

## Stereotypes ingrained in language: the concepts of *right* and *left* in Spanish, Polish and English

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## Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of the concepts of *right* and *left* in Spanish, Polish and English. The authors depart from the precise definition of a language stereotype proposed by Bartmiński's studies (1996, 2012), and offer an explanation of how the language's features differ from the meaning of a language prototype presented by cognitive research. The authors maintain that both concepts can complement each other. By linking the features of stereotype and prototype, a full picture of semantic concepts can be created, especially of those with strong cultural connotations. The comparison of the symbolism linked to the notions of *right* and *left* and the comparative analysis of their cultural connotations show the similarities and differences between those concepts in Spanish, Polish, and English.

**Keywords:** stereotype; comparative semantics; lateralization; right; left.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Among the basic human experiences of man is corporality: we have bodies, we use them to experience our environment through the senses. We are, ultimately, bodies, whose existence is reflected in language: there are various words that define different parts of the body, but the boundaries of these parts are many times blurred<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, we are aware that there are symmetric parts of the body: two eyes, two ears, two hands, two legs. There are words to differentiate on which side they are: *right* and *left*. Furthermore, we notice laterality, that is, the preference for using one side of the body, which for most humans is the right side. Scientists have tried to explain why some people use the left or both sides equally well, but they have not found a satisfactory answer yet.

We would like to stress the fact that the two terms can be studied from different perspectives, especially the sociological one, such as Hertz's *La muerte y la mano derecha* (1990); however, we are interested in the linguistic point of view. The aim of our work is to present a contrastive analysis of the linguistic stereotypes related to *right* and *left* in Spanish, Polish and English, their cultural connotations, and the worldview they offer. We will research concepts that at first sight seem ordinary and neutral, and we will unveil the traces of our ancestors' history, experiences and beliefs that are associated with them.

To fulfil our objective, we will compare the definitions of the terms, explain their etymology, and comment on phraseologies. For Spanish we will use *Gran diccionario de la lengua española* (1991), *Diccionario Manual de la Lengua Española* (2007) and *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Real Academia Española, 1999). For Polish we will consult *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (1996), *Słownik języka polskiego* (1958-69) and *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej Leksykon* (2001), and for English, *Collins Dictionary* (2019), *Etymology Dictionary* (2019), *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2019), *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* (2019) and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2019). It is worth noting that we have listed above the most significant dictionaries published in recent decades, the only exception being *Słownik języka polskiego* (an eleven-volume dictionary of the Polish language) published between 1958 and 1969, the most complete of its kind to date.

We have chosen that methodology because we believe that dictionaries, on the one hand, include definitions of the concepts more widely used in the respective language communities; yet on the other hand, they explain words' etymology and also register many phraseological units together with the corresponding explanation. It is worth mentioning that even

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1 The present article is based on an article on the Spanish and Polish concepts of *right* and *left*, originally published in Spanish (Tatoj, 2012).

2 See Tatoj (2014, 2019a).

though etymology is an interesting field of study, our purpose is not to make a historical analysis of individual terms, although on occasion we may refer to phrases that have become obsolete. We will not analyse the use of words. We will limit our study only to data found in the chosen lexicographic sources: we are not interested in a detailed presentation of data, but we would rather show some regular features common to the three languages.

To explain the symbology present in *right* and *left*, we will use findings from Cirlot's *Diccionario de símbolos* (2019), written in Spanish, and from Forstner (1986) *Die Welt der Symbole*, written in German. Both writers analyse symbols taking into consideration European history and tradition, a vision to which we have adhered because the three languages in our study originated in Europe.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we explain the concept *linguistic stereotype*, which is the basis of our study; next we deal with laterality in symbology, and then in language. We offer the basic meanings of the words *right*, *right-handed*, *left*, *left-handed*, and *sinister*. Each section includes definitions of words, and of phraseological units and their meanings, which can be found in the aforementioned dictionaries. We always follow the same order of presentation: first Spanish words, then Polish words, and finally English words. The procedure will show that the three languages have very ingrained stereotypes in words *right* and *left*.

