers influence the actual use of hypocorisms in *-i*?

Hypothesis 3: Since *-i* is not gender marked in Spanish and simply expresses affection, informants are expected to make a balanced use of hypocorisms in *-i* for male and female names, regardless of their age.

To test the hypotheses specified above, a survey was conducted on 60 informants. They were Spanish (Spain) speakers born between 1946 and 2010. This age range allows a comparison of the use of hypocorisms in *-i* by speakers of different ages. Thus, for the purpose of our study, participants were split into two age groups of roughly 30 people each: one for those born between 1946 and 1980 (Baby Boomers and Generation X), and one for those born from 1981 to 2010 (Millennials and Generation Z). Participants were selected so that the number of men and women was balanced within each age group. They were also homogeneous with respect to their educational background (intermediate educational level), social class (middle class) and ethnicity (Caucasian).

A Google Forms survey was designed to investigate the three research questions and hypotheses described in the previous section. The survey was aimed at assessing the actual use of real hypocorisms in Spanish. It consisted of two sections. In the first section participants were asked some basic personal information (age, gender, educational level, monthly income, nationality, country of residence). In the second section, informants were provided with a brief definition of the notion of *hypocorism* and asked to choose between one of two hypocorisms offered for eight proper names in Spanish, of which four corresponded to male names (i.e. *Francisco, Antonio, Víctor, Eduardo*) and four to female names (i.e. *Francisca, Antonia, Laura, Miriam*).

The criteria for name selection were the following. First, only names susceptible of having two or more well-known hypocorisms, including one using the suffix *-i*, were considered. Recently coined names, which have not yet developed a hypocorism, and monosyllabic proper names, which are not susceptible of developing one, were discarded. Second, names whose hypocorisms in *-i* stem from a clipping process (e.g. *Daniel > Dani*) or are a loan from a foreign language (e.g. *Charles > Charli*) were also set aside so that the data exclusively contains instances of use of the high-front vowel [i] as an affection marker morpheme. Finally, names which share the same hypocorisms for male and female names were not included (e.g. *Pablo/Paula > Pau*). The final selection also attempted to achieve a balance between the inclusion of traditional names (*Francisco, Antonia*) and more contemporary ones (*Laura, Eduardo*). In the survey, all participants were given the same pairs of hypocorisms for each name, but the shuffle order option in Google Forms was activated so that the hypocorisms under analysis were presented randomly for each participant.

The results from the survey were collected in an excel file, and later analysed in relation to the speakers' preferences of the use of the high-front *-i* suffix in real male and female hypocorisms, as well as their interaction with the age and gender of the participants.

4. Results and Discussion

This section reports on the results obtained from the survey data collected to investigate the pragmatics of Spanish hypocorisms in *-i* and offers a qualitative discussion from which fine-grained conclusions are drawn about the prevalence and functions of the hypocorisms under consideration.

4.1. Potentiality vs Actuality of Use of the High-Front Vowel *-i* as a Hypocoristic Suffix in Male and Female Proper Names

The survey questionnaire was designed to elucidate the actual use of hypocorisms in *-i* in Spanish. The literature has traditionally considered this suffix as gender neutral and as a means of conveying endearment or affection towards the addressee [De Bruyne 1995; García-Page 2018]. Under this premise the use of the high front suffix is expected to be similar when considered in relation to both male and female names. The analysis of the data yields the following results in relation to the names under scrutiny.

Three of the male names under scrutiny (*Francisco*, *Antonio*, and *Eduardo*) showed a marked reluctance towards the use of hypocorisms in *-i*. For *Francisco*, *Paco* was preferred to *Franci* (50 vs 10); for *Antonio*, *Toño* was preferred to *Toni* (55 vs 5); and for *Eduardo*, *Edu* was preferred to *Edi* (56 vs 4). Figure 1 illustrates the results. Only for one of the male names (i.e. *Victor*) the informants' choice of hypocorisms showed a more balanced result, with approximately half of them using *Vito* and the other half using *Viti*. As a matter of fact, *Vito* also exists as a proper noun different from *Victor* and this fact was overlooked when the names were chosen for analysis. This could have led some informants to use *Viti* as a preferred hypocoristic for *Vito*, and *Vito* as a preferred hypocoristic for *Victor*, which explains the exceptional functioning of this name in comparison to the previous three.

