

Attitudes and stereotypes of gender inclusive strategies in Italian

Italian language, by virtue of its morphology, is of particular interest for analysing linguistic strategies for a gender-inclusive language. Italian is in fact an inflectional language with an overt expression of a morphological gender marking (Corbett 1991; Thornton 2006). Although assigning the grammatical gender is arbitrary for inanimate nouns, for animate nouns the correspondence between grammatical gender and inherent gender is not always realized. That is, because Italian language tends to use the masculine form with presumed neutral or universal value. Therefore, different possibilities have been proposed in order to make the language more inclusive (Sabatini 1987; Robustelli 2012; Cavagnoli 2013; Thornton 2016). During the last few years, it appears that the two most common, and used, strategies for making Italian more inclusive are i) the feminization with reduplication (as, for example, *cari tutti e care tutte*, 'dear all', with both feminine and masculine forms) and ii) the neutralization of the morpheme that conveys the grammatical gender information (as, for example, *car* tutt**, 'dear all'). Crucially, neutralization is more commonly used by non-binary people and by individuals who identify as genderfluid. In Italian, the two most popular neutralization strategies appear to be the asterisk * and the IPA symbol schwa [ə] (Marotta & Monaco 2016; Gheno 2019; Maturi 2020; Manera 2021).

The debate regarding the use of a gender inclusive language and on the possible forms it can take appears to be very vivid: in February 2022, the Italian linguist Arcangeli launched a petition through the www.change.org platform ("Schwa (ə)? No thanks") with the aim of banning neutralization strategies in official documents. The political value of linguistic strategies such as neutralization, which depend on very specific political stances, suggests that these proposals are likely to be welcomed by people with similar political views; however, it is possible that these strategies may be opposed by other people with strong standard language ideologies (Lippi Green 2012), as well as those who identify with different feminist views who prefer to avoid obscuring the feminine (such as second wave feminism, in certain cases). Thus, it appears that different stances for adopting or rejecting specific linguistic strategies can be useful for accessing different language ideologies (cf. Cameron 2003). Nevertheless, research in Italy has been focused on how these strategies, such as feminization or neutralization, are mostly used online (see, for example, Comandini 2021), whereas very little work has been done to understand how people react to the use of inclusive language (Slemp 2013).

This proposal aims precisely at filling this gap by studying the attitudes of the Italian linguistic community towards inclusive language, as well as the stereotypes associated to people using specific strategies. The research also investigates whether there is a correlation between attitudes towards inclusive strategies and linguistic sexism as a whole. Finally, it attempts to confirm whether any personal involvement or interest in feminist issues may play a role in determining attitudes. For investigating stereotypes regarding the use of gender inclusive language, the Stereotype Content Model (SCM, Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu 2002 and others) was adopted: according to this model, people judge social groups along two axes, namely competence and warmth. The SCM has been successfully tested in linguistic analyses, especially in studies on attitudes towards different accents that use the verbal guise technique. These have demonstrated that linguistic varieties are evaluated along the two axes of warmth and competence; speakers of standard varieties are usually perceived as being more competent, while speakers of local varieties are best evaluated along the dimensions of warmth and solidarity (MacFarlane & Stuart-Smith 2012; Calamai 2015; Rakić 2019). Nevertheless, some studies have also shown that the model can be successfully applied to classify written texts (e.g., Durante, Volpato & Fiske 2010; Fraser, Nejadgholi & Kiritchenko 2021). For this study, the hypothesis to be tested is that different strategies (reduplication with the feminine form and neutralization) are associated with different stereotypes along the two dimensions of competence and warmth. Furthermore, in order to investigate the more explicit sexist attitudes, the Italian adaptation of the IASNL - Inventory of Attitudes toward Sexist/Non sexist Language (Parks &

Robertson 2000) was used in its short version of 21 questions (IASNL - General IASNL-G). The translation was borrowed from Maass & Merkel (2013) and slightly adapted for this study.

A questionnaire was then designed and administered online through snowball effect. In the first part of the questionnaire, people were asked to judge the hypothetical writer of different texts. These short texts contained one of the two most common strategies, namely 4 had reduplication with the explication of the feminine (e.g., *Cari tutti, care tutte*, 'dear all') and 4 texts had neutralization through schwa or asterisk (e.g., *car* tutt**, 'dear all'). People were asked to judge using a 5-point Likert scale the dimensions of competence and warmth of the hypothetical writer; they then had to guess the sex of the writers and to indicate how much they felt the text to be acceptable. In the second part of the questionnaire, the 21 questions of the IASNL-G were administered. In the last section of the questionnaire, the respondents answered a few questions regarding age, educational qualification, gender, and interest in feminist issues of the respondents. At the moment, 125 questions have been collected. The preliminary results show that different strategies activate different stereotypes, with neutralization strategies being evaluated better on the warmth and competence dimensions; it appears also that respondents show neutral or slightly positive attitudes for an inclusive language. Finally, it seems that the evaluation along the dimensions of competence and warmth is statistically correlated with the IASNL-G score, with people reporting positive attitudes towards inclusive language judging neutralization strategies as warmer. During the conference results will be further discussed with reference to standard language ideologies. The overall final results of this research will contribute to understand what the prevailing attitudes toward gender inclusive language in the Italian setting are.