## 2. What is *linguistic stereotype*?

To explain our topic, it is essential to approach the concept of stereotype. We would like to highlight that the concept understood broadly is of great interest to various branches of science, especially to psychology, sociology, and linguistics. We are interested in the latter, particularly in the semantics subgroup.

The first academic to use the term stereotype in the field of linguistics was Putnam (1975), who stated that the concepts we use to communicate with one another should not be understood as sets of necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the term. We should understand stereotypes as concepts which consist of the conventional ideas a linguistic community has about a certain reality. Putnam called them *stereotypes*, and added that those ideas might even be inaccurate, but, in any case, they were bound to properties of prototypical models. The cognitive psychologist Rosch (1973) agreed with Putnam's view. Rosch rejected the Aristotelian claim that a category was a set of equal members, and defined prototype as the most representative example of a category; she added that categories had hierarchical structures: within them, both prototypical and peripheral members would be found.

Lakoff (1987) elaborated on that concept, proposing a new theory: the Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM), within which elements with few characteristics in common were in correlations

due to radial categories. Geeraerts (2007) also addressed the issue, presenting several theories on the origin of prototypicality.

It is worth noting that various authors refer to prototype as a subcategory of which there is a cognitive image or stereotype<sup>3</sup>; nevertheless, in our work, we will differentiate the two concepts. We understand the former, as mentioned above, as being neutral and, at the same time, the best representative of a category. The latter will be considered as the one that “contains some information which many times has to be inferred, and which in many occasions affects our perception of the world and its appraisal” (Tatoj, 2019b: 16). Following Bartmiński (1998: 105-108) and the cognitive ethnolinguistic view posed by the School of Lublin<sup>4</sup>, we will consider stereotypes as full mental images that also comprise a specific vision of the world. Chałasiński (1935)<sup>5</sup> argued that stereotypes were definitions of persons, objects, situations that we faced daily and which passed on social tradition. It is worth noting that stereotypes are not products of reasoning, but of experience, where intuitive processes are very important. We can refer to them as image-abbreviations related to a strong positive or negative sentimental tinge.

According to Grzegorzczkova (1998: 109-115), what is important about the prototype is the semantic description, understood as the necessary and sufficient traits to unequivocally designate objects that belong to an expression, whereas a stereotype is the description of the understanding of a given expression by a linguistic society, that is, the description of a typical mental state related to the expression.

Tambor (2008: 26) explains the difference between the two terms by considering the concept of a *bird*. On the one hand, we can speak of bird prototype, that is, an animal that has wings, legs, beak, and can fly. On the other hand, bird as stereotype is culturally associated with freedom, which can be observed in the Polish phraseology *wolny jak ptak/free as a bird/*.

In reference to the concepts *right* and *left*, we would like to address the semantic description of the cultural elements that hold patterns of thought and popular reasoning in depth. As Bartmiński (1996: 10) highlights, those patterns function as archetypes of a collective imagination but, on the other hand, they form a sort of reference system for scientific and rationalized concepts that signal the cultural level of the elite. To many, what is attractive about traditional popular imagination is its naiveté, understood as the union of knowledge and faith, poetic and popular thought, and the sensibility and mentality of a child. Popular

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3 See Geeraerts (1985), Kleiber (1990), and Lara (1997), for example.

4 See Bartmiński (2012).

5 From here onwards, unless stated, translations from Polish and Spanish have been done by the authors.

tradition that relies on stereotypes and symbols offers us a vision of the world which, at its deepest levels, is a harmonious unity of objects and human beings.