On the contrary, when a clear difference in use existed, as was the case with the other three male names, this was towards the avoidance of the hypocorisms in *-i* for male names. The theoretical potential of this allegedly neutral suffix in the derivation of affective hypocorisms clashes with the speakers' actual use preference towards alternative forms in *-o* or *-u* for male names.

All female names displayed a marked preference for the use of hypocorisms in *-i*. Thus, for *Francisca*, *Paqui* was preferred to *Paca* (43 vs 17); for *Antonia*,

Toñi was preferred to *Toña* (45 vs 15); for *Laura*, *Lauri* was preferred to *Lau* (40 vs 20); and for *Miriam*, *Miri* was preferred to *Mir* (46 vs 14). See Figure 2 for the quantitative results on the actual use of hypocorisms in *-i* in relation to the female names under consideration. Thus, in contrast to male names, in the case of female names, the suffix *-i* has been found to be the preferred choice in the formation of hypocorisms among the informants taking part in the survey.

As reported in previous sections, phonosymbolism has mounted up evidence supporting the association between the high-front vowel *-i* and concepts like smallness and, indirectly, affection, since small things are usually harmless and lovable. Many unrelated languages (Spanish, German, Hungarian, English, Swedish, Hebrew, some Arabic variants, Akan, and Guaraní, among others) have been reported to make use of the suffix *-i* in the formation of hypocorisms that show affection towards the addressee [Bodor & Barcza 2007; Hora et al. 2007; Monzó Gallo 2017]. For some of these languages, which lack a gender-marking morphological system (e.g. English), studies have further revealed a more frequent use of this suffix in association with female names. In those languages equipped with gender-marking morphological suffixes (e.g. Spanish), the literature, however, has traditionally described this suffix as a gender-neutral morphological resource to build affective hypocorisms [De Bruyne 1995; Monzó Gallo 2017]. García-Page [2018: 242] also states that hypocorisms in *-i* involve a higher degree of affection, and his data suggest that the use of this suffix is more frequent in the formation of female names. However, there are many instances of Spanish proper names, both male and female, which offer a choice between a hypocoristic form in *-i* and alternative forms resulting from different strategies (e.g. clipping). The names used in our survey illustrate this (e.g. *Antonio* > *Toño/Toni*; *Antonia* > *Toña/Toñi*).

The analysis of our data, however, challenges the gender-neutral views of hypocorisms in *-i*. It shows that Spanish speakers tend to favour their use for female hypocorisms and largely avoid them for male hypocorisms even in those cases in which they are equally at their disposal. The association between the high-front vowel and the notion of smallness and affection, which is well-known since classical studies (Plato), correlates with gender stereotypes about women (small, fragile) and may provide an explanation for the preferences of use described in relation to hypocorisms in *-i* in Spanish in this section.

4.2. The use of *-i* as a hypocoristic suffix in relation to the gender of the speakers

The second research question guiding this study focuses on the effect of the speakers' gender in the choice of hypocorisms. It aims at elucidating whether

