

# Language Effects on Gender Perception and Discrimination: Language Inclusivity as a Compensation Tool

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## Abstract

In the last few years, feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements have been trying to raise awareness of inclusive language as a medium that can compensate for the negative consequences of sexist language. On one hand, it is easy to introduce new idioms and neologisms in genderless or natural-gender languages such as English. On the other hand, it is difficult to suggest and establish new expressions in that direction in Italian since it is a gendered language. That means that Italian is composed of words and phrases that ascribe gender-based attributes or feature an inclination to one sex. This characteristic already makes it difficult to introduce changes in everyday language. Moreover, Italian socio-political culture plays intrinsically an “obstacle” role for the everyday language modifications that awareness-raising movements pursue.

**Keywords:** gender, language, inclusion, LGBTQIA+, culture

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It is common knowledge that, in the linguistic field, language and its structure can influence how we view, understand, and interpret society. Two scientists are mostly known for studying this topic: Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. In the 1930s, Sapir and Whorf worked together on the “Sapir-Whorf theory”, explaining how language shapes the way we think (Whorf, 2018). Indeed, according to the Sapir-Whorf theory, language as a means of expression and its symbolism condition all our thinking, affecting how we speak and perceive many aspects of the world.

This theory was and still is useful for subsequent studies on the relationship between language and gender perception, which has gone

on to demonstrate how the use of the *unmarked generic masculine*<sup>1</sup> (Henley, 1989; Cameron, 1985), the use of the unmarked pronoun “he”<sup>2</sup> (Cole et al., 1983; Khosroshani, 1989), the phenomena of *connotative asymmetry* and *semantic derogation*<sup>3</sup> (Schulz, 1975; Robustelli, 2000) make language a medium for gender stereotypes and discrimination.

Like many other gendered-languages, the Italian language uses the masculine gender as an unmarked gender or “false neutral” (Robustelli, 2000). An example would be “*physician*” (to refer to men and all physicians - both men and women - in a generic conversation) and “*female physician*” (when we refer to someone who is not a man).

Although it is not easy to determine how much the use of unmarked masculine causes certain discrimination effects, many argue that our language inappropriately leads to the conclusion that “all people are male until proven otherwise” and promotes “male dominance in our culture” (Cole et al., 1983). Many are therefore in favor of language reform. There are two different currents of thought regarding language change (Cole et al. 1983): on one hand, several individuals believe that the approach that needs to be taken is to change language patterns in an attempt to actively implement social change; on the other, some people argue that social change creates language change, not the other way around.

Language is at the center of human interaction, of our identity. It is no wonder, then, that people feel accused when their spoken language is described as unfair and the need for change is presented (Henley, 1989).

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1. Language ignores women. We can see it with the use of the masculine form as a generic form (Henley, 1989), as in *chairman*, *spokesman*, and *men of goodwill*. The unmarked masculine in these cases is used because it is generally more appreciated than the equivalent feminine terms. Any attempt to place terms such as *chairwoman* or *spokeswoman* alongside the generic masculine has been vain (Cameron, 1985).

2. The pronoun “he” is frequently used to refer to an unspecified unknown human being. This means that the masculine form is unmarked, while the feminine is marked (Henley, 1989).

3. In the phenomenon of “semantic asymmetry”, we find equivalent terms that in the masculine form connote power, independence, and freedom, while in the feminine form they refer to sexual promiscuity (Robustelli, 2000). In this regard, Schulz (1975) describes as “*semantic derogation of women*” the process by which the connotation of originally neutral words is devalued when associated with women, often by correlating them with “negative” sexual activities.

However, the evidence adds specific grounds for concern about the use of sexist forms (Henley, 1989). In light of this, several proposals have been made over time to make languages more inclusive.

Inclusive language can be used to compensate for these effects caused by sexist language expressions. Indeed, speaking from a gender perspective contributes to spreading awareness against discrimination and is directed towards enhancing the roles that women and men have in contemporary society (Guadagnini and Bosi, 2021).

### **Inclusive language**

Inclusive or representative language is characterized not only by increased use of the appropriate feminine declensions of professional and non-professional terms but also by the introduction of neologisms and new linguistic formulae.

*“Recommendations for a non-sexist use of the Italian language”* (Sabatini and Mariani, 1993) was one of the first Italian reflections on linguistic sexism and how it could be contained through a series of instruments. The *Recommendations* aimed to *“give linguistic visibility to women and equal linguistic value to terms referring to the female sex”* (Sabatini and Mariani, 1993:97) so as to establish a relationship between the symbolic values of language and shared **values** in everyday life.

Sabatini suggests avoiding the use of the masculine as a non-marked gender when we are referring to a generic **universal concept**. The use of the words “man” and “men” in nouns such as “mankind” can be avoided by using “human”, for example.

Expressions such as “brotherhood”, “fraternity”, and “paternity” can be avoided too, especially when talking about two people who are not men. In Italian, it is very common to say *“the paternity of this work is attributed to Jane Austen”*, even if she is a woman and it would be best to say “maternity”.

Moreover, one should avoid mentioning women as a separate category after having drawn up a list of generic categories. An example might be “doctors, students, athletes, and women” as if they were not included in those generic expressions.

Likewise we should avoid referring to a woman with her first name if we are using the first name and surname to refer to a man. It is not right to say “Miss Angela” (Merkel, female politician) and “Mister Adinolfi” (Matteo Adinolfi, male politician).

