"Decorative" morphology in Spanish: when typology meets sociolinguistics (and vice versa)

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Abstract

Human languages are hypothesized to be adapted to the functions they fulfill. Specifically, their structure has been claimed to be optimized for efficient communication and easy learning. Nonetheless, languages also exhibit many "extravagant" features, with no clear straight role in information transfer or language acquisition. Building on typological research on this topic, in this paper we present evidence that varieties of Spanish (colloquial mostly) feature the type of "decorative" morphology found in some world languages. We provide a detailed characterization of such morphology and further hypothesize some potential functions for this "extravagant" feature. We conclude by advocating for a sociopragmatics approach to intralinguistic variation that considers the findings by language typology, but also for a typological approach to language diversity that takes into account findings by variationist sociolinguistics. Ultimately, our study argues for a unitary view of linguistic variation and for taking "secondary" language functions (like aesthetics or play) into account when explaining the design features of human languages.

Keywords: Spanish; intralinguistic variation; typology; extravagant language features; "decorative" morphology

Introduction

Increasing evidence suggests that languages adapt to their physical and social environments (Trudgill, 2011; Nettle, 2012; Everett et al., 2015; Majid, 2015; Lupyan & Dale, 2016; Wang et al. 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Research also suggests that languages might adapt, more specifically, to the functions they fulfill. Accordingly, language structure has been argued to be optimized for efficient communication and learning, with this adaptive response impacting on all language domains, from syntax to the lexicon (Fedzechkina et al., 2012; Gibson et al., 2019; Levshina & Moran, 2021). For instance, in all world languages, the frequency of words shows a power relation with their rank (Zipf's law of frequency), seemingly reflecting a trade-off between expressivity pressures (the larger number of words, the more exact communication), and learnability pressures (the larger number of words, the more learning costs) (Lavi-Rotbain & Arnon, 2022). Nevertheless, this type of research has mostly focused on communicative and cognitive aspects, while largely ignoring other language functions. It is thus unclear whether languages are equally optimized for e.g. expressing emotions or bonding. At the same time, languages exhibit features that cannot be properly regarded as optimal. Consider redundancy. Grammatically, redundancy entails two or more language features conveying the same meaning or serving the same function, as in e.g. the pronoun *I* and the verbal form *am* both informing about 1SG in *I am happy* (Wit & Gillette, 1999). Similarly, in syntax, expletives are sentence components without semantic content, like *there* in English existential constructions of the sort *There is a cat on the roof* (Sabel, 2000). Expletives can be also found within words, as with empty morphs (i.e. morphs without meaning or function) (Hockett, 1947; Aronoff & Repetti, 2022). A cover term for redundancy, expletives, and other "superfluous", non-canonic, or non-normative linguistic features is "extravagancy", which was originally coined by Haspelmath (1999). Extravagant expressions can be said to contain more verbal material than strictly needed (Detges & Waltereit, 2002; Petré, 2017), thus going against the principles of economy and communicative/cognitive efficiency. The amount of extravagancy diverges cross-linguistically. For instance, in Khmer, sentences show many servant words with no clear referential roles, as in *papuh teuk pruac pruac* 'water keeps bubbling and bubbling' (literally, 'bubble water bubble.up bubble.up') (Haiman, 2010).

It has been suggested that these extravagant features could still be functionally motivated, even if they eventually result in language structures that are more difficult to acquire and/or that communicate less efficiently. According to Wit and Gillette (1999), redundancy plays a pragmatic role, like contrasting or emphasizing some parts of the utterance. Rizza (2009)

further notes that semantic redundancy is greater in formal speech: how words are uttered (including a notable degree of redundancy) can be more important than the exact meaning to be conveyed. This is indicative of redundancy playing a social role too (as providing status to skilled language users). Redundancy could also help children acquire some aspects of their native language. Tal & Arnon (2022) have shown that marking syntactic functions through both word order and case improves the successful identification of thematic roles by children in experiments involving artificial languages. Extravagance more generally has been typically regarded as a pragmatic device (Baumann & Mühlenbernd, 2022), in line with Grice's Maxim of Manner (i.e. whenever the speaker avoids clarity, brevity, or order, some implicit meaning is conveyed). Nevertheless, as noted above for redundancy, extravagance can also increase social fitness (see e.g. Neels, 2019), if users gain attention and/or status by detaching from (socio)linguistic norms. Related to this effect, extravagance has been hypothesized to promote language change. Specifically, it might play a role in grammaticalization processes (Haspelmath, 1999; Neels et al., 2023). According to Haspelmath (1999), grammaticalization might be indeed a side effect of the social uses of extravagance: at first, extravagant formulations are employed to attract attention, but later they become established within the speech community, usually through semantic bleaching. Finally, extravagance has been also considered a purely aesthetic phenomenon. This is most notably observed in certain poetic styles (e.g., gongorism), although the type of servant or "decorative" morphology found in languages like Khmer has been claimed to be aesthetically-motivated too. Hence, in Khmer, morphemes or words lacking a primary referential or grammatical function typically present reduplicated (Haiman, 2013). This might be explained by our pervasive taste for regularity, order, and symmetry (Westphal-Fitch & Fitch, 2018). Ultimately, extravagant features might be rooted in our proclivity to play. We indeed use language for playing, as in pretend play (Pleyer, 2020), but we also extensively play with language, i.e. we exploit language structure creatively to provoke pleasant effects. Besides the type of "decorative" morphology mentioned above, which will be our main concern in this paper, other evidence of such a tendency are verbal plays involving sounds (as in rhymes, alliterations, and the like), or meanings (as in creative metaphors, semantic displacements, etcetera) (see Benítez-Burraco et al., 2022 for details).