We support the concept of stereotype which, with everything else, and added to the basic meaning of a word, makes it possible for us to look for traces of a culture, of our collective thinking, and of the popular traditions hidden in a language. Thus, we will compare the three languages as witnesses to three different visions of the world, and will search for differences that will tell us about the peculiarity and richness of their respective cultures, but also, or perhaps above all, we will seek similarities that can show us a wider vision, typical of the entire human race.

### 3. Laterality and its most remarkable symbology

When we think about the most important organs of the human body, we cannot dismiss the hand, which is, as Forstner (2001: 351) emphasises, “man’s most perfect organ to do external work”. At the same time, we are aware of an inequality: most people use only one hand to perform their work accurately, namely the right hand. Consequently, it should not be surprising that in symbology the right hand is related to what is good and appropriate.

We use the right hand to greet people; just as Forstner (2001: 351) states, stretching out the right hand has been, since ancient times, the outward symbol of an agreement. The same meaning was shared by the two clasped right hands found on Roman coins. The *dexterarum coniunctio* of spouses was for a long time, and not only in Christian times, a significant symbol of the marriage bond, representing spouses on ancient bas reliefs and on golden vessels that were probably passed around at wedding feasts.

In the Bible there are many examples that show the importance and superiority of the right hand over the left. To the right of God is Jesus Christ, who is presented as the right hand of God. It is also on the right side of God that the “righteous” will sit on Judgement Day. The same symbology is found in religious representations: to the right of Jesus Christ is his mother; also, on this side are the prudent virgins, and it was to the right of Jesus that the Good Thief was crucified. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism Shiva makes the *abhaya mudra*—the “fear-not” gesture—by holding the right-hand palm facing forward with fingers upright, which denotes peacefulness, safety, fearlessness, and the pouring of protection and divine blessing.

The left hand, however, symbolizes the “evil ones”: the wicked, the foolish virgins or the unrepentant thief. All through human history being left-handed was considered something against nature, tinged even with a diabolical meaning, resulting in the left-handed being discriminated against and being forced to use the right hand.

In Arab culture, the left hand is considered so unclean that its use is reserved only for toilet duties. Hence, it cannot be used during meals; likewise, to greet someone with the left hand is considered a serious insult. On the other hand, it may surprise some people that members of the Scout Movement firmly grasp the left hand of a fellow scout to greet them. According to one of the versions of the origin of that tradition (El saludo scout, 2019), the greeting was instituted by the movement's founder, Robert Baden-Powell, on the occasion of receiving the salute of an Ashanti chief he had defeated. The African warrior insisted on offering his left hand, explaining that only the brave leave the protection of their shield to salute.

Cirlot (2019), quoting Jaffé in *Słownik Symboli* (2000: 329), emphasized that in all ancient Mediterranean civilizations the left side symbolized the direction of death. Benedict (1959), describing the Pueblo Indians of the United States, stated that they believe the left hand is related to death.

#### 4. Laterality in language

Before looking for traces of symbology in language, we would like to present the prototypes of both *right* and *left* concepts. Two types of definitions can be found in the dictionaries we mentioned above: an anthropocentric one, and another which also includes the human being, but makes reference to the cardinal points of the Earth. That is, *right* is defined as what is on the side of the human body or of an animal opposite the heart, and the right hand is, thus, farthest from the heart; *right* is also the side of a person or an animal that faces east when they face north. *Left* is defined as the side where the heart is, or the side that faces west when the person faces north. The concept applies to all objects a person wears, such as gloves, shoes, etc., and also to vehicles or boats. In Spanish, Polish, and English the two concepts can be found in reference to the banks of rivers, even though with an anthropocentric orientation: the right bank is to the right of a person who is facing downstream. Departing from the prototypes of both concepts, we would like to analyse their stereotypes, that is, their cultural connotations.

