

Yes, You Can (too)!

Post-pandemic Messages of Gender Equality, Inclusion and Diversity in Italian Language Courses and Beyond
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Abstract

The global health crisis has shown extreme inequalities across the continents, particularly in the USA, where the healthcare system and social injustices have taken centre stage since the appearance of the virus. After the pandemic, many countries will have to recover not only financially but also socially. Learning a world language can have a predominant role in shaping globally-oriented generations willing to improve the current social scenario, pursuing gender equality, inclusion and diversity transversally and at all levels; therefore, language departments worldwide have an important card to play not only to recover from the decrease of enrolment numbers which has affected many institutions, but also to re-emerge from the global crisis as an essential humanities subject to shape a fairer world. Furthermore, world languages lie at the core of the study abroad experience and should prepare students to deal with any aspects of the country they wish to visit, including issues concerning race, gender, and social class, to quote just a few of them. In this article I shall show that working on the evolution of a targeted language (Italian), and being updated on how the socio-cultural context influences it and vice versa is an essential step to pass students the appropriate tools to be successful in the discipline not only as language learners but also as globally-oriented citizens of the post-pandemic world.

Scholars in the area of foreign language pedagogy have been suggesting for a long time that teaching a world language has little to do with technical skills, as commonly perceived in the past; on the contrary, educating students in this area is a form of sophisticated pedagogy. At university level, researching in the field of second language acquisition

has increased exponentially over the last few decades. The creation of a number of journals exclusively devoted to this subject and a variety of conferences in the same area organized yearly are also evident elements of this evolution. Furthermore, several universities have invested in centers fully devoted to the cause, such as the Institute of World Languages at the University of Virginia, where educators in this field have created a lively, cross-cultural and globally-oriented community focused on teaching and researching languages across all latitudes.¹ However, the rise of far-right parties and conservative leaders on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond have played a prominent role in framing diversity as an attack to national identities and values rather than a form of enrichment; as a consequence, languages (symbols of cross-cultural communication, inclusion, diversity, integration and mutual exchange, among many other positive points I could briefly mention) have also suffered from this interpretation. Coupled with a tangible global decrease in enrolments and other administrative and financial issues which have been affecting universities for a long time, many institutions have decided not to support the discipline and several language programs have been closed or drastically reduced (in terms of faculty members, funds and courses offered) around the world in recent years.² Due to the pandemic, this scenario will be inevitably more challenging in the upcoming years; however, world languages are

1. "The University of Virginia's Institute of World Languages is an initiative of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. The Institute brings world languages to the forefront of our educational mission and promotes innovative collaboration for research, instruction and outreach activities in languages and cultures across departments and disciplines. The Institute is intended to: Prepare students to be linguistically proficient, culturally competent, and thoughtful global citizens. Strengthen research and collaboration across language programs and interdisciplinary areas through programmatic, departmental, and institutional initiatives that will further enhance language teaching and learning at UVa. Create, exchange, and expand language resources and innovative technologies for language learners and educators in the international language community at UVa and beyond. Organize activities promoting world languages and second language acquisition in order to support prospective and current language educators in enhancing their professional development". For further details on IWL at UVa, see <https://iwl.virginia.edu/>

2. For further details on the crisis of foreign language programs in the USA, the UK and globally, see: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-lose-a-stunning-651-foreign-language-programs-in-3-years/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/oct/09/university-language-departments-10-things-to-know>

a key-discipline to rebuild a more inclusive and diverse post-pandemic world, as I shall try to demonstrate in this short contribution. The global health crisis has shown extreme inequalities across the continents, particularly in the USA, where the healthcare system – largely dominated by insurance companies – and social injustices have taken center stage since the appearance of the virus³. After the pandemic a number of nations would need to recover not only financially but also socially. Learning a new language can have a predominant role in shaping globally-oriented generations willing to improve the current social scenario, pursuing gender equality, inclusion and diversity transversally and at all levels; therefore, language departments worldwide have an important card to play not only to recover from the decrease of enrolment numbers, which has affected many institutions, but also to re-emerge from the global crisis as an essential humanities subject to shape a better world. Furthermore, languages lie at the core of the study abroad experience and should prepare students to deal with any aspects of the country they wish to visit, including issues concerning race, gender and social class, to quote just a few of them, that might shape all societies. Undeniably, a central point in learning a new language is also understanding its culture(s).

