

Gender and Spanish Agentive Suffixes: Where the Motivated Meets the Arbitrary¹

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1 Arbitrary gender in Spanish

The gender of inanimate nouns in Spanish is generally regarded as being arbitrary. Alvar and Pottier are at some pains to substantiate this view on the basis of the history of gender inheritance and assignment, speaking of ‘la indiferencia de la lengua ante tales hechos’.² As one of their arguments in support of this position, they cite the case of deverbal nouns, which may be assigned to a variety of phonological endings and genders: the noun corresponding to *desesperar* is the masculine *desespero*; from *honrar* we have the feminine *honra* and from *arrancar* the masculine *arranque*, but in this case with the final vowel *-e* rather than *-o*; while from *costar* there is a triplet development of *costo* (m.) / *costa* (f.) / *coste* (m.). However, the history of Spanish morphology reveals a number of instances in which it seems that the gender of inanimate nouns is not simply inherited from Latin or assigned in an arbitrary way but is used productively to encode regular semantic distinctions. A well-known and simple example of this is the gender of trees and their fruits, trees in general having the masculine *-o* inflection and fruits the corresponding *-a* inflection (*manzano* ‘apple tree’ / *manzana* ‘apple’); it seems that so firmly is this gender difference implanted in Spanish that throughout the language’s history gender pairs continue to be formed on this basis, extending to lexical borrowings such as Amerindian *lúcumo* ‘eggfruit tree’ / *lúcuma* ‘eggfruit’, and French *frambueso* ‘raspberry cane’ / *frambuesa* ‘raspberry’. Yet at the same time some such gender distinctions, which may originally have been productive, seem to have moved towards the point of arbitrariness. For example, there are a large number of gender pairs in which the feminine denotes a larger notion than the masculine (e.g. *rama* ‘bough’ / *ramo* ‘branch’), but also some pairs in which the relation is the opposite (e.g. *barca* ‘small boat’ / *barco* ‘boat (generic)’) and some semantically related pairs in which size may be involved but is not the distinctive feature (e.g. *cuchillo* ‘knife’ / *cuchilla* ‘blade’):

2 Theoretical interest

I am interested in such data because of the implications for what might broadly be referred to as the ‘economy’ of a language. There has been a great deal of interest recently in historical linguistics in what Lass labelled exaptation, that is, the redeployment of an obsolete feature for a different purpose.³ I have looked at what I think is a related but rather different process, that of capitalisation, by which I mean the increased exploitation of an under-utilised feature, but, in contrast to exaptation, without

¹ The present article is a more detailed investigation of one of the topics covered in Christopher J. Pountain, ‘Gender without Sex: the semantic exploitation of the masculine/feminine opposition in the history of Spanish’, to appear in a homage volume for Ralph Penny.

² Manuel Alvar and Bernard Pottier, *Morfología histórica del español* (Madrid: Gredos, 1983), 45.

³ Roger Lass, ‘How to do things with junk: exaptation in language evolution’, *Journal of Linguistics*, 26 (1990), 79–102.

loss of the feature's original function.⁴ Looked at economically, gender is a very inefficient feature of the Romance languages, since in inanimate nouns it tends to carry no semantic value and is purely an agreement phenomenon. Tendencies to introduce meaningful gender distinctions in inanimate nouns such as the ones I have exemplified could be seen as instances of incipient capitalisation, yet for the most part full capitalisation appears to be prevented. Why, for instance, was it not the case that all noun stems that are pragmatically qualified to do so developed a productive gender opposition denoting size — rather like the addition of a diminutive or augmentative suffix — given that that is what quite a large number of nouns (though a tiny proportion of all the nouns in the language) actually do? Because such distinctions as the ones I have just mentioned are in a sense fossilised in the language (though interestingly enough they seem to remain latent for occasional productive exploitation), we do not have the opportunity to see exactly what motivates the original exploitation of gender and what causes its ultimate demise. I am also interested in these data because, as I hope to demonstrate, changes in this area may be both encouraged by pragmatic necessity and limited by pragmatic constraint. I have investigated the relevance of pragmatic factors in syntactic change in a quite different area of the evolution of Spanish, and see some of the conclusions I drew there as being relevant to gender too.⁵

3 Agentive suffixes

In this paper, I want to look at a case of gender exploitation in Modern Spanish where I think we can see these processes currently in action, namely, the contrast between the masculine and feminine forms of the agentive suffix *-dor(a)*. Such suffixal neologisms have not been very extensively studied, though they are intrinsically very interesting because the opposition they express is often a complex one, relating not only to inanimate nouns but also to animate nouns. The general scenario of the Spanish nouns in *-dor(a)* is in fact hinted at by Corbett as follows:

If we have a derivational affix with a particular meaning, which is therefore also tied to a particular gender, and this affix extends its meaning, then this may affect the distribution of nouns. For an example, an affix with the meaning 'agent', whose derivatives were all in the human gender, might extend to cover tools (like English *cutter*, *trimmer*) and could lead to a conflict of assignment criteria.⁶

Spanish does not have a 'human' gender and a 'tool' gender, of course; but what we are looking at is a process by which a suffix originally primarily associated with animate agents extends to inanimate functions. That is to say, a suffix whose gender assignment is originally motivated by reference to sex extends to an inanimate referential area in which gender assignment is in principle arbitrary.

⁴ Christopher J. Pountain, 'Capitalization', in *Historical Linguistics 1995, Volume 1: General Issues and non-Germanic Languages*, ed. John Charles Smith and Delia Bentley (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 295–309.

⁵ Christopher J. Pountain, 'Pragmatic Factors in the Evolution of the Romance Reflexive (with special reference to Spanish)', *Hispanic Research Journal*, 1.1 (2000), 5–25.

⁶ Greville G. Corbett, *Gender* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), 318.

Another crucial factor involved is that agentives in *-dor(a)* also have an adjectival function and that in historical terms their expansion to inanimate nominal reference may be construed as having been achieved by the ellipsis of a noun which they originally qualified. This provides an interesting situation in modern Spanish in which transparently motivated neologisms may be polysemous and in which the assignment of gender to inanimate-referring nouns again tends to become arbitrary. Yet there is some evidence that gender has come to be used to achieve semantic discrimination within inanimate reference in this area in a way that is essentially independent of what may be taken as an original formal motivation.