References

- Calamai, Silvia (2015). "Between linguistics and social psychology of language: the perception of non-native accents". *Studi e Saggi Linguistici* (53:2), pp. 289-308.
- Cameron, Deborah (2003). "Gender and language ideologies". In Holmes, Janet & Meyerhoff, Miriam (eds.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 447-467.
- Cavagnoli, Stefania (2013). *Linguaggio giuridico e lingua di genere: una simbiosi possibile*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.
- Comandini, Gloria (2021). Salve a tuttə, tutt*, tuttu, tuttx e tutt@: l'uso delle strategie di neutralizzazione di genere nella comunità queer online.: Indagine su un corpus di italiano scritto informale sul web. *Testo e Senso* (23), pp. 43-64.
- Corbett, Greville G. (1991). *Gender*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Durante, Federica, Volpato, Chiara & Fiske, Susan T. (2010). "Using the Stereotype Content Model to examine group depictions in Fascism: An archival approach". *European Journal of Social Psychology* (40:3), pp. 465-483.
- Fiske, Susan T., Cuddy, Amy J. C., Glick, Peter, Xu, Jun (2002). "A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (82:6), pp. 878-902.
- Fraser, Kathleen C., Nejadgholi, Isar & Kiritchenko, Svetlana (2021). "Understanding and countering stereotypes: A computational approach to the stereotype content model". In *Proceedings of the Joint Conference of the 59th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics and the 11th International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing (ACL-IJCNLP 2021)*.
- Gheno, Vera (2019). *Femminili singolari*. Firenze: effequ.

- Lippi Green, Rosina (2012). *English with an accent. Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge.
- Maass, Anne & Merkel, Elisa (2013). *An Italian translation and adaptation of the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language*. Manuscript unpublished.
- MacFarlane Andrew E. & Stuart-Smith, Jane (2012). “One of them sounds sort of Glasgow Uni-ish’. Social judgements and fine phonetic variation in Glasgow”. *Lingua* (122:7), pp. 764-778.
- Manera, Manuela (2021). *La lingua che cambia. Rappresentare le identità di genere, creare gli immaginari, aprire lo spazio linguistico*. Torino: eris edizioni.
- Marotta, Ilaria & Monaco, Salvatore (2016). “Un linguaggio più inclusivo? Rischi e asterischi nella lingua italiana”. *gender/sexuality/italy* 3, pp. 44-57.
- Maturi, Pietro (2020). “Qual è il tuo pronome? Riflessioni su questioni di genere nelle lingue europee”. *Fuori Luogo. Rivista di sociologia del territorio, turismo, tecnologia* (8:2), pp 67-74.
- Parks, Janet B. & Robertson, Mary Ann. (2000). “Development and Validation of an Instrument to Measure Attitudes toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language”. *Sex Roles* 41, pp. 415–38.
- Rakić, Tamara (2019). “How accent and gender influence perceptions of competence and warmth in the medical profession”. *Journal of Language and Discrimination* (3:2), pp. 218-231.
- Robustelli, Cecilia (2012). “Linee guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo”. In *Progetto Genere e linguaggio. Parole e immagini della comunicazione*. Comune di Firenze, pp. 1-32.
- Sabatini, Alma (1987). *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*. Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato: Roma.
- Slemp, Katie (2021). “Attitudes towards varied inclusive language use in Spanish on Twitter”. *Working papers in Applied Linguistics and Linguistics at York* (1), pp. 60-74.
- Thornton, Anna M. (2006). “L’assegnazione del genere”. In Luraghi, Silvia & Olita, Anna (eds.). *Linguaggio e genere*. Roma: Carocci, pp. 54-71.
- Thornton, Anna M. (2016). “Designare le donne: preferenze, raccomandazioni e grammatica”. In Corbisiero, Fabio & Maturi, Pietro & Ruspini, Elisabetta (eds.). *Genere e linguaggio. I segni dell’uguaglianza e della diversità*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, pp. 15-33.

Contact

Rosalba Nodari
Research Fellow
University of Siena
Campus di Arezzo
Viale Celso Cittadini, 33, 52100 Arezzo AR
Italy
rosalba.nodari@unisi.it