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The Role of Language in Accusations of Witchcraft in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Spain

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Abstract

Linguistic factors played a significant role in the origin and spread of accusations of witchcraft in Early Modern Spain. The preoccupation with witches' words is at its root a preoccupation about the power of speech and, to a great extent, of female speech. Studies in some Early European countries have connected aggressive female speech styles with accusations of witchcraft, and this article offers evidence to this effect for Early Modern Spain. The speech of women with 'ungoverned tongues' is stigmatized as masculine, and the power it conveys is regarded with suspicion. Rumor, gossip, and reputation also played a key role in accusations of witchcraft in these oral societies. Once the accusation is launched, public reputation was often adduced as 'proof' of culpability. Rooted in the specific reality of the northern provinces of Early Modern Spain, this study shows how assumptions about women's 'linguistic place', along with certain forms of linguistic performance played a significant role in transforming a woman into a witch.

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1. Introduction

The conflict that witches present in Early Modern societies, from a linguistic perspective, stems from the power that magic words confer to women. The preoccupation with witches' words is at its root a preoccupation about the power of speech and, to a great extent, of female speech. Women, through unnatural or supernatural means (witchcraft), summon up a capacity for agency that they lack otherwise, and it is for this reason that witches' words are sometimes deemed 'masculine'. To exemplify the magical uses of language associated with Spanish witches in this period, this study considers formulas used to cast spells and curses, and also pays attention to what could and could not be said in the context of the witches' Sabbath, as recorded in the northern provinces of Spain. Most of the documents and testimonies presented come from the Basque region and from the province of Aragon, both scenarios of the furthest reaching witch-hunts in the history of Spain. Zugarramurdi (Navarre) became the epicenter of the witch-hunt craze, and this study looks into how such cataclysmic events affected communication among neighbors in that community. Decades after the trials ended, strained social relationships are evidenced by the way people talk, and not talk, to one another. In pre-democratic oral societies communicative politeness was highly regulated, and flouting norms by verbal or non-verbal means (absence of a greeting, certain gestures, etc.) gave way to gossip, rumors, and threatened the communal peace. This leads to a crucial juncture, which is the role rumor, gossip, and reputation played in accusations of witchcraft.

In societies where living conditions forced a largely public existence, rumor became both source and proof of any accusations. Testimonies show how people's lives were largely public and every event seemed to be, willingly or unwillingly, witnessed by somebody. People talk and the rumor starts. By the time the gossip has spread to conform public opinion, the tinted reputation will be proof of guilt in itself. One of the social factors that singled out certain women as best candidates for witchcraft was their aggressive linguistic behavior. In this respect, the purpose of this article is to explore how beliefs about

language and different types of linguistic performance played an important role in the developments that would lead to and follow accusations of witchcraft in Early Modern Spain. The study starts by addressing connections between women, language, and witchcraft, an association that crosses European borders, and that unearths underlying assumptions about women's 'linguistic place' in the societies of this period. From the definition of *bruja* (witch) in Early Modern Spanish Dictionaries, to the comments on female speech found in witch-hunt manuals and Spanish moral treatises, a clear identification can be traced between women, witchcraft, and a series of typically female linguistic 'defects'. Women's 'ungovernable tongue', in manifestations such as yelling, scolding, harsh words, or confrontational speech, seems to be at the heart of accusations of witchcraft. This connection, which has been studied mostly for Early Modern England and Scotland (Barry, Hester, & Roberts, 1996; Dye, 2016; Kamensky, 1997; Rowlands, 2001; Stavreva, 2015; Stewart & Strathern, 2004; Williams, 2011), can also be traced in the Spanish tradition, and this article offers evidence to this effect. Rooted in the specific reality of the northern provinces of Early Modern Spain, certain forms of linguistic performance (from a particular manner of speech, to rumor and gossip and the use of incantations) appear to play a significant role in both the origin and the propagation of witchcraft accusations or, in other words, in transforming a woman into a witch in the eyes of the community.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Women, Language, and Witchcraft

Witchcraft is not an exclusively feminine enterprise, but its intrinsic association with women is reflected in the European courts, as much as in all the treatises on witchcraft and the folk tales and narratives that collectively gave form to a female witch archetype. While there were important regional differences, the vast majority of witchcraft accusations fell on women, "women appear to have constituted approximately 80% of the accused and approximately 85% of the executed for witchcraft during the period of the major European witch-hunts" (Clark & Richardson,

1996, pp. 119-120). In the county of Essex, England, out of 270 suspected witches, 247 were women. In Scotland, between 1560 and 1762, there were 1,491 women and 242 men accused, the women representing 86% of the total (Stewart & Strathern, 2004).

The same is true in Spain, where the consideration of witchcraft as a female 'trade' is betrayed even in documents that make an effort to include both sexes as possible trespassers. Some statutes from the province of Aragon start by including both *bruxas* y *bruxos* in their exhortations, to end up using only the feminine as the text continues. In accusations from this province, the masculine epithet *brujo* was reserved for cases of very serious abuse and, even then, it appears only in diminutive forms (*brujón*, *brujote*), in an effort to downplay the expressive force of the word since, in an absolute tense, only women could be *brujas* (Tausiet, 2004).

