Little Words

Leow, Ronald P, Campos, Héctor , Lardiere, Donna

Published by Georgetown University Press

Leow, Ronald P., et al.
Little Words: Their History, Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatics, and Acquisition.

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“Little Words” in Small Talk: Some Considerations on the Use of the Pragmatic Markers *man* in English and *macho/tío* in Peninsular Spanish

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**Pragmatic Markers** are linguistic forms that are very common and frequent in spontaneous conversation, and, as Carranza (1997) points out, they can signal not only some kind of attitude on the part of the speakers toward their interlocutor(s) but also the limits and relationships between different parts of the text or discourse.

In this chapter I present, discuss, and analyze (both qualitatively and quantitatively) the different uses and discourse functions of the pragmatic markers *man* in English (E) and *macho/tío* in Peninsular Spanish (PS), including some reflections on and analysis of their feminine counterpart (*tía* and “macha”) in Spanish.

The corpus used for the analysis has been taken from different sources, such as the online concordances of oral language of the *British National Corpus* (BNC) in Variation in English Words and Phrases (VIEW; Davies 2005) and *US TV Talk*, as well as some American radio interviews and movies. For Spanish, the main source has been the oral section of the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA), which includes television and radio shows, telephone conversations, and face-to-face oral interactions among friends, workmates, or members of a family. The recording and transcriptions of some conversations in Spanish, carried out by the researcher and author of this article, have also been made use of.

Following Fraser’s (1996, 2006) taxonomy, we could label the markers *man* (E) and *macho/tío* (PS) as parallel pragmatic markers, “whose function is to signal an entire message in addition to the basic message” (1996, 21). I also follow Fraser in his view of pragmatic markers as expressions that occur as part of a discourse segment but are not part of the propositional content of the message conveyed and that do not contribute to the meaning of the proposition per se.

Within parallel markers, *macho/tío* (PS) and *man* (E) belong to the subclass of vocatives, but, as will be shown with examples in the following sections, they can also be found fulfilling the functions of any of the other three subclasses in Fraser’s
taxonomy, namely *speaker displeasure markers, solidarity markers, and focusing markers*. Other authors, such as Gille (2006) refer to these markers as a kind of “conversational appendix,” a term defined as a mechanism that is typically conversational in nature and that is used in order to modify the original, basic message or to make sure that the appropriate interactive effect is conveyed. Within the class of conversational appendices, Gille classifies the Spanish *macho* as an “intersubjectivity appendix” (*apéndice de intersubjetividad*), which is a kind of appendix that addresses the interlocutor(s) and consequently regulates the ongoing interaction.

As authors like Gili Gaya (1970) or Martín Zorraquino (1998) point out, pragmatic markers can be associated to different communicative registers. Some markers are normally associated with the written registers and others with the spoken ones. The markers being analyzed herein (*man* [E] and *macho/tío* [PS]) are normally found in spoken, informal registers in both English and Spanish, and, as the results of this study show, they very frequently form part and are features of the so-called small talk. The underlying perspective of small talk in this study adheres to that of Coupland (2000) and many other authors who, far from considering this kind of talk as “small,” view it as a useful tool in helping individuals accomplish social goals such as building solidarity and connection with their interlocutors, putting people at ease, or winning the listener’s approval of their own perspective (among other functions). Small talk then acts as a catalyst for “big talk,” also called (according to Tracy and Naughton 2000) “information exchange,” “formal remarks,” or “real business” (63).

An important feature of small talk is the fact that, in some way or another, the speakers always tend toward the use of conversational strategies that entail a certain degree of solidarity. As will become apparent, the markers studied herein very frequently carry a solidarity message that is independent from, but at the same time accompanies, the basic propositional message of the utterance. This fact makes the study of these markers a fertile ground for their analysis from the linguistic politeness perspective. In the examples found in the corpus, these markers tend to be used within positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987), in order to mark the affiliation (Bravo 1999) bonds between the interlocutors. However, on some occasions they may also become markers of a greater or lower degree of impoliteness (in the sense given to it by Kaul de Marlangeon 1995; Culpeper 1996; or Alba-Juez 2006, 2007), as well as of disapproval or disbelief.

Another interesting function of the markers *man* (E) and *macho/tío* (PS) is their turn-changing function (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), that is, they are very frequently found at the beginning or end of an utterance, where they clearly mark the change of a turn in the ongoing conversation. This function is related to the above-mentioned view (Gille 2006) of these markers as interaction regulators.