4 Data

The data I shall be using require some comment. I have examined the behaviour of some 300 agentive nouns in *-dor(a)* (taken to include variant forms such as *-tor(a)* and *-sor(a)*), an area of ongoing neologism, which is by no means completely documented in current dictionaries and reference works. A measure of this is shown (1) by the number of feminines in *-dora* I have found attested which are not included in the 2001 *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (DRAE)*.⁷

- (1) Recently created feminine nouns in *-dora* not included in the *DRAE*

abridora
abrillantadora
abrochadora
aceleradora
acuchilladora
acumuladora
adaptadora
agarradora
alargadora
alisadora
amoladora
anilladora
archivadora
asadora
atornilladora
azufradora
bañadora
barredora
bruñidora
calibradora
cambiadora
cardadora
cargadora
cauterizadora
cernedora

⁷ Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española*, (Madrid: Espasa, 2001 and buscon.rae.es/diccionario/drae.htm), 22nd ed.

cerradora
clasificadora
congeladora
convertidora
cortadora
cosechadora
cosedora
cultivadora
decapadora
depiladora
depuradora
desalinizadora
desarmadora
desbrozadora
encajadora
encuadernadora
ensambladora
escurridora
esmeriladora
esmoladora
espaciadora
espiraladora
estabilizadora
filtradora
fumigadora
heladora
indicadora
inyectora
marcadora
moduladora
moldeadora
multiplicadora
niveladora
ordenadora
ovilladora
perfiladora
perforadora
planchadora
podadora
procesadora
pulidora
pulverizadora
punteadora
purificadora
quemadora
rastrilladora
recogedora
reguladora

remalladora
repetidora
reveladora
selladora
separadora
servidora
simuladora
sintonizadora
soldadora
sumadora
temperadora
tiradora
tocadora
tostadora
transmisora
tricotadora
vaporizadora
vibradora

Some of these neologisms may be expected to be ephemeral, not least because they denote ephemeral artefacts, but also because there is a patently high degree of variation in their use and acceptance within the Spanish-speaking world. However, such variable data, it may be argued, are the stuff of which language change is made, and it is available to investigators as never before with the advent of electronic corpora and the Internet. I have used three major electronic corpora, the Real Academia Española's Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA) and Corpus Diacrónico del Español (CORDE) and Mark Davies's Corpus del español (CDE).⁸ The RAE's *Nuevo tesoro lexicográfico de la lengua española (NTLLE)* has also allowed the tracing of the chronology of this expansion as revealed in published dictionaries.⁹ The VARILEX project on 'geosynonyms', partial though it is as yet, has also sometimes afforded interesting data.¹⁰ But it is the Internet itself that has provided the most interesting evidence of expansion and variation. All these sources have to be approached critically, of course. Corpora are by their nature unsystematic and prone to performance error, not to mention typographical error. Dictionaries are selective publications which do not record very new words or the detail of extensive variation. Web pages are often hastily produced and created on the basis of existing pages in English or other languages; at the same time they provide evidence of the very spontaneity in neologistic creation which I am seeking to measure.

5 The expansion of the functions of the *-dor* suffix

⁸ Consulted at <http://www.rae.es/creanet.html>, www.rae.es/cordenet.html and <http://www.corpusdelespanol.org>.

⁹ Real Academia Española, *Nuevo tesoro lexicográfico de la lengua española. Edición en DVD-ROM*. (Madrid: Espasa, 2001).

¹⁰ *Diccionario de español VARILEX. Diccionario de geosinónimos*. (Signum, <http://www.lenguaje.com/herramientas/varilex/varilex.asp>).

Let us now look more closely at the properties of the *-dor* suffix. It has undergone a substantial expansion of functions by comparison with the Latin *-TÖR* suffix from which it derives, so that it is now exploited to denote not only human agents, but also a range of machines, tools, rooms, devices and materials which carry out the action of the corresponding verb. Many such deverbal creations in *-dor*, as already indicated, also act as adjectives, in which function they have developed a hypercharacterised feminine gender marking in *-dora*: this feminine form in turn has been used nominally, principally to designate machines and companies.

(2) Range of meaning of the *-dor* suffix:

devices and tools	<i>radiador</i> ‘radiator’ <i>soldador</i> ‘soldering iron’
room or piece of furniture designated for a particular function	<i>probador</i> ‘fitting room’ <i>mostrador</i> ‘counter’ <i>velador</i> ‘bedside table’
materials	<i>bronceador</i> ‘suncream’
garments	<i>bañador</i> ‘swimming costume’ <i>calentador</i> ‘leg-warmer’ <i>ceñidor</i> ‘belt’
more abstract functions	<i>cuantificador</i> ‘quantifier’
miscellaneous	<i>embellecedor</i> ‘hubcap; trim’

Range of meaning of the *-dora* suffix:

machines	<i>excavadora</i> ‘digger’
company	<i>constructora</i> ‘construction company’

This expansion of nominal use to inanimate reference has taken place since the Middle Ages: Pattison observes that ‘there is scarcely any sign in Old Spanish of the extension of nouns in *-dor(a)* to signify a tool, weapon, or machine with which the verbal action is done ... or the place where it is done’.¹¹ As can immediately be seen from the examples discussed later in (5), the external motivation for such expansion is likely to have been the need to label new products and concepts. Take, for example, the word *acumulador(a)*. The first instance of this in the *NTLLE* is Oudin’s 1607 dictionary, where it is simply glossed as ‘accumulateur, amasseur’, and in this general agentive and adjectival meaning it continues to be attested in dictionaries until the late 19th century. The first mention of *acumulador* in the meaning relating to a device for the accumulation of electricity seems to be José Martí’s *Escenas norteamericanas* of 1874, according to CDE; in the Peninsula, according to CORDE, it is José Casas Barbosa’s *Manual de electricidad popular*, published in 1881, where it is used adjectivally. Its nominal use is recorded in the Zerolo encyclopaedic dictionary of 1895, closely followed by the 1899 *DRAE*. The feminine *acumuladora* is recorded only in the 20th century and in adjectival use in CDE (*placa acumuladora*: ENCARTA Encyclopaedia) and in CORDE (*caldera acumuladora*: this is not an electrical meaning but a hydraulic meaning, from Enrique de Montero y de Torres’s *Los modernos barcos submarinos al*

¹¹ David G. Pattison, *Early Spanish Suffixes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 111.

alcance de todos, published in 1912). An inanimate nominal meaning for the feminine is apparently extremely recent and very restricted. It is used on a website advertising weaving machines; the meaning is perhaps most easily deduced from the following explanation:

Aunque se haya implantado el mejor sistema de detección posible para cabos cortados o hilos defectuosos, hay casos en los cuales un cabo cortado o un defecto del hilado llega al enjullo. Cuando esto sucede, la única manera de garantizar la perfección absoluta del enjullo es usar una acumuladora, para poder desenrollar el enjullo con el objeto de encontrar y corregir el defecto. La acumuladora Modelo 202 es única en el sentido de que funciona con el principio de la tensión de la faja en vez del principio de emparejar la velocidad. Esto asegura que no hay posibilidades de que se dañe el hilado durante el ciclo de acumulación.¹²

5.1 Ellipsis

I have already mentioned that the original motivation for assignment of gender in the nominal use of such adjectival forms is almost certainly elliptical. The restricted range of the feminine *-dor(a)* seems to suggest that, as usual, feminine is the marked choice, limited to association with *máquina* for machines or *empresa* for companies. Although specific nouns might be proposed as candidates for ellipsis with the masculine *-dor* (e.g. *aparato*, *cuarto*), it seems more likely that the masculine is the default choice in the absence of any positive motivation for the feminine. Productivity of the feminine, as we have seen with *acumuladora*, is likely generally to have been a later process than that of the masculine. In the present day, we can still see some evidence of this process, since some feminines in particular are attested much more frequently as adjectival modifiers than as nouns in their own right: *conmutadora*, for example, seems not yet to have broken free of dependency on such nouns as *llave* and *caja*. Even with the feminine, however, such ellipsis is unlikely to have been from a single source: (3) shows several more ellipses of which I have found current evidence.