The definition of *bruxa/bruja*, as it appears in Spanish sixteenth and seventeenth century dictionaries and vocabularies, provides a first glimpse at who and what is associated with the practice of witchcraft. The entry for *bruxa* in the first dictionary of the Spanish language, Covarrubia's 1611 *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española* (Treasury of Castilian or Spanish Language), states the higher frequency of this "vice and evil" among women than man, "*por la ligereza y fragilidad, por la lujuria, y por el espíritu vengativo que en ellas suele reinar, y es más ordinario tratar esta materia debajo del nombre de bruja, que de brujo*" ("because of the flippancy and fragility, the lust and vengeful spirit that rules in them, it is customary to address this matter under the name of bruja and not brujo") (Covarrubias, 1611, p. 154). In the same fashion, the entry for *hechizar* (bewitch) reiterates the prevalence of these arts among women, now explained because they are an easier target for the devil, and because of their vengeful and envious nature:

Este vicio de hazer hechizos, aunque es común a hombres y mugeres, más de ordinario se halla entre mugeres, porque el demonio las halla más fáciles, o porque ellas de su naturaleza son insidiosamente vengativas y también envidiosas unas de otras.

This vice of casting spells, although it is common practice to men and women, it is more regularly found among women, because the devil finds them an easier target, or because they are by nature treacherously vindictive and envious of one another". (Echevarría, 2006, p. 2191)

In these definitions, the female qualities of 'flippancy' and 'fragility' put women at risk of falling into the evil practice, while their characteristic inclination to lust, revenge, and envy, are presented as their motivations. A contemporary definition of *bruja*, in Gonzalo Correas' *Vocabulary of Sayings and Proverbial Phrases* (1627) will introduce an important linguistic component in the discussion. Now the witch is defined by the power of her lying and intoxicating speech, which confuse her victims with false hopes and flattery: "*Adivina, vedera, hechicera y bruja todo es uno, y como consultora del padre de la mentira, engañarte ha con vanas esperanzas y embelecós*" ("Fortune-teller, seer, sorceress, and witch, all are one and the same, and as consultant of the father of lies, she will deceive you with empty hopes and deceit") (Correa, 1906, p. 432). Female deceit and treachery are personified in the old witch, sorceress, and enabler, whose Spanish paradigm is Fernando de Rojas' *Celestina* (Caro Baroja, 1993; Echevarría, 2006).

The fundamental connection between female speech and witchcraft had already been established one and a half centuries earlier in what would become the most influential treatise of witchcraft in Europe, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). According to the *Malleus*, women "have slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things which by evil arts they know; and, since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft" (Sprenger & Institoris, 1928, Part I, Question VI, p. 1). Witchcraft is at a very elemental level a linguistic performance, speech turned into action, and the action associated with it is seen as motivated by 'revenge', 'lust', or in general terms, whatever it is that women want to 'vindicate' for themselves. Witches are described as women who use their 'slippery tongues' to play by their own set of rules. Through their magical

speech, and by sharing their knowledge with other women, witches can obtain an ‘unnatural’ or ‘anti-natural’ advantage in reaching their goals. In other words, they can alter reality according to their wishes and have an influence in the life of the community that is not available to women ‘naturally’; this makes witches frighteningly powerful and socially dangerous. Women’s words quickly become dangerous when they are perceived as defiant or as a threat to the laws, customs, and traditions characteristic of the established social order. In this context, witchcraft can be seen as another linguistic performance that helps to understand the complex role language played in the construction of a female identity in this period. This new female role resembles the social role traditionally played by men and, in this sense, it is symptomatic that witches’ words are at times associated with masculinity, as will be illustrated in the following examples.

In her study of speech in Early New England, Kamensky (1997) mentions that witches’ voices are sometimes deemed “masculine” by the accusers, not so much for the way they sound, but for what the accused women “did” with their voices. When the witch is “demanding, complaining, and blaming”, she “spoke as if she were entitled to the kind of verbal authority that, in her world, accrued only to men” (Kamensky, 1997, p. 157), and this makes her sound “masculine” to her detractors. In the Spanish northern region of Asturias, there was the case of Ana García, *La Lobera* (The Wolfhunter), a rural witch tried by the Inquisition in 1648 because of her command of techniques to invoke demons (Mantecón & Torres, 2011). Demons not only came to her ritual convocations, but they also acted according to her wishes, evidencing, according to the depositions, a “*sofisticación en su discurso*”. What this “sophistication in her discourse” implies is that she had such verbal proficiency as a witch, that her words carried great power. It turned out that this young woman had been raised in a very masculine social milieu, in the midst of nomadic shepherds. In her appeal to knowledge of demon invocations, she found a tool that brought about the respect of the men in the male dominated environment of her community.

