

# Building identities: the case of Inclusive language in Italian

FEDERICA FORMATO (BRIGHTON UNIVERSITY)



# overview

A brief introduction to the phenomenon

Inclusivity = identity

Inclusive language and communities

conclusions

# Where do we start from?

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There has been a lot of interest in relation to gendered language, particularly around feminisation (of job titles in masculine-oriented environments). The debate focused on the language of the binary (men/women) according to the principle of markedness (men=usual, women=unusual) within the social structure (Formato 2014,2016, 2019; Formato and Tantucci 2020)

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Specifically, generic masculines are found to be used in the parliament, in the media, in job adverts (Nardone 2016,2018).

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“Grammatical gender languages [...] pose a far greater challenge to a non-heteronormative language policy because gender binarism is much more firmly entrenched in language structure” (Motschenbacher 2014: 258)

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Grammatical gendered languages function in a way so that there is “less space, opportunity, ease and susceptibility to [neutral language] development” (Hord 2016: 1)

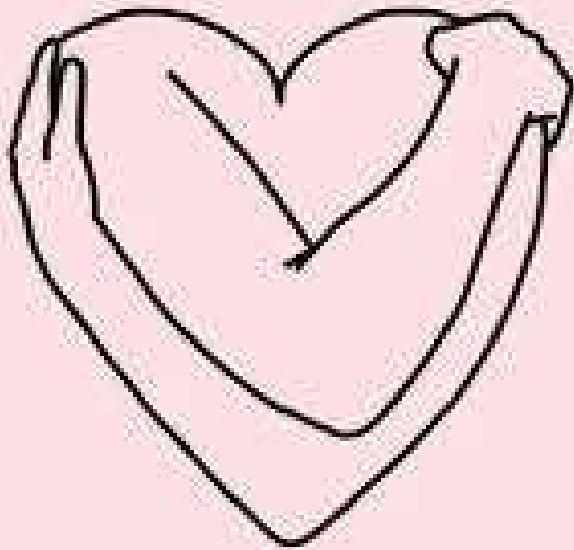
# Speakers' solutions: inclusive language

- Inclusive language is: *A linguistic device or a set of devices that make a specific view of social gender **visible*** (similarly to using feminine morphological inflections)
- It is different from neutral language, e.g. *chi lavora* (those who work)
- It *breaches* traditional grammar introducing symbols and letters which did not form part of the system for gender as a grammatical class.
- Linguists who advocate for these forms (Gheno 2021; Manera 2021) are usually abused/attacked on social media.

Strategy	example (ragazz- is the root person/pe young person/pe ople)
asterisk *	ragazz*
schwa ə (singular) and long schwa ɜ (plural)	ragazzə, ragazzɜ.
-u	ragazzu
-@	ragazz@
-x	ragazzx

# Language decisions

- Inclusive language forms part of *deliberate decisions* we make rather than habitual mechanisms (see Sczesny, Moser and Wood on sexist language 2015)
  - choosing language can modify “the value of the terms and remove the option of political neutrality” (Cameron 1995: 120).



## Talking about the self and/or an *extended* self

- Inclusive language is a tool for people who do not identify in the binary to talk about themselves
- Inclusive language is a tool for allies to reflect on their subject-position in a recognisable imbalanced *world* (*allyship*)