Despite its unquestionable advantages, mastering a language and /or being native speaker does not imply guaranteed excellence in teaching this discipline; while researching in the area of second language acquisition, including pedagogy, specific post-graduate specialisations and /or trainings are necessary to achieve high standards as educators. In particular, in this essay I shall show that working on the evolution of a targeted language and being updated on how the socio-cultural context influences it and vice versa is an essential step to provide students with the appropriate tools to be successful in the discipline not only as language learners but as globally-oriented citizens of the (post-pandemic) world. Framing class-discussion

3. As of October 2020, the American health care system is a complex mix of public and private programs. Many citizens and sponsored foreign workers who have health care insurance rely on employer-sponsored plans. However, the federal government insures veterans, federal employees and congresspeople, those without financial resources (Medicaid) and elderlies (Medicare).

and lectures in sociolinguistics, linguistics anthropology and sociology of language is crucial not only to be innovative in the field of foreign language acquisition, but -- as I have already pointed out in other articles -- also to pass onto students crucial messages of gender equality and social justice that these linguistic variations very often suggest.⁴ In other words, language classes give educators the opportunity not only to teach vocabulary, grammar, and syntax and engage in everyday conversation (as commonly perceived in the past and sometimes still today) but to use words to brainstorm with their students on present-day issues in an often international and diverse setting, thus helping them to become global and active citizens of the world.⁵ As a consequence, educators in the area of languages have the opportunity to rethink themselves also as cross-cultural mediators and innovators, connecting people around the world and creating spaces where diversity, inclusion and gender equality are the norm rather than the exception. This interpretation of the discipline is one of the possible approaches languages departments should capitalize on in a post-pandemic world.⁶ Indeed, as Michel Foucault already suggested in the 1970s: "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and make it possible to thwart" (1978, pp. 100-101). Furthermore, with specific references to gender issues, already in 1990 Catherine Lalumière (former Secretary General of the Council of Europe) wrote in the recommendation adopted by the European Committee for Equali-

4. In particular see Francesca Calamita (2018), "Sexism and Gender Stereotypes in Italian Language Courses: No, Grazie!", *TILCA, Teaching Italian Language and Culture Annual*, pp. 126-138. I also worked on this topic in a recent essay with Roberta Trapè (University of Melbourne), "Virtual Exchanges and Gender-inclusive Toponymy: An Intercultural Citizen Projects to Foster Equality" forthcoming with *Edizioni Ca' Foscari*, University of Venice.

5. Active citizenship in the classroom was introduced by Michael Byram (2008, 2011) and developed, among others, by Robert O'Dowd (2019). Intercultural citizenship links education with initiatives/outcomes outside the classroom to improve the world.

6. For recent articles on a similar approach see Turebayeva, Klara, Salima Seitenova, Meiramgul Yesengulova, Aigulden Togaibayeva and Shynar Turebayeva, "Nurture of Multiculturalism of Future Teachers in the Process of Foreign Language Teaching", *Talent Development & Excellence*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1 Jan. 2020, pp. 960 – 969; Abreu, Laurel, "Awareness of Racial Diversity in the Spanish-Speaking World Among L2 Spanish Speakers," *Foreign Language Annals*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2016, pp. 180-190.

ty: “It was inevitable [...] that the Council should turn its attention to language [...], the languages spoken in its member states subordinate women to men by giving the masculine gender precedence over the feminine. [...] it is no longer possible [...] to tolerate a retrograde style of language which enshrines and perpetuates men’s power over women” (1990, p. 5). More recently (2013), Melissa Bocci in an article on foreign language acquisition and community-based language learning suggests that together with gender, also the debate on race should be included in the classroom: “By privileging whiteness, white normativity in service learning can lead to assimulative, discriminatory, and/or exclusionary practices that reinforce oppressive socioeconomic power dynamics” (p. 8). Learning a language is undoubtedly about learning new words. However, words matter and shape the way we think about the world; the political and cultural messages that words bring with them have the power to shape students’ future choices, widen their horizons, and in turn create a more inclusive and diverse world with less social injustices. As educators, it is part of our job to help students to think critically about the world. A language class gives teachers the invaluable opportunity to do so. Finally, it is precisely by giving the required importance and value to this discipline in academia that world languages can (re)gain visibility and center stage in university settings.