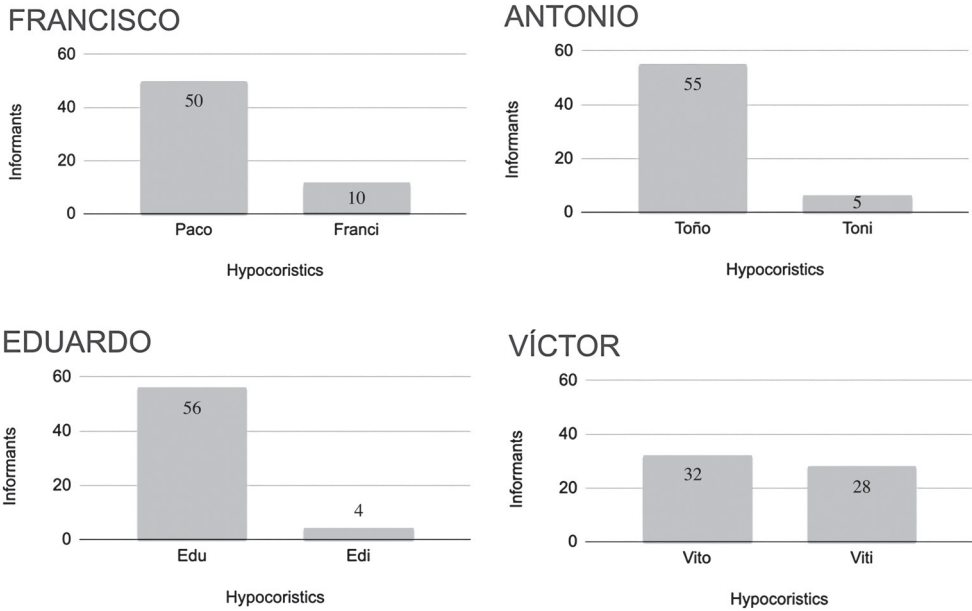


Figure 1. Quantitative results for the use of male hypocoristic pairs in Spanish

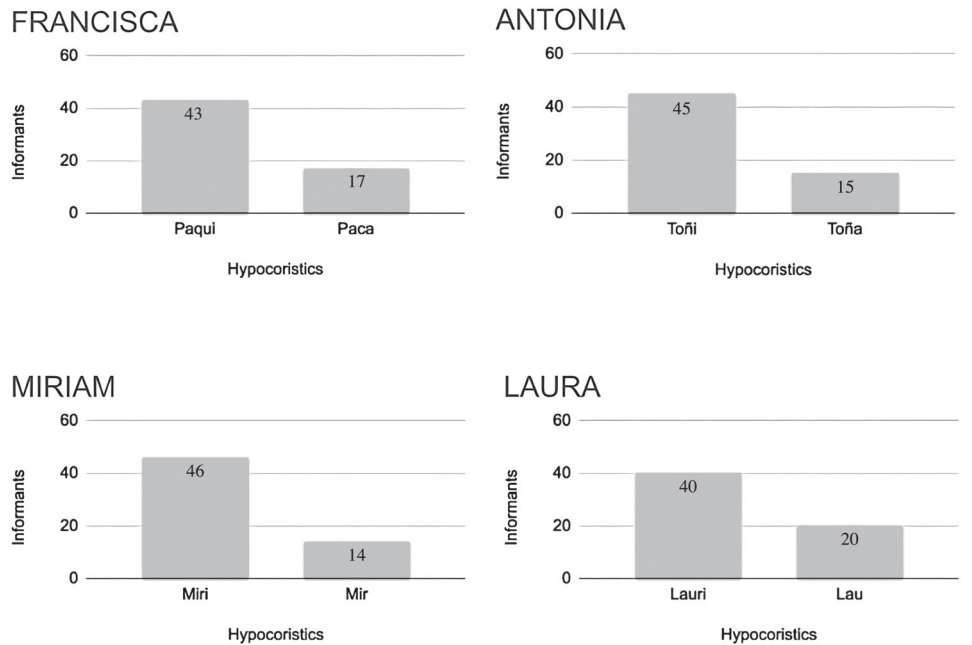


Figure 2. Quantitative results for the use of female hypocoristic pairs in Spanish

male and female speakers make a similar use of hypocorisms in *-i*. In relation to this issue, it was hypothesized that, since the suffix under consideration is not gender marked in Spanish, both male and female informants would make a balanced use of hypocorisms in *-i* and other alternative forms both for male and female names. The analysis of the data suggests that this is not always the case.