- (3) Some elliptical origins of nouns in *-or* and *-ora*:

Feminines:

(*arma*) *ametralladora*
 (*avioneta*) *fumigadora*
 (*bacteria*) *fijadora*
 (*boquilla*) *atomizadora*
 (*bola*) *tiradora*
 (*caja*) *registradora*
 (*carpeta*) *archivadora*
 (*chaqueta*) *cazadora*
 (*cuchilla*) *afinadora*
 (*herramienta*) *infladora*
 (*lámina*) *rascadora*

¹² http://www.mccoy-ellison.com/span_filamentdirws.htm.

(llave) conmutadora
 (luz) indicadora
 (máquina) hiladora
 (navajilla) podadora
 (pala) cargadora
 (pistola) decapadora
 (placa) acumuladora
 (plancha) asadora
 (silla) mecedora
 (tarjeta) temporizadora
 (torre) archivadora
 (válvula) atomizadora

Masculines:

(cepillo) lijador
 (llavero) destapador
 (martillo) clavador
 (rodillo) laminador

Laca and Rainer, who have studied this phenomenon quite extensively, are agreed that the names of appliances and machines in *-dora* no longer develop exclusively through elliptical nominalisation but by direct analogy with established nouns.¹³ From all this we can provisionally conclude that the appearance of inanimate feminine agentives in *-dora*, originally the specific product of ellipsis with particular nouns, creates the possibility of a gender contrast with machines which is essentially free of elliptical motivation. We might also bear in mind that this distinction is consistent with, and possibly reinforced by, the much longer-standing distinction based on size, feminine machines being typically larger than masculine implements.

5.2 The need for gender contrast

Expansion of functions in the masculine extends, as we have seen in (2), to a number of different meaning categories. It is interesting that these meanings seem to conflict relatively rarely with the animate agentive meaning, or with each other. For example, *acelerador* is unlikely to denote a human agent, since it does not represent a pragmatically human function and in particular does not refer to any regular occupation (this is not even listed as a possible meaning by the *DRAE*), and is reserved for a car accelerator — the currency of this meaning is reflected in its figurative use in the expression *pisar el acelerador* ‘to hurry, to step on it’, which is firmly established enough to be listed by the *DRAE*. (However, it does have other, more recent inanimate meanings too: ‘atom accelerator’, which the *DRAE* distinguishes as *acelerador de partículas*, a web accelerator, distinguished as *acelerador (de) internet* or *acelerador de descargas* and a graphics accelerator (*acelerador gráfico*)). When there is a potential conflict, it seems that there is sometimes a default, preferred, meaning, and that the

¹³ Brenda Laca, *Die Wortbildung als Grammatik des Wortschatzes. Untersuchungen zur spanischen Subjektnominalisierung* (Tübingen: Narr, 1986), 290–94, and Franz Rainer, *Spanische Wortbildungslehre* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993), 454–55, summarised in David Pharies, *Diccionario etimológico de los sufijos españoles* (Madrid: Gredos, 2003).

discourse context prevents an inappropriate reading. *Tocador* has both the animate agentive meaning of ‘player (of a musical instrument)’ and the inanimate meaning of ‘dressing table’. But of the 70 20th-century examples retrieved from CDE, only 7 have the animate agentive meaning; furthermore, fairly rapid scanning of the discourse context will enable the appropriate assignment to be made, as can be seen from the two examples in (4) below, where *tocador de marimba* is interpretable only as ‘player’ and *tocador de tía vieja* can only be ‘an old lady’s dressing table’.

(4) Determination of meaning of *tocador* in a KWIC concordance (CDE):

boy, guiña el ojo a un mulato de ojos verdes **tocador** de marimba. Johnny Smith la atrae por la cintura. Es ‘player’
la apariencia de un cofre para joyas en un **tocador** de tía vieja.; los cantos rígidos, la tapa ‘dressing table’

Amongst the potential inanimate meanings of the *-dor* suffix, there is little likelihood of conflict. Nouns denoting rooms, pieces of furniture and clothes are relatively few in number and derive from verbs which denote activities with typically animate subjects and are not normally susceptible of being construed as being performed by instruments. Thus *probador* ‘changing room’ is pragmatically unlikely to mean ‘a device for trying something on’ and *velador* ‘bedside table or lamp’ is unlikely to mean ‘a device for keeping vigil’.

Again, cases of theoretical conflict are obviated by the preference for one particular meaning. As an example, we may observe the history of *bañador*. This word currently has three meanings according to the *DRAE*:

1. adj. Que baña. Apl. a pers., u. t. c. s.
2. m. Recipiente donde se baña algo.
3. m. Prenda, generalmente de una pieza, usada para bañarse en playas, piscinas, etc.

The last is much the commonest, however: instances in the CDE are only in this meaning, though it is first recorded only in 1884. The animate agentive meaning, presumably coined from *baño*, though in fact directly parallel to Lat. *BALNĒATOR*, is recorded from the 1492 *Dictionarium latino-hispanicum* of Nebrija, but it has now been largely replaced by *bañista*, first recorded in the *NTLLE* in the Academy dictionary of 1803 with the meaning ‘el que toma las aguas minerales en los mismos baños’; so the specific notion of taking the waters, or bathing for the sake of one’s health, later bathing for pleasure, is already distinguished lexically. The second meaning, the one that interests us here, is recorded from the 1770 Academy dictionary as a container in which candles were dipped, and is as such obsolete; this instrumental meaning of *bañador* is in any case very close to that of *baño* itself and it is the latter that seems to be preferred today in such phrases as *baño de ojos*, *baño de pie*.

A number of phenomena seem to suggest that gender contrast is being actively exploited in this area. A number of deverbal agentive nouns in *-dor(a)* do not under normal pragmatic circumstances have animate reference, because the agentive notion is not normally construable as a regular occupation. For example, it is difficult to imagine *delineador* as having the animate reference ‘someone who outlines’, since outlining is

not a normal occupation. In such cases, a non-animate reference for the masculine, and sometimes for the feminine too, is available: the masculine often denotes an implement or material (so *delineador* has the meaning ‘eye-liner’), sometimes even a machine (e.g. *climatizador* ‘air conditioner’), while the feminine, which is less widely exploited in this fashion, appears only to denote a machine (e.g. *exprimidora* ‘juicing machine’). The extent of this phenomenon can be judged from the large number of examples in (5).