##### 4.1. *Derecho, cha/ prawy, wa/ right*

The Spanish word *derecho, cha/right*, as stated in *Gran diccionario de la lengua española* (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991) refers to what is straight, what does not bend to either side; for example: *Este es el camino más derecho a la ciudad./This is the most direct road into town.* At the same time, Spanish *derecho,cha/straight* is the vertical position, erect, unbent; for example: *Ponte derecho!/Straighten up!* It also means that something is done directly, without any spatial or temporal interruption, as in: *Él fue derecho al colegio./He went right/straight back to school./*, which we mentally associate with the word *directo/direct*, of the same origin, that is, both concepts, *derecho/right* and *directo/direct*, have the same Latin origin—*directus*.

*Derecho/right* is also related to justice<sup>6</sup> and, according to the *Diccionario manual de la lengua española* (2007), it means the human ability to demand what the law allows or prescribes; for example, the right to quality public education. It also means the set of laws and rules that regulate life in society, which all human beings must obey—*derecho marítimo / maritime law*, or *derecho comercial/business law*—. *Derecho/law* also means the science that studies laws and their enforcement, and the set of natural consequences derived from emotional ties or the relationship among persons.

Also, as stated in *Diccionario manual de la lengua española* (2007), in Spanish there are typical expressions, such as a *derechas*, which means that something is done correctly; for example: *Hazlo a derechas/Do it right*, and *al or del derecho*, which means that something is done in the due or expected manner; for example, to know the multiplication table backwards and forwards. At the same time, it is common to hear *ser el ojo derecho de alguien/ be somebody's right eye* with the meaning of a person or thing that is very much loved and admired: *Ella es el ojito derecho de la profesora/She is the teacher's pet*.

In Polish, as explained in *Słownik języka polskiego* (1958-69), *prawy/right* is related to the noun *prawo/right, law*, which corresponds to the explanations of the Spanish terms we have mentioned above. *Prawy* means what is fair, reasonable, legitimate, or well founded. It can also be used as an adjective with similar meaning; for example, *prawy człowiek/a righteous man* is an honest, honorable person who behaves well and complies with the law. There are also expressions like *prawa małżonka/rightful wife*, and *z prawego łóża/rightful bed*, which mean legitimate wife and legitimate child and children, respectively, or *z prawego władza/by rightful power*, which refers to legitimate power. We may *naprowadzić kogoś, nawrócić na prawą drogę/take somebody along, make someone convert to, the right path*, that is, to *the right direction*, which brings to mind the Spanish expression *el camino derecho* or *el camino recto/the straight path* or *the rightful path*.

In English, *right* shares some meanings with the Spanish and Polish words. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2019), *right* as an adjective derives from Old English *riht*; akin, to Old High German *reht*. *Right* is also related to the Latin word *rectus*, which means *straight, right*, and to *regere*, which means *to lead straight, direct, rule*. With regard to the health of a person, *right* means they are in good physical or mental health; in reference to the exact location, position, or moment, it means *precisely*.

*Collins Dictionary* (2019) explains that *right* as an adjective means *appropriate, convenient*; as an adverb, it means *exactly, precisely*; it also can denote that you are listening to what

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6 It is worth noting that similar connections can be observed in other European languages, for example, German *Recht* and French *droit*.

someone is saying and that you accept it or understand it. A *right-minded* person is one whose opinions or beliefs are sensible. *Right* is also related to justice; the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2019) states that *right* refers to what is morally good or correct, or to the legal or moral claim to have or obtain something, or to act in a certain way.

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word *right* began to be used in France in political discourse to mean *conservative*. Bienfait and Van Beek (2014) relate that, during the debates of the Legislative Assembly of July 1789, the royalist supporters of King Louis XVI sat to his right, and the members of the Third Estate, predominantly revolutionaries, to his left, even though some historians suggest that such placement may have been fortuitous.

In English, there are some expressions similar to the Spanish ones, such as *keep on the right side of (someone)/mantenerse a la derecha de (alguien)*, meaning to do things that cause someone to like one; *a step in the right direction* is an action that increases one's chances of achieving something (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2019); *to be on the right track* means that a person is thinking or behaving in the proper way (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2019).