In this paper, we survey the evidence for "decorative" morphology in Spanish, which, as noted, is a distinctive feature of some Asian languages. By the reasons above, we expect this extravagant feature to be more abundant in colloquial varieties of Spanish. Nonetheless, this is

an understudied trait, among other reasons because, as noted by Haiman (2013), the very concept of "decorative" morphology is highly controversial in Western linguistics. In the paper, we first provide a detailed account of "decorative" features in the morphology of Spanish. Afterwards, we advance some explanations for this marked behavior. In contrast to other approaches to this topic, like the pragmatic takes discussed above, our study builds on findings by typology (particularly, Haiman 2010, 2013). At the same time, we think that examining this type of variation in a WEIRD language (i.e. Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic, after Henrich et al., 2010) such as Spanish can help clarify the structural patterns found among the world's languages, including traits that are typically found in non-WEIRD languages. In doing this, we adhere to previous attempts to achieve a more fluid dialogue between sociolinguistics and typology. One notable example is Trudgill's seminal work (2011), which roots the typological diversity of the world's languages on selected social factors (group size, degree of contact, type of social networks), all of them with a known effect on language variation within individual languages. Eventually, since varieties of Spanish (and of other WEIRD languages) are more accessible than most of the world's languages featuring "decorative" traits, focusing on such varieties should allow to conduct fine-grained analyses of underexamined phenomena like "extravagant" features.

2. Methodological concerns

To characterize the morphological phenomena that can be construed as "decorative" or extravagant in Spanish, we have mostly relied, as noted, on Haiman's (2013) influential work on Khmer. Haiman focuses on two main "decorative" morphological patterns:

- Infixation of pre-existing (monosyllabic) words (e.g., *ksae > k-ra-sae* 'string'), with infixed words being perceived as "more elegant" (p. 66).
- Compound formation via reduplication, with one of the pairs being secondarily modified (e.g., *sranawh + **sranaok***, the latter from *saok* 'sad') (p. 69), or via combination with a non-existent or semantically unrelated word (e.g., *lveung **lviaj*** 'vast') (p. 68). Moreover, in both types, the "decorative" part of the compound usually alliterates with the meaningful part. In some cases, however, these compounds are dysphemistic, and speakers intentionally seek for assonances with obscene or derogatory words (e.g. *kuj kandeh*, from *keh kanduj* 'scratch cunt' and used to refer disparagingly to the Kui people) (p. 70). Symmetry is thus the most noticeable property of these compounds, and it is preserved even when compounds undergo a phonological

reduction (p. 75). Haiman notes further (p. 76) that: "The upshot of this is that Khmer, an isolating language, is beginning to manifest a system of obligatory but non-referential grammatical agreement between symmetrically conjoined morphemes". Later (p. 80), he qualifies this claim and maintains a distinction between grammatical (agreement-based) morphology and "decorative" morphology. What is most relevant for our purposes here is that these symmetrical patterns, which superficially resemble agreement patterns, are also well-documented in Spanish, as we will show below. Similarly to Khmer, they contrast with true grammatical words and are also sociolinguistically-marked.

