Piropo as a cultural term for talk in the Spanish-speaking world

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Keywords (for overall index):
Piropo, sexual harassment, cultural terms for talk, gender, Spanish, Anglo-America, politeness, compliments, catcall

Abstract:
This paper examines meanings of a Spanish term for communicative action – piropo – and a range of practices in the Spanish-speaking world that are subsumed under the term.
The archetypal *piropo* – a male making unsolicited flirtatious or sexually oriented comments to a passing female of reproductive age whom he does not know – has correlates in Anglo-America in the form of catcalls, but it encompasses a wider range of practices and meanings. The concept and activity of giving *piropos* are closely linked to cultural beliefs about gender and gender roles, the performance of masculinity, and appropriate behavior toward unacquainted fellow humans in public places.
This paper examines meanings of a Spanish term for communicative action – *piropo* – and a range of practices in the Spanish-speaking world that are subsumed under the term. The term and a range of associated practices are immediately recognizable to those socialized in Spanish-speaking worlds, but the term has no equivalent in English. It has traditionally been translated as ‘compliment’, or ‘amorous or flirtatious flattery’ but the term encompasses a wider range of activities than suggested by such English terms and often invokes a highly specific interactional context. The archetypal communicative activity to which it refers – a male making unsolicited flirtatious or sexually oriented comments to a passing female of reproductive age whom he does not know – has obvious correlates in the English-speaking world, e.g., in various kinds of catcalls. However, the term also embraces a range of practices and meanings that do not fit into a single conceptual or communicative category in Anglo-American culture. While the term ‘catcall’ refers to a narrow range of male remarks to women, the term *piropo* can refer to various types of flattery unrelated to expressions of sexual interest. The term *piropo* can imply a degree of exaltation, for example, and it is a term used for expressions of enthusiastic praise for the Virgin Mary. These connotations of exaltation and flattery make the term *piropo* much more ambiguous than the term ‘catcall,’ and this ambiguity can extend to interpretations of *piropos* directed at passing women. Some feminists in the Spanish-speaking world see any *piropo* as an exercise of male power over women, while others, typically men, consistently see them as gifts bestowed on women. Many women evaluate them on a case-by-case basis, depending on content, tone, and context,
interpreting some *piropos* as offensive and demeaning and others as esteem-enhancing and desirable flattery.

The Spanish-speaking world – encompassing Spain, parts of North, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean – is diverse in history, culture, and ways of speaking, and the specifics of the ways that *piropos* are used and interpreted vary across these areas. At the same time, however, the term *piropo* and the associated activity of unsolicited comments to a passing female are recognized throughout this world and have been studied academically in countries as socially and geographically diverse as Spain, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Costa Rica, and Argentina, documenting comparable patterns despite differences in local context. (Analogous practices have also been documented in various non-Spanish-speaking places around the Mediterranean, such as Italy, Greece, and North Africa.) The robustness of this phenomenon in the Spanish-speaking world allows comparison, at a general level, with related Anglo-American terms and practices. *Piropos* occur much more frequently and predictably, take more diverse forms, and occur across a much wider range of situations and actors (both male and female) than activities such as “street harassment”, “flirtatious comments”, or “pick up lines” in Anglo-American worlds. The concept and activity of giving these flirtatious compliments are closely linked to cultural beliefs about gender and gender roles, the performance of masculinity, and appropriate behavior toward unacquainted fellow humans in public places.

At the conceptual level, *piropo* is a cultural term for talk (Carbaugh 1989, Carbaugh, Berry & Nurmikari-Berry 2006) *par excellence*. It characterizes a culturally distinctive communicative activity that is broadly recognized by Spanish speakers and is
intertwined with cultural notions of gender and appropriate forms of social interaction in public. For the cultural outsider, the term and the activity to which it refers become a source of insight into cultural meanings and activities. When the local meanings accorded to a term are contested, as they are with *piropos*, the term can provide a window onto cultural politics and processes. The conflicting ways that Spanish-speaking men and women tend to interpret the overall significance of them, for example, illustrates ways that gender politics are intertwined with everyday communicative activities and cultural meanings. There is evidence that the use and interpretation of *piropos* is shifting more broadly over time, as gender roles in Spanish-speaking cultures change. Feminist activists have sought, with increasing visibility, to transform popular understandings of them from unmarked, chivalrous flattery to sexual harassment, and in 2015, federal laws in Chile and Peru were passed that prohibited sexual remarks to women passing in public places. At the same time, the term and associated activities remain part of the commonsense cultural landscape in many parts of the Spanish-speaking world. A cultural terms for talk approach does not assume a static or monolithic culture; rather it is a heuristic for understanding communicative and cultural meanings, even as those vary, intertwine with politics, and shift over time.