(5) Nouns in *-dor* and *-dora* with non-animate reference

<i>abridor</i> ‘tin-, bottle-opener’	<i>abridora</i> ‘carding machine’
<i>abrillantador</i> ‘polisher for precious stones’	<i>abrillantadora</i> ‘polishing machine’
<i>abrochador(a)</i> ‘button hook’; ‘stapler’	
<i>acelerador</i> ‘accelerator (car, physics)’	<i>aceleradora</i> ‘graphics accelerator (computing)’
<i>acumulador</i> ‘accumulator (electrical)’	<i>acumuladora</i> ‘accumulator (weaving)’
<i>adaptador</i> ‘adaptor (general)’	<i>adaptadora</i> ‘adaptor (card in computing)’
<i>aerodeslizador</i> ‘hovercraft’; ‘hang-glider’	
<i>agarrador</i> ‘oven glove’	<i>agarradora</i> ‘suction pad’
<i>alargador</i> ‘extension lead’	<i>alargadora</i> ‘extending cue (billiards)’
<i>alisador</i> ‘styler (hair)’; smoothing tool (bookbinding)’	<i>alisadora</i> ‘smoothing machine (for mitre joints)’
<i>alternador</i> ‘alternator’	Although <i>alternadora</i> is attested in the meaning of ‘generator’, it also has the animate meaning of ‘hostess’ in Mexico
<i>ambientador</i> ‘fragrant spray’	
<i>amolador</i> ‘steel, knife-sharpener’	<i>amoladora (angular)</i> ‘(angle) grinder’
<i>amortiguador</i> ‘shock absorber’	
<i>amplificador(a)</i> ‘enlarger (photo)’	
<i>apisonador</i> ‘upright rammer’	<i>apisonadora</i> ‘steamroller’
<i>asador</i> ‘spit, roaster; restaurant specialising in roast dishes’	<i>asadora</i> ‘electric griddle’
<i>aspirador(a)</i> ‘vacuum cleaner’	
<i>atizador</i> ‘poker’	
<i>atomizador</i> ‘spray, atomiser’	
<i>atornillador(a)</i> ‘electric screwdriver’	
<i>bastidor</i> ‘wings (theatre)’; ‘chassis’	
<i>bronceador</i> ‘suncream’	
<i>calculador(a)</i> ‘calculator’	
<i>calentador</i> ‘heater’	
<i>calibrador</i> ‘gauge’	<i>calibradora</i> ‘sizing, sanding machine’
<i>calzador</i> ‘shoehorn’	
<i>carburador</i> ‘carburettor’	
<i>catalizador</i> ‘catalyst’	
<i>ceñidor</i> ‘belt, sash’	
<i>centrifugador(a)</i> ‘centrifuge’	
<i>cerrador</i> ‘lock’	<i>cerradora</i> ‘seamer’

<i>clavador</i> ‘tool for hammering in a post’	<i>clavadora</i> ‘tacker gun’; ‘mechanical pounder’
<i>climatizador</i> ‘air conditioner’	
<i>colgador</i> ‘hanger, hook’	
<i>computador(a)</i> ‘computer’	
<i>condensador</i> ‘condenser’	
<i>congelador(a)</i> ‘freezer’	
<i>conmutador</i> ‘two-way switch’	
<i>contenedor</i> ‘container’	
<i>convertidor(a)</i> ‘power converter’	
<i>copiador</i> ‘letter book’	<i>copiadora</i> ‘(photo)copier’
<i>cuantificador</i> ‘quantifier’	
<i>decapador(a)</i> ‘hot air stripper’	
<i>delineador</i> ‘eye liner’	
<i>demodulador(a)</i> ‘modem’	
<i>denominador</i> ‘denominator’	
<i>depilador</i> ‘depilatory wax’; ‘depilatory tongs’	<i>depiladora</i> ‘(electric) depilator’
<i>depurador</i> ‘(air) purifier’; ‘debugger (computing)’	<i>depuradora</i> ‘(water) purifier’
<i>desatascador</i> ‘unblocking agent’; ‘plunger’	
<i>descodificador</i> ‘decoder’	
<i>desfibrilador</i> ‘defibrillator’	
<i>deshuesador</i> ‘stoning knife’	<i>deshuesadora</i> ‘stoning machine’
<i>desnatador</i> ‘cream jug’	<i>desnatadora</i> ‘decreaming machine’
<i>despertador</i> ‘alarm clock’	
<i>destapador</i> ‘bottle opener’ (Am); ‘chemical for unblocking a drain’	<i>destapadora</i> ‘device for unblocking drain’ (Am)
<i>destornillador</i> ‘screwdriver’	
<i>ecualizador</i> ‘equalizer’	
<i>elevador</i> ‘lift, elevator’	
<i>embellecedor</i> ‘hubcap’	
<i>encendedor</i> ‘lighter’	
<i>enjugador</i> ‘drying agent’; ‘clothes dryer’	
<i>ensamblador</i> ‘assembler language (computing)’	
<i>escurridor</i> ‘drainer’	<i>escurridora</i> ‘draining machine’
<i>esmerilador</i> ‘grinding wheel’	<i>esmeriladora</i> ‘bench grinder’
<i>espaciador</i> ‘spacebar’	
<i>estabilizador</i> ‘stabiliser, stabilising agent’	<i>estabilizadora</i> ‘stabiliser (on a car)’
<i>excavador</i> ‘digger’	<i>excavadora</i> ‘mechanical digger, bulldozer’
<i>exprimidor</i> ‘squeezer’	<i>exprimidora</i> ‘juicing machine’
<i>fijador</i> ‘fixer (photography)’	
<i>filtrador</i> ‘filtering agent’	
<i>finalizador</i> ‘fattening agent’	