2.2. Ruling over Women’s Tongues

Witches’ words are also women’s words; so, in order to fully understand how they are received and judged, we need to consider them in the context of the great mistrust and negative stereotyping that characterized women’s speech in the Spanish Early Modern Era. Women’s idiosyncratic linguistic ability and sensitivity proved to be a critical tool for their advancement, but it also brought forth no shortage of conflicts. One doesn’t have to look far in Spanish popular sayings and proverbs or in the literature of this period, to get a full account of the long litany of vices and defects associated with female speech (García Mouton, 1999; Horozco, 1986; Martínez Kleiser, 1989; Mendieta, 2016; Miktova, 2007). This negative portrayal of her speech is combined with an increased zealotry in the political and religious effort for its regulation, as is articulated in a number of moral treatises and manuals that give full account of women’s shortcomings, as well as advice regarding optimal conduct.

Luis Vives (1936), for example, warns married women against the female inclination to rage and impulsiveness, which result in angry words, sour recriminations and yelling, much to the disgust of their husbands. There is nothing that alienates more the disposition and good will of a husband towards his wife than “*las voces y riñas y acedías de la mujer y las más de las veces sin razón o causa, encendiendo a los ánimos de sus maridos con fuego que echan de aquella boca*” (“women’s yelling, scolding, and sour words and most of the time without rhyme or reason, provoking their husband’s anger with the fire they spit from their mouths”) (Vives, 1936, p. 112). Vives (1936) remarks that all women are ‘*desgovernadas de la lengua*’ (have ungoverned tongues) and are easy prey to rage. Even with women, who are otherwise, sane, honest, and good, the same lack of moderation and temperance is found, what makes this vice a general trait of female speech. The same failure to ‘govern the tongue’ seems to have been at the root of many accusations of witchcraft.

Studies show that not all women considered witches ended up accused or put on trial. Factors such as their perceived public behavior

and their social status proved to be decisive in the outcome. Stewart and Strathern (2004, p. 158) find that in Early Modern England and Scotland the perceived “egregious behavior of some women made them vulnerable to accusation”, particularly, when the lack of restraint concerned their speech. Witches are described as “women with hot tempers” who insult, threat, and quarrel: “The witch had the Scottish quality of *smeddum*: spirit, a refusal to be put down, quarrelsomeness. No cursing; no malefice; no witch” (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 158). When a woman uses language in this fashion, she is ‘trespassing’ the safer territory of normative social behavior and making herself more vulnerable to attacks and accusations, particularly if she already has a conflictive relationship with her neighbors, and if she is poor, a widow, or not married. To be accused of witchcraft in this society is akin to be pointing to some source on internal tension at play, centered around the accused: “*Ser brujo ... es referirse a personas que levantan animadversión, personas a las que se imputa ojeriza o malquerencia, mala vecindad*” (“To be a witch is to refer to people who breed hostility, people who are accused of enmity or animosity, of being a troublesome neighbor”) (Azurmendi, 2013, p. 25). The reasons for the animosity against the accused are varied and could range from suspected theft or inheritance disputes, to a reputation for arrogance and pride. Kamensky (1997, p. 156) finds that “the connection between being accused of witchcraft and having a reputation for verbal aggression appears strong In New England accused witches far exceeded the general population in rates of ‘assultive’ speech, lying, and railing against authority”. The transition from being a “particularly heinous variety of scold” to being a witch is travelled in part through the intensity of the linguistic “violence” exhibited (Kamensky, 1997, p. 151). We can conclude that the acts of the reputed witches were “inseparable from their sinister words” in the accusers’ minds (Kamensky, 1997, p. 156). Also crucial in determining what presumptive witches will end up accused and tried, is their place in the social ladder. It seems universal that prejudice centered on women who were socially weak and studies of witch hunts find that witches were women “predominantly poor, middle-aged, or elderly”, often the wives or widows of tenant farmers, wage laborers, or

beggars (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, pp. 89-90).

Turning to Spanish sources, an example of a similar association between witchcraft and aggressive speech can be found in Covarrubias’ *Tesoro* (Treasury). Echevarría (2006) studies the representation of the feminine voice in this sixteenth-century dictionary and finds multiple words and expressions that portray women as loud-mouthed, fierce, and characteristically involved in verbal fights, insults, and threats. In this text, combative forms of language firmly connect verbal aggression with social disturbance and with marginal female characters such as witches, prostitutes, and Jewish women. Collectively all these linguistic performances serve to transform the defiant, loud, and brazen woman into a good candidate for witchcraft. This is also the message of Luis de León (1980) in the chapter of *La perfecta casada* (The perfect wife) devoted to modeling and criticizing married women’s linguistic behavior. From all virtues, women should pay special attention to being

*... apacible y dulce en su hablar...
Porque una mujer necia y parlera, como lo son de continuo las necias, por más bienes otros que tenga, es intolerable negocio. Y, ni más ni menos, la que es brava y de dura y áspera conversación, ni se puede ver, ni sufrir.*

... gentle and sweet in their speech... Because a foolish and talkative wife, as the foolish ones normally are, cannot be endured, no matter what other good qualities she may have. And, for certain, the one who is fierce and of harsh and rough conversation, cannot be borne or suffered. (p. 122)

There is nothing as monstrous as a ‘rough and fierce’ woman. Such ‘roughness’ is the trait of lions, tigers, and men; but if a woman becomes a lioness, what is left of her womanhood? Nothing, Luis de León responds. What remains in her place is ‘el trago y la estantigua’, in other words, a malefic spirit and a ghost, both of which belong to the supernatural realm of the witch.

