International Conference **“Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language. A multinational perspective”**
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The debate on gender-inclusive language in Italy

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Outline

- Factors in Italian grammar concerning the expression of gender
- 1987: *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana*
  - Recommendations
  - Reception by the press and by linguists
  - Current situation
  - Two case studies: Boldrini vs. Unions 2016 , Senate 2022
- 2020s: the challenge of including non-binary people
  - Clash between different pressure groups

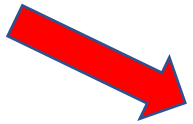
will be addressed
by Nodari
and by Formato

The expression of gender in Italian

- Italian has the feature **GENDER** with two values: MASCULINE and FEMININE.
- Gender assignment has a semantic core, i.e. nouns denoting male vs. female human beings are masculine and feminine respectively:

uomo 'man' M *donna* 'woman' F

padre 'father' M *madre* 'mother' F



Source of trouble for non-binary gender identities!

- with a handful of exceptions:

sentinella 'sentry' F *soprano* 'id.' M

(till very recently, denoting only males) (today denoting only females)

- and a residue: nouns denoting inanimate and abstract entities can belong to both genders

libro 'book' M *penna* 'pen' F

noce 'walnut tree' M *noce* 'nut' F

Gender of controllers is visible on **many** agreement targets

- In NPs nouns control agreement on:
  - Articles (definite and indefinite)
  - Demonstratives
  - Possessives (agreement in gender and number with **possessed** N, not possessor)
  - Adjectives (both pre- and post-nominal)

- Subject NPs control agreement on certain predicates:
  - Adjectives
  - Past participles in some periphrastic tenses
  - (variable behaviour with nouns in the predicate)

An example of «Alliterative agreement»

l-a	*su-a*	*bell-a*	*cas-a*	*nuov-a*
DEF-F.SG	POSS.3SG-F.SG	beautiful-F.SG	home(F)-SG	new-F.SG

l-a	*ho*	*vist-a*
3GS.OBJ-F.SG	AUX.1SG	see.PST.PTCP-F.SG

‘his/her beautiful new home, I saw it’

But things are not always so easy…

Quel-Ø	*vecchi-o*	*pigiam-a*	*verd-e*	*e*	*blu*
DIST.DEM[M.SG]	old-M.SG	pyjamas(M)-SG	green-SG[M]	and	blue[M.SG]

‘that old green and blue pyjamas’

Agreement is not always alliterative in Italian

Relations between a noun's ending and its gender

- The correspondence between a word's final vowel, its gender and the sex of the referent is not one-to-one
- However, the vast majority of nouns ending in *-o* are masculine and the majority of nouns ending in *-a* are feminine

Singular ending	Masculine nouns	Feminine nouns	Nouns with both genders
-a	5,1%	86,8%	7,9%
-o	99%	0,4%	0,4%
-e	50,9%	40,6%	8,5%
-i	35,2%	54%	10,6%
-u	83,1%	5,3%	11,6%
stressed V, C	51,6%	43,7%	4,7%
Total	52,4%	42,2%	5,3%

Percentage of masculine and feminine nouns with different endings; Data elaborated on the basis of Sgroi (2008: 109)

- Speakers' perception that the endings -*a* and -*o* «mean» feminine and masculine respectively has consequences in the debate on gender fair usage
- ... and in some speakers' misguided practice:

pediatra 'pediatrician' and *apprendista* 'apprentice' in the sg.

end in -*a* both when used as a masculine and as a feminine, but...

Trouble when reference is plural or non-specific

Given the large amount of agreement targets, and the frequent overt expression of gender, splitting often results in stylistically unsatisfactory sequences:

I	*candidati*	*e*	*le*	*candidate*	*saranno*	*avvisati*	*e*	*avvisate*
the.	candidate.	and	the.	candidate.	will be	notified.	and	notified.
M.PL	M.PL		F.PL	F.PL		M.PL		F.PL

Un/una professore/professoressa 'a.M.SG/a.F.SG professor.M.SG/professor.F.SG'

Un/a professore/ssa 'a.M.SG/F.SG professor.M.SG/.F.SG'