<i>flotador</i> ‘buoyancy aid’	
<i>hervidor</i> ‘water heater, kettle’	
<i>humidificador</i> ‘humidifier’	
<i>impulsor</i> ‘impeller’	
<i>indicador</i> ‘indicator’	
<i>inflador</i> ‘inflater (pump)’	
<i>inhalador</i> ‘inhaler’	
<i>intercambiador</i> ‘interchange’; ‘heat exchanger’	
<i>intercomunicador</i> ‘intercom’	
<i>interruptor</i> ‘switch’	
<i>inyector</i> ‘injector’	
<i>irrigador</i> ‘sprinkler, irrigator’	
<i>llamador</i> ‘door-knocker’	
<i>marcador</i> ‘scoreboard’; ‘marker pen (LA)’; ‘marker’; ‘dialler’	<i>marcadora</i> ‘pistol used in paintballing’
<i>marginador</i> ‘margin stop (on typewriter)’	
<i>mecedor</i> ‘stirrer’	<i>mecedora</i> ‘rocking chair’
<i>modificador</i> ‘modifier (maths)’	
<i>modulador</i> ‘modulator’	
<i>mojador</i> ‘moistener’	
<i>moldeador</i> ‘(hair) styler’	<i>moldeadora</i> ‘machine for moulding concrete’
<i>mostrador</i> ‘counter’	
<i>multiplicador</i> ‘multiplier’	<i>multiplicadora</i> ‘multiplier (gear used in a turbine)’
<i>nebulizador</i> ‘atomiser’	
<i>nivelador</i> ‘spirit level’	<i>niveladora</i> ‘grader (machine for levelling ground)’
<i>numerador</i> ‘enumerator (maths)’	<i>numeradora</i> ‘numbering machine’
<i>obturador</i> ‘shutter (photography)’	
<i>ordenador</i> ‘computer’	
<i>oscilador</i> ‘oscillator’	
<i>perfilador</i> ‘liner’; ‘trimmer’	<i>perfiladora</i> ‘machine for smoothing surfaces’
<i>perforador</i> ‘hole punch’	<i>perforadora</i> ‘pneumatic drill’
<i>planeador</i> ‘glider’	<i>planeadora</i> ‘speedboat’
<i>prendedor</i> ‘tiepin’; ‘brooch’	
<i>probador</i> ‘changing room’	
<i>procesador</i> ‘processor (computing)’	<i>procesadora</i> ‘processing machine’
<i>prolongador</i> ‘extension lead’	
<i>pulsador</i> ‘(electric) button’	
<i>pulverizador</i> ‘atomiser’; ‘carburettor jet’; ‘spray gun’	<i>pulverizadora</i> ‘pulverising machine’
<i>purificador</i> ‘purifier (cloth used for wiping the chalice at Mass)’	<i>purificadora</i> ‘water purifying machine’
<i>quemador</i> ‘burner (gas etc)’	<i>quemadora</i> ‘CD burner, writer’

<i>radiador</i> ‘radiator’	
<i>rallador</i> ‘grater’	<i>ralladora</i> ‘electric grater’
<i>recogedor</i> ‘dust pan’	<i>recogedora</i> ‘mechanical shovel’
<i>rectificador</i> ‘rectifier (electronics)’	<i>rectificadora</i> ‘rectifier (for metal)’
<i>reflector</i> ‘spotlight’	
<i>regador</i> ‘sprinkler’	
<i>regulador</i> ‘hairpin’; ‘crescendo mark (music)’	
<i>remolcador</i> ‘tugboat’	
<i>repasador</i> ‘dishcloth’	
<i>respirador</i> ‘face-mask’	
<i>resucitador</i> ‘resuscitator’	
<i>revelador</i> ‘developer (photography)’	<i>reveladora</i> ‘machine used for developing (photography)’
<i>rizador</i> ‘curler’; ‘curling tongs’	
<i>rotulador</i> ‘felt-tip pen’	<i>rotuladora</i> ‘labelling machine’
<i>secador</i> ‘hair dryer’	<i>secadora</i> ‘tumble dryer’
<i>sellador</i> ‘sealer, sealant’	<i>selladora</i> ‘sealing machine’
<i>señalador</i> ‘bookmark’	
<i>separador</i> ‘file separator’	<i>separadora</i> ‘separating machine’
<i>silenciador</i> ‘silencer’	
<i>simulador</i> ‘simulator’	
<i>sintetizador</i> ‘synthesiser’	
<i>sintonizador</i> ‘tuner’	<i>sintonizadora</i> ‘tuning card for a computer’
<i>sujetador</i> ‘bra’	
<i>sumador</i> ‘adding machine’	<i>sumadora</i> also used with same meaning
<i>surtidor</i> ‘fountain’; ‘supply pump’	
<i>tabulador</i> ‘tab key (typewriter)’	<i>tabuladora</i> ‘tabulating machine (computing)’
<i>templador</i> ‘tuning key’	<i>templadora</i> ‘tempering machine for chocolate’
<i>temporizador</i> ‘timer’	
<i>tenedor</i> ‘fork’	
<i>tostador</i> ‘toaster’	<i>tostadora</i> ‘CD burner (computing)’
<i>tra(n)sformador</i> ‘transformer’	
<i>transbordador</i> ‘ferry’	<i>transbordadora</i> ‘ferry company’
<i>transmisor</i> ‘transmitter’	
<i>transpondedor</i> ‘transponder’	
<i>transportador</i> ‘protractor’	<i>transportadora</i> ‘transport company’
<i>trapeador</i> ‘dishcloth (regional)’	
<i>vaporizador</i> ‘vaporiser’	<i>vaporizadora</i> ‘steamer (machine)’
<i>ventilador</i> ‘fan’	
<i>vestidor</i> ‘dressing room’	
<i>vibrador</i> ‘vibrator’	<i>vibradora</i> ‘vibrating machine (industrial)’

It can now be seen that there are relatively few cases like *tocador*, discussed above, which have significant potential for both animate and inanimate reference. As against

the long list of agentive nouns in (5) which are inanimate in reference by default, I have found only the following which have both animate and inanimate reference:

(6) Non-animate-referring nouns in *-dor* which also have animate reference:

<i>limpiador</i> ‘cleansing agent’ (but also ‘cleaner’)	<i>limpiadora</i> ‘power hose’
<i>mezclador</i> ‘(sound) mixer’ (also ‘person who mixes’: see below)	<i>mezcladora</i> ‘(concrete) mixer’
<i>perfumador</i> ‘(scented) oil burner’ (also ‘parfumer’)	
<i>pulidor</i> ‘polishing cloth’ (but also ‘polisher’)	<i>pulidora</i> ‘(electric) floor polisher’
<i>tocador</i> ‘dressing room’ (but also ‘player (of a musical instrument)’: see above)	<i>tocadora</i> ‘player (computing)’

However, where conflict between animate and inanimate meanings is a more realistic possibility, there are some indications that discrimination of animate and inanimate meanings is made by means of gender. (7) shows a list of cases in which the development of a feminine noun in *-dora* to denote an inanimate concept seems to facilitate the continuing use of the masculine *-dor* with animate reference. As an example, let us take *embutidor* ‘maker of sausages’ as opposed to *embutidora* ‘machine which makes sausages’. Of course, *embutidora* could logically denote a female sausage-maker — if it does, it is not currently substantiated by a Google search under either “la embutidora” or “una embutidora” — but pragmatically it remains the case that it is much more likely to denote the machine.

