

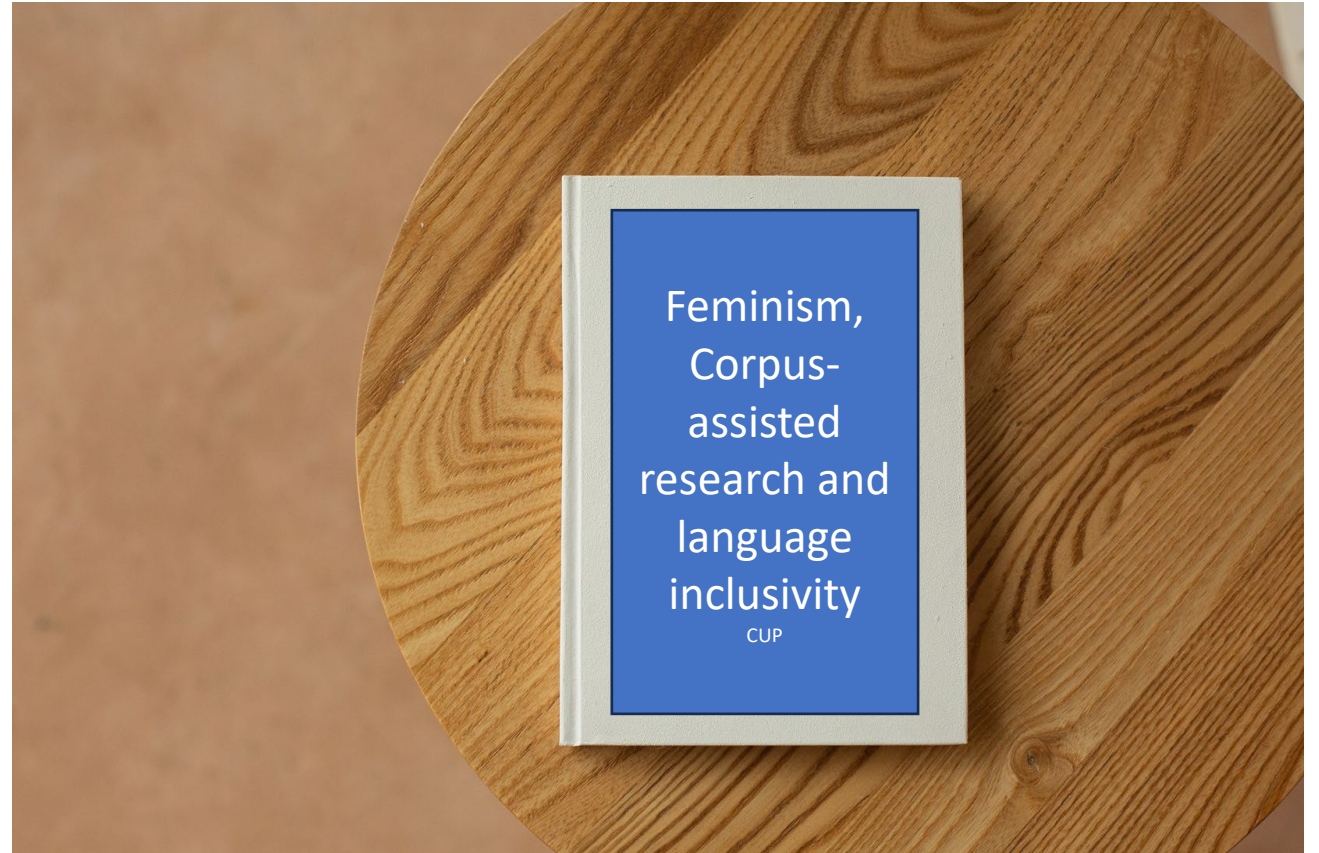
Reflecting on Terms and Terminology in researching Italian and gender/sexuality



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overview

- Starting points
- Terms and terminology
- Examples from my work
- Conclusions



Spoiler Alert: A circular argument

Different terms will be used depending on the scholar's interests, the language under investigation, the dataset, and other circumstances.

Can we really escape from this?





What is the language phenomenon?

- Ways in which speakers attempt to avoid the linguistic **and social** binary.
- Ways in which speakers **constructs** alternative views of society (still inhabited by traditional ones)
- Ways in which speakers actively **narrate** themselves or others (people they know or communities)
- In Italian, speakers use ə, *, x and other symbols.



And within what is this seen?