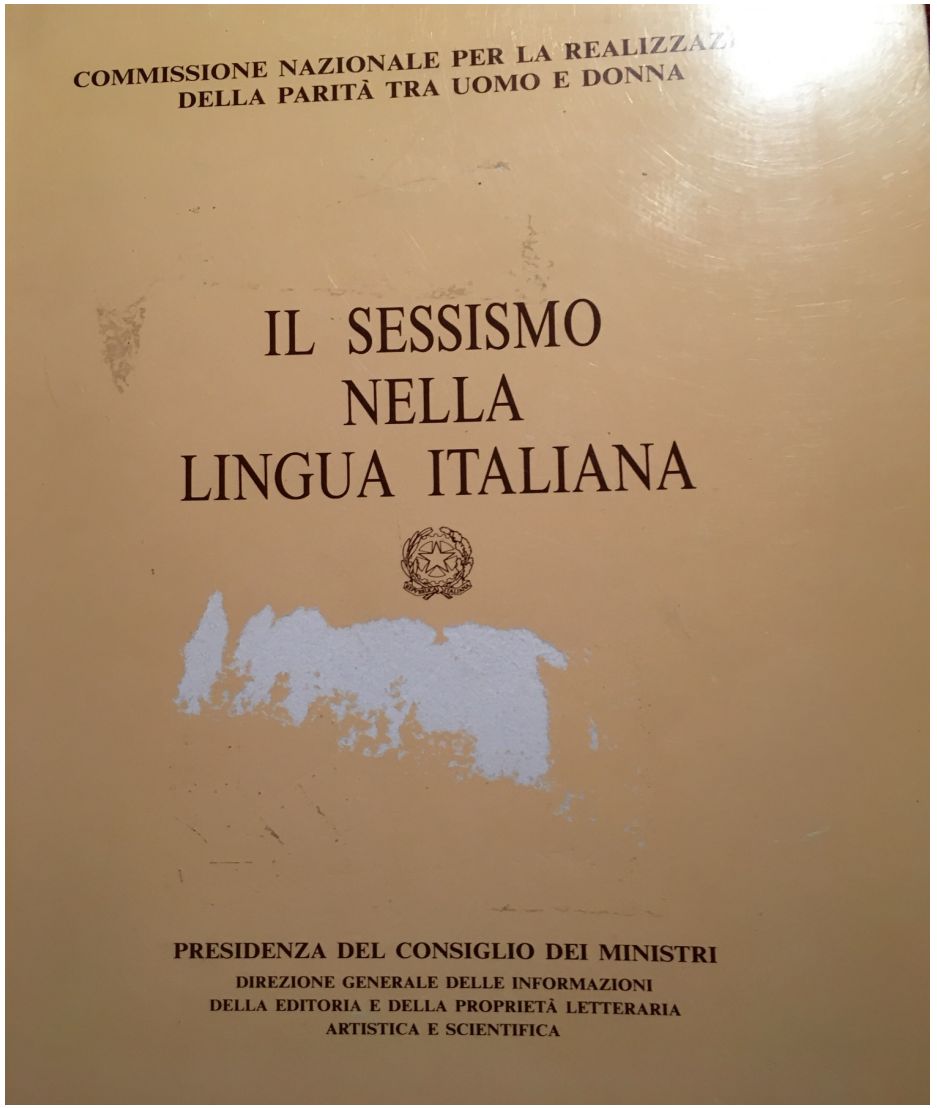
Therefore, experimentation of gender-neutral forms has started

See the talks by Nodari and by Formato

Interim summary

- The Italian language poses a bigger challenge to realize gender-fair usage, because overt gender marking is not restricted to third person pronouns and a few nouns denoting roles and professions, but is widespread in determiners, adjectives and predicate agreement targets
- On the other hand, since Italian is a null subject («pro-drop») language, preoccupation with pronouns is much less pronounced in Italian than in other European languages (such as Swedish, English, French...)