It is interesting and important to point out that these expressions, as well as any other pragmatic markers, are versatile, multifunctional, and polysemous, for they communicate not only one message but also different and various messages, depending on the context and situation in which they are found.
Some similarities and differences between the use of *man* in English and *macho/tío* in Spanish will be commented on as well, although I do not intend to arrive at definitive or final contrastive conclusions.

**Man (E) and Macho/Tío (PS) as Parallel Pragmatic Markers**

When used as pragmatic parallel markers, the “little words” *man* (E) and *macho/tío* (PS) may occur in initial, middle, or final position in the utterance, as illustrated in table 15.1.

According to Fraser (1996), there are a number of small classes of parallel markers, of which he presents the following four: (a) vocative markers, (b) speaker displeasure markers, (c) solidarity markers, and (d) focusing markers. It is evident that the markers *man* (E) and *macho/tío* (PS) belong to class a, that is, to the class of vocative markers. However, apart from being clearly vocative, in some situations they can also be classified as speaker displeasure, solidarity, or focusing markers. Examine the following examples:

(1) (Scene: in the limousine)

Lee and Carter land in the back. Slam into their seats and try to catch their breath. The TWO MEN START TO LAUGH when they realize they’re alive!

*Carter:* We made it, *man.*

*Lee:* No problem.

(Movie Script: *Rush Hour 2*, by Jeff Nathanson)

Example (1) is one of many instances where the marker *man* has been found to be used not only as a vocative but also as a solidarity marker. Here both men are happy because they finally beat their enemies, and therefore the language and expressions they use are an explicit sign of solidarity and friendship.

But many other times this vocative marker can be used with a very different, almost opposite, meaning, as is the case in example (2), where Lucy Lawless shows her anger after the New Orleans floods in 2005:

(2) *Lucy:* You know the best thing to come out, the only good thing that can come out of this, is this is our wake up call to consciousness, *man*; you gotta be awake for what’s coming. Consciousness is going to stop us all being lazy, intellectually, emotionally, in our

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15.1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of the Different Markers in Initial, Middle, and Final Position</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marker</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Man (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macho/tío (PS)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
relationships with our neighbors. Also politically, socially, stopping lazy, let’s stop anaesthetizing ourselves with BeniFer or Michael Jackson or Nancy Grace in my case.

HARRISON: [chuckles] At least you admit it, that’s step 1.

LUCY: Yeah, man, recognize your own shit. I think that’s really important. We can’t fix anything while all this misinformation, all the nonsense about “let’s not point the finger” moment. BS! Man, you are going to use your anger to springboard you into action. THERE’S NO HOPE WITHOUT ACTION. So get off our arses and start making a difference in our own lives and everyone else.

(Interview with Lucy Lawless on Harrison on the Edge radio show, September 18, 2005, AUSXIP)

The three occasions on which Lucy uses the marker man are instances in which she shows her deep anger and displeasure, and, even though we may say that man is a vocative and she is addressing Harrison, in fact her anger is directed toward the government and the desperate situation of the city at that moment. Thus we may place the marker man into the speaker displeasure category here, and, at least in the last instance where it is used (“Man, you are going to use your anger to springboard you into action”), we may also classify it as a focusing marker, because Lucy is trying to incite the listeners to take action. In addition, it is worth noticing that this is one of few instances in the corpus where a woman uses the marker man, which, according to the findings of this study, seems to be much more widely used by men in general, as shown by the quantitative analysis results in table 15.2.

Man may also co-occur with other vocatives (as in John man, please shut up!), with other classes of pragmatic markers or with other subclasses of parallel marker. Examine (3):

(3) SARAH: Look, I’ll show you, right. It’s right to save, yeah. Nationwide that . . . wow, see man, that’s, that’s just, just what, that’s what I put in and take out do you get me. Hi you see, you know er . . . how much are you taking out? (BNC, 3691 KPY)

Here man is used together with an interjection (wow, a lexical basic marker) and another parallel marker of the focusing type ([you] see):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15.2</th>
<th>Use of the Marker man according to Gender (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occurrence in the English Corpus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male addressing male</td>
<td>85.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male addressing female</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female addressing male</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female addressing female</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Spanish, *macho* or *tío* may also co-occur with other pragmatic markers, such as *pues* and *mira* (4). *Mira* functions here in a way similar to Fraser’s focusing parallel markers in English:

(4) . . . ¿De dónde la has sacado? ¡De mis contactos! ¡Pues, macho mira, me lo pidió Diseprosa. Entonces una cosa, una cosa dime. . . .