Spanish is a fusional language with a rich morphology. It is a predominantly suffixing language, but it also makes use of prefixes and compound patterns. Inflectional morphology is exclusively suffixing. New words in Spanish can be formed via prefixation, compounding, acronymy, and other mechanisms, but word formation is mainly suffixing. A distinction is typically made between (truly) derivational suffixes and evaluative (or affective) suffixes. The latter typically convey expressive meanings, mostly related to size or intensity. This is also the case of the rare interfixes linking some roots to some derivational suffixes (Fábregas, 2017). Fábregas et al. (2021) has provided an updated and comprehensive characterization of the morphology of Spanish. Because Spanish morphology is richer than Khmer morphology, we have extended our analysis to other morphological phenomena that can be regarded as "decorative" or extravagant (i.e. that display features such as redundancy, expletivity, or non-referentiality), in the domains of inflectional morphology (section 3), derivational suffixation (section 4), evaluative suffixation (section 5), and compounding, phraseology, and prefixation (section 6). Many of the features we examine in the paper are reasonably well described in the literature. Nevertheless, they have never been approached collectively, despite sharing remarkably similar functions and notable parallels to "decorative" morphology in languages like Khmer. Our paper aims to contribute to filling this gap and to explore potential cross-similarities. For each phenomenon, we provide examples retrieved from the *Corpus del español NOW* (https://www.corpusdelespanol.org/now/) and other sources (see footnotes), we discuss their prior characterization in the literature, and provide reasons for their characterization as instances of "decorative" or extravagant morphology. Whenever possible, we draw parallels with Haiman's analysis, particularly, with attempts at producing symmetric patterns and more stylish words (and occasionally, a less refined lexicon). Whenever relevant, we also highlight

two functions of this "decorative" or extravagant morphology not straightly under Haiman's radar: playfulness (Pleyer, 2020) and word processability (Wit & Gillette, 1999).

3. Inflectional morphology

3.1. Gender

Consider the examples in (1) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold):

(1)

a. *Aunque una madre vasca hubiera dicho "Ni fiestas ni fiestos"*[1]

'But a Basque mother had said "in any case there will be any party"'

b. *Ni entrega ni entrego*.[2]

'Don´t ask me for more dedication'

c. *Ni Cristina ni Cristino. Haced el programa y dejarme vivir unos minutos*.[3]

'I, Cristina (Pedroche), ask you to conduct the program and give me some rest'

d. *Ni por favor ni por favora y otras frases de madre*.[4]

'"Don't please me" and other mother saying'

e. *y no hay más, ni Maillo ni Mailla ni teoría de la conspiración*.[5]

'I think that the conservative politician Fernando Martínez-Maíllo is not involved in any conspiracy theory'

Fiestos, entrego, Cristino, por favora, and *Mailla* are ungrammatical (or rare) versions of the nouns *fiestas* 'parties'*, entrega* 'dedication', *Cristina* 'Christine', (*por) favor* 'please' and *Maillo* 'Maillo', respectively. In Spanish, only animate nouns vary in gender. This is marked with the morphs *-o* (MASC) and *-a* (FEM) (e.g., *niño, niña* 'kid'). *Fiesta* and *entrega* are inanimate nouns that are inherently feminine. The interjection *por favor* contains the noun

favor, which is assigned to masculine. *Maillo* is a surname and, as such, is not assigned grammatical gender. *Cristina* is a proper female name. Its masculine counterpart, *Cristino*, though rare, does exist. In Spanish there is a strong correlation between the presence of a final -*o* in the word (usually called *word marker*) and masculine gender, and -*a* and feminine gender, although some exceptions do exist (e.g. many inanimate nouns with the word marker -*a* are masculine, like *el tema* 'the topic'), or can be used to refer to both males and females (*el pianista* 'the piano man', *la pianista* 'the piano woman') (for the relationship between gender and word markers in Spanish, see Roca, 2005). The important issue in (1) is that word markers have become variable and reinterpreted as gender markers.

González Ollé (1981) has regarded this phenomenon as an example of *expressive negation* via the paradigmatic opposition of grammatical gender, typically found in the construction [*ni (x) ni (y)*] 'neither x, nor y'. García Page (1991) has discussed this as a purely inflectional issue, with nouns belonging to a single gender class now taking both gender affixes. Finally, Bajo Pérez (2021) has regarded these alternations as a pragmatic phenomenon, in line with the derogatory use of the masculine morpheme in new creations such as *palabro*, *bicicleto*, or *señoro* (which are dysphemistic variants of *palabra* 'word', *bicicleta* 'bike', and *señor* 'gentleman').

In our view, these are too reductionistic views. Examples from (1) are not derogatory. More importantly, this alternation also occurs from masculine to feminine, as in (1d-e). Finally, expressive or emphatic negations can be also achieved via the replacement of the second word in the [*ni (x) ni (y)*] structure, as in (2):

(2) *Ni Sfairopoulos, ni **ostias en vinagre**. El calvo NO se toca.*[6]
'Even Sfairopoulous is not a good replacement for our current mister (the bald one) is irreplaceable'

Accordingly, we think that the pragmatic effect is caused by the construction itself (see Booij, 2005 for discussion), particularly, if used in a colloquial/conversational context. But importantly for our concerns here, the mechanism in (1) results in strong symmetric expressions, with the two contrasting elements being nearly identical, with the exception of the

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word ending. This neatly resembles the "decorative" compounds found in Khmer by Haiman. Supporting our view, in contemporary Spanish, constructions like those in (1) have a playful effect, which is a typical function of extravagant morphology. For instance, they can be used to imitate how Spanish mothers typically speak (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vBTuITemFc).