The importance of the right hand in the three languages is noticeable in phrases such as *ser la mano derecha de alguien/być czyjąs prawą ręką/be someone's right-hand man or woman*. In both Spanish and English, there are phrases such as *entrar con el pie derecho/to get off on the right foot, or to start off on the right foot*, meaning that a person will very likely achieve success when they start performing an activity or enter into a relationship (*Collins Dictionary*, 2019). In English, the expression *I'd give my right arm to* means that a person would give up things to get something they want (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2019).

The Spanish word *derecho/cha*, the Polish word *prawy*, and the English expression *right side* are also used in reference to the face, and to the right or good side of a fabric, paper, or wood on which the handiwork or a more brilliant colour can be observed. In Polish and in English, they also refer to clothing; for example, Polish *prawa strona bluzki/el lado derecho de una blusa/the right side of a blouse*, which stand in opposition to *lewa strona/the left side*, to Spanish *revés*, and English *the wrong side out* (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2019).

#### 4.2. *Diestro, tra/prawica/right-handed/dexterous*

It is worth noticing that in Polish there is also the word *prawica*, which, in the past, referred to the right hand; in the Bible we can find the expression *po prawicy Boga/at the right hand of God*, which nowadays is strongly related to political discourse<sup>7</sup>.

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7 See Bartmiński (1993), for example.

In Spanish, it is common to use the word *diestra*<sup>8</sup>, also of Latin origin (*dexter*), to refer to the right hand. The word denotes somebody who “has the tendency to preferably use the right hand and the right side of the body” (*Diccionario de la lengua española*, 1999). In English, the adjective *right-handed* refers to a person who uses their right hand to write or to do chores and tasks (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2019).

*Gran diccionario de la lengua española* (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991: 1671) states that the Spanish word *diestro, tra* makes reference to an expert in any kind of activity, or to an artistic person; for example: *Es muy diestro, tra en esgrima/He/She is an expert swordsman*, and *Un(a) diestro, tra pianista/an expert pianist*. This definition of *diestro, tra* can be compared with that of *Diccionario de la lengua española* (1999): “Sagacious, careful, smart in doing business, unhesitant in the face of difficulties”. *Diestro, tra* may also refer to somebody who is “cunning in business deals or able to face difficulties” or “is an expert at handling weapons” (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991: 1671). There are also expressions, such as *va de diestro a diestro*, which explains the parity of two persons as regards skill, ability or sagacity, and *juntar diestra con diestra*, which means to make friends or enter into a partnership with a person. The word *diestro, tra/right-handed* also forms part of the word *ambidiestro, tra/ambidextrous* and its synonym *ambidextro, tra/ambidextrous*, both referring to persons who can do things equally skilfully using either hand or either foot. It should be pointed out that the words also denote the better performance of the right hand over that of the left hand.

It is worth noting that the Latin word *dexter* is part of the English noun *dexterity*—meaning skill and ease in using one's hand, body or mind—and also of the adjective *dexterous*, which denotes a clever and skilful person, who does things with mental or physical skill or grace; at the same time, *dexterous* denotes somebody skilful and able to do things with the hands. The English noun *ambidexter* refers to a person who takes money or receives favours from people who support either side of an issue, while, in the past, it referred to a person skilful with both hands (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2019).