(7) Development of a feminine noun in *-dora* to denote an inanimate concept seems to facilitate the continuing use of the masculine *-dor* with animate reference:

<i>acuchillador</i> ‘person who sands’	<i>acuchilladora</i> ‘sanding machine’
<i>afeitador</i> ‘barber’ (though <i>afeitador</i> also found as ‘(electric) shaver’; ‘(disposable) razor’)	<i>afeitadora</i> ‘(electric) shaver’ (<i>afeitadora</i> archaically ‘woman who shaves others’)
<i>agavillador</i> ‘binder’	<i>agavilladora</i> ‘binding machine’
<i>amasador</i> ‘person who kneads’	<i>amasadora</i> ‘kneading machine’
<i>anillador</i> ‘ringer (of birds)’	<i>anilladora</i> ‘comb binder’
<i>archivador</i> ‘filing clerk’ (though also ‘filing cabinet’)	<i>archivadora</i> ‘filing cabinet’
<i>cardador</i> ‘carder’	<i>cardadora</i> ‘carding machine’
<i>cazador</i> ‘hunter’	<i>cazadora</i> ‘jacket’
<i>copiador</i> ‘copyist’ (though <i>copista</i> now preferred)	<i>copiadora</i> ‘copying machine’
<i>cortador</i> ‘cutter’	<i>cortadora</i> ‘cutting machine’
<i>cosechador</i> ‘harvester’	<i>cosechadora</i> ‘combine harvester’
<i>cultivador</i> ‘grower’	<i>cultivadora</i> ‘cultivator’ (though <i>cultivador</i>

	also used)
<i>embotellador</i> ‘bottler’	<i>embotelladora</i> ‘bottling plant’
<i>embutidor</i> ‘person who makes sausages’	<i>embutidora</i> ‘sausage-making machine’
<i>empacador</i> ‘packer’	<i>empacadora</i> ‘packing machine’
<i>encajador</i> ‘fitter’	<i>encajadora</i> ‘machine for packing (bottles)’
<i>encerador</i> ‘person who polishes’	<i>enceradora</i> ‘(floor) polishing machine’
<i>encuadernador</i> ‘person who binds books’ (though <i>encuadernador</i> also used as ‘binder, folder’)	<i>encuadernadora</i> ‘binding machine’ (also ‘comb binder’)
<i>espigador</i> ‘gleaner’	<i>espigadora</i> ‘router’
<i>esquilador</i> ‘shearer’	<i>esquiladora</i> ‘electric shearing machine’
<i>exprimidor</i> ‘squeezer’	<i>exprimidora</i> ‘juicing machine’
<i>(micro)filmador</i> ‘person who films’	<i>(micro)filmadora</i> ‘(micro)film camera’
<i>freidor</i> ‘frier’	<i>freidora</i> ‘deep fat frier’
<i>fresador</i> ‘milling machine operator’	<i>fresadora</i> ‘milling machine’
<i>grabador</i> ‘engraver’ (though also widely used as ‘tape recorder’)	<i>grabadora</i> ‘tape recorder’
<i>hilador</i> ‘spinner’ (note also <i>hiladero/a</i> ‘spinner’)	<i>hiladora</i> ‘spinning machine’
<i>impresor</i> ‘printer’	<i>impresora</i> ‘(electric) printer’
<i>lavador</i> ‘washer’	<i>lavadora</i> ‘washing machine’ (note <i>lavandera</i> ‘washerwoman’)
<i>mandrilador</i> ‘person skilled in using a metal punch’	<i>mandriladora</i> ‘metal punch’
<i>ordeñador</i> ‘person who milks’	<i>ordeñadora</i> ‘milking machine’
<i>picador</i> ‘picador (bullfighting)’; ‘miner who uses an axe’	<i>picadora</i> ‘mincer’ (the meaning of ‘female picador’ is not unknown, but is pragmatically less likely)
<i>pisador</i> ‘grape treader’	<i>pisadora</i> ‘grape press’
<i>planchador</i> ‘person who irons’	<i>planchadora</i> ‘ironing machine’ (also as an animate agentive ‘woman who irons’)
<i>podador</i> ‘pruner’	<i>podadora</i> ‘pruning hook’; ‘hedge trimmer’
<i>registrador</i> ‘registrar’	<i>registradora</i> ‘till’
<i>remachador</i> ‘riveter’	<i>remachadora</i> ‘riveting machine’
<i>segador</i> ‘reaper’	<i>segadora</i> ‘mowing machine’
<i>sembrador</i> ‘sower’ (note also some local use as ‘container which holds seed for sowing’)	<i>sembradora</i> ‘broadcast sower’
<i>serrador</i> ‘sawyer’	<i>(a)serradora</i> ‘mechanical saw’
<i>soldador</i> ‘solderer’ (note also ‘soldering iron’)	<i>soldadora</i> ‘welding machine’
<i>taladrador</i> ‘driller’	<i>taladradora</i> ‘electric drill’

<i>tejedor</i> ‘weaver’	<i>tejedora</i> ‘knitting machine’
<i>trillador</i> ‘thresher’	<i>trilladora</i> ‘threshing machine’
<i>tritador</i> ‘person who chops’	<i>tritadora</i> ‘chopping machine’

Returning to those cases in (5) in which the masculine in *-dor* does not normally denote an animate agent, we may notice that it seems to be precisely in such cases that semantic contrast between inanimate meanings for masculine and feminine has developed: thus *calibrador* has the meaning of ‘gauge’ and *calibradora* the meaning of ‘sizing, sanding machine’; *escurridor* ‘drainer’ and *escurridora* ‘draining machine’. I have been surprised by the number of such examples that can be found, which is much greater than is suggested by current reference works. They are relatively recent and not necessarily universal in the Spanish-speaking world; some can at best be described as incipient. The extremes of the scale can be appreciated by considering those that seem reasonably well attested, such as *copiador* ‘copy book’ versus *copiadora* ‘copying machine’ (both well attested in dictionaries), through *bruñidor*, attested since the 17th century in *NTLLE* in its meaning of ‘polishing cloth’, versus the more recent *bruñidora* ‘honing machine’, which has still to find its way into the dictionaries, to the pair *depilador* ‘depilatory cream’ and *depiladora* ‘(electric) depilator’, neither of which seem yet to have hit the dictionaries.¹⁴

Although I have been suggesting here that the chronology of the contrast is that the appearance of the feminine is subsequent to that of the masculine (since in general the mechanical device is likely to be newer than the non-mechanical implement or substance), it is also possible to see the contrast exploited the other way round: *depuradora* ‘(water) purifying plant’ is attested in *CDE* and the *DRAE*, but the corresponding masculine *depurador*, which appears to be used in the meaning of ‘(air) purifier’ but has come to be used prominently in computing literature as ‘debugger (of computer programs, etc.)’ and does not figure in the dictionaries, is obviously the newer term. Another such case, this time of a more expected and straightforward contrast, is that of *deshuesadora* ‘stoning machine’, included in the *DRAE*, versus *deshuesador* ‘stoning knife’, which is not.

Indeed, there does seem to be a tendency in Spanish for a corresponding *-dor* form to be developed if a feminine *-dora* form exists: there are relatively few examples of *-dora* nouns which have no corresponding *-dor* form (8), and this is no doubt confirmatory evidence of our earlier impression that the feminine is the marked form.