1987: *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana,* by Alma Sabatini (1922-1988)



- A group led by Alma Sabatini was appointed by the Government's *National Committee for Equal Opportunity between Men and Women*
- The group investigated usage of words and phrases referring to women in 6 daily newspapers and 4 magazines in the period 1/11/1984- 15/12/1984
- The results showed a number of problematic areas, for which recommendations were then issued

Problematic areas in usage (1984)

«Grammatical asymmetries»

- So-called «unmarked» masculine nouns used to refer to women
- Masculine agreement with conjoined NPs including NPs referring to women
- Masculine Agent nouns used to refer to women
- Asymmetric usage in mentioning men and women's names

«Semantic asymmetries»

[not discussed here because of time constraints]

Recommendations

Recommendations were issued to address all the grammatical asymmetries

They were presented in two sections:

- Unmarked / «neuter» masculine
- Agent nouns: titles, offices and positions, professions

Unmarked / «neuter» masculine

Recommendations: avoid it!

diritti	*dell'*	*uomo*		*diritti*	*umani*
rights	of-the	man		rights	human

'human rights'

Agent nouns: titles, offices and positions, professions

Recommendations: Always use a feminine noun to refer to women!

If such a noun doesn't exist yet, apply regular word-formation rules to create it

This section contains a long list of correspondences, with a slightly more extended discussion of some «difficult» cases (but by no means all of them!)

NO	SI
Il senatore Maria Rossi	*La senatrice* Maria Rossi
Il notaio Maria Rossi	*La notaia* Maria Rossi
Maria Rossi è un grande scrittore	*Maria Rossi, è una grande scrittrice*
Maria Rossi, lettore (ricercatore) universitario	*Maria Rossi, lettrice (ricercatrice) universitaria*

Agreement resolution with conjoined NPs

A particularly controversial recommendation:

«Avoid agreement of past participles in the masculine when the nouns [i.e. the controller subject NPs] are mostly feminine. In this case we suggest to agree with the majority gender or with the gender of the last noun»

Carla, Maria, Francesca, Giacomo e Sandra sono arrivati **traditional**

Woman, woman, woman, man and woman have arrived.M

Carla, Maria, Francesca, Giacomo e Sandra sono arrivate **recommended**

Woman, woman, woman, man and woman have arrived.F

Contemporary reception in the press

MR, *la Repubblica*, 19/3/1989: two arguments

- We are not used to the proposed changes, the proposals «clash with the ear's habits»

- «the list of recommended nouns

(the.F field marshal.F, the.F captain.F, the.F admiral.F,

the.F lance corporal.F, the.F councilwoman)

reminds us of the Pierino movies»

[«l'elenco dei termini consigliati (la marescialla, la capitana, l'ammiraglia, l'appuntata, l'assessora) finisce per richiamare irresistibilmente alla mente la serie dei film di Pierino.»]

Some «Pierino movies»

Anna M. Thornton, 8/9/2022

‘high school student.F’

‘teacher.F’

‘doctor.F’

‘policewoman’

Contemporary reception by linguists

- Giulio C. Lepschy 1987, 1989[2]: *Lingua e sessismo*

A serious and non-aggressive discussion of all points (not summarized here for time constraints)

About agreement resolution with conjoined NPs:

The recommendation entails the proposal to use the following structures:

Mario e Paola sono arrivate / sono belle

'Mario[man] and Paola[woman] have arrived.F / are beautiful.F'

«Questa proposta contrasta con i normali meccanismi dell'accordo grammaticale in un modo che pare poco accettabile»

'This proposal contrasts with the normal mechanisms of grammatical agreement in a way that appears hardly acceptable'

Closest conjunct agreement with inanimate NPs

- Crollate abitazioni, ospedali, alberghi

'houses, hospitals, hotels fell down'

- Ben poche notizie o commenti sono arrivati

'very few news or comments have arrived'

- Si è persino ventilata l'ipotesi di espropriare tutte le ville e i casali intorno a Roma

'it was even suggested to expropriate all the mansions and farmhouses around Rome'

- quando nelle prossime settimane si saranno sciolte le nevi e i ghiacci

'when in the coming weeks snow and glaciers will have melt'

Closest conjunct agreement with Human NPs

Tutte le funzionarie e i funzionari possono partecipare...

'All.F the.F officers.F and the.M officers.M can take part...'

Tutti i funzionari e le funzionarie possono partecipare...

'All.M the.M officers.M and the.F officers.F can take part...'