In 2018, I wrote an article at the intersections of Italian language, gender issues and pedagogy, where I pointed out that I was not raised with linguistic gender equality, but I reached this level of awareness during the years of my doctoral studies. When I was studying in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, almost all teachers at elementary, intermediate and high schools used to say “Buongiorno ragazzi [good morning guys]” while greetings their students, therefore employing the masculine form to address a group of people made up of women and men. This grammar rule is commonly referred to as “maschile universale [universal masculine form]” and as every Italian I learned it as such. However, when I was a pupil I always wondered why the masculine form prevailed over the feminine and at the time I never received a satisfactory answer at school or elsewhere. The typical answer was often “perché è grammaticalmente corretto [because it is grammatical-

ly correct]”. Today, if educators want to share a message of gender equality while greeting students, they would say “Buongiorno ragazze e ragazzi [good morning girls and boys]”. In a forthcoming contribution that I co-authored with Roberta Trapè (University of Melbourne) for a volume by Edizioni Ca’ Foscari (University of Venice) we also suggest a further detail: while using this more inclusive formula, the word “ragazze” should also come first, thus helping female students to realise that they can be ahead of their male counterparts in all fields. This is an important detail that girls at school and other settings should hear, thus being led to think that the masculine form does not necessarily prevail over the feminine form either in language or in everyday life. However, not all teachers wish to convey such messages of equality; for a variety of reasons, they often use the masculine form to refer to a group of students made up of women and men.

A similar scenario happens when addressing colleagues in written and verbal exchanges with “carissimi, cari colleghi, gentili professori [dear all, dear colleagues, dear professors]”, which I always perceived as exclusive. If we think about the Italian language being used on a daily basis in institutions and administrative contexts, we can find plenty of similar examples. Some educators might also argue that they simply apply the traditional grammar rule according to which the masculine form is used to address a group of people where at least one man is present. However, if the masculine form prevails, all students except those identifying as men, might think at some point that the language excludes them or sees them as second-class learners.

Furthermore, the issues of pronouns for the LGBTQ community in romance languages still requires much attention also from scholars who actively work towards linguistic gender equality. A variety of solutions have been proposed, such as the use of the asterisk and the neutral vowel “ə”. These proposals are encountering much criticism from public opinion, while – on the contrary – some activists and academics welcome their use.⁷

7. For the latest debate accessible to public opinion on the “schwa” see <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/08/25/asterisco-lingua-italiana/>

Moreover, traditional textbooks to teach and learn Italian often give more visibility to male protagonists of history, literature, cinema and arts. This is not only true of Italian but of other languages too (such as French and Spanish) and – more generally speaking – of the traditional curriculum at all levels. Indeed, the canon has usually been written by (white) men and it focuses on (white) men revolving around heteronormative discourses. However, it is also time to re-think a refreshing post-pandemic education that might help to dismantle socio-cultural patriarchal traditions through the language. Today, almost all – if not all – textbooks to learn Italian mention Dante; however, how many textbooks give visibility at least to one well-known woman writer such as Dacia Maraini, Elsa Morante or Elena Ferrante? Why students taking one semester or more of Italian should not be acquainted with Igiaba Scego or Matilde Serao as they are with well-known male writers? Why language learners must study Michelangelo's life but never learn about masterpieces by Artemisia Gentileschi? Although the traditional curriculum keeps them hidden, as we know, women and the LGBTQ community have made history, contributed to literature, arts, cinema, and much more. It is only a matter of rethinking the canon to include many more, diverse angles, which in turn might be more representative of the current world. With these remarks I am not suggesting that canonical male writers, artists and intellectuals should not appear in textbook, but that there should be space for diversity and inclusion.

I have been left wondering many times how female and LGBTQ students feel about what I call the “invasion of male authority” while studying Italian and if this unbalance (affecting both language and content) is one of the reasons for having less enrolments in Italian language classes at university level in comparison with the past. In particular, to answer these questions, we should reflect on the following points from my 2018 article and forthcoming essay with Trapè: “Has the university population changed from the typical wealthy white boy to a diverse and inclusive community who prefers to study subjects from their perspectives (not all males related, not all white related, not all heteronormative related points of view)? Why teachers are not usually trained yet to pay attention to issues

of inclusion and diversity, including language related debates on linguistic equality? Why publishing houses have not been questioning the content of language textbooks? Why do we maintain this *status quo*?" And today I would add: how come these questions do not become central in reshaping the curriculum of Italian Studies across countries? Teaching a language requires training and this training must be designed to be "al passo coi tempi [to keep up with the times]". Both institutions and faculty from all kinds of departments should value a language PhD. Language educators should not be perceived only as teachers; they should be regarded as scholars and researching should be a central part of their career. It is essential in every department that professors teaching upper level courses in literature, cinema and cultural studies (just to mention some options) collaborate with professors teaching second language acquisition to strengthen the curriculum. It is precisely on this point that Italian Studies must (re)gain visibility at university level. The divisive approach (language vs content class) used in most US universities might have worked in the past, but it is not valid anymore. Content must be integrated in language classes as an "appetizer" – so to speak – to deepen discussion in the upper level curriculum.