In this paper I first describe the typical structure of a *piropo* as an activity and illustrate some of the range of forms a *piropo* can take. Data and examples come from academic literature in English and Spanish, personal observation, and print and internet media that give lists of specific *piropos* and commentaries on the politics and meanings of them. I then review competing interpretations that the activity of giving *piropos* can have in the Spanish-speaking world, one linked largely to men and tradition, and one to
female perspectives in changing societies. I then consider piropos from two outside perspectives, an Anglo-American, Goffman-inspired perspective about behavior in public places, and a feminist American academic perspective that focuses on power and inequality. I briefly use Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of positive and negative face to make sense of contrasting Anglo-American and Spanish-speaking notions of appropriate interpersonal behavior. Finally, I review functions of piropos, both as understood by members, and from an analytical, communicative perspective that highlights power and their role in the performance of a particular type of masculinity. I suggest that the activity and its interpretations will continue to evolve as gender roles and relationships in Spanish-speaking countries change over time.

Piropos as a communicative act

Piropos are a commonplace in Spanish-speaking countries and the term and its variants (piropear ‘to give piropos’ and piropeador ‘person who gives piropos’) are immediately recognizable to those socialized in such worlds. The word piropo originally referred to a red garnet or ruby, and scholars are unsure how it came to mean compliment, although some claim a link to its 16th century use in Latin by Spanish scholars and students to describe the red of an attractive woman’s cheeks (Preisig 1998:6). By 1831, the term piropo was being used synonymously with terms such as lisonja (‘flattery’), requiebro (‘compliment, flirtatious remark’), and alabanza (‘praise’).

They typically involve a male making a brief, sexually-oriented comment or compliment to a female whom he is passing in a public place such as a street or plaza. The male is typically adolescent or older and the female object of the piropo is typically
adolescent up to age 40 or so. The male typically does not know the female, or at least know her well, and the encounter is relatively anonymous. The male as well as the female can be with a group of friends, and a piropo can be addressed to more than one female at once. Piropos addressed from females to males are much rarer, and when they do occur, are likely to come from a young female accompanied by a group of friends, to be playfully addressed to an acquaintance or friend, or to be in a context specifically associated with dating, such as a disco. In the context of anonymous street encounters between single women and men, piropos from a female to a male would be rare and have traditionally been associated with streetwalking prostitutes (Andrews 1977).

The interactional sequence of everyday street piropos is very brief: the male makes an utterance (sometimes accompanied by nonlexical expressions such as a whistle or psst) loud enough for a passing female, and possibly companions, to hear. The female does not answer and continues walking. The piropo activity is over. Young women are taught not to respond verbally – although angry responses to vulgar or insulting piropos can occur – because responding to the piropo at face value is seen as presenting oneself as open to sexual advances of the male.

The textual form and content of piropos

In practice, piropos encompass a wide range of forms, from single word exclamations or whistles to brief, metaphorical, poetic forms. The most typical piropos take the form of a comment remarking on some element of a woman’s physical appearance, e.g., ¡Qué ojos! (‘What eyes!’). Verbal artistry can be displayed in piropos through many of the stylistic elements typical of poetry, e.g., metaphor, irony (often
through hyperbole), alliteration, rhythm and rhyme. Thus, rather than simply exclaiming, “What eyes!” the piropeador could say, ¡Tus ojos me encandilan! (‘Your eyes dazzle [blind me]’) or ¡Nunca manejes porque tus ojos encandilan! (‘You should never drive because your eyes will blind people’) (Achugar 2001, 2002). These píropos use metaphor and hyperbole, comparing the recipient’s eyes to bright lights that can dazzle or blind those who look at her.