### 4.3. *Izquierdo, da/lewy, wa/left*

In the three languages, there are words with the opposite meaning to *right*: *izquierdo, da* in Spanish, *lewy* in Polish and *left* in English, which denote the side where the heart is. In Spanish, the word *izquierdo, da* also means twisted, bent, not straight or apt. The derogatory expression *ser un cero a la izquierda* (literally: *a zero to the left*) means that somebody is good for nothing; *matrimonio de la mano izquierda/marriage of the left hand* refers to a

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8 On the one hand, the word *diestra/right* as a noun may refer to the hand, but, on the other, as an adjective, only to the part of the body. In the case of the latter, it is preceded by the word *mano/hand*; for example, in the phrase *con mano diestra*, that is, *with great dexterity*.

morganatic marriage—a marriage between two persons of unequal social rank. As *Diccionario de la lengua española* (1999) explains, in Mexico, the phrase *batear con la izquierda/to hit with the left hand* is slang for being homosexual. The phrase *de izquierda; izquierdista/of the left; leftist* denotes those ideas or persons that follow tenets of the political left. In Argentina, *por izquierda* refers to something unlawful.

*Słownik języka polskiego* (Polska Akademia Nauk, 1958-1969) shows that Polish *lewy* also shares negative connotations: it may refer not only to a slow, unintelligent person, but also to somebody who looks suspicious, or simply lazy. *Lewy* has a negative meaning—*illegal, false*— as opposed to *prawy*, which means *fair, honest*. *Lewe papiery, dokumenty* literally means *documentos de izquierda*, that is to say *documentos ilegales/illegal documents*; *robić coś na lewo* means *hacer algo por izquierda/to act against the law*, and *zarobić na lewo/ganar por izquierda* means to *make money illegally*. We can mention Polish expressions no longer in common use which, similar to Spanish ones, refer to marriage: *Dziecko z lewego łóża/hijo, ja de la cama izquierda*, and *żona z lewej ręki/esposa de la mano izquierda/ wife of the left hand* mean illegitimate child and unlawful wife, respectively. Phrases like *ożenić się na lewą rękę/casarse con la mano izquierda/to get married with the left hand*, or *ślub lewej ręki /matrimonio de la mano izquierda/marriage of the left hand* mean that a couple starts living together without celebrating marriage, expressions that do not share the Spanish meaning of morganatic marriage.

Pejorative expressions can be found in both Spanish and Polish: *tener dos manos izquierdas/mieć dwie lewe ręce/to have two left hands* are often used to refer to a clumsy person. In English, however, the expression denoting a person's clumsiness, lack of elegance or grace when moving, dancing or playing sports employs the word *feet*: *to have two left feet* (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2019). Notice that the word *left*, which comes from Germanic languages (during the Old English or Anglo-Saxon period) referred to the side opposite to the *right* one, and denoted the weakest part of the body (*Etymology Dictionary*, 2019).

Spanish and Polish share phrases such as *levantarse con el pie izquierdo/wstać lewą nogą/to get out on the wrong side of the bed*. The Spanish phrase means to have bad luck, a temporal state that may last the whole day, whereas the Polish expression is used to describe somebody who is in a bad mood, even though naturally this mood may be a consequence of bad luck. Consequently, this is often used as explanation: *Jan jest w złym humorze – wstał lewą nogą/Juan está de mal humor: se ha levantado con el pie izquierdo./John is in a bad mood: he has got up left foot forward*. In English, *to get off on the wrong foot* means that a person begins something badly, especially a relationship (*Collins Dictionary*, 2019)—the word *wrong* standing in the place of *left* in Spanish and Polish.

The English expression *a left-handed compliment* denotes an unpleasant remark disguised as a flattering comment (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2019). In the informal register,

especially in the United States, when *someone or something has come out of left field*, or *is out in left field*, the person, thing or comment is atypical, surprising and unexpected (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019). This expression derives from an association with the baseball field, the *outfield*. This area is situated to the left of the batter, where players do not have a constant involvement in fielding plays as in other positions. On the other hand, in stage directions, that is, the instructions written into the script of a play indicating stage actions, movements of performers or production requirements, the expression *to exit stage left* means that a performer has to leave the stage uneventfully, so as not to distract the audience.