(CREA, párrafo nº 5, Conversación telefónica en una empresa, 20/03/91)

**Solidarity and Gender**

As pointed out in the introductory remarks, the analysis made through the concordances of the markers *macho* and *tío* in the CREA corpus (as well as that of the marker *man* in the English corpus) sheds light on the fact that, in the majority of cases, these little words are used as markers of solidarity. In most of these cases, the solidarity message is given from a man to another man or boy, but there are a few instances in which a woman uses the markers when she addresses men. When women address other women in Spanish, they can use the feminine *tía*, which is not an uncommon feature of Peninsular Spanish. Also, in everyday conversation in Spain, I have been able to observe that some women are now using the marker *macho* when addressing other women, which sounds surprising when first hearing it, considering the feature of masculinity attached to the meaning of the word. Probably that is the reason why, mainly among female teenagers, one can sometimes hear utterances like (5), which still sound a bit contradictory, for the feminine of *macho* in Spanish is *hembra*. However, *hembra* would sound rude or rough to the ears of a native speaker, because it is normally associated with animals, not people.

(5) A: “Macha, ¿te vienes conmigo o te quedas?”

Table 15.3 shows the percentages of occurrence of all these possibilities in the Spanish corpus used for this study. As can be observed, of all occurrences, the marker *macho* used by men addressing men is the most frequent (33.7%). Second in order of frequency is the use of the marker *tía* used by women addressing women (20.4%). Thus *macho* seems to be the most frequent choice for men, and *tía* for women, leaving the use of *tío* in second place for men and *macha* for women. In instances of men addressing women, *tía* seems to be the preferred option (10.2%) and *tío* the most common choice for women addressing men (7.14%), in cases where they decide to use a marker of the kind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15.3</th>
<th>Use of the Different Markers in Spanish according to Gender (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>macho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male addressing male</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male addressing female</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female addressing male</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female addressing female</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Use of These Markers as Elements of Small Talk
Because of the inherent spoken/colloquial quality of the markers in question, they are very frequently found within episodes of small talk in both English and Spanish. As stated previously, small talk is a type of talk that helps the interlocutors achieve certain social goals, such as building rapport, putting people at ease, or winning power, approval, or support. In the corpora examined, it is clear that the use of the markers man (E) and macho/tío (PS) is a strategy that contributes to these goals, in combination with other strategies of small talk, such as (a) use of narratives of personal experience/use of the vernacular language, (b) deviation from the norm in the use of journalistic talk (conversationalization [Fairclough 1995] of journalistic talk), (c) joking (humor and irony), (d) gossiping, and (e) cursing/use of impoliteness markers.

We very frequently find instances of the use of the markers man (E) and macho/tío (PS) in combination with, or as substrategies of, one or more of the above-mentioned strategies. Example (6) presents an instance of tío (PS) used in a radio program in Spain, within a kind of talk that has been conversationalized and consequently does not strictly follow the norms of formal journalistic discourse. We can also observe a certain degree of gossiping and humor in the conversation, and thus it can be said that there is a combination of strategies b, c, and d:

(6) A: Bueno, pero lo que te he dicho, que hoy les voy a tener que dar esquinazo a las periquitas. Porque tengo mucha prisa que esta tarde tengo una boda. Que me han dicho los novios que estás invitado.

B: Pero, pero si no sé ni quiénes son los novios, no los conozco, ni sé si los conozco, ni había nada de esta boda.

A: Pero yo pero, pero tío, ellos a ti si te conocen, sí. Además yo te he hablado de la novia ¿si? Si te he hablado en otras emisiones ¿si? Te he hablado de la novia que es la madre de mi amigo el orejones López. ¡Anda! Que no, que no parece una madre porque está superstebua.

B: Mira tío, esa no es manera de hablar de las madres de un amiguito.