# Identity Work



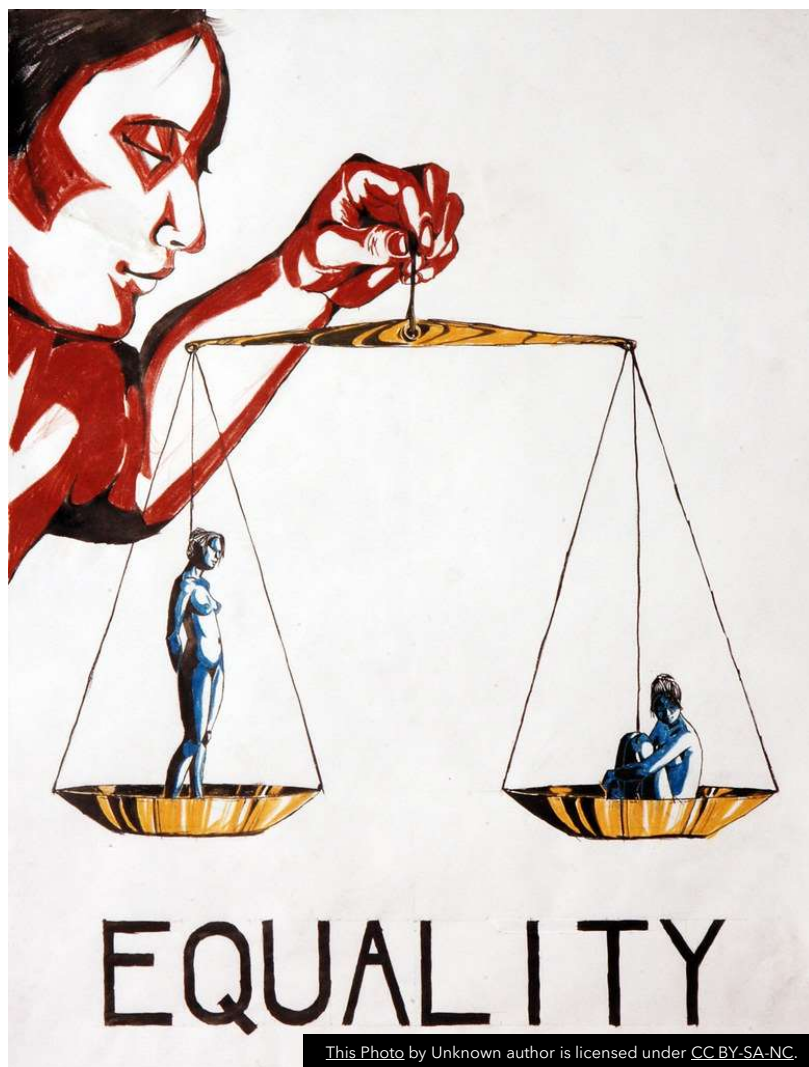
Speakers who use inclusive language (as much as those who do not) have reasons to do that based on an identity work, that is employing “symbolic resources available for the cultural production of identity” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 379).

A large crowd of simple, stylized human figures with round heads and thin bodies. One figure in the center is highlighted in yellow, standing out from the rest of the crowd. The background is a gradient of dark blue to light blue.

# Identity work towards self-representation

- In the identity work, one important aspect is to be taken into account.
  - Gender is *Motivated* (Abbou 2011:60), that is "[c]hoosing to act on gender by marking both genders can involve different stances". This can be a solid basis to talk about inclusive strategies too.





# How can allyship be conceived of?

- Linguistic allyship is a form of collective action of those who "espouse egalitarian ideals" (Ashburn-Nardo, 2018)
- Egalitarian but also inclusive ideals

# (R)ESISTANCE WORK

"resistance suggests conscious, political and directed actions" (Radke et al. 2020: 293)

"Active, collective Overt. collective action against what actors perceive to be dominant power relations, with clear goals towards broad social change. Conceptualization of dominant group and subordinates who are challenging it" (Raby 2005:153)



# Inclusive language, allyship and resistance work: sociolinguistic communities

- **Speech communities**, "a socially based unit of linguistic analysis" where language items become meaningful
- **Communities of practices**, a "community defined by social engagement – after all, it is this engagement that language serves, not the place and not the people as a bunch of individuals" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 493).
- **Imagined communities**, language functions to connect people who do not know one another "yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006: 6);

Formato and Somma (forthcoming)

Michela Murgia, Writer and Journalist.  
Feminist activist



Una donna a capo di un partito che affonda le sue radici nella tradizione fascista non solo non dovrebbe compiacere nessuno che abbia a cuore l'emancipazione femminile, ma impone anzi di far scattare una serie di allarmi ulteriori rispetto a quelli che già trillano per questioni di tutela dei valori democratici. Cosa succede nella testa di chi è convinta che una donna sia sempre un valore aggiunto a prescindere dal contesto e dalle modalità con cui agisce? Perché Giorgia Meloni dovrebbe allertarci meno di quanto possa fare un Matteo Salvini di medesima area ideologica? La risposta è nella struttura del pensiero patriarcale, che attribuisce pregiudizialmente al maschile e al femminile inclinazioni differenti. È facile per tutto guardare a un maschio a capo di un partito di estrema destra come si guarderebbe all'uomo nero per