An extreme case of women's verbal disruptive behavior is found in the *Barking Women*, a group of witches who were accused of barking and making other women bark. Barking women were attested in the valleys of Aragon and on both sides of the Pyrenees between 1498 and 1596. These witches are charged with provoking *mal de ladrar* (barking illness), and the sight of people barking is considered "*un claro síntoma de posesión diabólica provocada por embrujamiento*" ("a clear symptom of diabolical possession caused by witchcraft") (Tausiet, 2004, p. 200). Metaphorically the word *ladrar* refers to a violent or vengeful use of language "*vale también murmurar, o hablar con rabia o enojo contra alguno*" ("means also to gossip, to speak with rage or angrily against somebody") (Real Academia Española, 1726-1739), and in this acception these inarticulated sounds could also be related to the verbal aggressiveness associated with the women turned witches.

3. The Transformative Power of Words

3.1. Magic Formulas and Devil Worship

A traditional and magical use of speech by women is related to the curses, incantations, and spells, through which they were believed to transform reality, often uttered in the context of a wider act of witchcraft that included the preparation of magical substances. Words could be used to secure or ruin a love interest, to spoil the crops, cure sicknesses, and a long list of situations for which blame or help needed to be enlisted. While all the women related to this 'trade' were encompassed by the general term *bruja*, a basic distinction has been made between two different types of activities that set apart the traditional *bruja* from the *hechicera* (sorceress), and the differences relate to the nature of their actions, as much as to the regions where each was normally found. The *hechicera* is mostly associated with urban culture, is more individual and characteristic of the region of Castilla and the south of Spain (Caro Baroja, 1993; Lara Alberola, 2017 Tausiet, 2004). The *hechicera*, while may be assisted by the power of the devil in the achievement of her goals, does not commit apostasy nor does she become a Devil's subject, and because of that their persecution did not fall under the scope of the Inquisition.

They used special incantations to grant all sorts of wishes; for example, to change a husband's bad disposition towards his wife, the following formula is recorded: "*con dos te miro, con tres te ato, la sangre te bebo y el corazón te parto*" ("with two I see you, with three I tie you, I drink up your blood and break your heart") (Coronas 2000, p. 246). On the other hand, the typical *bruja* who attends *akelarres* (Basque word for witches' Sabbath) is mainly found in the rural north, particularly in the provinces of Navarre, Aragon, and the Basque region. One representative example is the trial that took place in 1616 in the Bizcaian coastal town of Bermeo, where witches were accused of being responsible for the destruction of the crops "*aber echo muchos daños, perdiendo trigo, uba, mançana, castaña, y todo genero de fruta y mantenimientos, con polbos que el diablo les daba*" ("have done much damage, spoiling wheat, grapes, apples, chestnuts, and all kind of fruit and food, with the powder that the devil gave them.") (Zabala, 2000, p. 89). Wanting to divert the authorities' attention from the trials against them, these witches ask the Devil for help, so that they can inflict "*un daño notable en este Señorío de Vizcaya*" ("considerable damage in this Lordship of Biscay") (Zabala, 2000, p. 89). The Devil complies and gives them a powder that they are to throw into the rivers while they recite the following magic formula, which the Devil tells them in Basque: "*deziéndoles estas palabras en lengua bascongada: echo estos polvos en nonbre y con la virtud de quien me los ha dado*" ("telling them these words in the Basque language: I throw this powder in the name and with the virtue of the one who gave it to me") (Zabala, 2000, p. 89). After this, a deluge ensured in Biscay that ruined "*cassas y heredades, molinos, ferrerías, puente, caminos y otros hedifiçios que estaban en partes muy seguras y aogaron jente y ganado y solo en esa dicha villa causaron de daño mas de diez mil ducados*" ("homes and estates, mills, forges, bridges, pathways, and other buildings that were in very safe parts, and people and cattled drown and just in that town they caused damage of more than ten thousand ducats") (Zabala, 2000, p. 89). Also in 1616, in a similar edict in the Biscayan town of Gernika, some witches were told by the Devil to say the following words while throwing the powder he had given to them: "*al trigo mucha poya y*

paja y poco grano” (“may the wheat have much chaff and little grain”) (Zabala, 2000, p. 94). These formulas are perhaps the most obvious linguistic performance directly associated with an act of witchcraft, and be it to heal or hurt, they epitomize the transformative power of magical speech.