- Research has only recently been interested in a language that goes beyond the binary, especially in grammatical gender languages
- This is not surprising, the whole concepts of gender and sexuality have evolved theoretically but, most importantly, socially.
- Language *follows* social changes in this respect.
- In the previous decade, research studied feminisation of (job)titles. Visibility was referring to women. The *enemy* was the generic *he* and generic masculines.

The case of Italian: my previous work

Uno : A corpus linguistic investigation of intersubjectivity and gender

Formato, Federica and Tantucci, Vittorio (2020) *Uno - A corpus linguistic investigation of intersubjectivity and gender*. *Journal of Language and Discrimination*, 4 (1), pp. 1-12.



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Abstract

Generic masculines – masculine forms used for women – are employed in many languages, for example English (Mills 2008), French (Coady 2018), Spanish (Bengoechea 2016) and German (Motschenbacher 2016), providing accounts of how gender is made visible in the language through morphological, lexical and syntactic units. These accounts are also linked with how gender is seen in societies and culture, reproducing an imbalance between women and men. Specifically, language discrimination against women – the idea that speakers orient themselves towards androcentric language, recognising 'men' as a metonym for the group 'human being' (Alvanoudi 2014), causing a lack of visibility of women. Similarly, studies in Italian have also discussed the use of masculine forms to refer to, talk about and describe women (Cavagnoli 2013), or have shown how these are used in specialised (Nardone 2016, 2018) or media corpora (Formato 2014, 2016, 2019). This article investigates the use of a specific (and underexamined) generic masculine in Italian – namely, the indefinite pronoun *uno.m.sg* (in comparison with *una.f.sg*) labelled 'impersonal masculine' (Formato 2019:69) – in three subcorpora: the Perugia Corpus (TV, Web and Spoken; Spina 2014). *Uno.m.sg* is seen as constructing 'extended intersubjectivity', that is, the awareness of a general third party (3rd person) as the social bearer of the utterance (Tantucci 2013, 2016, 2017a). The results show that the masculine impersonal *uno.m.sg* is widely used in the three subcorpora and serves several functions, confirming that grammatically gendered language is still employed within a 'masculine as a norm' order.

LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER IN THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT

Corpus linguistic markers of sexism in the Italian media: a case study of *ministra* and *ministro*

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Abstract

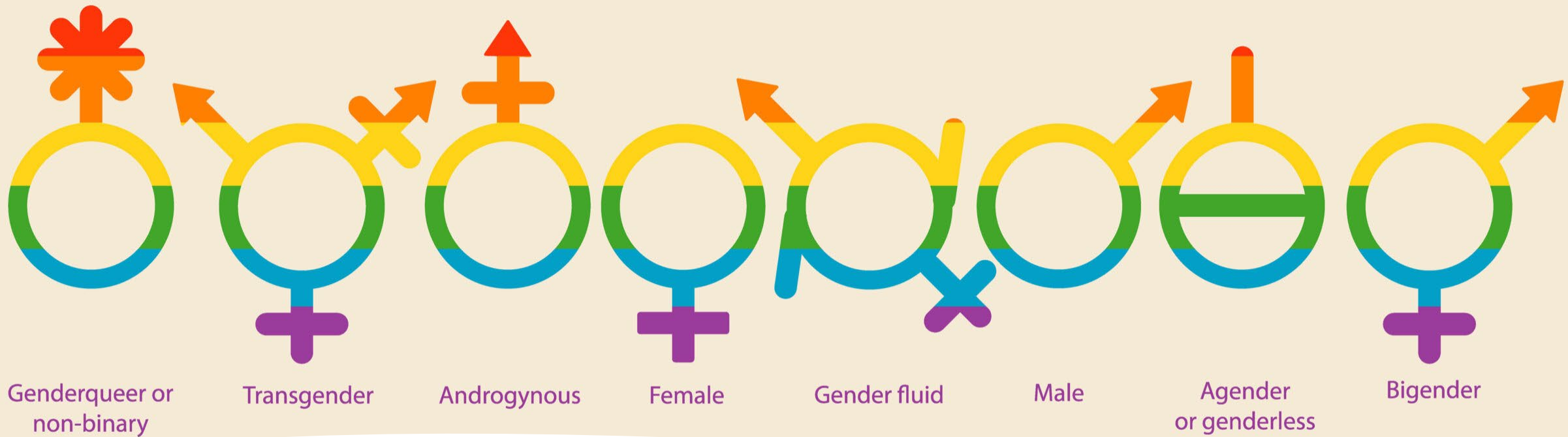
This paper examines the way that the Italian media use language to refer to female ministers in the last three governments. While Italian is a gender-specific language (e.g., a root of job titles can be followed by either feminine or masculine morphemes, singular and plural), it is common to use masculine forms to refer to and address women. *Ministro* is one of the cases where masculine forms replace feminine ones – a practice which could be considered as sexist, is only rarely challenged in institutions, and to which attention has only recently been paid in academia (Fusco, 2012; and Robustelli, 2012a, 2012b). The investigation presented here focusses on how grammar is translated in a way that reproduces women's invisibility in a sexist society. A corpus-based quantitative analysis of feminine and masculine forms of *ministr-* used in three widely read printed Italian newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *Resto del Carlino* and *La Stampa*) is undertaken. Newspaper articles were collected in the period 2012–14 to cover the Monti technocratic government (three female ministers), the left-winged Letta (seven female ministers) and part of the Renzi (seven female ministers) political governments. This paper contributes to the literature on language reform and gender equality in language in traditionally male-inhabited physical and metaphysical (stereotypes, protocols) spaces such as the institutional public sphere.