3.2. Number

Consider the examples in (3) and (4) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold). These illustrate the usage of plural forms of common nouns (3) or hypocoristics (4) to refer to single individuals. Cases like (3) are amply attested and even described in reference grammars (Ambadiang, 1999: 4889; RAE & ASALE, 2009: 13.5j; 3.2o). Usages like (4) are recent and poorly documented. They are typically found among young people (examples in (4) have been extracted from platform X):

(3)
a. *un lumbreras* 'a whiz', *un guaperas* 'a vain person', *un finolis* 'a mannered person', *un frescales* 'a cheeky person', un *rubiales* 'a blonde boy', *un agonías* 'a worrywart'

b. *un bocazas* 'a bigmouth', *un manazas* 'a clumsy person', un *calzonazos* 'a wimp', *un melenas* 'long-haired, hippie/heavy boy'

c. *un chapuzas* 'a botcher', *un voceras* 'a loudmouth'

(4)
a. *Jorgis* 'Georgie', *Lauris* 'Laurie', *Adris* 'Adrie'[7]

b. *Pableras* 'Paul'(used mainly to refer to Spanish politician Pablo Iglesias)[8]

Regarding the examples in (3), reference grammars of Spanish (e.g. RAE & ASALE, 2009: 13.5j; 3.2o) only discuss the plural forms ending in -*as* with a derogatory use. But as noted, words with other endings can be pluralized (e.g., *rubiales*, *finolis*, *calzonazos*). Moreover,

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[7] https://x.com/marianapch/status/1889901952525537343,
https://x.com/pilarmj78/status/1908067717086695623, https://x.com/adri_fg14/status/1913659957951807765
[8] https://x.com/chainsaw_joe/status/1910682082151477394

although the appellatives in (3) have a true dysphemistic sense, they are not proper insults. Typically, they are used in informal, familiar settings to highlight, either metaphorically or metonymically, some distinctive feature of the subject. Finally, the plural affix lacks any referential role, since the appellatives in (3) and (4) are applied, as noted, to individuals. It has been argued that the plural ending is an intensifier, as in true verbal+noun compounds, such as *aguafiestas* 'blow+parties' 'killjoy' (Varela, 1990; Moyna, 2011: 63). Nonetheless, this makes no sense for the hypocoristics in (4). One must conclude that plural suffix may be purely decorative. This view is supported by the consideration of examples in (5) and (6).

(5)

a. *Y dirá usted 'la gente no tiene derecho a comprarse chale-**s**-**es**, en los que poner sofa-**s**-**es**, para tomar café-**s**-**es**'*[9]

'And you will say that people have no right to buy **chalets** where to put **sofas** to take **coffees**'

(Carlos Herrera, a Spanish presenter, criticizing left-wing politicians with high lifestyle)

b. *carne-**s**-**es*** 'carnets'[10], *papa-**s**-**es***[11]

(6)

a. *Profesora, ¿se dice muéranse o muéra-**n**-se-**n**?*[12]

'Teacher, which is the correct form to say *they die*, *muéranse* o *muéransen*'? (a teenagers' fashion to mock their teachers)

b. *preocupe-**n**-se-**n*** 'you worry'[13], *una-**n**-se-**n*** 'you join'[14], *dedique-**n**-se-**n***[15] 'commit yourselves'

In (5) and (6), plural affixes appear reduplicated, resulting in agrammatical forms. Ambadiang (1999: 4892) suggests that in (5) speakers are pluralizing nouns ending in *-é* or *-á*, which are rare, as nouns ending in *-és*, which are more frequent (e.g. *inglés* 'Englishman', *ingle**s**-**es***

[9] https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/el-vapuleo-de-carlos-herrera-a-iglesias-y-a-montero-tras-comprarse-un-casoplon-de-600-000-euros_es_5c8a93d1e4b0f489d2b41efd.html
[10] http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2019/05/06/matematica-numerica-a-lo-zubi-y-respondiendo-a-la-fhc/
[11] https://www.excelsior.com.mx/opinion/maria-luisa-mendoza/2015/07/25/1036591
[12] https://www.ecuavisa.com/noticias/mueransen-o-mueranse-nueva-fiebre-juvenil-MTEC53248
[13] https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2015/04/17/5530e62122601d452c8b457b.html
[14] https://www.threads.net/@indirectaspqsi/post/DGgpmnQxwCI
[15] https://www.elesquiu.com/policiales/2016/9/21/secuestran-drogas-casa-donde-paraban-veinte-menores-226951.html

'Englishmen' vs. *café*, *cafes-es*, even though *cafés* is already a plural form). Although the uses in (5) are typical of popular speech, it is interesting that literate speakers can rely on them to produce a humorous effect (as in 5a) (see RAE & ASALE, 2009: 3.2d). The same can be said of the plural verbal forms in (6), with a reduplicated plural suffix -*n*. They are dialectal, strongly stigmatized forms (RAE & ASALE, 2009: 4.4l), seemingly resulting from a hypercorrection effect (in Spanish, third-person plural verbal forms always end in -*n*). But as in the case of (5), educated speakers can use the forms in (6) for kidding, as in (6a).