The use or absence of words is also significant in the testimonies centered around Devil’s worship. In their confessions, Basque women accused of witchcraft speak about their *maestra*, the woman who initiated them and introduced them to the *akelarre*; this female teacher with her acts and words transforms the regular person into a witness and participant in supernatural events. Several elements reoccur in this process: the neofite is first given something to eat or drink (chestnuts, apples, millet bread, or cider), and at night the *maestra* spreads an unguent in different parts of his or her body (face, neck, palms, chest, back, or belly) before they can both fly towards the *akelarre*, where all sorts of sacrilegious acts take place. In her deposition, the thirty-six year old Basque woman María de Ulibarri identified María de Ondraita as her *maestra* and explained her process of initiation (Reguera, 2012):

[...] sacó una calabaza de donde sacó unos polvos y untos con los cuales le untó a esta confesante pechos, vientre y espaldas, diciéndole que no mentase el nombre de Jesús ni se encomendase a Dios ni a sus santos, y con esto salieron por las puertas de la casa de la dicha María de Ondraita, dejándolas abiertas, y por el aire.

[...] she took out a gourd from where she took out some powder and ointments which she spread in this deponent’s breasts, belly, and back, telling her not to mention Jesus’ name nor to entrust herself to God and his saints, and with this they left through the doors of the house of said María de Ondraita, leaving them open and by the air. (p. 252)

Once the witch and her company arrive at the meeting place, the *maestra* presents her new “gift” to the Devil: “Lord, look at the present I have brought for you”, the Devil thanks her

and then commands, that the newly inducted speaks repudiating “God our Lord and Holy Mary his mother, and all the sacraments of the Church and saints in heaven and her parents and godparents” and take the Devil for God and Lord (Reguera, 2012, p. 255). This amounted to a ceremony of renouncement. In these events, the power of words in the transformation comes to play, either by preventing the uttering of words that would entrust the person to the Christian God, or by saying words with which the witch entrusts the neofite’s soul to the Devil.

3.2. Language in the Aftermath of the Witch-Hunts: The Case of Zugarramurdi

The relationship between witchcraft and language can yet be further explored when we consider the intersections between witchcraft and literature. Witchcraft narratives circulated in the community as oral stories, just as other gossip and rumors did, but in this case the origin of the stories can often be traced back to traditional literary motifs. In all these trials, the person accused of witchcraft becomes a “story teller”, producing a testimony that incorporates some of the traditional motifs and also adds new elements of their own invention or invented following the hints provided by the very questions of the inquisitors (Lara Alberola, 2017, p. 267).

Azurmendi’s (2013, p. 57) account of the Zugarramurdi witch trials recounts how, as the events escalated, priests, and friars “*tronaban desde el púlpito contra el cabrón del Diablo y contra sus brujos que lo adoraban y besaban en el culo*” (“thundered from the pulpit against the Devil and against the witches who adored him and kissed him in the ass”), filling the minds of all the faithful with the gory details of devil worship, and giving form to the stories that will later be recounted by the presumptive witches. When, at the end of the conflict, the Inquisition tries to amend the damage done, an Edict of Silence is promulgated, as they are now convinced that “*no hubo brujos ni embrujados en el lugar hasta que se comenzó a tratar y escribir sobre ellos*” (“there were no witches or bewitched in the place until people started talking and writing about them”) (Azurmendi, 2013, p. 157). Once completed, the renditions of the trials are written down in pamphlets that fed people’s appetite for the

morbid and the macabre. Witchcraft thus can also be approached as a literary product, and judging by the popularity of these pamphlets, it is clear that readers found these ‘witch tales’ terribly compelling (Gibson, 1999; Rowland, 1999; Willumsen, 2011).

Azurmendi (2013, pp. 167-168) ends his revision of the Zugarramurdi witch-hunts with a reference to *Gero*, the first book of prose written in the Basque language, authored by the priest Pedro Daguerre Azpilcueta, known as Axular. Axular writes this sinner’s guide in 1643, many years after the imprisonments and burnings of Zugarramurdi have passed. In its pages, however, there is ample evidence that what remained in the aftermath of the horror, was a broken community consumed by the hate and the resentment of neighbors who had reported on each other in a desperate effort to save themselves. Taking into account that *Gero* is a sinner’s guide, Azurmendi (2013) finds surprising the large portion of the book (about 20%) devoted to admonitions against poor neighborly relations, characterized as “*murmuraciones, odios mutuos y enemistades entre vecinos*” (“rumors, mutual hate and feuds among neighbors.”) (Azurmendi, 2013, p. 172). And what is the prescribed way to fight such irascibility among neighbors, such rage and hatred? According to Axular, it’s all about language:

En poder de la lengua están la muerte y la vida, la guerra y la paz. Si tú quieres, puedes convertir al enemigo en amigo pero también volverlo más enemigo. Echale agua, háblale suave y dulcemente, el fuego se apagará, el odio se calmará.