In my work, to investigate sexist language towards women, I used:

- Gender-fair
- Gender fairer
- Gender specific
- Gendered language
- Sexist language

GENDER, DISCOURSE
AND IDEOLOGY
IN ITALIAN

FEDERICA FORMATO



What happens now?

- With the change of focus, we are asked to rethink about these terms with some questions in mind.
- Do these terms explain the language phenomena under consideration (that is language beyond the binary)?
- To whom do these terms explain the language phenomena? (what we claim is necessarily what people will adopt? And if so, is it fair for them as users of the language? How open are we to this kind of *criticism*?)



What's out there?

- There is a growing interest and a lot of literature that is already available. However*, this literature shows the complexity of the terminology.
- This might have impacts on how we access this literature:
 - Google scholar:
 - *gender inclusive language* (2,340,000 results),
 - *inclusive language* (4,960,000),
 - *gender sensitive language* (3,050,000),
 - *neutral language* (4,600,000),
 - *gender neutral language* (1,310,000).

One aspect to bear in mind

- There is A LOT of literature that is written in languages other than English, which sometimes is not widely accessible. This reflects some issues about how we name the language phenomenon.
- This is relevant also in relation to contextualising the Global North, Global South, everything in between.

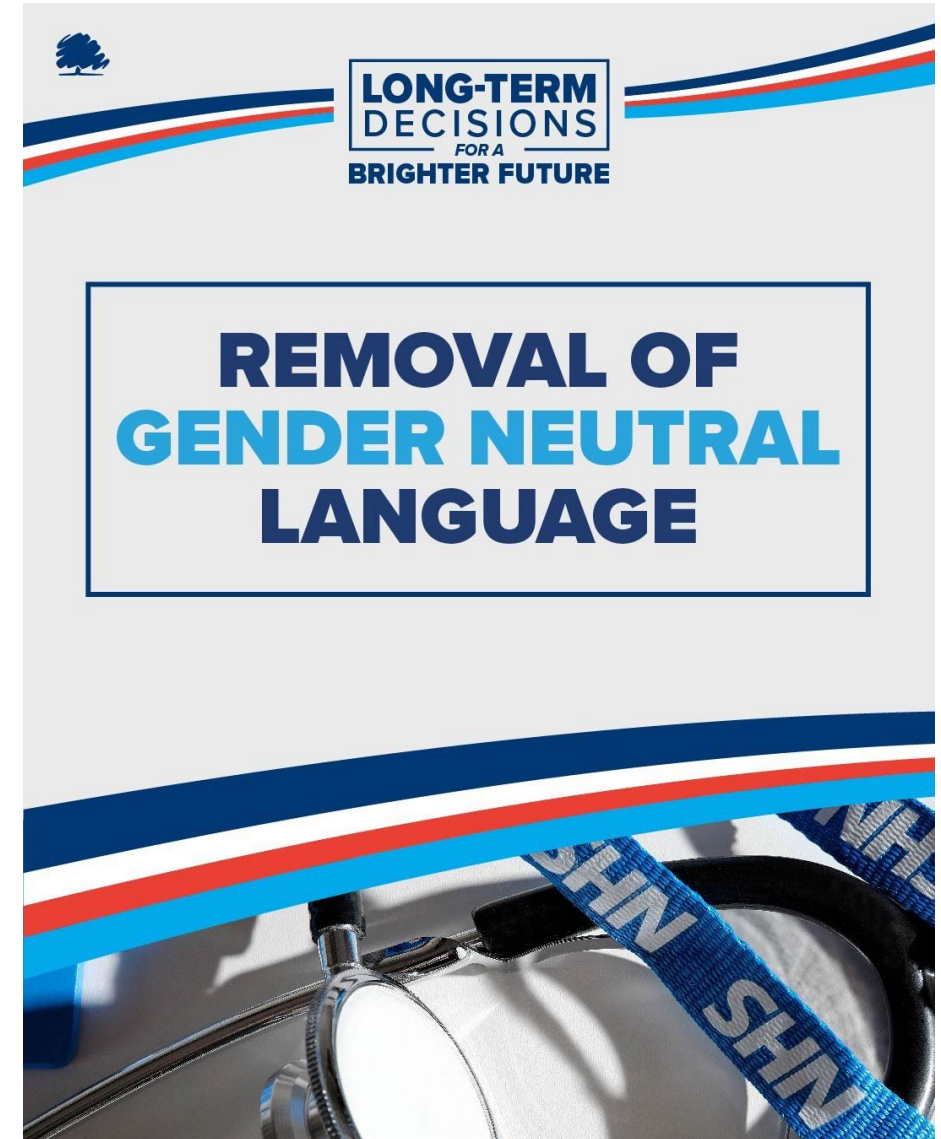


What are the options *available* at the moment?

- ⑩ **Inclusive language** (Banegas and Lopez 2019)
- ⑩ **Nonheteronormative language** (Motschenbacher 2014)
- 🔷 **Écriture inclusif**
- ⑩ **Gender fluid language** (Lange 2022)
- ⑩ **Non gendered language** (Bonnin and Coronel 2021)
- ⑩ **Gender expansive language** (Shárron del Rio and Aja 2020)
- ★ **Pangender language** (Shedaei 2021)
- 🔷 **Gender neutral language** (Cordoba 2022; Urbancova 2019)
- ⑩ **Gender sensitive language** (Bogetić 2022)
- ★ **Trans affirming language** (Zimman 2017)
- ⑩ **Anti-sexist language** (Lomotey 2018)
- 🔷 **Gender inclusive language** (Sczesny, Moser and Wood 2015; Slemp, Black and Cortana 2020; Kosnick 2019, Popič and Gorjanc 2018)
- 🟡 **Nonbinary language, lenguaje non binario, langue non binaire, nebinarni cestina** (Konnelly, Bjorkman and Airton 2022, Hekanaho 2022, Kolek 2022)

Gender neutral language

- The term neutral is, in my view, *erasing* the complexity of the emergence of identities.