Feminist scholars have been addressing sexism in languages since the late 1960s: initially, it was explored in the UK, the US and other Anglophone contexts (such as New Zealand and Australia). Only later it started to involve Romance languages, including Italian. Sexism in languages referred originally to the discriminatory way of representing women with respect to men through words; currently the notion should address also the matter of (in)visibility of those who do not identify themselves with this binary system. Therefore, I would rethink a more wide-ranging definition which could frame sexism in languages as the discriminatory way of representing everyone, except heterosexual men. It is very evident that sexism is inherent in the Italian language and other Romance languages based on similar grammar structures and rules, such as French and Spanish.

Despite being less visible for those outside the area of linguistics, English can be a very sexist language too and recent valuable changes have also been introduced to make it more inclusive; I am referring to the

use of the pronoun “they” and the word “person” rather than “woman” or “man” as well as neutral terms, as it happens in “police officer”, rather than “policeman” and “policewoman”. However, some discriminatory words are still used: for example, the very exclusive “freshmen” to refer to first year-students.

At university level, the interconnectedness between gender and linguistics is a major field of research. Yet, it is very seldom addressed in second language acquisition courses despite this interdisciplinary field having been founded several decades ago.⁸ As Michela Menegatti and Monica Rubini remark: “[v]erbal communication is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced [...]. The use of expressions consistent with gender stereotypes contributes to transmit and reinforce such belief system and can produce actual discrimination against women” (2017). As a professor committed to pass messages of gender equality to my students, I often find challenges on my path due not only to the traditional grammar norms that shape the Italian language, but -- as mentioned above -- also owing to the resistance shown by some educators at university level who have not given the required importance to this issue. This remark is also related to the fact that, particularly in US universities, teaching languages has been often framed as a subject related to technical skills and at times getting a position in second language acquisition does not require a terminal degree. In doing so, departments have also devalued the importance of a PhD in languages and/or applied linguistics, which -- paradoxically -- is one of the most important “products” sold in tertiary education. Blending second language acquisition with relevant cultural content indeed requires a sophisticated background that cannot be fulfilled by “technical skills”. Since the publication of Alma Sabatini’s *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (1987), linguistic gender equality has been progressively promoted and sometimes

8. Deborah Cameron (2006), one of the leading voices in the field, reminds us that gender and linguistics came together as a university discipline in the 1980s.

achieved. However, in and outside the academia, scholars and public opinion continue to remark that inclusive language is cacophonous and too complicated to be used every day. This interpretation often seems an excuse to not use a less unequal language and -- as a consequence -- promote a less unequal society. If sexist language is at the base of the iceberg to illustrate gendered violence,⁹ rethinking its sexist connotation is the first step not only to achieve gender equality but to contribute to reduce violence against women and the growing number of femicides which have reached record numbers during the lockdown in March and April 2020.¹⁰ The word “femminicidio” has been misinterpreted for a long time in Italy by public opinion and this is symptomatic not only of the cultural resistance to frame gender issues in the appropriate context (anthropologically, socially and linguistically)¹¹ but also of the tangible unfamiliarity of people with certain gender-related matters. The works by Cecilia Robustelli and her collaboration with a group of journalists (G.I.U.L.I.A) have done much to improve this complex scenario. Nevertheless, many journalists on major Italian TV channels, radio and in newspapers, politicians and those who might have an impact on public opinion are still adamant about linguistic equality. For example, you might hear journalists saying “avvocata” in one instance and in the second one come back to the traditional “avvocato” to refer to a woman. The recent volume by Anna Lisa Somma and Gabriele Maestri (2020) also recalls this debate, attempting to create a dialogue, not only among academics, but with a wider audience too. As Trapè and I suggest in our forthcoming article on social media feminist collectives (“Non una meno” and “Abbatto muri”, for example) as well as other associations

9. I am referring to this widely-known image <https://www.nap.edu/visualizations/sexual-harassment-iceberg/> There are several variations of it.

10. For data on Italian society see in particular this article from *La Repubblica*, which summarises the scenario very clearly: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/07/18/news/aumentano_i_femminicidi_il_77_delle_donne_uccise_in_famiglia-262247587/

11. Paradoxically English words enter our everyday language very quickly; think, for instance, about the use of the word “lockdown” when Italians could have said “confinamento”.

and well known activists and writers (such as Michela Murgia, Michela Marzano, and Lorella Zanardo), there is an attempt to pass messages of equality. Yet, a part of Italian society seems reluctant to progress, particularly with using professions of power in the feminine form and the use of a more inclusive language in general.