4. Derivational suffixes

Consider the examples in (7) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold).

(7) *catastrof-**íst**-ica* (catastrófica)[16] 'catastrophic', *lingüística roman-**íst**-ica* (lingüística románica) 'Romance linguistics'[17], *muse-**al**-izar* (museizar) 'to musealize', *potenci-**al-izar*** (potenciar) 'to promote'[18], *parti-cion-a-**miento*** (partición) 'partition'[19], *aisla-**cion**-a-miento* (aislamiento) 'isolation'[20]

In the examples in (7), two derivational suffixes conveying the same meaning co-occur within the word. This is rare, but not exceptional. What one finds more frequently is that two suffixes conveying the same (derivational) meaning/function are applied to the same root resulting in two different words with the same meaning, as in *peregrina**ción**/peregrin**aje*** 'pilgrimage', *blanc**or**/blanc**ura*** 'whiteness', or *controvert**ido**/controversi**al*** 'controversial'. This is also observed in many other synthetic languages. English, for example, has the words *horrific*, *horrid*, and *horrible*, all of them with the same meaning. That said, words ending, specifically, in -*íst-ico* or -*al-izar*, as in (6), are quite common in Spanish (Nishimura, 2020). One of the suffixes is semantically empty, since an equivalent word with the same meaning but lacking the suffix does exist in the language (between brackets in (7)).

We wish to argue that these empty suffixes (in bold in (7)) are instances of "decorative" morphology resembling the infixed words in Khmer that are perceived as more elegant by speakers. We acknowledge that this is not the mainstream view. Typically, the second suffix is

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[16] https://www.filmaffinity.com/es/reviews2/1/169402.html
[17] https://dle.rae.es/roman%C3%ADstica?m=form
[18] https://dle.rae.es/potencializar?m=form
[19] https://rpubs.com/JairoAyala/MP
[20] https://trampantojos.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/epc3adgrafe-2.-franquismo2019.pdf

viewed as a modifier of a previously derived word (i.e. *criminalizar* 'to criminalize' = *criminal* 'criminal' + *izar*). But this view is problematic for some words. First, semantically, the second suffix could be argued to be more directly tied to the root. Accordingly, the meaning of *armament-íst-ico* 'weaponry' is more related to *armamento* 'armament' than to *armamentista* 'arm supporter'. Likewise, *musicalizar* 'to musicalize' means "to add music", but not "to make a musical". Second, sometimes the words with the first suffix only are not found. For instance, whereas *memor-ístico* 'memory-related' is a real word, **memorista* is not. Likewise, there exists *medic-alizar* 'to medicalize.', but not **medical*.

By contrast, some further evidence supports our view that these are instances of "decorative" suffixation. First, as noted by Benítez González (2024), a root with two suffixes, as in (7), is less integrated and easier to be (morphologically) traced, as proposed for words with interfixes by Natural Morphology (see Dressler, 1986 for discussion). In fact, the second suffix in words like those in (7) occupies the same position as true interfixes, also lacking an independent semantic interpretation (see also Zacarías, 2006)[21]. Second, as also observed by Benítez González, whereas relational adjectives with *-ico* only tend to be inherited from Latin and used in formal contexts (typically, the scientific literature), words with the two suffixes are recent and used widely (sports, information technology, politics, or education). Third, as noted by Fábregas (2007), it is semantically empty suffixes that are hypercharacterized more frequently. Finally, words like those listed in (7) are perceived by Spanish speakers as more /too technical, or even as plainly pompous. One example is *desayunístico* 'breakfast-related', which is derived from *desayuno* 'breakfast'[22] . In our view, these uses parallel those given to the infixed versions of some words in Khmer, which are also perceived by speakers as more stylish and suggestive of a greater competence in the language.

5. Evaluative suffixation

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[21] We will not address the issue of interfixation in Spanish in this article, as it is a particularly controversial and complex matter to which the literature has given considerable attention. The traditional view was that interfixed segments, such as the *ar* in *polvareda* 'dust cloud', are located between the root *polv-* and a derivational suffix *-eda* without adding any other meaning (Malkiel, 1958:177). Based on this idea, Dressler (1986: 388) argues that the function of the interfixed element is to enlarge the stem before the suffix. According to this definition, the interfixed element could be considered a type of decorative morphology. By contrast, Martín Camacho (2002) denies the existence of interfixes as a morphological unit in Spanish. Likewise, Portolés (1999) differentiates between interfixes with true meanings, such as intensive or derogatory (e.g. the *-uc* in *besuquear* 'to kiss many times' or the *-arr* in *bicharraco* 'an excessive animal or man'), and interfixes without true meaning, aimed at recognizing the root (such as the *c* in *mayorcísimo* 'very old').