Even though in Spanish and Polish there are strong negative connotations associated with the word *izquierdo*, *da/lewy/left*, there is a colloquial expression in Spanish with very positive connotations: *tener mano izquierda*. This expression, which presents difficulties to translators—it would literally mean *to have a left hand*—is explained in the *Gran diccionario de la lengua española* as the characteristic of a person “having the ability and cunning to give solutions to difficult or compromising situations” (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991: 1170).

#### 4.4. *Zurdo, da/mańkut/left-handed*

As has been mentioned before, the tendency to use the left hand is characteristic of a minority of the human race and it is a peculiarity that has always drawn people's attention. Thus, it should not surprise us that in Spanish, Polish and English there are words that refer to persons who predominantly use their left hand. It must be pointed out that these words have pejorative connotations in all three languages: the Spanish word *zurdo, da*, the Polish *mańkut* (together with words that are no longer in use: *mańka, mańkut, mańczasty*), and *la zurdería/mańkuctwo*. At present, it is common to hear the Polish word *leworęczny*, a noun made up of two words, whose literal meanings are as follows: *lewo-*, which means *izquierdo, da/left*, and *ręczny*, which appears as *manual* in both Spanish and English. At the same time, the word *leworęczność*, which makes reference to the preferential use of the left hand, is not frequently used. In English, a person who uses the left hand to write and carry out most tasks is called *left-handed*.

In Spanish, the negative connotation of the word *zurdo, da/left handed* can be found in phrases such as *a zurdas*, which in informal register means “the opposite of how something should be done” (*Diccionario de la lengua española*, 1999), and *no ser zurdo, da/not to be left-handed*, meaning that a person is skillful, intelligent, or smart (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991). In Argentina, *ser zurdo, da/ be left-handed*, also means *izquierdista*, a term we have already explained.

In Polish, there are two words that mean *left hand*: *lewica* and *mańka*. Nowadays, the former is usually used only in political discourse, while the latter has become old-fashioned. We used to hear it in expressions such as *mańkudem mnie palnął/He gave it to me with the*

*left hand*, or *zażyć/podejść/zajść kogoś z mańki*, which more or less means *to approach somebody on the left*, with the meaning of deceiving somebody.

It is worth noting that the word *mańka* comes from Italian, where it means both a left hand and something flawed or defective. Brückner (1996: 332) refers to the Italian words *manicare/to miss, to lack*, and *mancamiento/lack of strength*, and to the Polish borrowing of the latter, *mankament*, which refers to something defective.

#### 4.5. *Siniestro, tra/sinister*

As regards Spanish, we should keep in mind that the pair *derecho, cha* and *izquierdo, da/right and left/* do not share the same origin: while the word *derecho, cha/right*, as already stated, comes from Latin, the word *izquierdo, da/left* derives from Basque (*ezker, ezkerra*, according to Buitrago and Torijano, 2007). It seems interesting that such a closely connected pair has two different origins, even more so, if we take into consideration the fact that two Latin words, *diestro* and *siniestro*, were used in Spanish. The explanation for the displacement should be looked for in the linguistic stereotypes related to the left side. Even though the word *siniestro, tra/sinister* may be used in formal language as an adjective with the same meaning as the word *izquierdo, da/left*<sup>9</sup>, it also has very negative connotations—even more than for the word *izquierdo, da/left*.

As *Gran diccionario de la lengua española* (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991: 1745) records, *siniestro, tra/sinister* refers to something malignant or perverse, as in *Me echó una mirada siniestra/He cast a sinister look on me*. *Diccionario de la lengua española* (1999) emphasizes that, in figurative language, *siniestro, tra/sinister* means not only perverse and vicious, but also a propensity or inclination to what is evil; it also denotes a vicious or corrupt habit that men or beasts have. *Siniestro, tra/sinister* is, according to *Gran diccionario de la lengua española* (Sánchez Pérez and others, 1991: 1745), something grim that causes or comes together with misfortune; for example, a sinister event, but also tragedies or calamities, such as the sinking of vessels, fires, etc., generally caused by natural forces.