At the crossroad  
between speech  
community and  
imagined  
communities

# My work on inclusive language


- Investigation, through corpus linguistics techniques, of a corpus of tweets (1,500,000 words)
- The corpus has been collected through a python script
- The corpus is a specialised one: it contains the tweets using 26 words with schwa (divided into sub-corpora compiled through semantic categories)
- The theoretical background is a triangulation of CADS (Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies) and FCDA (Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis)
- This will be published in a monograph titled *Feminism, Corpus-Assisted Research and Language inclusivity* (Cambridge University Press 2023)

Allyship can appear in two different forms:

- Direct: explaining 1) that/why they use the linguistic strategies to ally with the social cause or self-representation in a "folk linguistic" fashion 2) its social functions. A meta allyship?
- Indirect: use of the linguistic strategies (as shown in the examples that follow)

## Direct and indirect choices





# How is inclusive language used?

- In the next few slides, I will present some telling examples of how speakers used the schwa to self-represent themselves and represent others
- Some linguists/speakers have commented on some obstacles but speakers have found their way round these obstacles, e.g. use of the articles
- These examples show that inclusive language can be used in several ways (mostly informal but also political communication)

# self and group representation

la mia cosa preferita è vedere la mia insegnante di disegno che piano piano scopre che tutte le sue allieve sono gay

My favourite thing is to see my teacher realising that all her students are gay



# Self, group presentation and specific others

- L'evento è aperto solo a addette ai lavori, ma ci auguriamo che possa essere l'inizio di un percorso per il riconoscimento del genitore bi all'interno di una società in cui i nuclei familiari devono ancora essere rigidamente incasellati per essere considerati degni.
- The event is exclusively open to insiders, but we hope that this is a journey into recognising bisexual parenthood within a society in which families must still be fit specific boxed in order to be considered valid (to be parents)

# allyship through specificity

- oggi è il [#BiVisibilityDay](#) e voglio ricordare a tutte e mie bi mutuals che siete tutte valide e meravigliose, vi voglio bene
- Today is [#BiVisibilityDay](#) and I want to remind all my bi friends that you are all valid and wonderful, I love you.

# A generic ə

- Ma ce l'avete anche voi ə amice che per dirvi ciao come stai vi mandano un longform di 20.000 battute spazi esclusi?
- Do you also have friends who, in order to say hi, send a longform of 20.000 characters without spaces?
- Quest'anno mi impegno ad esser più socievole con ə colleghe a lezione
- This year I will do my best to be more sociable with [my] colleagues

# A generic $\exists$

1. Non esiste femminismo senza anticapitalismo; 2. femminismo liberale è fuffa rivolta solo ad una determinata categoria privilegiata, le donne d'affari 3.  $\exists$  influencers non incontrano i principi anticapitalisti del femminismo 4.  $\exists$  influencers non sono femministe

1. Feminism without anti-capitalism does not exist. 2. Liberal feminism is a cover up for a privileged category, i.e. women in business. 3 Influencers do not meet the anti-capitalist principles of feminism. 4. Influencers are not feminist.



ciwati 3 min



SI STANNO ISCRIVENDO TUTTΘ  
A @POSSIBILEIT

DOVE ABBIAMO SBAGLIATO?

A generic  $\Theta$  (in  
political  
communication)

# split form: a new option?

- Una curiosità, un sondaggio. A quanti quotidiani o riviste, di carta o no, sei abbonata/o/ə, e/o sostieni come nel modello del Post o del Guardian?
- A poll for curiosity. To how many newspapers such as Post or The Guardian, printed or online, are you subscribed and/or support?

