

# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RECOUNTS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH BY SPANISH PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** *In this paper we present an analysis of the representation of gender roles in texts written by Spanish Secondary School (Bachillerato) students of EFL. This work is part of a larger research project on the relationship between knowledge of genre and writing quality in the UAM corpus of interlanguage writing. Here, we examine a sub-corpus of recounts from the point of view of the presentation of the writers in the texts, their centrality, and the roles they assign themselves and others. We work in the framework of systemic functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) and genre theory (Martin and Rothery 1980-81; Martin 1992; Rothery 1994; Martin 1997; Rothery and Stenglin 1997; Martin and Rose 2003). We use the Systemic Coder (O'Donnell 2005) to record and quantify the features we analyse. The analyses show how, despite the limitations of their language, these young EFL writers reproduce dominant cultural patterns in their representations of gender.*

**KEYWORDS:** *EFL writing, secondary school, representation of gender, differences, recount.*

**RESUMEN.** *En el presente artículo se examina la representación de género en textos escritos por alumnos de ILE en Bachillerato. El trabajo forma parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio en el que el objetivo final es analizar la relación entre conocimiento de género textual y calidad de la escritura en el corpus de la UAM de escritura en interlengua. En este trabajo analizamos los relatos en el corpus desde el punto de vista de la representación de los escritores en los textos, a través de los papeles semánticos que eligen y que asignan al otro. El trabajo se desarrolla en el marco de la gramática sistémica funcional (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004) y la teoría de los géneros textuales (Martin and Rothery 1980-81; Martin 1992; Rothery 1994; Rothery and Stenglin 1997; Martin and Rose 2003). Se ha utilizado el Systemic Coder (O'Donnell 2005) para el análisis de los rasgos de los textos. En el estudio, se muestra como, a pesar de la falta de recursos lingüísticos, los estudiantes reproducen los patrones culturales dominantes en su representación de género.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Composición en ILE, bachillerato, representación de género, diferencias, relato.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we analyse gender differences in the representation of experience in compositions written in English by Spanish pre-university students. In a writing task designed to produce a personal recount genre, we examine the linguistic resources these young non-native writers of English use to describe the events and to present themselves and others in their texts. By studying the students' use of the stages of the generic structure of the text, and the types of processes and semantic roles in the texts, we find significant gender differences in the way male and female students in their late teens represent the event, and their actions and feelings, as they describe them to their readers.

## 2. THE STUDY

### 2.1. *Participants and task*

This study is part of a larger research project on writing in EFL in Spanish schools, focusing on students' ability to produce written texts in different genres at the end of the school system<sup>2</sup>. One of the tasks we designed elicits a recount on the topic of the writer's first date, in the form of a letter to a friend. This gave us the sub-corpus we analyse here. It consists of 81 texts, 43 written by females and 38 by males.

### 2.2. *Theoretical background.*

Our linguistic model is that of Systemic-Functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), a model which allows us to relate an analysis of the students' use of the lexis and grammar of English to the functions and meanings in the different parts of the text. Linguists working in this model have produced a detailed description of the features of a number of genres for English, and this provides the background to our study of the generic structure and register features of the recount, and, in particular, its social function of sharing experience and reinforcing social values (Martin and Rothery 1980-81; Rothery 1994; Martin 1992; Rothery and Stenglin 1997; Martin and Rose 2003; see Martín *et al.* in press for a brief summary). The interpretation of gender differences is based on work dealing with identity and voice, gender and language (Tannen 1990; Cameron 1997; Ivanic and Camps 2001; Baxter 2003; Coates 2003; Eckert 2003; Ehrlich 2004).

### 2.3. *Data preparation and methodology*

The texts were divided into the generic stages of the recount -orientation, events and reorientation-, which had been separated from the letter framework made up of the stages greeting, preparation for closure and farewell (Martin and Whittaker 2003). Each recount was then divided into clauses using the Systemic Coder<sup>3</sup> (O'Donnell 2005), a flexible, semi-automatic coding tool which allows users to design a systems network (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) to structure and record an analysis of the linguistic choices the writer has made in a text, and to perform statistical operations. For the purpose of this study, the network of systems we designed included generic structure, process-type, writer-type, date-type and writer-gender. This allowed us to examine each clause in the different generic stages of the recount for the following categories: presence or absence of the writer and/or date (writer-solo, writer-with-date, writer-with-other, date-solo, date-with-writer, date-with-other); their position (central or peripheral); the type of process which formed the pivot of the clause; the role of writer and/or date in that process. We can also relate this representation of the event – the date- to the gender of the writer. The statistical analysis of the use of different features by male and female writers is given at significance level  $p < 0.01$ , represented in the tables by +++, or  $p < 0.05$  represented by ++.