In the power of speech are death and life, war and peace. If you want, you can make your enemy a friend, but you can also turn him into a worse enemy. Throw water to him, speak to him gently and sweetly, and the fire will die off, the hate will calm down. (Azurmendi, 2013, p. 175)

The antidote against hate is as easy as talk among neighbors; friendly words will sweeten the strained relationships. In traditional pre-democratic societies what is said and not said among neighbors carry a great deal of social

meaning, and the way people relate linguistically to one another can fundamentally challenge the peace in the community (Azurmendi, 2013):

decir es un hacer mediante palabras, ‘mal-decir’ equivale a hacer mal ... no domesticar la lengua y los ojos implican enemistad, belicosidad, pues la paz está condicionada a la distensión coloquial, al diálogo fluido,.... Dar-que-decir, cotillear, estar pendiente del qué dirán, todo eso lleva a la irascibilidad y, por tanto, al odio y al deseo de venganza

to speak is to do through words, to curse equals to do wrong not to domesticate the tongue and eyes implies enmity, bellicosity, because peace is built on colloquial ease, on fluid dialogue ... To give people something to talk about, to gossip, to worry about what people say, all that leads to irascibility and therefore, to hate and thirst for revenge. (p. 175)

Axular repeats the question that he has been asked over and over again by the townsfolk: Is it a sin not to talk, no to greet a neighbor, not to chat, even if you don’t have ill will? The question speaks volumes as to how the dramatic events had torn apart the social fabric of the town. In his response, Axular gives two main patterns of behavior that will have to be followed: greet your fellow townsfolk when you meet them in the way, and don’t act in such a fashion (by avoiding the person, not talking, etc.) that would create a rumor of a feud and give people reason to gossip. However, in order to be a saint, a mere greeting is not enough, it’s not enough just not to entertain ill-will and not to create a scandal, “*sino que es preciso ser con todos lo mismo, con todos es preciso ser conversador cariñoso y familiar*” (“but you need to be the same with everybody, with everybody you need to have a warm and pleasant conversation.”) (Azurmendi, 2013, p. 177). The reality seems to be quite far from such communicative ease, as going beyond the mere greeting and having a pleasant conversation with the neighbors is labelled ‘saintly’ behavior. The truth was that

neighbors did not greet each other and enmity and bad relations were rampant and apparent. Axular warned against the dangerous consequences of not following the minimum accepted standards of neighborly communication: people will talk and once rumor is set in motion, the consequences are unpredictable. The emergence and spread of accusations of witchcraft had followed a similar path, as will be discussed below.

4. Gossip, Rumor, and Public Reputation

In these fundamentally oral societies, the reputation of a person was, to a very big extent, based on what people said about him or her in the community. In such a context, “rumor and gossip become important tools in gathering information against people and the development of a consensus about who is responsible for deaths, illnesses, misfortunes, thefts, ‘unnatural’ weather, and the like” (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 195. See also Hindle, 1994; Norton, 1987; Ong’au-Mong’are & Agwuele, 2017; Paine, 1967; Wilson, 1974). Once this ‘consensus’ has been built and it has spread around, the accusations of witchcraft start. Rumors that preceded accusations of witchcraft, affected women to a much larger extent than men, in part due to women’s legal status. Norton (1996, p. 249) points out that while there were many ways to express anger towards a man, “a man could be hounded with nuisance lawsuits, he could be deprived of whatever offices he held, his fences and other property could be vandalized or his pigs and cows stolen or injured”, it was a lot more difficult to successfully attack a woman. Married women didn’t own property, held no public office, and in case of a lawsuit, not she but her husband would have to appear in court, “of necessity, then, neighbors’ attacks on mature women often took verbal form. And the most damaging charges that could be leveled against women were those that accused them of capital offenses, chiefly witchcraft, infanticide, or... adultery” (Norton, 1996, pp. 249-250).

Once the accusation is launched, public reputation was often adduced as ‘proof’ of culpability. The formula ‘*ha oído y entendido*’ (has heard and understood) appears continuously in the depositions of witnesses who personally had nothing against the

accused women, except the knowledge of the rumors that circulated about them. In a sixteenth century trial against María López, one of the witnesses states that “*siempre ha oído y entendido assi en el lugar de Sinues como por toda la val de Aysa, de muchas y fidedignas personas cuyo nombre no se acuerda, ser y que era bruxa, malefica, hechizera*” (“she has always heard and understood, in Sinues as well as in the whole valley of Aysa, from many and trustworthy people whose names she doesn’t remember, that she was a witch, a conjurer, and a sorceress”) (Tausiet, 2004, p. 220). The veracity attributed to the rumor and gossip had a lot to do with the living conditions that characterized the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Documents repeatedly evidence a constant and very close cohabitation with family and neighbors. Nothing can really happen in the community outside the sight and ear of people living in very close quarters. In Aragonese witch trials there is a constant reference to events that we would nowadays deem private and what filters in the depositions is a general absence of privacy. In one occasion, a testimony states that one Catalina García could not have possibly met with her presumed accomplices, because if she did, the rest of the town would have known about it (Tausiet, 2004):

Jamas ha visto ni oído que dicha Catalina Garcia haya hecho ajuntamiento de mujeres para hacer exarmos, santiguaciones o bruxerias ... ni entiende ni crehe se pudiesen juntar que no se hubiese sentimiento por el pueblo y, habiendose sentimiento por el pueblo de tal cosa, pretiende la deposante lo sabria, porque cosas semejantes, en publicandose por el pueblo, lo saben todos los del pueblo.