Sabatini (1993) also suggests abolishing the use of expressions such as “young lady” and similar expressions in Italian language, since they are used to refer to young women who are not married. Women who are married are called “madam”. Men do have similar expressions but with different meanings. “Young boy” refers only to young boys (usually not eighteen years old yet) without acknowledging their marital status. “Mister” is commonly used for all men, whether married or not.

### **A new tool for inclusive language**

In the last few years, a new inclusive language tool has been introduced. The International Phonetic Alphabet letter “schwa” (graphically “ə”) was established in Italy in 2015 by Luca Boschetto, curator of the website “Inclusive language” (Sofri, 2021). This letter is used by linguistic researchers and in a few Italian dialects but it is not present in the Italian alphabet.

It is used to unmark gendered nouns and adjectives. This is very useful when talking about a group of people composed of both men and women or a non-binary person.

It is very important to highlight that this tool needs to be used sparingly. Italian is a language rich in expressions and linguistic possibilities, meaning we do not need to use the letter “ə” now and then. “ə” is to be used when the language in use does not offer any other solution to make a discourse inclusive.

Because the new tool is not very common at the moment, there are still a few obstacles to using it: indeed, not all electronic devices have the letter “ə” on their keyboard; moreover, it can be a problem for dyslexic or blind people because screen readers are not coded to read it yet.

### **How people react to inclusive language**

At the beginning of the XXI century, ten years after Sabatini’s es-

say (Robustelli, 2000), her suggestions were still scarcely accepted. The non-marked masculine form is still used, partly because a percentage of women prefer the male title when referring to a specific profession. This decision stems from the belief that it indicates the function of the profession without referring to the person who exercises it (Robustelli, 2000). The rejection of a linguistic form that has not yet entered into everyday use probably reflects the feeling on the part of women themselves that the profession is not yet well defined and accepted when exercised by the female gender (Robustelli, 2000).

Indeed, language use reflects stereotypes and traditional social roles that discriminate against women. The fluctuations we witness today in common communication situations are testimony to the difficulty with which language modifies itself on command: it takes decades for deeper changes to take hold (Robustelli, 2000).

There is also an opposition movement (Sofri, 2021) that claims that these new linguistic usages are “imposed” and “unnatural”. People mainly claim that the letter “ə” erases the differences between men and women (Somma and Maestri, 2021). These opinions tend to push attention toward more “pressing” battles (Somma and Maestri, 2021:20) such as those for equal rights and wages. Just to clarify, fighting for equal rights and wages does not mean abandoning other mobilizations, such as language inclusivity, and vice versa.

Moreover, language reform initiatives such as the use of “ə” are often promoted by activist movements and therefore receive negative reactions. Historically, activist movements have provoked and demanded sudden changes, especially at a socio-political level, often subverting pre-existing social hierarchies (Sczesny et al., 2016).

Individuals’ reactions to these forms of language are not only due to their novelty but also to their attitudes towards gender equality and certain political views associated with both less openness to novelty and greater support for traditional gender structure and hierarchy (Sczesny et al., 2016).

Another factor related to inclusive language usage is the gender of

the person who is communicating. Indeed, women are generally inclined to have a positive attitude towards inclusive forms of language. However, some studies have shown that there are no gender differences in the use of inclusive language (Sczesny et al., 2016).

Before these suggestions had been introduced to Italy, there had been other studies that were not welcomed. At the end of the 80s, in the US and the United Kingdom linguists tried to introduce language reforms but these attempts were seen as a threat to free speech by its detractors, who used the expression “*political correctness*” to denounce the imposition of new linguistic forms. Feminist activists affirmed that the use of the phrase “politically correct” was an attack against the movement itself and the anti-sexist linguistic reforms.

## Conclusions

It is important to reform language because the use of one term instead of another entails a change in the thinking and attitude of those who use it and thus of those who listen to it. If we want to bring a different attitude toward women, this must also transpire through thoughtful and non-discriminatory linguistic choices (Sabatini and Mariani, 1993). Language is a dynamic structure. Nonetheless, most people are wary of linguistic changes because they “disturb” their habits. Indeed, faced with the crossroads of accepting or not accepting a new word, people often adopt a moralistic attitude in defense of the “correctness” of language, seen as a kind of “sacred, untouchable thing” (Sabatini and Mariani, 1993:97).

Innovating language allows “a more correct representation of reality” (Somma and Maestri, 2021:29), which is fundamental as a possible medium for civilizational achievements and equality. However, linguistic reforms are seen as limited and limiting (Robustelli, 2000). In the lexicon, it is easy to find innovations through neologisms, but when we speak of morphology and syntax, we must be aware of how much these “are reluctant to change” (Robustelli, 2000).

It is important to remember that many linguistic changes that have occurred over time have not been spontaneous and unhindered. Indeed,

they are the result of precise socio-political actions.

“Nig\*a”, and “fag\*ot” became “black person” and “homosexual person” with time passing because people got used to it. These changes, indeed, show how important words are to society. Moreover, the fact that they have been assimilated means that the problem has truly become common sense or that, at the very least, people are now ashamed at the mere thought of being accused of being “racist”, “homophobic” or generally discriminatory (Sabatini and Mariani, 1993).

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**About the author**

Alice Pomodoro earned her bachelor's degree in Corporate Communication and Public Relations from IULM University (Milan, Italy) in July 2022. Her final thesis is on how language shapes the way we think and its effects on gender perception. She is currently studying to become a sex educator.