Beinhauer (1934), based on his study in Spain, argues that píropos that poetically praise and elevate a woman are an expression of a distinctively Spanish ethos, an extension of the medieval courtly love tradition and Spanish chivalry and gallantry. In medieval courtly love, a man sees a woman, worships her from afar, declares passionate devotion, and is virtuously rejected by the woman (Tuchman 1978). Analogously, a píropo can be a spontaneous, passionate exaltation of the beauty of a woman, and the woman virtuously ignores it. Píropos that suggest the trials the admirer would undergo for the recipient’s attention fit this tradition. Achugar (2002:183), for example, documents this example:

Por vos cruzaría la Antártida en alpargatas (‘For you I would cross the Antarctica in espadrilles’)

This píropo elevates the object of the píropo by suggesting that the speaker would do something impossible and painful – walk across Antarctica in light-weight canvas shoes (espadrilles) – to make himself worthy of her.

Metaphors that compare women to angels or divine beings are a widely attested genre that elevate women. For example, ¿De qué estrella te caíste? (‘What star did you fall from?’) (Achugar 2001:13), indirectly suggests that the addressee is an angel. It is
indirect at two levels: 1) it does not mention the word “angel” but leaves it to the hearer to deduce that one who falls from the stars is an angel, and 2) it works as a metaphor, in that the addressed female is not literally an angel, but is compared to one, i.e., she has the glorious characteristics of an angel. Similar examples include ¿No te dolió cuando te caíste del cielo? (‘Didn’t it hurt when you fell from Heaven’?). Like the first example, this requires the hearer to infer that the addressee is being compared to an angel, and like the first, it is phrased as a question. Although women do not generally respond to piropos, putting the piropo in the form of a puzzling question may encourage her to engage with the content more than a simple statement or assertion (e.g., ¡Qué cara tan bella! ‘What a pretty face!’), which does not make necessarily call for a response.

Many piropos are more directly sexually suggestive than these prior examples, e.g., ¡Qué curvas y yo sin frenos! (‘What curves, and me without brakes!’). This piropo metaphorically implies two parallel images: 1) a dangerously curvy road and a driver without brakes to slow down, and 2) a woman with notable female curves and a male who cannot restrain himself in his desire for her. The relationship between the degree of sexual directness in piropos and the ways in which they are interpreted will be addressed, below, in the next section.

Many such piropos – sometimes called piropos callejeros ‘street piropos’, to contrast them with more elegant flattery – draw attention to a woman’s sex characteristics and the male’s focus on those body parts and, possibly, desire to engage in sexual activity with her. Unlike piropos that metaphorically and abstractly compare a woman to an angel, a revered figure, these draw attention to females in ways that can highlight
females’ physical and sexual vulnerability. Malaver and Gonzalez (2006:267) give the example of:

*Mami, ¡qué cuca tan rica!* (‘Baby, what a hot pussy’) 

While this remark takes the form of a positive evaluation, the overall effect is not to elevate the woman but to express a hierarchical system in which men can publicly evaluate women in terms of their sexual value to men. While this example is very simple and direct linguistically, more figurative, artistic language can also be used in ways that focus on males’ sexual interest:

¡*Si fueras mango, te chuparía hasta la pepa!* (‘If you were a mango, I would suck you all the way to the pit!’) (Malaver and González 2008:268)

This *piropo* uses the metaphor of a mango for a female, and the metaphor of eating every bit of a mango for engaging in sexual activities with the female. It displays verbal artistry, an admired characteristic of *piropos*, through its use of a metaphor and hypothetical structure, but its focus is not on elevating the woman, but rather on a particular male sexual desire and use for the woman.

*Piropos* can display verbal artistry not only through poetic form, but also through their fit to the historical and cultural moment and to the distinctive characteristics of the female that is praised. After Gabriela Isler of Venezuela won the 2013 Miss Universe title, for example, addressing a female in Venezuela, *Hola, Gabriela* (‘Hello Gabriela’) was a metaphor in which the addressee was favorably compared to (the ostensibly attractive) Miss Universe in a way that is interpretable only with knowledge particular to a time and place. In Costa Rica, many young Anglo-American women have been addressed, *Machita mas bonita* (‘Most beautiful fair-skinned female’) by Costa Rican
men. The word *machita* is a diminutive form of a Costa Rican colloquialism for a blonde or fair-skinned female. The *piropo* embodies verbal artistry by expressing a specifically Costa Rican perspective on the addressee’s specific complexion in a three-word form that rhymes.

The *piropo* most admired for verbal artistry is one that is creative, spontaneous, and particularly fitting to its context, but there have long been newspaper columns, pamphlets, books, and, more recently, web pages, with lists of *piropos* (analogous to books or webpages of jokes, pick up lines, or insults). These *piropos* are often longer and more elaborate than the ones that are reported from actual experience, which are commonly uttered in the fleeting moment of passing.