Two of the masculine names (i.e. *Francisco* and *Antonio*) displayed no marked differences in the use of hypocorisms in relation to the gender of the speakers (See Tables 1 and 2). Both male and female informants showed a clear preference for alternative forms that did not make use of the suffix *-i*:

Table 1

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Francisco* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Paco</i>	25	25	50
<i>Franci</i>	5	5	10

Table 2

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Antonio* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Toño</i>	28	27	55
<i>Toni</i>	2	3	5

The data about the other two male names under scrutiny (i.e. *Víctor* and *Eduardo*), however, did reveal the existence of differences in use between male and female informants. In the previous section, *Víctor* was shown to display no significant preference for the use of either of its potential hypocorisms (i.e. *Vito* vs *Viti*) when considering the responses of all informants regardless of their gender. However, a closer analysis of the choice of hypocorisms for *Víctor* in relation to the gender of the informants reveals an interesting asymmetry (see Table 3). In this way, male speakers align themselves with the overall trend, already witness in the global analysis of the data, of using the hypocorism that avoids the use of the suffix *-i* for male names. While women, especially those belonging to younger generations (see next section), tend to use *Viti* more often. This fact could find an explanation in the desire of men not to show affection for other males, a behavioural pattern that is not socially penalized in the case of women.

Table 3

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Víctor* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Vito</i>	10	22	32
<i>Viti</i>	20	8	28

The choice of hypocorisms for *Eduardo* also exhibits some variance in relation to the gender of the speakers, as can be seen in Table 4. Its hypocoristic in *-u* [u] (i.e. *Edu*) is generally preferred by both male and female informants. In fact, the former do not report any instance of use of the hypocoristic in *-i*, but some women in younger generations (Millennials/Generation Z) seem to have started using the *Edi* form in a significant manner both in comparison to women in previous generations (Baby Boomers/Generation X) and to men of their own generation, as will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Table 4

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Eduardo* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Edu</i>	25	30	55
<i>Edi</i>	5	0	5

As regards female names, interactions with the gender of the speakers are less marked. Three of the names (i.e. *Francisca*, *Antonia*, and *Miriam*) do not display any relevant differences in the use of the hypocorisms in relation to the gender of the informants. Both male and female speakers prefer *Paqui* over *Paca*, *Toñi* over *Toña*, and *Miri* over *Mir*. Quantitative data for these three names is included in Tables 5–7.

Table 5

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Francisca* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Paca</i>	9	8	17
<i>Paqui</i>	21	22	43

Table 6

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Antonia* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Toña</i>	7	8	15
<i>Toñi</i>	23	22	45

Table 7

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Miriam* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Mir</i>	8	6	14
<i>Miri</i>	22	24	46

The only exception arises in the case of *Laura* where the survey data points to significant asymmetries in the choice of a hypocorism (i.e. *Lauri* vs *Lau*) depending on the gender of the informants. Thus, overall, women tend to use *Lau* more often than men (13 vs 7 instances respectively). See Table 8.

Table 8

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Laura* in relation to the speakers' gender

Name	Female	Male	Total
<i>Lau</i>	13	7	20
<i>Lauri</i>	17	23	40

4.3. The use of -i as a hypocoristic suffix across generations

This section focuses on the third of the research questions guiding the present investigation. In this regard, it was hypothesised that, since according to the existing literature the diminutive suffix *-i* is not gender marked in Spanish, informants are expected to make a balanced use of hypocorisms in *-i* for both male and female names regardless of the generation to which they belong.

As regards male names, the analysis of the data reveals an effect of the age of the speakers in three of the names under scrutiny (i.e. *Francisco*, *Antonio*, and *Eduardo*). On the contrary, the use of the hypocorisms for *Víctor* does not seem to be affected by this factor. Let us look into each name in detail.

As Table 9 illustrates, in the case of *Francisco*, the data shows that, despite the fact that *Paco* is used by a higher number of speakers (both male and female) of all generations, those belonging to the Millennial and Generation Z groups show a slight increase in the use of *Franci*.