She has never seen or heard that the mentioned Catalina Garcia had met with other women to cause destruction, and to do magic and witchcraft ... and she doesn’t understand or believe that they could have gotten together and this not be known in the town, and once the town had knowledge about it, the deponent insists she would know about it,

because once a thing like that is made public through the town, everybody in the town knows about it. (p. 370)

The close living quarters that characterized life in the same town, neighborhood, or even house, “*convertía a cada uno en testigo presencial más o menos involuntario de las vidas ajenas*” (“turned every person into a more or less involuntary witness of other people’s lives”) (Tausiet, 2004, pp. 371-372). In the accusations of witchcraft studied in the Aragonese corpus, conversations outdoors and in the presence of witnesses are much more common than their private counterparts. Most of the time, it is the women through the sociability of their daily life who act as agents of diffusion of these accusations. Female sociability is dense and repetitive, and as women find each other over the daily scenarios of their multiple chores, they talk and spread the news. Public places of female work, such as the communal oven (*el horno*), frame many of the “*sucesos de brujería*” (witchcraft event) that will later be described by witnesses in front of a judge. To say something out loud at *el horno* is as good as to publish it to the whole town. For example, in 1594 a woman denounces to the episcopal judge that another woman, whom she called a witch, had spoken publicly against her, “*Lo qual dixo en presencia de dichas mugeres del orno*” (“and she said it in front of the women at the oven.”) (Tausiet, 2004, p. 375). Disputes and recriminations recorded at these public places will be recounted much later by not only the women present, but also their husbands, and relatives, as they become common knowledge. Other public female place of gathering is *el lavadero*, where women went to wash clothes and where sometimes the tensions among them played out. Caro Baroja cites a case in the Basque town of Fuenterrabia (Guipuzcoa), where a woman making an accusation of witchcraft tells how she was washing some sheets at the fountain when she met the woman who later coopted her to attend the *akelarre* (Caro Baroja, 1985). These living conditions, characterized by close physical proximity and multiple public meeting places, frame an existence where privacy hardly existed.

It is not hard to imagine how far and wide a piece of news travelled once it became *vox*

populi. In the accusations of witchcraft, the main support for any argumentation was, without a doubt, public opinion. The accounts of the witnesses really served to prove what was already decided in the court of public opinion, and were only used to ‘prove’ what everybody already ‘knew’. More than what is sin or virtue, truth or lie, what really mattered was the personal reputation in front of the neighbors. In Tausiet’s (2004, p. 392) words, it is “the triumph of appearances”. This triumph of appearances explains the great importance given to good manners, gestures, greetings, and farewells, and every other aspect of public communicative exchanges. What was said earlier regarding the aggressive linguistic style of women accused of witchcraft, can now be revisited, from this perspective. As Tausiet (2004, p. 393) remarks, “*En un mundo donde los usos de la civilidad tenían tanta trascendencia, se entiende mejor que ciertas mujeres aisladas y descorteses, o incluso irascibles y reñidoras, fueran acusadas de ser las causantes de cuantos males afectaban a quienes las conocían*” (“In a world where good manners had such transcendence, we can understand better that isolated and rude women, or even those short-tempered and quarrelsome, were accused of being the source of any other malady that affected whoever they knew”). Now the verbal and non-verbal impoliteness of certain women is presented as proof of witchcraft. A greeting withdrawn is interpreted as a curse, and any gesture can be seen as a magic attempt to harm. Isabel Garay was accused of witchcraft because, according to a witness, she turned away her face when they run into each other. Another witness presents as proof that he had seen the accused arguing many times with different people (Tausiet, 2004):

con muchas personas vecinas de Cosuenda, y en particular con un molinero y una molinera que hay en dicho lugar ... y vio que, estando con ellos, se ponía el dedo en la nariz a manera de que les amenazaba, y luego, despues de dichas rifias vio este deposante estuvieron dichos molineros muy enfermos.

with many people from Cosuenda, and particularly a miller and his wife that live there ... and he saw that, while

she was with them, she touched her nose with her finger as if she was threatening them, and later, after those quarrels, this deponent saw that the millers were very sick. (p. 393)

Every external sign could affect the fame of a person, and the fame would direct the high regard or scorn of the neighbors. Slander appears in these centuries as one of the most common crimes brought to the courts. No proof of truthfulness was needed beyond the good name of the plaintiff and the testimony of other accusers “*gente cuerda y virtuosa y sin sospecha*” (“sane and virtuous people, trustworthy”) (Tausiet, 2004, p. 395). The importance of the personal fame and reputation was reflected in the writings of the bishops. Next to usury, the sin they most strongly denounced was that of spreading rumors and gossip. To threaten the social standing of a person was to question his or her own existence; it is extremely easy to do, but the consequences can be fatal.