## 3. RESULTS

We present the results focusing on the presence of the writer in the clauses of the text and the way the writer presents her or himself and the date. The total production of clauses in the recount section of the letters was 2183, of which 1030 were written by males, and 1153 by females. The recounts written by females were slightly shorter in number of clauses (mean

length: 26.8 clauses) than those written by males (mean length: 27.1 clauses) though the difference is not significant.

### 3.1. Presence of writer

In the recounts as a whole, the writer is present in 65.6% of clauses; that is, the text is focused to a considerable extent on the writer, as to be expected given the topic of the compositions. Table 1 gives the data.

Feature	writer-male			writer-female		
	Mean	N	TStat	Mean	N	TStat
writer-solo	46.9%	483	1.25	44.2%	510	1.25
writer-with-date (we)	19.4%	200	0.61	20.5%	236	0.61
writer-with-other	1.2%	12	0.29	1.3%	15	0.29
TOTAL	67.5%	695		66%	761	

Table 1. *Writer company*

There is no significant difference by gender with respect to the number of clauses in which the writer appears. As regards the company in which the writer represents him or herself, of all the clauses in the recounts, the writer is on his/her own –that is not involved in actions or descriptions together with the date or a third party- in almost half of the clauses in the recount. The rest of the clauses in the recounts exclude both writer and date. Selecting only the clauses in the category “writer-solo” we found a number of significant differences between texts written by male and female students. The rest of the data presented, then, correspond to clauses with the feature “writer-solo”.

#### 3.1.1. Presence of writer across generic stages: gender differences

Each stage in the recount has a different function, and we find that our writers distribute the clauses in which they appear alone among the stages differently, as Table 2 shows.

Feature	writer-male				writer-female			
	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
GENERIC-STRUCTURE	483				510			
orientation	31.7%	153	2.30	++	25.1%	128	2.30	++
events	52.4%	253	2.11	++	59.0%	301	2.11	++
reorientation	15.9%	77	0.03		15.9%	81	0.03	

Table 2. *Generic Structure (writer solo)*

Male and female teenagers, then, give a different amount of importance to themselves at different moments of the recount. Males appear in more clauses in the orientation (31.7% vs. 25.1% for females); and in fewer clauses in events (52.4% vs. 59% for females). Males appear, then, in the preparation for describing the date, while females appear more in the elaboration of events in their representation. In the reorientation, no difference was found.

### 3.1.2. Presence of writer in process types: mental processes

In order to discover whether there was any difference in the type of actions or states our writers presented themselves as being involved in, we examined the process types they used when alone. In our corpus, we find no significant difference in the use of process types by male and female writers except in the case of the subtypes of mental processes. These subtypes are cognition, perception and affection.

Feature	writer-male				writer-female			
	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
MENTAL-TYPE	483 = all processes				510 = all processes			
affection	8.1%	39	2.50	+++	12.9%	66	2.50	+++
perception	2.9%	14	0.34		2.5%	13	0.34	
cognition	12.0%	58	0.81		10.4%	53	0.81	

Table 3. *Mental processes*

As Table 3 shows, female writers produce a significantly higher number of clauses based on processes of affection (eg. “and I love him”, “that this boy loved me”, “I enjoyed very much that day”).

### 3.1.3. Presence of writer in process types: verbal processes

A comparison of the production of verbal processes in clauses in which the writer appears alone also produced a significant difference, with males producing more verbal processes than females (eg. “I asked Lisa last Thursday”, “she answered me with a loud ‘yes’”).

Feature	writer-male				writer-female			
	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
VERBAL-TYPE	93				107			
Writer-solo	81%	75	2.43	+++	65%	70	2.43	+++

Table 4. *Verbal processes*

### 3.2. *Writer – type: central or peripheral*

As well as the types of processes male and female teenagers use in their representation of the event, the date, we were interested in the general conception of the centrality of the writer in the text; grammatically, whether the writer presents him or herself as grammatical subject or in a less central role. Table 5 gives the results of the analysis.

Feature	writer-male				writer-female			
	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
writer-central	85.7%	414	3.29	+++	77.6%	396	3.29	+++
writer-peripheral	14.3%	69	3.29	+++	22.4%	114	3.29	+++

Table 5. *Writer-type- central or peripheral*

We find that the writer is central significantly more often in clauses written by males. In the females' texts, though they also write a large number of clauses in which they are central, they place themselves in a peripheral role significantly more often. In general, the compositions show an egocentric focus, which can be put down, at least partly, to the task and topic.

### 3.2.1. Writer – type: central- material processes

As regards the process-types in which the writers are involved, and the roles they take on when central, we find that males present themselves significantly more often as Actors (eg. “I paid she an other beer”) than females do- in 34,2% of their clauses, as opposed to 26,5% for females. No gender differences were found in other writer-central roles, except in one sub-type of mental process.