How can we help students to question and fight gender stereotypes in (and beyond) a language class? Do educators feel comfortable telling their students that the masculine agreement always prevails? How can professors convey a message of gender equality if sexism is embedded in the Italian language? Where can students find a textbook to learn Italian in an inclusive way, if they wish? As I suggested in my 2018 article, it would be surprising (yet refreshing) to see the word “casalingo” in a textbook, while “casalinga” is usually mentioned several times. In most textbooks, positions of power (such as directors of a museum, an institute or a bank) are assigned to a man. I never came across the depiction of same sex-couples and the word “lesbica [lesbian]” in a textbook, not to mention transgender issues. The portrayal of the heteronormative family pervades many textbooks that educators use daily, thus suggesting an old – and patriarchal – idea of Italy (often dominated by the Catholic Church, whiteness and its traditions) that does not reflect this country in the 2020s.

Furthermore, in most cases the portrayal of social class and status is also debatable: professions and lifestyles addressed in textbooks often belong to the upper or middle classes. For example, I never came across an exercise in a language textbook where a factory worker or a taxi driver takes center stage. As Joan Clifford and Deborah S. Reisinger suggest: “As educators [...] it is our responsibility to maintain an atmosphere that does not discriminate, stereotype, tokenize, privilege, or somehow treat students unfairly”. To improve this scenario in my courses and beyond, from 2017 onwards, I have been working on a project in intermediate Italian (ITAL 2020) at the University of Virginia titled: “A Gendered Wor(l)d: Grammar, Sexism and Cultural Changes in Italian Language and Society”. This initiative (which I discussed in my 2018 article) is a multimodal learning experience that allows students to engage critically with Italian media and to be-

come sensitive to the gendered politics of language. The aim of this module is to discuss with students how sexism is inherent in the Italian language. Every two weeks, selected sections of ITAL 2020 are required to close-read and analyse a number of newspaper headlines and rewrite them in such a way that they do not reflect any gender stereotypes through language. Students create a blog page in the course platform to collect the analysed materials. In their blog, they assemble scanned copies of the articles, the rewritten headlines, and also their reflections on the project. Students also present their work at the end of the semester, using a variety of media to showcase the outcome of this new learning experience. Since 2017, I have tried to open a productive debate on teaching Italian with gender equality and to inspire colleagues to engage in related projects.

The collaborative initiative on gender-inclusive toponymy I lead with Roberta Trapè represents a further step towards this effort and it fosters women's visibility in Italian language, culture, society and beyond. This new project, based on a virtual exchange, involves students of intermediate Italian at the University of Virginia and students of English at Liceo Adelaide Cairoli, an upper-secondary school in Pavia.¹² Study materials on gender and toponymy have been uploaded onto the university and school platforms¹³ and students meet virtually on Skype and/or Zoom to discuss these resources in Italian and English. They create a transnational group which closely considers the issue of gender equality in relation to streets' and relevant places' names, which are rarely named after women on both sides of the Atlantic. Seeking others' perspectives and advice, they propose changes in their local communities. In particular, students write down proposals to name a new or unnamed street/place in their towns after women who gave a meaningful contribution to the local community and then present them to the respective mayors.

12. We are grateful to Deborah Ricci whose 2015 contribution on gender and toponymy has inspired our project.

13. In Spring 2020 we asked students to read several articles in preparation for the project: these include -- but are not limited to -- newspapers' articles from *The Guardian* and the BBC news: "Next stop...Nina, Simone" (*The Guardian*, June 2018) and "Are our street names sexist?" (BBC, April 2012).

While I am writing this article, Trapè and I are about to send students' letters to the mayors in Charlottesville and Pavia.

Reflecting on gender issues in the Italian language over the years also inspired me to work on a textbook to learn Elementary Italian with a focus on inclusion and diversity, jointly with Chiara De Santi (Farmingdale College, CUNY) and with the collaboration of several other language specialists worldwide, including a number of UVa colleagues on campus and in our study abroad programs in Siena and Florence. The manuscript, entitled *DiversITALY* (the contraction of the words "Diversity+Italy") is under contract with Kendall Hunt and should be completed by the end of 2021, thus being ready for adoption in the academic year 2022/2023. This textbook will be the first one to teach Italian with inclusion, diversity and gender equality. As such, it will give an opportunity to Italian Studies Programs to reconsider their offer in their language classes. Furthermore, the textbook will have an accessible price. With this publication covering the first two semesters of Italian, De Santi, our collaborators (which also include David Marini and Serena Baldini from ISI Florence) and I hope to give students and colleagues the bases to create a better world and give more relevance to Italian Studies in the Twenty-first Century. We need to rebuild a more equal world after the pandemic and languages can be one of its foundations. Italian language (which is often regarded as a sexist and non-inclusive language) has its chance to thrive. Join us to make it happen!

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