Although reference works always define *piropos* as compliments (Moore 1996:114), many *piropos* are clearly insults, rather than praise. Dundes and Suarez-Orozco (1987:141), for example, attest that a male with a male friend may say as he passes two females:

*A mí me gusta la del medio* (‘I like the one in the middle’)

Since there are only two females, with no one in the middle, the utterance means that the speaker finds neither of the females attractive. Google searches in 2015 for *piropos para feas* (‘*piropos* for ugly females’) and *piropos para gordas* (‘*piropos* for fat females’) reveal dozens of pages listing insults, often using creative metaphors, about a female’s appearance. This suggests that many understand the term *piropo* to embrace not just compliments but also insults. Margarita González (Malaver and González 2008; 2009) coined the term *antipiropo* (‘anti-compliment’ or ‘insult’) to refer to those *piropos* that recipients find offensive or hostile rather than complimentary or flattering. The term,
however, has not been adopted popularly or by other academics, and the term *piropo* continues (with some challenges by activists) to be used to refer to both flattering and insulting remarks.

**Interpretations of *piropos***

Flattering *piropos* involve a communicative tension: by highlighting the positive characteristics of a recipient, they represent verbal gifts that pay homage to the recipient and elevate her. At the same time, however, *piropos* are done by men at their own discretion, reproducing gender asymmetry and inequality in society. This communicative tension can explain much of the variation in ways that men and women interpret, and talk about, *piropos*.

Men and women regularly disagree on whether *piropos* are a verbal gift to women or a form of harassment, with men tending to see a wide range of them as flattery that they claim women enjoy, and women tending to see some of them as flattering and desirable and many as offensive and harassing. In April of 2014, for example, the male mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri, took part in a radio interview that included discussion of off-color (*subido de tono*) *piropos* in Argentina and activists’ campaigns against them. During the interview the mayor offered the following opinion:

“Ultimately, all women like it when you say a *piropo* to them. If someone says, ‘No, that offends me,’ I just don’t believe them. Because there can’t be anything nicer than someone telling you how pretty you are. Even if it’s together with something crude, like, if someone says, ‘What a nice ass you have.’ It’s fine.”
On the one hand, this radio interview quote from a public figure illustrates a common perspective among males in many Spanish-speaking countries: that piropos are verbal gifts that women like, even if they may claim they don’t like them. It also illustrates a common male perspective that it is “fine” to comment appreciatively to women – even strangers – on their sexual characteristics. At the same time that Macri expressed a common sentiment, however, the statements were widely reported and debated in traditional media and online, suggesting that many found his statement problematic. Criticisms focused on Macri’s assertions that he didn’t believe women who said they were offended and that women liked even crude piropos. Many criticisms differentiated between what they called “messages of admiration” and “vulgarities” or “street harassment”, seeing Macri’s example of “What a nice ass, you have!” as the type of street harassment that is a form of verbal violence against women. Implied in this differentiation is the idea that unsolicited comments that are “admiring” are not widely considered offensive.

Mayor Macri subsequently made a nominal apology on Twitter:

“One of my daughters called me and challenged me on the topic of piropos. I made a comment from chivalry [galantería]. I apologize to those I offended.”

While nominally apologizing, Macri explains his actions as coming from galantería, a term more common in Spanish than its corresponding translation ‘chivalry’ in English. In Spanish it evokes a valued Spanish courtly love tradition and traditional gender roles. Macri thus offered an explanation for his claims in terms of a valued cultural tradition rather than the sexism of which he was accused.
Women in Spanish-speaking countries have ambivalent reactions to piropos, often distinguishing two types of piropo: flattering comments, on the one hand, and groserías, ‘vulgar comments’ or insults on the other. In a 2014 survey of 400 men and women in greater Buenos Aires, for example, 72% of the women reported that they had recently been whistled at or catcalled. Of these, 59% reported feeling “uncomfortable or intimidated” while 33% reported feeling “flattered” (halagado).

Margarita González, in her study of piropos and antipiropos (‘insults’) in Caracas, Venezuela argues that (flattering) piropos are part of everyday life and are socially and culturally accepted (2009:72). (González is using piropos as a technical term that refers only to those piropos deemed polite and not insulting or directly sexually suggestive.) In interviews with 12 women, aged 18-30, she found that 11 of the women said they “like it that people say piropos to them” (emphasis in original) (2009:69), and only one of the 12 didn’t like being addressed with flattering comments by strangers.