- (8) Nouns in *-ora* which have no corresponding *-or* form:

ametralladora ‘machine gun’ (masc. only used as adj.)
cauterizadora ‘tool used in tattooing’ (Mex)
desalinizadora ‘desalinator’
desbrozadora ‘machine used to clear vegetation’
engrapadora ‘stapler’ (areas of Latin America)
engrapadora ‘stapler’
espiraladora ‘spiral binding machine’ (Argentina)

¹⁴ See also Rainer, *Spanische Wortbildungslehre*, 455.

fotocopiadora ‘photocopier’
grapadora ‘stapler’
heladora ‘ice-cream maker’
incubadora ‘incubator’
licuadora ‘juice extractor’ (*licuador* is also occasionally attested)
lijadora ‘electric sander’
ovilladora ‘winding machine’
panificadora ‘bakery’
rasuradora ‘razor’ (El Salvador, Mexico)
roturadora ‘roturator’
sulfatadora ‘sulphurizer’
topadora ‘bulldozer’ (Argentina, Cuba, Peru, Uruguay)
tricotadora ‘knitting machine’

Despite the foregoing, however, there are plenty of instances in which reference of the masculine *-dor* to an animate agent does not preclude an inanimate reference as well, and so in these cases the masculine ends up polysemous:

- (9) Cases in which reference of the masculine *-dor* to an animate agent does not preclude inanimate reference:

compilador: ‘compiler’ (animate agentive) / ‘computer program which creates machine code’ (inanimate)
deshollinador: ‘chimney sweep’ (animate agentive) / ‘chimney brush’ (inanimate)
estrangulador: ‘strangler’ / ‘choke (on car)’
operador: ‘operator’ (animate agentive) / (maths)
pasador: ‘smuggler’ / ‘hairpin’; ‘tiepin’; ‘cuff link’; ‘bolt’; ‘filter’ (*OSD* gives only the inanimate meanings)
programador: ‘programmer’ (animate agentive) / ‘programmer (mechanical, electronic)’
propulsor: ‘promoter’ / ‘propellant’
receptor: ‘recipient’ / ‘receiver (machine)’
reparador: ‘repairer’ (animate agentive) / ‘filler (material)’
restaurador: ‘restorer’ (animate agentive) / (material)
saltador: ‘acrobat’ / ‘skipping-rope’
servidor: ‘servant’ (animate agentive) / ‘server (computing)’
soldador: ‘solderer’ (animate agentive) / ‘soldering iron’
tirador: ‘shooter’ (animate agentive) / ‘handle’; ‘bell-rope’; ‘catapult’; ‘braces’
velador: ‘watchman, guard’ / ‘bedside table’, ‘pedestal table’; ‘type of candle’; ‘type of lamp’

At the same time, there are perceptible tendencies against this situation: alternative nouns designating animate agents have sometimes been developed (the *-ista* suffix has been particularly productive in this respect, as we have already seen in *bañista*; another example is *cambista* ‘money changer’, which leaves modern *cambiador* (not used in this meaning since the 18th century according to CDE) as

uniquely inanimate in reference ('changing table, mat'; 'changing room'; 'record changer'; '(heat) exchanger'). The agentive suffix *-ero* similarly permits a distinction between *obrero* 'worker' and *obrador* 'workshop (where pastries and sweets are made)'. The agentive notion corresponding to the verb *mirar* 'to look at' seems never to have been rendered by *mirador*, which since the 16th century has the inanimate meaning of 'viewpoint'; the notion of 'onlooker', 'viewer' is now rendered by the neologism *espectador* (first attested in the 18th century). *Recibidor*, which has a long history as an animate agentive, now also has the meaning of 'reception room' (first recorded by the 1970 *DRAE*), which may be facilitated by the existence of the learned but apparently longer-standing *receptor* (however, *receptor* has likewise developed an inanimate meaning '(radio) receiver'). *Servidor(a)*, recently propelled into use as 'server (computing)', has its obsolescent agentive notions covered by *sirvienta* and *criado*.

The basis of the gender contrast may also be changed by pragmatic necessity. *Mezclador* has a longstanding history as an animate agentive, particularly in Old Castilian with the specialised meaning of 'troublemaker' (now obsolete); from the 1956 *DRAE* the feminine *mezcladora* is attested with the meaning '(concrete) mixer', and at this stage we may think of the contrast as falling into the pattern observed in the pairs of (6). The 1984 *DRAE* adds the meaning of '(sound) mixer' (presumably originally an ellipsis of *(mesa) mezcladora*). However, there seems to be an increasing reassignment of the latter to the masculine, with a potential new inanimate contrast between *mezclador* as '(sound) mixer' and *mezcladora* as '(concrete) mixer'.

The number of feminine nouns in *-dora* which have both animate and inanimate meanings seems to be relatively restricted, and the animate meanings are not straightforwardly agentive, but specialised, e.g. *alternadora*: 'hostess (euphemistic)' (animate) / 'generator' (inanimate) and *coladora*: 'washerwoman' (animate) / *coladora* 'hand mincer'. This is despite the fact that women have come to perform occupations which were previously the preserve of men, with the consequent expansion in the stock of female-referring agentive nouns in *-dora*. As with the masculine, lexical discrimination of animate and inanimate sometimes takes place (e.g. *lavandera* 'washerwoman' / *lavadora* 'washing machine'), or the feminine noun denoting the machine does not pragmatically have the possibility of animate reference (e.g. *apisonadora* 'steamroller').

If a semantic contrast, real or potential, between masculine and feminine has not developed, there is often variation in the use of masculine and feminine. Again, I have been surprised by the extent of this. One of quite long standing is *aspirador* ~ *aspiradora* 'vacuum cleaner'. Sometimes variation is clearly regional, as in the preference for *aplanadora* over *aplanador* 'steamroller' seen in Latin America. Modern dictionaries have difficulty keeping pace: the notion of 'spin drier' is represented exclusively by the feminine *centrifugadora* in the *DRAE*, while the *OSD* differentiates *centrifugador* as 'spin drier' and *centrifugadora* as 'centrifuge'; however, searches on the WWW score the feminine more highly in both meanings. The interesting VARILEX project reveals some of these differences: among the many words for 'stapler' in the Spanish-speaking world, both *engrapador* and *engrapadora* are recorded, with the masculine clearly preferred in Peru, despite the overall greater acceptance of the feminine. In fact, the whole basis of gender contrast may vary from

place to place. *Peinador*, attested since the Covarrubias dictionary of 1611 in the inanimate meaning of ‘peignoir’, though also used in an agentive animate meaning, appears to be used today in the Peninsula primarily with inanimate meaning, while in areas of Latin America (Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay) it has the animate meaning of ‘hairdresser’; in other areas of Latin America there is variation between the masculine (Chile, Colombia, Panamá) and the feminine (Venezuela) in the inanimate meaning of ‘dressing table’. Since 1985 the *DRAE* has also recorded the feminine in the inanimate meaning of ‘combing machine’, used in the textile industry.