Table 9

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Francisco*
in relation to the speakers' generation**

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X (b. 1949–1980)	Millennials Generation Z (b. 1981–2010)	Total
<i>Paco</i>	28	22	50
<i>Franci</i>	2	8	10

Similarly, *Toño* is used by a higher number of speakers of all generations than *Toni*, but younger speakers (Millennials and Generation Z) have timidly introduced the use of *Toni* in their speech, as can be observed in Table 10.

Table 10

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Antonio*
in relation to the speakers' generation**

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Toño</i>	30	25	55
<i>Toni</i>	0	5	5

The same effect is shown by *Eduardo* (see Table 11). Despite a clear global preference for the use of *Edu*, the hypocorism in -i enters the use of language in speakers that belong to the Millennial and Generation Z groups.

Table 11

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Eduardo*
in relation to the speakers' generation**

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Edu</i>	30	26	56
<i>Edi</i>	0	4	4

The only exception to the trend in the emergence and/or increase in the use of the male hypocorism in *-i* is the name *Victor* (Table 12). Speakers show no preference for neither of the hypocorisms under consideration (i.e. *Vito* vs *Viti*) and this lack of preference remains stable throughout the four generations included in the study:

Table 12

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Victor* in relation to the speakers' generation

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Vito</i>	17	15	32
<i>Viti</i>	13	15	28

As regards the female names under analysis, the use of hypocorisms for three of the names under consideration (i.e. *Francisca*, *Antonia*, and *Miriam*) does not show any variation in relation to the age of the informants. Thus, speakers belonging to all age groups prefer *Paqui* over *Paca*, *Toñi* over *Toña*, and *Miri* over *Mir*. Quantitative data for these three names is included in Figures 13–15.

Table 13

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Francisca* in relation to the speakers' generation

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Paca</i>	10	7	17
<i>Paqui</i>	20	23	43

Table 14

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Antonia* in relation to the speakers' generation

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Toña</i>	8	7	15
<i>Toñi</i>	22	23	45

Table 15

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Miriam*
in relation to the speakers' generation**

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Mir</i>	8	6	14
<i>Miri</i>	22	24	46

In contrast, as Table 16 illustrates, the use of *Lau* has experienced a marked increase in the speech of Millennials and Generation Z speakers.

Younger generations show a tendency towards a change in the choice of hypocorisms. Unlike previous generations which markedly favoured the use of *-i* hypocorisms for female names, the Millennials and Generations Z group seems to be in the process of gradually accepting the use of hypocorisms in *-i* for male names. In addition, they also have started to use hypocorisms which do not take the suffix under scrutiny for some female names such as *Laura* (i.e. *Lau*).

Table 16

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Laura* in relation to the speakers' generation

Name	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	Total
<i>Lau</i>	6	14	20
<i>Lauri</i>	24	16	40

Given the attested sound symbolic properties of the high-front vowel *-i*, which convey female stereotypes (i.e. smallness, fragility, etc.), these findings signal an interesting turning point in the use of hypocorisms in Spanish which correlates with decades of anti-sexism institutional campaigns that may somehow be proving effective. However, it is interesting to see this data in the light of the speakers' gender to see if these changes affect the speech of male and female speakers alike. The next section delves deeper into the interactions between the age and gender of the speakers in the actual use of *-i* hypocorisms in Spanish.

4.4. Interaction of age and gender variables

This section seeks to unravel the interactions that may exist between the use of the suffix *-i* in the formation of hypocorisms and the age and gender of the speakers.

The comparison of the data points to an interaction of the age and gender of the speakers in the choice of hypocorisms for *Francisco*. As can be observed in Table 17, the most significant increase in the use of the *-i* hypocorism (i.e. *Franci*) has taken place among male speakers in the Millennial and Generation Z groups.

Table 17

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Francisco*
in relation to the speakers' age and gender**

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Paco</i>	13	12	25	15	10	25
<i>Franci</i>	2	3	5	0	5	5

Interactions between the age and gender of the informants can also be found in relation to the hypocorisms of *Antonio*. As can be observed in Table 18, in this case there is a significant increase in the use of the hypocorisms in *-i* (*Viti*) in the speech of Millennial and Generation Z women, both in comparison to male informants in the same generation and to speakers of previous generations.