Margarita González’s study (2009) provides a portrait of the types of piropos that young women in Caracas, Venezuela found to be complimentary or offensive. She asked subjects to evaluate a series of 14 piropos on a scale of 1 (‘polite’) to 6 (‘rude’) (2009:91-92). Those that did not make reference to parts of the recipient’s body but otherwise praised her through metaphor were seen as the most polite. Two of the 14 piropos were overwhelming evaluated as polite:

¡Cómo avanza la tecnología que hasta las flores caminan!

(‘How advanced technology has gotten that even flowers can walk now!’)

and

¿Qué pasa en el cielo que los ángeles están bajando?
(‘What is going on in heaven that angels are falling?’)

The first one uses the metaphor of the recipient as a flower to suggest her beauty and positive qualities. The second uses a metaphor of the recipient as an angel to suggest her positive, heavenly qualities. For each of these, at least 10 of the 12 subjects evaluated it as at the most polite end of the scale.

In contrast, comments that explicitly addressed body parts and body functions were consistently judged as rude. Eleven of 12 subjects evaluated the following as on the rude half of the scale, with a median evaluation of ‘5’ on a 6-point scale with ‘6’ being ‘rude’.

¿Esos cocos tienen agua?
(‘Do those coconuts [i.e., breasts] have water in them?’)

A *piropo* that was categorically evaluated as rude was the following:

¡Quién fuera mierda para atravesar tu culo!

(‘If only I were shit, so I could pass over your ass’).

All 12 respondents judged this to be at the most extreme rude end of the continuum, assigning it a 6.

*Piropos* judged as neither especially polite nor rude included the following, with judgments distributed in both directions from the midpoint of the polite-rude continuum:

*Si como caminas cocinas me como hasta lo pegado.*

(‘If you cook like you walk, I’ll even eat what’s stuck to the pot’)

and

¿*Todo eso es tuyo*? (‘All of that belongs to you?’).
The first of these two uses an alliterative rhyme to suggest that the woman walks alluringly. The second one refers indirectly to all of the attractive physical characteristics of the woman, suggesting that it is a wealth of such features. The median evaluation of both of these *piropos* was just to the polite side of the midpoint in the polite-rude scale.

Perceptions of whether an utterance is flattering or insulting can differ across cultural boundaries. Margarita González (2009:6), for example, uses the following as an example of a positive, or polite, *piropo* that compliments and flatters, claiming that the recipient would feel pleased by what is expressed:

*Mi amor no te pongas al sol que los bombones se derriten* (‘My love, don’t go in the sun because chocolates [‘confectionery’] melt’)

Many women raised in the United States, in contrast, would not feel complimented and flattered by a stranger saying this to them on the street, but instead might feel harassed or threatened. As discussed in the next section, the very premise of addressing or engaging with strangers on the street is a cultural one.

Anglo-American perspectives on engagement with strangers

For many Anglo-Americans, engagement or interaction with strangers in urban places is carefully limited. Goffman (1966: 84) describes an urban, Anglo-American behavioral norm for relatively anonymous passing of individuals in public places as “civil inattention.” Civil inattention involves displaying recognition of an approaching other as a fellow person through gaze, but then averting eyes from the other at about eight feet distance and then passing in silence.

“What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to
demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one’s attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design” Goffman (1966:87). This norm is directly at odds with the explicit attention to the person of the other expressed in *piropos*.

Goffman’s description of Anglo-American cultural preferences for behavior in anonymous street encounters aligns closely with a relative emphasis on negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) in that culture. Negative politeness behaviors focus on the minimization of imposition on another and are associated with relative interpersonal restraint. Positive politeness practices, in contrast, display and attend to interpersonal involvement. Goffman’s “civil inattention” indicates a minimal, generic recognition of the other as a person, but without imposing any further demands on the person for engagement or interaction. A number of studies (e.g., Hickey 1991, Stewart 1999, Marquez Reiter 2000) comparing politeness orientations in Spain or Latin America with England or America have concluded that Spanish speakers emphasize politeness practices toward the positive politeness end of the continuum relative to England or America. These differences correlate with what Anglo-Americans and English experience as the seeming interpersonal warmth in Spanish-speaking cultures and what Spanish speakers perceive as the relatively cooler interpersonal affect in Anglo-America and England.