(Adapted from CREA, párrafo nº 4, A vivir que son dos días, Madrid, 02/11/96, Cadena SER)

Example (7) contains an instance of the marker man used within a narrative of personal experience (strategy a), where the vernacular language (Labov 1972) is used:

(7) Then we had bayonet practice. And er, then, we was all sorted out, this was the staple for the Home Guard, we was sorted out er to go to er, er man, the guns at Sutton-on-Sea, the er, girder rockets. And er I was er one that was sorted out to go, but they wouldn’t let me go because er, I couldn’t get , they couldn’t get me.

(Adapted from BNC, 279 FY2)

In spite of the fact that man (E) and macho/tío (PS) are normally markers of a high degree of solidarity and rapport, on some occasions they may accompany some curse words and rude language. However, even when used with rude language, they may be markers of solidarity or rapport, by showing that the speakers have a high degree of familiarity or closeness with their interlocutors, which makes them feel com-
fortable enough to allow for the use of a kind of language that would otherwise be used in private or intimate conversations.

The data analyzed exhibit innumerable cases of these markers within the informal context and language of small talk. The examples in this section are only a small sample illustrating the fact and making the point that man in English and macho or tío in Spanish are also used as strategic markers that fulfill important discursive functions, to which I now turn.

Discourse Functions
The study of the different and numerous occurrences of the markers man (E) and macho/tío (PS) in the corpora has shed light on the fact that these markers are normally used in one or more of the following three ways: (a) as markers of (im)politeness, (b) as markers of turn change (interaction regulators), and (c) as alerters (focusing or warning function).

a) Markers of (im)politeness: These markers always show a given attitude on the part of the speakers toward their interlocutor(s), and consequently some degree of politeness force can always be ascribed to them. In the majority of occurrences studied in the corpora, both in Spanish and in English, these markers are used within a positive politeness context (Brown and Levinson 1987) showing some kind of affiliation (Bravo 1999), where the speakers are willing to express feelings or emotions such as rapport, encouragement, admiration, or bewilderment (91% of occurrences in English and 84.7% in Spanish; see table 15.4), as illustrated in (8) and (9).

(8) 75 WINSTON: Oh, you were brilliant, man!
    DAVID: Nah, not really
    (Adapted from US TV Talk 26:871)

    B: No me ha tocado nada, tía.
    (Adapted from CREA, párrafo nº 39, Conversación en Talleres de Inspección Técnica de Vehículos, Madrid, 23/12/91)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15.4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Use of the Different Markers according to Discourse Function (%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Markers of (Im)politeness</th>
<th>Interaction Regulators</th>
<th>Focusing Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
<td>Impoliteness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man (English)</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macho/a // tío/a (Spanish)</td>
<td>84.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As stated earlier, these vocative parallel markers can also be used to indicate some degree of impoliteness (9% of occurrences in English and 15.3% in Spanish; see table 15.4), conveying some negative thoughts or feelings such as threat, warning, disapproval, disappointment, or disbelief, as examples (10) and (11) show:

(10) BOBBY: You’re dead, *man*, you’re dead!  
 *(US TV Talk, 52:604)*

(11) A: ¿Negocio? ¡Me cago en la puta! Chungo, tío, me he limpiado nada más que un coche en todo el día!  
 B: Limpia, que me has dejado aquí una caca de pájaro! Pero, ¿cómo es posible, hombre? ¡Si tienes aquí el negocio del siglo!  
 A: ¿Qué negocio? ¡Pero si todo el mundo baja y me da de hostias! ¿Qué no puedo limpiar ni un coche, *macho*! Pero, quítate de ahí, me cago en la puta! Venga hombre, con el cubo, hostia!  
 Mira, mira, mira el pie, me han chafado veinticinco veces ya . . .  
 *(Adapted from CREA, párrafo nº 22, No te rías que es peor, Madrid, 19/12/91, TVE 1 A)*

b) Markers of turn change/Interaction regulators: One very noticeable and frequent function of the markers *man* in English and *macho/tío* in Spanish is the function of regulating the interaction by marking turn change. Consider example (12):

(12) (Conversation about a video game):  
 A: Oh this is so rubbish, *man*.  
 B: You can only see like his back, his legs an, and the back of running. They’re copycats, *man*.  
 A: So shit, *man*.  
 B: Mm, Sega’s better. Sega are blatantly better.  
 *(BNC, 3248 KNV)*

The marker *man* is found at the end of each turn except for the last, where the culmination of the term is marked by *yeah*, a lexical basic marker expressing agreement (Fraser 1996). In some of the conversations analyzed this is taken to such an extent that we find repeated instances of the marker at the end of almost every tone group uttered by the same person, in which case the function is not marking turn change but change of tone group, as in (13):