[22] https://sevilla.cosasdecome.es/tapas/ciencia/desayunistica

Consider the examples in (8) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold).

(8)

a. *empres-**it**-a-s chiqui-**tit**-a-s* 'small companies'[23], *oj-**ill**-o-s asustad-**ill**-o-s* 'a bit scared eyes'[24], *ley-e**cit**-a-s adelantad-**it**-a-s* 'fairly advanced laws'[25], *os-**it**-o-s cariños-**it**-o-s* (translation of Care Bears toy)

b. *gallet-**it**-a-s crioll-**it**-a-s* 'Creole cookies'[26], *pis-**it**-o turistiqu-**it**-o* 'tourist flat'[27]

c. *cervec-**it**-a-s muy fresqu-**it**-as* 'very fresh beers'[28]

The suffixes in bold are instances of the diminutive morpheme, a highly productive affix in Spanish which is typically bound to nouns (*librito* 'small book') and adjectives (*delgadillo* 'a bit thin'). By default, it is used to mark a reduction in size (or other features) of the referent. Nonetheless, in many cases, it conveys the speaker's feelings about that referent (*qué semanita* 'what a week'), or it is added to reduce the illocutive force of the utterance (*¡Un poquito de silencio!* 'Please, be (slightly) quiet!'). One single utterance can contain several suffixed words of this kind, resulting in quite an affectionate effect, as in (9), an excerpt from *Misericordia* by Benito Pérez Galdós, the renowned Spanish writer, which is intended to imitate the popular speech from Madrid (diminutive forms are bolded):

(9) *Ay, mi **galapaguito** de mi alma, qué **enfadadito** está conmigo, que le quiero tanto!… Sor Marcela, una **palabrita**, nada más que una **palabrita**. Yo no quiero que me saques de aquí, porque me merezco la encerrona. Pero ¡ay **niñita** mía, si vieras qué mala me he puesto!*
'Oh, my little turtle, my soul, how upset you are with me, even though I love you so much!… Sister Marcela, just a word, just one little word. I don't want you to get me out of here, because I deserve this punishment. But oh, my little girl, if only you could see how sick I've gotten!'

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[23]https://eju.tv/2015/04/en-bolivia-hay-63-empresas-estatales-gobierno-advierte-con-cerrar-las-que-no-dan-ingresos/

[24] https://www.abc.es/cultura/cine/abci-concha-para-china-no-madame-bovary-201609242220_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.abc.es%2Fcultura%2Fcine%2Fabci-concha-para-china-no-madame-bovary-201609242220_noticia.html

[25] https://www.carasycaretas.com.uy/8m-darnos-por-aludidos

[26] https://www.clarin.com/espectaculos/teatro/arturo-bonin-60-anos-teatro-historia-muchacho-vendia-rulemanes_0_8mRmY-Tv0.html

[27] Alcedo et al. (2025).

[28] https://www.freshdespedidas.es/excursion-lancha-rapida.html

Likewise, several diminutive suffixes can be attached to one single word to intensify the affective effect, as in (10) (Martín Zorraquino, 2012: 129):

(10) *poqu-it-ín* 'very little', *ahor-it-ica* 'just now, sorry'[29]

Notice that in contrast to (9) and (10), in the examples in (8), the diminutive suffixes are systematically attached to both the noun and the adjective comprising the noun phrase. It is not clear why the adjectives are also suffixed in these cases. Kornfeld (2016: 127) suggests that they have an attenuative sense too, but this can be true of qualifying adjectives only (2016: 127). The reason why the relational adjectives in (8b) take the diminutive, or why the diminutive form *fresquitas* co-occurs with the intensifier adverb *muy* 'very' remains thus unclear. Our contention is that they are subserving another function, namely, the creation of morphologically symmetric structures. As noted above, in Spanish, nouns and adjectives agree in gender and number, hence the widespread co-occurrence of gender and number suffixes within the noun phrase. By contrast, since there is no diminutive agreement in Spanish, phrases with a diminutive sense and consisting of a noun and an adjective should be asymmetric. Our hypothesis is that the diminutive suffixes are attached to the adjectives not only to increase expressiveness, but mostly to produce symmetric phrases, as clearly illustrated by the examples in (8b). In our opinion, some choice patterns between the short and the long form of the diminutive also point to a likely decorative function. In Spanish, there are several allomorphs of the diminutive, including *-it* (*cas-it-a* 'small house'), *-cit* (*collar-cit-o* 'small necklace'), and *-ecit* (*pec-ecit-o* 'little fish'). They are selected depending on phonological and prosodic factors, but also on the speaker's preferences, as in *viej-it-o* vs. *viej-ecit-o* 'oldie' (Eddington, 2007). Nonetheless, the data in (11) illustrate a preference for longer allomorphs (*-ecit*/*-ecill*) over short allomorphs (*-it*/*-ill*) even in cases in which the shorter are expected according to phonological/phonotactic rules (see Ambadiang & Camus, 2013 for discussion). In (11), the unexpected allomorph is bolded and the expected diminutives are between brackets; like the hypocoristics in (4), these unexpected forms are typically used by younger speakers.