According to such studies, in Spanish-speaking cultures, individuals often have less expectation of negative politeness “civil inattention,” and more of positive politeness
involvement and engagement. *Piropos* that compliment directly embody five of the fifteen positive politeness strategies enumerated by Brown and Levinson (1987:101): 1) Notice and attend to the hearer, 2) Exaggerate interest in the hearer, 3) Joke, 4) Include both speaker and hearer in the activity, and 5) Give gifts to hearer. *Piropos* include exaggerated attention to the woman, humor (typically through hyperbole or other verbal artistry), mention of both speaker and hearer (e.g., “For you I would…), and a verbal gift, in the form of the *piropo* itself.

In addition to an orientation toward positive politeness practices, the relative gender inequality of traditional gender roles in many Spanish-speaking countries, may make *piropos* less face threatening than they would be in societies where gender roles are less sharply distinguished and less hierarchical. As described by Scollon, Scollon & Jones (2011:55), politeness in relatively hierarchical social systems differs from expectations for politeness in more egalitarian contexts. Specifically, positive politeness behaviors from higher-status individuals to lower-status individuals in hierarchical systems are not as socially threatening (even between strangers, where social distance is high) as such behaviors would be in a system that is less explicitly hierarchical. Thus, expressions of attention and exaggerated interest from a higher status individual (male) to a lower status individual (female) are not considered as face threatening and inappropriate as they are in contexts where gender roles are less sharply defined and less hierarchical.

US feminist academic perspectives on street remarks to women

For US-based feminist academics, comments from men to passing women on the street, such as *piropos*, are always acts of gender domination and violence. Such
academics highlight a) the larger social context of gender inequality and related violence in which any “street remarks” (the term used by Gardner (1980), in a widely cited piece), must be interpreted, and b) the powerful, symbolic reinscription of male dominance that occurs through such public address of females. According to Kissling (1991:455-456), for example, uninvited comments to women on the street are part of a larger context of “sexual terrorism” that includes rape, wife-battering, and all matter of sexual harassment:

All of these functions, including the view of street harassment as compliment or 'reward for looking good', work as part of a larger strategy of social control through sexual terrorism. Even ostensibly complimentary remarks remind women of their status as women, subject to evaluation as sexual objects in ways that men are not. Similarly, invasions of privacy remind women of their vulnerability to these and other violations, and that they are seldom, if ever, in a position to treat men this way.

From this perspective, conscious individual intentions of a piropeador or the possible pleasure the recipient of a flattering píropo might experience and report do not matter, as the remarks are simply part of a larger system of social control.

According to such theorists, comments directed by men to women are not just reflections of gender inequality but rather actively reproduce such inequality.
Tuerkheimer (1997:1, 14), for example, argues that when “a woman in a public place is intruded on by a man’s words, noises, or gestures” the man is “defining her as object and himself as subject with power over her” and “The power structure which defines women as subordinate sex objects is activated and reenacted each time we are victimized.”

Kissling (1991:456) explicitly links comments to women to an imminent threat of sexual
violence:

street harassment is not a product of a sexually terroristic culture, but an active factor in creating such a culture. An environment of fear and sexual terrorism is produced by, in part, street harassment that frightens women and reinforces fears of rape and other acts of terrorism.

Tuerkheimer (1997:13) argues that sexual violence is not directly threatened by what she calls street harassment, but that street remarks invoke a larger system of inequality of which sexual violence and vulnerability form a part:

Most of the women with whom I have spoken have suggested that the greatest harm of street harassment is not directly related to a fear of any immediate physical danger. Rather, being harassed on the street is a vivid reflection of male dominance and an inescapable reminder of the vulnerability of women to harm.

It is not that women see every male who says something on the street as a rapist or violent, but the fact of the communicative act reminds them of their subordinate position and vulnerability to violence.