(10) Variation between *-dor* and *-dora*:

- abrochador* ~ *abrochadora* ‘buttonhook’
- amplificador* ~ *amplificadora* ‘enlarger’
- aplanador* ~ *aplanadora* ‘steamroller’ (Am)
- archivador* ~ *archivadora* ‘filing cabinet’
- aspirador* ~ *aspiradora* ‘vacuum cleaner’
- atornillador* ~ *atornilladora* ‘electric screwdriver’ (note that the feminine denotes this exclusively: the tool is *destornillador* and *destornilladora* does not exist)
- azufrador* ~ *azufradora* ‘fumigator’ (variation is regional; the feminine is apparently limited to Argentina and Chile)
- calculador* ~ *calculadora* ‘calculator’ (preference for feminine)
- centrifugador* ~ *centrifugadora* ‘spin-drier’; ‘centrifuge’ (the feminine is the only form given in *DRAE*; the Collins bilingual dictionary distinguishes ‘spin-drier’ for masculine and ‘centrifuge’ for feminine; the feminine appears to be more extensive on the Internet)
- computador* ~ *computadora* ‘computer’ (the feminine now much more frequent, though *DRAE* still gives both. The Google search engine score is 117,000 masculine and 311,000 feminine)
- congelador* ~ *congeladora* ‘freezer’ (statistical preference for masculine on Internet and in most dictionaries, but significant numbers of feminine in CDE and CREA)
- contestador* ~ *contestadora* ‘answering machine’ (masculine in *DRAE* and most dictionaries, but the feminine is quite widely used on Latin American websites)
- cultivador* ~ *cultivadora* ‘cultivator’ (masculine in *DRAE*; *Clave* gives both, with preference for masculine; variation on Internet)
- decapador* ~ *decapadora* ‘hot air stripper’ (generally not attested in dictionaries; variation on the Internet)
- depilador* ~ *depiladora* ‘depilator’ (the feminine is much more common, and can contrast with the masculine in its meaning of ‘depilatory cream’)
- estabilizador* ~ *estabilizadora* ‘stabiliser’
- grabador* ~ *grabadora* ‘tape recorder’
- laminador* ~ *laminadora* ‘metal presser for making laminates’
- lijador* ~ *lijadora* ‘sander’
- mecedor* ~ *mecedora* ‘rocking chair’ (the masculine appears to be limited to LA)

peinador ~ *peinadora* ‘dressing table’ (masculine in Chile, feminine in Venezuela)
perforador ~ *perforadora* ‘hole punch’ (the feminine is restricted to Argentina)
refrigerador ~ *refrigeradora* ‘refrigerator’ (according to VARILEX these constitute 25.76% and 9.17% respectively of the various words for ‘refrigerator’ attested)
repetidor ~ *repetidora* ‘retransmitter’
sumador ~ *sumadora* ‘adding machine’

6 Conclusions

There is a significant tendency throughout the Spanish-speaking world to create deverbal neologisms in both *-dor* and *-dora* to provide designations for new artefacts. The motivation for gender assignment is in part purely formal: the elliptical use of the agentive adjective with a more general noun. However, there is significant evidence of the gender opposition being used, actually or incipiently, to distinguish different kinds of artefact which perform a similar function, which suggests that motivation in some instances is of a more iconic kind, masculine coming to be associated broadly with tools and the feminine with electrically-powered machines, and there is evidence that it is this semantic property which currently provides the model for further neologism rather than simply ellipsis. Another broad motivation for the opposition is consistency with the existing association between gender and size.

However, we can also see that a totally productive gender opposition is unlikely to result. In the first place, there are significant referential gaps: in particular, as we have seen, it is very far from being the case that every inanimate masculine in *-dor* has a corresponding feminine in *-dora*. The opposition is also rather more complex than the binary contrast between tool and electrically powered machine, since masculine agentive nouns especially, as we have seen, have other kinds of reference, including animate reference. This means that gender is not capitalised upon systematically: we have seen (7) how a neologistic feminine in *-dora* distinguishes an inanimate artefact from a (male) human agent, even if the former is not a large electrical machine (e.g. *anilladora*, *cazadora*), and how (5) a neologistic masculine in *-dor* may denote an electrical appliance if there is no risk of polysemy with the animate agentive (e.g. *alisador*, *decapador*, *tostador*). Indeed, it is ultimately impossible to assign consistent overall inanimate meanings to masculine and feminine counterparts, since although the possibility of gender opposition is frequently exploited, it is not always exploited in the same way. These conflicting motivations seem ultimately to lead to arbitrariness in the assignment of gender, evidence for which can be seen in the variation currently observable in the Spanish-speaking world, sometimes even within the same document.

(11) Examples of gender variation in the same document:

(a)

Extract from <http://www.cdc.gov/nasd/docs/d000001-d000100/d000063/d000063-s.html>, the Spanish-language version of the US National Agricultural Safety Database:

El trabajador estaba parado atrás, y muy cerca del cultivador. Al frente, otro trabajador se encontraba tratando de alinear un tractor con el cultivador. El pie del tractorista se resbaló del cloche (embrague) y el tractor saltó en reversa pegándole a la cultivadora. Uno de los postes de apoyo se quebró y la cultivadora se cayó hacia atrás y sobre el trabajador, separándole los huesos pélvicos. El trabajador quedó en el suelo prensado sufriendo mucho dolor hasta que llegaron suficientes trabajadores para poder quitarle la cultivadora de encima. [sic]

A similar variation is apparent on

<http://leu.irnase.csic.es/microlei/manual1/impelero/impel6.htm>, a CSIC website: cultivador(a) de rastrillo (but consistently cultivador de palas / de disco).

(b)

Extract from

<http://www.modelismonaval.net/xavicarreras/mi%20taller.htm>, a description of the workshop of Xavi Carreras:

Luego hay un taller móvil con freno, para la sierra caladora fija, el torno (que al principio, eran dos motores de lavadora recuperados de contenedores, que se deslizaban horizontalmente), la lijadora circular, que también es un motor de lavadora, etc. Otras herramientas muy útiles son: la sierra circular, la sierra caladora, el tester, el soldador, el taladro, el lijador, el cepillo eléctrico, el soldador de hierro, la lijadora de hierro, etc.

While we may anticipate that this variation may be settled by academic decision, those decisions are also likely to be arbitrary.

The conclusion, then, is that it is the process of capitalisation, unsystematically applied and constrained by pragmatic factors, that is in large measure responsible for the arbitrariness of gender assignment in this area. I think this may help us to understand some of the previous partially productive patterns of gender assignment observable in the history of Spanish. I mentioned at the outset gender distinctions based on size, where the opposition which is statistically most frequent, chronologically the first and, as we have seen, ongoing today, is based on the feminine term denoting a larger concept than the masculine. The possibility of the opposite also being the case, however, seems to suggest that the gender opposition here also is capitalised upon differentially with the consequence that it becomes arbitrary, gender essentially being used iconically to indicate some kind of semantic distinction based on size, though not necessarily in just one particular way. Differential capitalisation may also account for the impression that a number of semantic distinctions denoted by gender remain latent in the language, to be exploited as pragmatic need arises. At any rate, it will be interesting to track the future development of the agentive *-dor / -dora* contrast as these processes fashion the Spanish of the 21st century.