# The case of the article

- Italian has 7 articles (lo, la, le, gli, i, il, l')
- One of the biggest criticism is that it is difficult to make the article inclusive BUT, as we saw in previous examples,
- It is interesting to see that speakers are being creative, replacing the articles with the  $\emptyset$
- Some still use the masculine articles with inclusive forms
- Some others use the L+  $\emptyset$

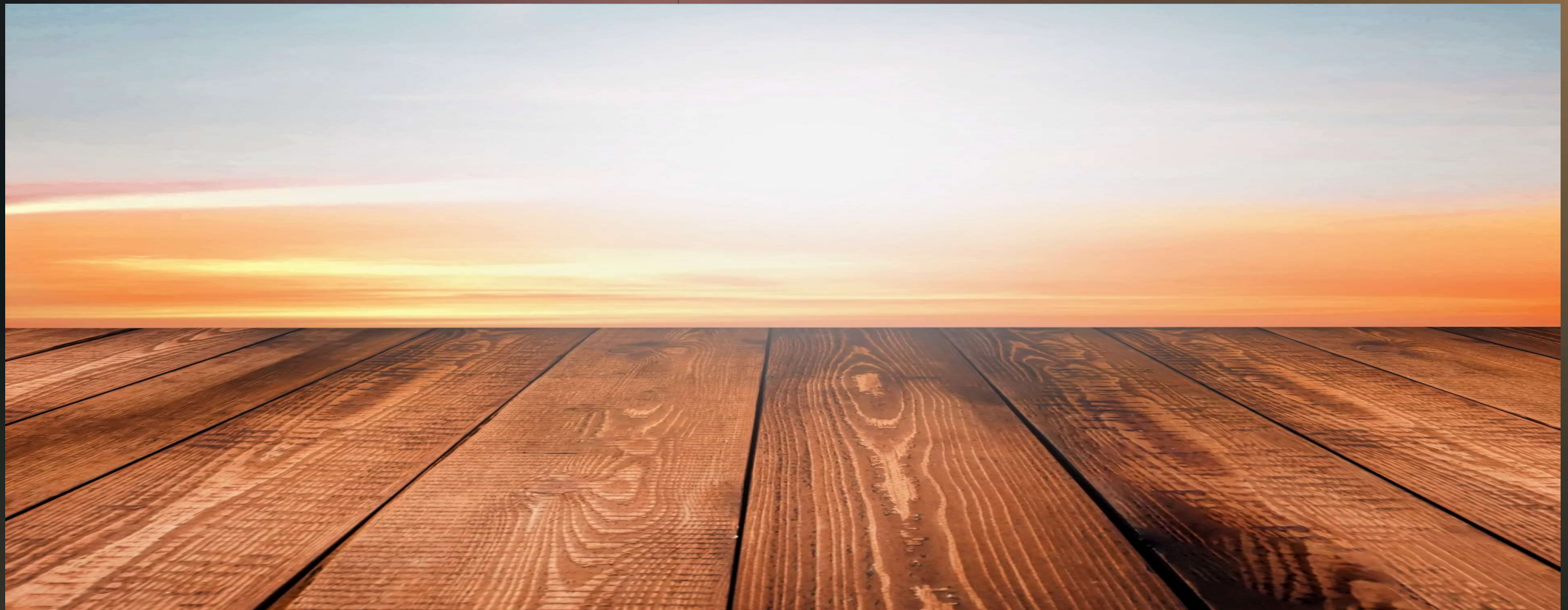




**AN OPEN  
DEBATE:  
IS INCLUSIVE  
LANGUAGE  
FAIR AND  
REALLY  
INCLUSIVE?**

- This presentation shows that inclusive language is a positive toll for a wide range of possibilities/options
- Motivation, identity and allyship are all to be taken into account when we investigate inclusive language.
- There is also a wider debate whether using inclusive language to include everyone is damaging those who are using it to be *seen* and break the heteronormative binary.
- Dame-Griff (2022:125) explains that the specific term *Latinx* should not be meant to include all people but "a term that can reflect years of grappling with issues such as discomfort with gendered norms and expectations, gender dysphoria, erasure within a binary system, and a personal and specific journey to understanding oneself beyond this binary system".





Grazie a tuttø!

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