(13) Get your knees under the table and ‘move them, ’*man*. You take up all the ‘space, ’*man*. ‘Yeah, dark ’horse. ’Right.  
 *(BNC, 4108 KSN)*

Table 15.4 shows that *man* is used as an interaction regulator in 53.2 percent of occurrences in the English corpus, and *macho/a* or *tío/a* in Spanish are used in 42.9 percent of occurrences in the Spanish corpus fulfilling the same function, which
makes it the second most frequent function in English and the third most frequent in Spanish. As we shall see, the focusing function (see following discussion) occurs slightly more frequently in Spanish, and many times both interaction regulation and focus can be attributed to the same marker in the same instance.

c) Alerters/Focusing function: The markers *man* (E) and *macho/tío* (PS) are also used on occasions at the beginning of an utterance with the intention of calling the attention of the speaker to focus on the message. Many times the marker also carries a threatening tone, the meaning behind the marker being something like “pay attention to what I’m going to say or else;” as is the case with Lucy Lawless in (14):

(14) LUCY: Yeah *man*, recognize your own shit. I think that’s really important. We can’t fix anything while all this disinformation, all the nonsense about “let’s not point the finger” moment. BS! *Man*, you’re going to use your anger to springboard you into action. THERE’S NO HOPE WITHOUT ACTION. So get off our arses and start making a difference in our own lives and everyone else.

(Interview with Lucy Lawless on *Harrison on the Edge* radio show, September 18, 2005, AUSXIP)

Of all three functions, the use of these expressions as markers of positive politeness (rapport) is by far the most frequent, the least frequent being their use as markers of impoliteness (9% for *man* and 15.3% for *macho/a or tío/a*). Table 15.4 displays these results, as well as the fact that on most occasions the marker is fulfilling more than one function at a time (considering that the sum of the subtotals is higher than 100%).

Conclusions and Comparison

Both the qualitative and quantitative findings of this study suggest that there are probably more similarities than differences between the use of the marker *man* in English and the markers *macho* and *tío* in Spanish. In both cases they are characteristic of oral, colloquial, and informal conversation, and consequently they are common features of small talk. The three markers in question may appear at the beginning, middle, or end of an utterance and can be classified as parallel pragmatic markers that carry out important functions in discourse, such as building solidarity and rapport, changing turn or regulating the interaction, or, when at the beginning of the utterance, focusing on or alerting the speaker about some aspect of the ongoing discourse.

Although all the similarities, the use of *macho* and *tío* in Spanish might be qualified as “more colorful” and varied than the use of *man* in English, due to the fact that both Spanish words have the possibility of undergoing grammatical gender change, however ridiculous the word “*macha*” might sound to anyone’s ears. The fact is that *macha* is nonetheless used, especially among adolescents or very young people in general. I do not have any records of the word *woman* used in English as a pragmatic marker in the same way as *man* is. The word *girl*, however, could be considered as the feminine counterpart in this case. Also, the different examples of *man*
in the corpus show that both women and men may use the marker *man* when addressing men or women indistinctly.

The present study has only been an initial approach to the study of these markers, and therefore they have been analyzed in a very general way, without taking into account other variables that might intervene in their use, such as, for instance, social class or race. The results have shed some light on the influence of the gender, strategy, and discourse function variables, as shown by the examples analyzed and the quantitative analysis results in tables 15.2, 15.3, and 15.4.

In addition, I am conscious of the fact that *man* in English and *macho/a* and *tío/a* in Spanish are not the only markers of this kind that are in use nowadays. These were chosen for being the most general and standard, but many interesting conclusions could be drawn if we also researched (and made comparisons among) similar markers, such as *dude* in English or *tronco* in Spanish, which, at first sight, seem to belong exclusively to the younger people’s repertoire.

NOTES

1. Notice, however, that neither of these authors uses the term “pragmatic marker”: Gili Gaya writes about “partículas” (particles), and Martín Zorraquino speaks of “marcadores del discurso” (discourse markers), the latter being more in agreement with Schiffrin’s (1987, 2001) view of the phenomenon.

2. The marker *pues* has been labeled differently by different authors. Bello (1847) refers to it as a “continuative particle.”

REFERENCES