Table 18

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Victor*
in relation to the speakers' age and gender**

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Vito</i>	7	3	10	10	12	22
<i>Viti</i>	8	12	20	5	3	8

Eduardo displays a similar trend (Table 19). The data reports an interaction between the informants' age and gender, and their choice of hypocorisms. As was the case with *Victor*, the variation is due to a marked increase in the use of hypocorisms in *-i* in the speech of women belonging to the Millennial and Generation Z groups both in comparison to women of previous generations and to men of the same generation.

Table 19

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Eduardo* in relation to the speakers' age and gender

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Edu</i>	15	11	26	15	15	30
<i>Edi</i>	0	4	4	0	0	0

Finally, as regards *Antonio* the data shows a slight increase in the use of -i hypocorisms in the speech of both male and female Millennial and Generation Z informants (Table 20).

All in all, the study of the interactions between the age and gender of the informants and their choice of male hypocorisms reveals an incipient trend for younger speakers towards the use of hypocorisms in -i. This trend is observed in all names under scrutiny, and it is especially noticeable in the speech of some Millennial and Generation Z speakers. More specifically, young male speakers display a marked increase in their use of *Franci* (vs *Paco*) and young female speakers show an increasing preference for the use of *Edi* (vs *Edu*).

Table 20

Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Antonio* in relation to the speakers' age and gender

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Toño</i>	15	13	28	15	12	27
<i>Toni</i>	0	2	2	0	3	3

Female names appear much more stable as far as the choice of hypocorisms is concerned when its interactions between gender and age are considered. No significant interaction is observed between these variables in the case of *Francisca* and *Miriam*. Both genders in all generations show a similar preference for the forms in -i, *Paqui* and *Miri*, respectively. See Tables 21 and 22.

The results for *Antonia* do signal some potential interactions. A closer comparison suggests that young male speakers are slightly restricting their use of the hypocoristic in -i (i.e. *Toñi*), while young female speakers are growing fonder of this form (Table 23).

Table 21

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Francisca*
in relation to the speakers' age and gender**

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Paca</i>	6	3	9	4	4	8
<i>Paqui</i>	9	12	21	11	11	22

Table 22

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Miriam*
in relation to the speakers' age and gender**

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Mir</i>	5	3	8	3	3	6
<i>Miri</i>	10	12	22	12	12	24

Table 23

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Antonia*
in relation to the speakers' age and gender**

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Toña</i>	5	2	7	3	5	8
<i>Toñi</i>	10	13	23	12	10	22

Likewise, the interaction between the hypocorisms of *Laura* and the age and gender of the informants also displays some variations. In this case, women tend to use *Lau* more often than men (13 vs 7 instances respectively), but this difference in use of the hypocorisms of *Laura* concentrate in the speech of women belonging to the Millennials/Generation Z groups. While women in the Baby Boomers and Generation X groups make a use of *Lau/Lauri* that is similar to that of men, favouring the use of the hypocorism in *-i* (i.e. 12 instances of *Lauri* vs 3 instances of *Lau*), those women in the Millennial and Generation Z groups show a marked preference

for the use of *Lau* (10 instances of *Lau* vs 5 instances of *Lauri*). Thus, *Lau* arises as the preferred choice of younger women and this is observed both in relation to that of women in previous generations, to that by men in their same age group and in previous generations (see Table 24).

Table 24

**Quantitative results for the hypocorisms of *Laura*
in relation to the speakers' age and gender**

Name	Female		Total	Male		Total
	Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z		Baby Boomers Generation X	Millennials Generation Z	
<i>Lau</i>	3	10	13	3	4	7
<i>Lauri</i>	12	5	17	12	11	23

The analysis of the interplay of the age and gender variables in the choice of hypocorisms offers a panorama of change with younger speakers timidly challenging the linguistic habits of past generations. Thus, the data reflect an increase in the use of *-i* hypocorisms for male names in the speech of young speakers, which is especially noticeable in men's speech for *Franci* and in women's speech for *Edi*. Simultaneously, it has been observed a decrease in the use of *-i* hypocorisms for female names (*Toñi*) in men's speech. Women, on the contrary, have started breaking cultural expectations with the use of alternative forms which avoid the use of the *-i* suffix in the formation of hypocorisms like *Lau*.