The English word *sinister* (Spanish *siniestro, tra*), from the Latin *sinister*, denotes direction: whatever is of or on the left-hand side, as opposed to *dexter*, whatever is of or on the right-hand side. *Sinister* denotes something or somebody intimidating, wicked, evil, or dishonest—especially in some dark, mysterious way—or suggests harm or disaster. In this connection, *sinister* refers to that which can be interpreted as a warning for impending danger or evil. The Roman augurs who interpreted signs considered the left-hand side to be the unlucky side (*Collins Dictionary*, 2019).

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9 This meaning can be found in the phrase: *a diestro y siniestro/left, right and center/na prawo i lewo*.

As regards heraldry, where the right side and the left side are always those of the bearer of the arms, not of the beholder, *sinister* refers to the left side of the coat of arms' bearer, while *dexter* denotes their right side (*Collins Dictionary*, 2019). It should be noted that in Polish there is no word related to *left* denoting something malignant or perverse, as Spanish  *siniestro*, *tra*, or somebody or something wicked, as English *sinister*.

In short, as we have shared above, Spanish, Polish and English help reveal the culture of the respective social groups, and are at the service of their needs, feelings, myths, and all sensations perceived as positive or negative in their perception of the world through words.

## 5. Conclusion

The process followed to achieve the objective of our study—to discover and compare visions of the world in concepts *right* and *left* in three languages, Spanish, Polish and English—developed as follows. First, we explained the symbology of both concepts, showing that *right* is related to what is good and proper, and *left* to what is evil and inappropriate. Next, we explained the prototypes of both concepts and the anthropocentric view they hold, that is, that using those words we make reference to the human body. *Right* is defined as the side opposite the heart, or the side that points west when a person faces north. In both cases, man is the point of reference, and we broaden the body reference in connection to concepts *right* and *left* to objects we use. Finally, we offered a contrastive analysis of phrases containing either of the two terms, along which we have shown that, in the majority of cases, the three languages share the same connotations of the symbology we explained earlier. That is, Spanish *derecho*, *cha* and *diestro*, *tra* and their English and Polish equivalents are related to what is good, correct and proper, while *izquierdo*, *da*, to what is evil, incorrect and improper. In all three languages, *right* is related to laws and to the rightful road one should take. We have shown that in Spanish, the Latin word paring off with *diestro*, *tra/right-handed*, that is, *siniestro*, *tra/sinister*, had negative connotations, which caused a change of meaning and its replacement by *izquierdo*, *da/left*. We have also highlighted that in the Spanish phrase *tener mano izquierda*, the word *izquierda* is associated with something positive.

In the course of our study we have explained that the terms *right* and *left* are culturally very rich and hold stereotypes well ingrained in all three languages. As Hertz (1990: 132) stated, “the slight physiological advantages possessed by the right hand are merely the occasion of a qualitative differentiation of which the cause lies beyond the individual, in the constitution of the collective consciousness. An almost insignificant bodily asymmetry is enough to turn in one direction and the other contrary representations which are already completely formed”. These stereotypes coincide with the findings of J. Wilk-Racięska (2009: 16), who claims that Spanish and Polish (and we also include English), are based on the same macro system—European culture, largely rooted in antiquity and in Christian beliefs.

To conclude, we would like to share our belief that the world of words is certainly mysterious and enthralling, as Virginia Woolf suggested in a BBC radio broadcast on 29 April 1937: “Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries” (Macdonald, 2016). Over the years, Spanish, and Polish and English have allowed us to open the gift of the beauty and truth their words reveal. Those gifts have motivated us to start a study through which it has been possible to illustrate, to some extent, how the three languages have managed to adapt to the social, material and spiritual context of their communities. We believe that Spanish, Polish, and English, different as they are, have somehow succeeded in helping their respective societies express their true needs, feelings, and myths, transmitting all sensations perceived as positive or negative in their apprehension of the world through words.

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