Pace Lepschy, this is not against normal agreement rules

After Sabatini

Concerning Agent nouns, linguists have addressed in more detail specific issues that arise with certain nouns or classes of nouns to form a feminine counterpart to an existing masculine noun, in cases not discussed by the Recommendations, e.g.:

Nouns in C*sore*	Thornton 2012
Membro ‘member’	Thornton 2014
Falegname ‘carpenter’	D’Achille & Thornton 2020a
Probiviro ‘arbitrator’	D’Achille & Thornton 2020b
Critico ‘critic’	Thornton 2020a
Viceré ‘viceroy’	Thornton 2020b

The time factor

Research by Lepschy, Lepschy & Sanson 2002, Thornton 2016, Sgroi 2007 has shown that uneasiness, the feeling that a feminine Agent noun is «cacophonic», and usage of a noun to mock, almost invariably arise when a given feminine Agent noun first enters usage.

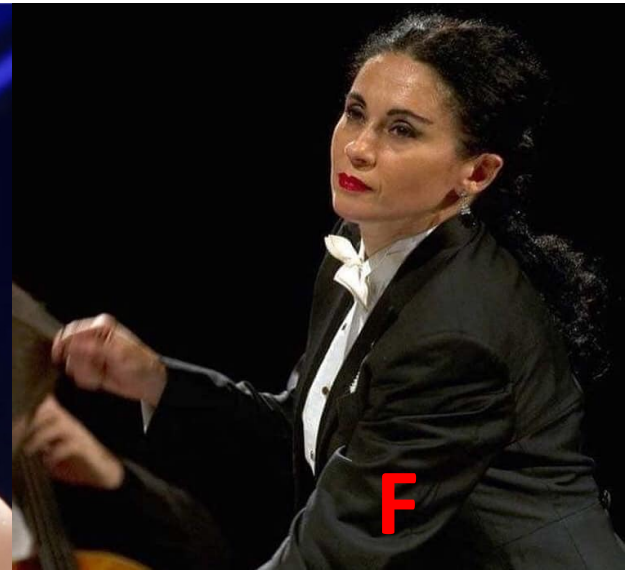
These feelings and usages disappear in time the more the noun is used.

Clear examples are *dottoressa* 'woman doctor' (Lepschy, Lepschy & Sanson 2002) and *ministra* 'woman minister' (Sgroi 2007)

The rate of acceptance varies from noun to noun, also in connection with specific choices by specific women in high-status professions to use or not use a feminine Agent noun for self-reference

At present, for every possible high-status role or professions, women are divided between those who use a masculine noun and those who use a feminine noun

President



Conductor

Many more examples are presented in Thornton 2021

May 2022

Three pieces of news announcing a Netflix production about the first woman lawyer in Italy

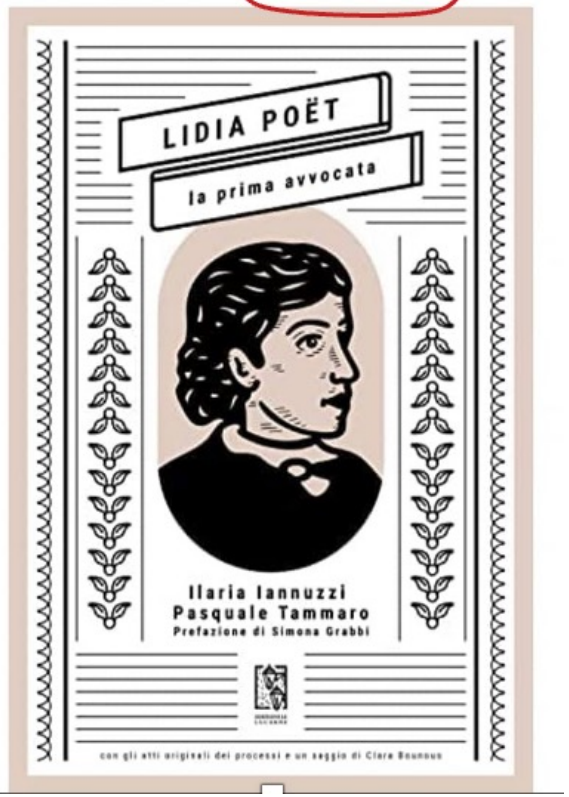
Conclusion: Rampant variation in usage!

MAM-e

Lidia Poët, il period drama Netflix sulla prima avvocatessa italiana: Eduardo ...

Ilaria Iannuzzi e altri 1

Lidia Poët. La prima avvocata



TIMgate

"Lidia Poët", la serie italiana Netflix sulla prima donna avvocato d'Italia

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