

The debate on gender-inclusive language in Italy

The presentation aims at illustrating the main aspects of the debate about gender-inclusive language with respect to the Italian language in Italy in the last 40 years.

Italian has the grammatical category **GENDER**, with two features, **MASCULINE** and **FEMININE**. Gender assignment has a semantic core, i.e. nouns denoting male vs. female human beings are masculine and feminine respectively (with very few exceptions), and a residue, so that nouns denoting inanimate and abstract entities can belong to both genders.

There is gender agreement, both in the singular and the plural, and in most cases overtly marked, within NPs between the head noun and adjectives and determiners, and between a verb and its subject NP when the verb is in a periphrastic form headed by the auxiliary 'be'; periphrastic verb forms also agree with a clitic object (obligatorily with 3rd person objects, optionally with 1st and 2nd person objects); in these periphrastic forms past participles inflect like adjectives.

The inflectional classes of nouns and adjectives and the paradigms of articles and personal pronouns, and a sample of masculine and feminine nouns and a glossed sentence can be seen [here](#) (since for reasons of space they could not be included in this abstract).

Italian is a pro-drop language; as a consequence, there is little debate on pronoun usage to refer to people, in sharp contrast to what happens in Germanic languages and in French.

The correspondence between a word's final vowel, its gender and the sex of the referent (in case of human and highly animate beings) is not one-to-one. However, the majority of nouns ending in *-o* are masculine and the majority of nouns ending in *-a* are feminine (SgROI 2008). Therefore, speakers perceive these endings as direct exponents of gender and sex, even if linguistic analyses take pain in showing that these correlations are not straightforward (Thornton 2001, D'Achille & Thornton 2008). This perception by speakers has consequences in the debate about proposed reforms of usage.

The first wave of discussion on gender-inclusive language in Italy goes back to the 1980s, when Recommendations for a non-sexist usage of the Italian language (Sabatini 1987) were first issued. These recommendations were written by a government-appointed committee, whose leading figure was Alma Sabatini (1922-1988), a feminist activist and English teacher. The purport of the recommendations was:

- to avoid so-called generic/unmarked use of masculine forms;
- to avoid asymmetric usages in referring to men and women (like the traditional usage of preposing a definite article to women's but not to men's surnames: e.g. *la Merkel* vs. *Johnson*);
- to use feminine forms of nouns denoting professions, jobs, roles.

The Recommendations were received with skepticism and sometimes openly mocked by journalists (e.g. Placido 1987, M.R. 1989). They were also discussed by some linguists (Lepschy 1989, Cardinaletti & Giusti 1991), who pointed out that some of the recommended choices were "hardly acceptable" (e.g., gender agreement on the basis of the sex of the majority of the members in a mixed group). Most feminist women, on the contrary, accepted the Recommendations almost uncritically, and many still do. In subsequent years various Departments and local administrations adopted new sets of Recommendations (see at least Robustelli 2012), which sometimes temper some of the most radical proposals by Sabatini.

Notwithstanding the fact that many administrations have now adopted recommendations for non-sexist language use, in particular with respect to equal treatment of women and men, application of gender-fair formulations is still not widespread, not even in official documents by local and national administrations. Some individual women also oppose the usage of feminine forms of agent nouns for self-reference (see Thornton 2009, 2016 and Voghera & Vena 2016 for some examples). Conflict ensued

in 2016 when the President of the House of Representatives Laura Boldrini ordered to adopt the feminine form of all titles and job descriptions on electronic badges: some women employees appealed this decision, arguing that the masculine noun *segretario* 'secretary' refers to a more highly qualified job than the feminine *segretaria*.

In informal written usage, some graphical solutions are relatively widespread to avoid using so-called generic masculine forms: e.g., in opening an e-mail message directed to a mixed group of addressees, one can write *Car* tutt** 'dear all', where the star is meant to stand for any or all the vowel endings. This is strongly opposed by normatively oriented linguists (D'Achille 2021) and other scholars (Iacona 2022).

The perception by speakers that word-final vowels *-a* and *-o* directly signal the sex or gender identity of a human referent is at the base of the uneasiness felt by people who do not identify with either end of the binary opposition male / female in using forms ending in *-a* and *-o* for self-reference, and by allies wrt. to reference to non-binary and gender fluid persons (the same holds wrt. usage of the respective plural forms for reference to mixed groups including non-binary people). Since using a <*> is unpractical, its main disadvantage being that it is not pronounceable, recently a solution has been proposed, to adopt schwa /ə/ <ə> as an additional ending, to be used on nouns to refer to non-binary persons or for generic reference to people of whatever gender identity. There are at least two sources of "norm" wrt. the usage of schwa: the publishing house *effequ*, which has adopted it in a book series, and the website <https://italianoinclusivo.it>, where it is proposed to use <ə> for singular endings and <3> for plural endings.

In the presentation I will discuss linguistic problems arising from the adoption of schwa in Italian, also in comparison with parallel proposals for other Romance languages, and present the current debate, in which several groups take part, including linguists, journalists, and feminists. Some feminist linguists maintain that generalised adoption of a schwa ending on nouns referring to mixed groups has the effect of obscuring the presence of women as much as the so-called generic masculine does (Giusti 2022). Therefore, there is a clash between different groups of proponents of different kinds of gender-fair usage.

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