### 3.2.2. Writer – type: central- mental processes of affection

We saw a difference in the use of sub-types of mental processes, in general, and this is confirmed when we select only those in which the writer is central. As table 6 shows, females represent themselves as Sensor (eg. “because I need you”) in processes of affection more often than males.

	writer-male				writer-female			
Feature	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
MENTAL-TYPE	483 = all processes				510 = all processes			
affection	8.1%	39	2.50	+++	12.9%	66	2.50	+++
perception	2.9%	14	0.34		2.5%	13	0.34	
cognition	12.0%	58	0.81		10.4%	53	0.81	

Table 6. *Mental-type*

### 3.2.3. Writer–type: peripheral

In contrast to writer-central roles, writers can also present themselves in different types of non-subject positions in the clause. Females present themselves in the peripheral roles of Phenomenon in mental processes, often of perception or affection, (“He likes **me** a lot”), and Circumstance (“he came **to me**”) significantly more than males ( $p < 0,05$ ).

### 3.3. Date-type: central or peripheral

Turning to the way male and female writers present their date, we now complete the picture as regards representation of centrality. Not only do males appear more often in the central position, as Actor, in their recounts, but they also place the date in non-subject, or peripheral, position in the clause significantly more frequently than females do.

	writer-male				writer-female			
	483				510			
Feature	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
date-central	15%	73	1.24		18%	92	1.24	
date-peripheral	37%	179	5.75	+++	21%	106	5.75	+++

Table 7. *Date-type: central or peripheral*

As regards the specific roles male and female writers give to their date when non-central in the clause, we found significant differences in the three most frequent roles: Goal, Receiver and Circumstance.

	writer-male				writer-female			
Feature	Mean	N	TStat		Mean	N	TStat	
DATE-PERIPHERAL - TYPE	483				510			
date-as-goal	11.0%	53	2.91	+++	5.9%	30	2.91	+++
date-as-receiver	5.0%	24	2.41	+++	2.2%	11	2.41	+++
date-as-circumstance	12.8%	62	2.60	+++	7.8%	40	2.60	+++

Table 8. *Date-peripheral roles*

In each case, male writers present their dates as Goal (“I take **her hand**”), as Receiver (“I said **her** my name”) and as Circumstance (“I have stayed **with her** 6 months”) in a significantly higher number of clauses.

#### 4. INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

From our analysis of the representation of the self and of the other in the clauses which make up the texts of male and female writers, we propose the following interpretation.

##### 4.1. *Presence of writer*

By analysing their appearance in the generic stages of the recount, we find that male writers seem to focus more on themselves in the orientation stage, which suggests their role as planners. Female writers, on the other hand, present themselves more often in the events stage, where they participate in more clauses than males. This can be seen as representing their role as experiencers. As regards the different process types in the texts, we found that females’ recounts have a higher number of clauses with processes of affection, and females appear centrally as Sensors more than in texts written by males. When females present themselves they seem to take on a more emotional role. Both males and females use a large number of verbal processes in the recount -a generic feature, since speaking and what is said is an important part of a recount- but there is a difference in the representation of the activity: male writers include speaking and what is said more frequently and also assign the role of Receiver to their date to a significant extent, thus representing the date as listening to what they say.

#### 4.2. *Writer centrality*

As regards the position in the clause these young writers give themselves, it is evident that both males and females see themselves as playing a central role. However, males give themselves the role of Actor significantly more often than females, reproducing the accepted cultural pattern. At the same time, when females write, they present themselves in peripheral roles significantly more than males, specifically in the roles of Phenomenon and Circumstance. Here again, we are led to interpret their representation as the internalisation of a cultural pattern of male centrality. When representing the opposite sex, the roles males assign to women are: Goal, Receiver and Circumstance, which appear in the texts as complementary to their own role as Actor.

#### 4.3. *Construction of gender*

In our texts, then, we see how gender is constructed through social interaction. The recount in which we find the students' representations of gender roles formed part of a letter, in which the writers were free to choose their interlocutor. Interestingly, in this task, writers invariably chose to communicate with a representative of the peer group of the same sex: females shared the experience with females, males with males. We see in this interaction with a member of the same sex how writers are negotiating their identities. Especially clear is the male representation of their dominance in the situation. Communicating as they are with other males, this seems to show their aim of gaining prestige and the approval of the male group, as studies of masculinity have shown. Interestingly, then, despite the limitations of their language, these EFL writers reproduce cultural patterns in their representation of gender.

#### NOTES

1. This project is funded by the Ministry of Education: *Escribir en inglés en bachillerato: géneros y registros como base cognitiva del desarrollo del texto, y su relación con la calidad de la redacción*. HUM2004-06228; an earlier stage of which has recently been published (Martín Úriz and Whittaker 2005).
2. A foreign language is obligatory in the Spanish educational system from primary school. Most of the subjects in this study will probably have had English at school for eight years.
3. The Systemic Coder is available free of charge from the website <http://www.wagsoft.com/Coder/>

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