5. Conclusions

The hypocoristic suffix *-i* has often been found to distinguish male from female names in languages that lack gender marking morphology. Spanish, however, already has specific morphemes *-o/-a* for that purpose and, hence, the literature has traditionally described this suffix as a gender-neutral mechanism to express affection. Despite the existence of some evidence pointing to a more frequent use of the suffix *-i* in the formation of female as opposed to male hypocorisms [García-Page 2018], no studies had investigated the preferences of use of this suffix by Spanish speakers in relation to those names which also display alternative forms of hypocorisms (e.g. *Antonio* > *Toño/Toñi*).

The analysis of a survey collected data from a sample of 60 informants has revealed several interesting facts about the actual use of hypocorisms in Spanish. It has unveiled a general tendency towards the use of hypocorisms in *-i* for female names (i.e. *Paqui*, *Toñi*, *Mir*, and *Lauri*) and towards alternative forms

of hypocorisms for male names (i.e. *Paco*, *Toño*, and *Edu*) in those cases in which both options are available in the language. It has also been observed that there are marked differences in the use of hypocorisms by male and female speakers, the former having been found to largely avoid the use hypocorisms in *-i* for male names, and the latter being more prone to its use, as well as being open to introduce alternative forms (i.e. *Lau*) for female names. And finally, it has been found that the age of the speakers also has a significant influence on the choice of hypocorisms. Although the overall present-day use still favours hypocorisms in *-i* for female names, younger generations start to show a trend towards increasing the use of the hypocorisms in *-i* for male names (*Franci*, *Toni*, *Edi*), and that of alternative forms of hypocorisms for some of the female names (*Lau*).

The avoidance of hypocorisms in *-i* for female names is only significant in the speech of Millennials and Generation Z women which may signal a change in self-perception. The fact that other female names (*Francisca*, *Antonia*, and *Miriam*) in the study are not affected by this trend may find an explanation in relation to their more traditional flavour (*Francisca*, *Antonia*) and their lower frequency of occurrence (*Miriam*) in present-day Spanish. On the contrary, the increase in use of *-i* hypocorisms in male names (*Franci*, *Toni*, *Edi*) in younger generations is more evenly distributed among different genders, with *Franci* and *Toni* increasing their use in the speech of young men and *Edi* in the speech of young women.

These results reveal that the use of hypocorisms in *-i* is not as gender neutral in Spanish as had been accepted in the literature. The semantics that arise from the sound symbolism of high-front vowels and which associate the suffix *-i* with female stereotypes (smallness, frailty) may be at the base of the Spanish speakers' general preference for *-i* hypocorisms of female names and their low frequency of use in relation to male names when other alternative forms are available. In addition, the results have also shown differences in the use of hypocorisms in relation to the gender and age of the speakers, which signal changes in their choices that break free from the traditional use of hypocorisms in *-i* for female names. This finding is particularly interesting because of its implications not only for gender studies, but also for research on sound symbolism. Regarding gender, it presents an optimistic panorama of linguistic change that would deserve further investigation in which both women and men speakers are involved, even if in different ways. Regarding the debate on the conventional (language-specific) vs the synesthetic (cross-linguistic) nature of sound symbolism [Ackermann & Zimmer 2021], the findings in this paper provide further evidence for the conventional association of hypocorisms in *-i* with female stereotypes in Spanish. A convention that is being identified by Spanish speakers, probably due to the effect of recent generalized gender policies and which is generating a subsequent, though still

timid, change in the use of this type of hypocorisms in -i towards a more balanced representation of men and women.

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