Two witch trials from Biscay will clearly show how rumor served to perpetuate existing animosities between hostile groups, a fact that was at the heart of many accusations of witchcraft. The source of most accusations can be traced to preexisting conflict, rivalries, and bad relationships among neighbors or family members, often caused by power struggles, envy or revenge, suspicion of theft, or just hostility towards somebody who behaved in a way that elicited distrust. An example of such conflict can be found in the civil trial against the witches of the Bizcayan rural town of Ceberio (1555-1558): “*este proceso nos pone ante un grupo de aldeanos enemigos de otro grupo, al cual denuncian por delitos de Brujería o, mejor dicho, instigan a unas niñas a que hagan la denuncia*” (“in this trial we face a group of townsfolk who are enemies of another group, to whom they accuse of witchcraft, or more accurately, they incite some young girls into making that claim”) (Caro Baroja, 1993, p. 198). Eight year old Catalina de Guesala, after having confessed to witchcraft and accused a number of neighbors and family groups, retracts herself and explains how she was coerced into making those accusations:

Le dixieron que dixese cómo Diego de Guinea e Mari Ochoa de Guesala a esta testigo la abían hecho bruxa, e que los Hereinoca, que todos heran bruxos, e todo lo demás que antes esta testigo tenia dicho las susodichas le dixieron que dixiese así, amenazándole e teniéndola en el suelo tendida para darle cozes, e que por ello lo dixo.

They ordered her to tell how Diego de Guinea and Mari Ochoa de Guesala had made her a witch, and that the Hereinoca's were all witches, and the rest of what she had said those women ordered her to say, threatening her and having her pinned to the ground to kick her, and that is why she said it. (Zabala, 2000, p. 57)

Catalina will later retract herself and confirm the initial witchcraft accusations; then, she is asked by the court why she had previously claimed that it was a forced statement, to which she responds,

Repondio y dixo que dicha Mari Ochoa de Guezala, su tía, la aconsejó e dixo que así lo dixiese y hechase la fama que las dichas moças se lo abian mandado y hecho dezir, que si así no lo hiciese, que la mataría, e que por ello lo dixo

She answered and said that the mentioned Mari Ochoa de Guezala, her aunt, advised and asked her to say that, and to proclaim that those women had forced her to say it, and that if she didn't do it, she would kill her, and that is why she said it. (Zabala, 2000, p. 60)

Having been intimidated by one faction or the other, her testimony shows that what really lies behind are two enemy groups who spread rumors and accusations of witchcraft as a tool of confrontation. In this same trial, a clergyman presents what is taken for truth in public opinion as evidence of witchcraft, “*y que públicamente se nonbran de cómo heran bruxos y bruxas ... y que el testigo los ha tenido y tiene por bruxos e bruxas*” (“and that publicly they are known to be witches ... and

that the witness believed and believes them to be witches”) (Zabala, 2000, p. 64).

Zeanuri, another enclave in rural Bizkaia, is the site of similar conflicts in 1572. In this particular case, a woman is accused of using witchcraft to cause impotence to a man who she had wanted her daughter to marry. When, after many years, the young man is cured, he is told that the spell was given by someone who had wanted him to marry her daughter. In his deposition, the father of the victim states that, although there were other candidates, he only suspects of this particular woman, obviously because there was already a bad relation among them, “*y aunque también otros casamientos se ofrecieron para su hijo, sólo sospecha de Mayora*” (“and although there were other proposals of marriage for his son, he only suspects Mayora”) (Zabala, 2000, p. 75). When bad news strike and witchcraft seems to provide a viable explanation, the victims look for guilty parties or witches within the social structures of their rural communities. In this process, rumor and gossip help to perpetuate the existing animosity between opposing groups.

4. Concluding Remarks

From a purely linguistic perspective, speech acts of witchcraft point to a high level of agency in women’s language, metaphorically showing that women can do with words things that are powerful and very difficult to control. A variety of Spanish Early Modern texts and documents stigmatize female aggressive speech styles, and show a strong connection between having a reputation for insult, threat and quarrel and being accused of witchcraft. In this respect, additional research needs to be conducted for Early Modern Spain comparing the rate of ‘assaultive speech’ in accused witches and the general population. While I have concentrated on the Basque and Aragonese regions, it would be important to see how the trends outlined in the territory of the traditional *bruja* present themselves in southern Spain, where *hechiceras* prevailed in a very different demographic and cultural setting. The testimonies evidence an interconnection between rumor, reputation, and witchcraft that show how prejudice played out existing hostilities among neighbors and prayed on women who were socially weak.

Additionally, they help to understand the negotiation of identity in societies where personal value is anchored in public reputation, which consists entirely of other people’s words. In this respect, accusations of witchcraft can be seen as a *locus* where Early Modern gender, social, and existential tensions converge.

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