Functions of *piropos*

The givers and receivers of *piropos* are overwhelmingly of reproductive age. Combined with their (often) sexual content, one might assume their function to be a utilitarian one for achieving a sexual encounter. This may be the logic of “pick up lines” or “come-ons” in places where single people of reproductive age gather in Anglo-American culture. This utilitarian theory on *piropo* function fails on several counts,
however. First, the most typical *piropo* is done anonymously in passing and does not lead to interactional engagement – the female is not expected to respond. It is thus an ineffective strategy for achieving a romantic relationship. Second, *piropos* are made to many females who would not be appropriate romantic partners for the male, e.g., they can be directed at females much older or younger or even at nuns. Andrews (1977:54) attests the following *piropo* directed at nuns, “For you I’d become a friar.” If the primary function of *piropos* were to achieve a romantic relationship, they would be directed only toward women who could be romantic partners. Finally, many *piropos* are experienced as vulgar, insulting, or threatening by women. They have the effect of driving the woman away, directly countering any utilitarian goal of achieving a romantic relationship.

Dundes and Suárez-Orozco (1987:144) argue that the function of *piropos* is to negotiate conflicting Freudian impulses in men:

“For the student of Latin American cultures, the value of the piropo lies in the contradictory but all-pervasive male cultural image of women it mirrors. This image includes a fantasy about the virginal purity of the ideal woman and its binary opposite, a view of women as harlots.”

By adopting a Freudian perspective, they locate the meanings of *piropos* in the (collective) minds of men, but with a focus on women. Such an approach resolves seeming contradictions – e.g., that some *piropos* compliment while others insult – but only through unobservable, posited psychodynamic constructs in male minds.

A more convincing explanation of the function of *piropos* is the expression and performance of masculine identity. Such a social, communicative approach to *piropos* can explain this continuum of activities that fall under the rubric of *piropo* without
resorting to unobservable, second-order constructs. If one shifts from seeing *piropos* as articulating “a collectively held male fantasy on the nature of women” (Dundes & Suarez-Orozco 1987:121) to one of cultural, communicative performance of a particular masculine identity, their characteristics are better explained.

Central to the performance of masculinity in Spanish-speaking countries is the expression and enactment of culturally conceived notions of the relationship between men and women. As described by Achugar (2001:135), “[In *piropos*] Women are generally constructed as non-animate or non-agentive participants while men’s participant role is mostly that of agent. These are the reflections through metaphor of the traditional roles of men and women in Spanish speaking cultures.” Gender roles have historically been hierarchical in Spain and Latin America, and *piropos* are one expression of this hierarchy. The person higher in the hierarchy is allowed to evaluate and pass judgment (whether flattering or insulting) on the other. By doing this in public space to an anonymous other, the person higher in the hierarchy publicly marks hierarchical positions.

Finally, *piropos* serve the construction of heterosexuality and virility, which are both central to traditional masculinity. It does not matter that the *piropo* is unlikely to lead to a romantic liaison (and indeed, may make it less likely) because the expression of heterosexual orientation achieves the end of masculine performance. Many scholars have noted that *piropos* are especially likely when a group of young men or adolescents encounter a female. The female may simply serve as a token addressee: the *piropo* displays the male’s power over the female and heterosexual interest, both of which serve to constitute the *piropeador* as masculine. Thus, it is not utilitarian in terms of achieving
a sexual encounter, nor is it a matter of competing intra-psychic impulses, but it is highly functional in terms of publicly displaying a particular type of heterosexually assertive masculinity.

Changes in society, changes in *piropos*

If *piropos* are an expression and enactment of particular gender roles, one would expect *piropos* to change as the roles of men and women in the Spanish-speaking world shift and women gain greater economic and political power. In this section, I present three types of evidence that interpretations of *piropos* have been shifting: a) Google search data that indicate that references to *acoso callejero* ‘street harassment’ have increased much faster than references to *piropos* over the last 15 years, and, more importantly, that the number of webpages mentioning both *piropo* and street harassment has exploded, b) evaluations of *piropos* by females of different generations from Achugar (2002) that show younger women to be less culturally accepting of them, and c) recent legislation in various Spanish-speaking countries specifically aimed at making (some) *piropos* punishable offenses.