(11) *fresqu-**ecit**-o* (vs. *fresquito* 'cool'), *ejempl**ecit**o* (vs. *ejemplito* 'example')[30]

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[29] This also happens with intensifier prefixes, which share many of the properties of evaluative suffixes: (*súper-mega-famoso* 'supermegafamous', *ultra-súper-conocido* 'ultrasuperknown') (Martín García, 1998)
[30] https://x.com/RAEinforma/status/1163753712197820416

*botell-**ecit**-a* (vs. *botellita* 'small bottle'), *abuel-**ecit**-a* (vs. *abuelita* 'granny', *person-**ecill**-a* (vs. *personilla* 'little person'), *aren-**ecill**-a* (vs. *arenilla* 'sand')[31]

One could argue that in the examples in (11) the longer allomorph is reinforcing the appreciative effect, but this is not acknowledged by all speakers. Our view is that the *-ec* part is purely decorative. Even more, as with the examples in (7), *-ec* could be construed as an interfix that preserves the formal integrity of the root, thus preventing its resyllabification with the diminutive.

6. Decorative compounding, phraseology, and prefixation in Spanish

The data discussed in sections 3-5 above suggest that Spanish words are rich in superfluous suffixes, whether inflectional, derivational, or evaluative, with such words being more frequent in colloquial speech. In this section, we examine other "decorative" features in the morphology of Spanish beyond "decorative" suffixation.

6.1. Compounding with non-sense words

Consider the examples in (12) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold).

(12)

a. *sud-**aca*** (derogatory term for South American people), *catal-**ufo*** (derogatory term for Catalan people)

b. *gili-**pichis**, gili-**puertas*** 'dickhead'

The words in (12) are compounds that result, specifically, from lexical blending: parts of two words are merged into a single word. Nonetheless, the examples in (12) are noticeable because of their playful motivation, since blending results in diverse connotative meanings (see Horno & Marqueta, 2023). This is evident in known examples like *autonosuyas* (a modification of the word *autonomías* 'autonomies', in which the final segment *mías* 'mine' is replaced by *suyas* 'theirs', to criticize the idea that autonomies always follow their own interests, but not the

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general interest) or *hurtangarín*, in which the segment *-urda* in the surname of a member of the Spanish royal family, *Urdangarín*, was replaced by *hurta* 'to steal', to condemn his tax crimes. It is noticeable that these compounds tend to have derogatory, dysphemistic, ironic, or judgmental senses, so that they strongly resemble the synonymous compounds found in Khmer, where the blended parts usually have unpleasant connotations. Accordingly, in *sudaca* in (12a), *americano* 'American', as found in *sudamericano* 'Sudamerican', is replaced by *aca*, alluding to *caca* 'poop'. Similarly, in *catalufo*, *catalán* 'Catalan' is blended to *ufo*, which refers to *pitufo* 'midget'. By contrast, 12b are euphemistic solutions: to avoid the profanity *pollas* 'cocks' in the original word *gilipollas* 'moron', *pichis* (a word without meaning) or *puertas* 'doors' (an unrelated word) are used instead.

6.2. Symmetrical phraseology

Examples like (12) are rare in Spanish, since compounding patterns in this language are quite constrained. Phraseological units of the sort listed in (13) are, by contrast, more numerous (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold):

(13) *de pe a **pa*** 'from beginning to end', *de ciento a **viento*** 'rarely', *mondo y **lirondo*** 'very clean', *a diestro y **siniestro*** 'for everyone', *a trancas y **barrancas*** 'with difficulty', *un toma y **daca*** 'give and take', *regulín, **regulán*** 'badly'

In the expressions in (13), the bolded components are nonexistent or semantically irrelevant words. Once again, they could be argued to be there to preserve symmetry and/or rhyme with the meaningful component, that is, for purely aesthetic reasons. García Page (1990: 270) has called the bolded parts "idiomatic words" (i.e. phonological words without meaning and appearing in two-membered structures to rhyme with the first constituent). Aguilar Ruiz (2012) has emphasized the playful nature of many of these phraseological units. We wish to highlight the parallels of these structures with the synonymous compounds of Khmer.

6.3. Hypercharacterization with prefixes

To finish, consider the examples in (14) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold).

(14)

a. *Lo **puto** bailabais con cher y ni te **puto** enteraste*[32]

'You were dancing like crazy with Cher and you didn't even notice'

b. *únete al uso de "puto" como prefijo intensificador y no te vuelvas putoloco diciendo puto todo el puto rato*[33]

'Join the use of "puto" as an intensifying prefix, but don't go crazy saying 'puto' all the freaking time'

The examples in (14) illustrate an ongoing grammaticalization of the word *puto* (lit. 'gigolo', fig. 'fucking') as an intensifier prefix. Until recently, *puto* was used (in colloquial language) as an independent intensifier word (*el puto amo* 'a badass') or as a derogatory word (*puto Betis* 'fucking Betis'). Currently, it is increasingly used as a prefix (*te lo puto juro* 'I fucking swear to you'; *ni te puto enteraste* 'you didn´t fucking realize anything') (Annunziata, 2018). In some cases, several instances of *puto* can coexist within the same utterance, as in (14a), creating not only a strongly emphatic effect, but also a playful sense, as in (14b).

Consider now the examples in (15) (purported extravagant features are highlighted in bold).

(15) ***a**juntar/juntar* 'to join', ***a**matar/matar* 'to expire', ***a**tapar/tapar* 'to cover', ***a**bajar/bajar* 'to put down', ***a**rrascar/rascar* 'to scratch', ***a**rremangar/remangar* 'to roll up'

Unlike the examples in (14), the bolded words in (15) have a long history and nowadays they are mostly used by rural speakers (del Barrio de la Rosa, 2021). Notice that, in most cases, both variants have the same meaning (García Medall, 1994). Traditionally, prefixes like *a-* in (15) have been characterized as *inexpressive* (Menéndez Pidal, 1940: §126.3) or *unnecessary* (Carrera de la Red, 2002: 523), and ultimately, to go against the principle of language economy (Graça Rio-Torto & Mailson Lope, 2019: 127). In contrast to these views, Del Barrio de la Rosa (2019) has proposed that the presence of *a-* reinforces the causative meaning of verbs like those in (15). Nonetheless, the variants with *a-* could be also regarded as hypercorrect forms, that adhere to a well-stablished pattern of verb formation in standard Spanish, namely, the

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[32] https://x.com/PutoYanu/status/1914218315209232474
https://x.com/Nando_Lopez_/status/1721807586243006596
[33] https://www.thewatmag.com/asi-fue/rae-aprueba-uso-puto-como-prefijo-intensificador-podemos-putotuitear-tranquilos

parasynthetic *a–ar* model (Serrano-Dolader, 1999: 4707). If this is correct, the unnecessary prefix *a-* would be similar to the suffixes mentioned in (7), or to the decorative infixes found in Khmer, namely, a purely aesthetic device.

7. Discussion

In the final part of his paper, Haiman (2013: 78) suggests that "the decorative morphology of Khmer and other languages of the region may not be a totally marginal geographically isolated fact." He further proposes (idem) that "decorative language = ordinary language + decorative galumphing", and that "galumphing is recognizable as purposeful but functionally unmotivated frills. The most common of these frills may be repetition.". In this paper, we have tested both hypotheses (although not only). We have looked for evidence of "decorative" morphology in a typologically different language, namely, Spanish. We found that such evidence is widespread in the colloquial varieties of the language. Similarly to Khmer, we observed a frequent preference for symmetry and alliteration (which are both forms of repetition) in affixed words, compounds, and idioms. Also, the functions typically assigned to this kind of morphology, like creating aesthetic effects, playing, or increasing social fitness, are clearly identifiable in most of the morphological phenomena examined in the paper.

Our paper is just a test cut. We expect Spanish to show many other extravagant features, including syntactic expletives, or diverse types of vocal play. Examining the nature and the prevalence of other signs of extravagance seems a promising line of future research. It would be also of interest to delve into the parallels and differences between Spanish and other world languages with regards to "decorative" morphology, specifically, and to formal extravagance, more generally. Finally, we find of interest to explore the possibility that the vernacular varieties of languages like Spanish, English, and other global languages can serve as a test bench for examining questions of interest for typology, even aspects that have been described (or even thought to be circumscribed) to minority languages. And conversely, that the findings by typological studies can help illuminate known patterns of intralinguistic variation in well-studied languages like Spanish. Another example of the benefits of this approach that brings sociolinguistics closer to typology (and vice versa) is our recent examination of the varieties of Spanish used within families (aka familects). Their examination can help gain a better understanding of the languages spoken by close-knit, isolated human groups. Conversely, the consideration of the findings by typologists about this type of languages should help clarify some of the distinctive features of these private language varieties (see Benítez-Burraco, 2025

for discussion). Ultimately, we expect the study of "deviant" language features and behaviors to result in a more comprehensive view of the structural and functional properties of human languages, and in the end, of language as a distinctive human trait.

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