The frequency with which such terms as *piropo* and *acoso callejero* ‘street harassment’ have appeared on webpages over time suggest changing popular conceptions about the terms and related ideas. The table below gives the number of Spanish-language pages returned for particular search terms or combinations of search terms in Google for two different 5-year periods, 2000-2004 and 2010-2014. The first data column shows that the number of webpages with the term *piropo* increased 16-fold during this time period. The second data column shows that pages with the term “*acoso callejero*” increased from
60 pages for the 2000-2004 period to 24,200 for the 2010-2014 period, a 400-fold increase. This suggests that online discourse in Spanish about street harassment is increasing at a much greater rate than online mention of piropos. Even more telling is the increase of mentions of piropo in combination with the term acoso callejero ‘street harassment.’ The terms piropo and acoso callejero were rarely mentioned together on pages dated from 2000-2004, occurring together only 5 times. From 2010-2014, the two terms appeared on webpages 1170 times as frequently. The fact that mentions of piropo in combination with acoso callejero have increased so much more rapidly than mentions of piropo in other contexts suggests that there is increasing public discourse that frames piropos as street harassment and not just benign flirtatious flattery.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Achugar (2002) provides evidence that interpretations of piropos are shifting across generations as gender roles and gender hierarchy change. She asked 23 middle-class Uruguayan women between the ages of 21 and 56 to evaluate a set of 15 piropos drawn from a written collection of Southern Cone piropos and from interviews. Test subjects evaluated each of the 15 piropos on a 5-point scale that ranged from halago (‘flattery’) on one end to acoso sexual (‘sexual harassment’) on the other. Overall, women over 30 were more likely to evaluate the 15 piropos on the flattery side of the scale while the youngest participants were more likely to evaluate the very same 15 piropos as falling on the sexual harassment side of the scale. Achugar attributes this shift to changing attitudes toward power relations between men and women. Younger Uruguayan women are less accepting of the traditional system of hierarchical relations...
between men and women in which *piropos* might tend to be interpreted as flattery rather than as harassment.

A final indication that conceptions of *piropos* are changing is the legislation and proposed legislation in various Spanish-speaking countries in the last several years to regulate them. In 2015, both Peru and Chile passed laws against sexual harassment in public places a punishable offense. In Panama in 2015, legislation (Bill 177) specifically targeting *acoso callejero* ‘street harassment’ was being debated. In 2013 in Paraguay, Bill 66, an unsuccessful bill on gender rights and equality had a clause that specifically prohibited people from directing words with sexual connotations at women whom they did not know in public places. A 2008 law in Mexico City, the Law of the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence, prohibited “lascivious words” directed at women, but revisions to the law took out references to such words or comments by 2014. This recent proliferation of legislative bills, and the first successful passage of national laws against street harassment, are evidence of a transformation of attitudes about the meanings of *piropos* to passing women in those countries.

Conclusions

Both the cultural term for talk *piropo* and activities to which it refers are immediately recognizable to those socialized in the Spanish-speaking world. The archetypal communicative activity to which it refers – a male making unsolicited flirtatious or sexually oriented comments to a passing female of reproductive age whom he does not know – has obvious correlates in the English-speaking world, e.g., in various kinds of catcalls. *Piropos*, however, play a different role in the cultural and
communicative landscape than catcalls do in Anglo-America. They occur much more regularly and across a much wider range of contexts, they take more diverse forms, and, in some instantiations, they are evaluated much more positively than catcalls in Anglo-America.

*Piropos* embrace contradictions in both referential meaning and interactional functioning. At the level of referential meaning, *piropos* include texts that take the form of “amorous compliments or flattery” (the traditional translation of the word into English), but they also include texts with the exact *opposite* meaning, phrases that are unambiguously insulting and demeaning. At the interactional level, they also encompass conflicting meanings: a) complimentary *piropos* are a verbal gift to the recipient, both through their content and a poetic style that displays effort to entertain and flatter, but they are given asymmetrically -- men pronounce sexual interest or judgment about the women they pass in public -- so that even the most flattering *piropo* invokes and reproduces existing gender inequalities. These communicative ambiguities and contradictions are particularly salient as traditional gender roles change in various Spanish-speaking societies. As gender roles shift, so must understandings of *piropos* and the various activities to which the term refers. For the outsider, the cultural term for talk and associated activities provide a window onto contested and changing cultural understandings of gender and of appropriate forms of social interaction in public in Spanish speaking societies.
References


Table 1. Google search results for a) *piropo*, b) acoso callejero ‘street harrassment’, and c) *piropo* AND *acoso callejero* for the time periods 2000-2004 and 2010-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>a) Piropo</th>
<th>b) “acoso callejero”</th>
<th>c) Piropo + “acoso callejero”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>11900</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>196000</td>
<td>24200</td>
<td>5850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase from</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004 to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>16-fold increase</td>
<td>400-fold increase</td>
<td>1170-fold increase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>