- But, I also recognise that, to some extent, it might be more accepted in the scholarly community and in LGBTQIA+ communities; in some cases it is also used to attack them. I am not sure whether it could be perceived as less threatening to other people than other terms?
- Cordoba (2022, who also uses an interesting expression *the language of becoming*) uses this term to refer to **they** but also titles such as **Mx**.
- There is also work done on the Swedish gender-neutral *hen* (Vergoossen, Pärnamets, Renström & Gustafsson Sendén 2020), replacing third person singular masculine and feminine pronouns.





Gender neutral in the Italian case

- As for the Italian case, Rosola (forthcoming) suggests that in **tutt*** "gender is neutralised", but that in **tutt***, **tutte.fem.plur e tutti.masc.plur** gender is made visible.
- Thornton (2022) uses "neutralizzare", "neutralizzazione", "strategie di neutralizzazione" to explain the use of the schwa.
- Safina (forthcoming) similarly uses neutralisation to reference the use of symbols that go beyond the binary.

And what about degenderise?

- "What strategies can be used to degenderize our language?"

Baiocco, R, Rosati, F & Pistella, J.
(2023) Italian proposal for non-binary an inclusive language: The schwa as a **non-gender-specific ending**. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 27:3, pages 248-253





Questions I raise

- Here the split between grammatical and social gender could be of help. It seems that these strategies are *removing/erasing/neutralising* gendered morphological units, so grammar-related ones. but does this make sense when we see grammar through the social/political lens?
- Is the "neutral" telling us about the political work this type of language does?
- If we admit that we are neutralising gender *as we know it* (women/men, masculine/feminine), aren't we focusing on the binary and cisnormative perspectives? (e.g. we remove them so gender does not exist).



Gender inclusive language

- This is possibly newer with respect to gender neutral language but has sometimes used to refer to feminisation of job titles (and other forms) rather than a more complex view.
- It circulates in studies on many languages (Spanish, Slovene, Czech, etc).
- A similar term could be gender sensitive language (and possibly an alternative)

Gender inclusive language: pros

- The use of **gender inclusive** language as a term, can cover two functions:
 - The self narrative
 - The narratives of speakers who ally with the cause.

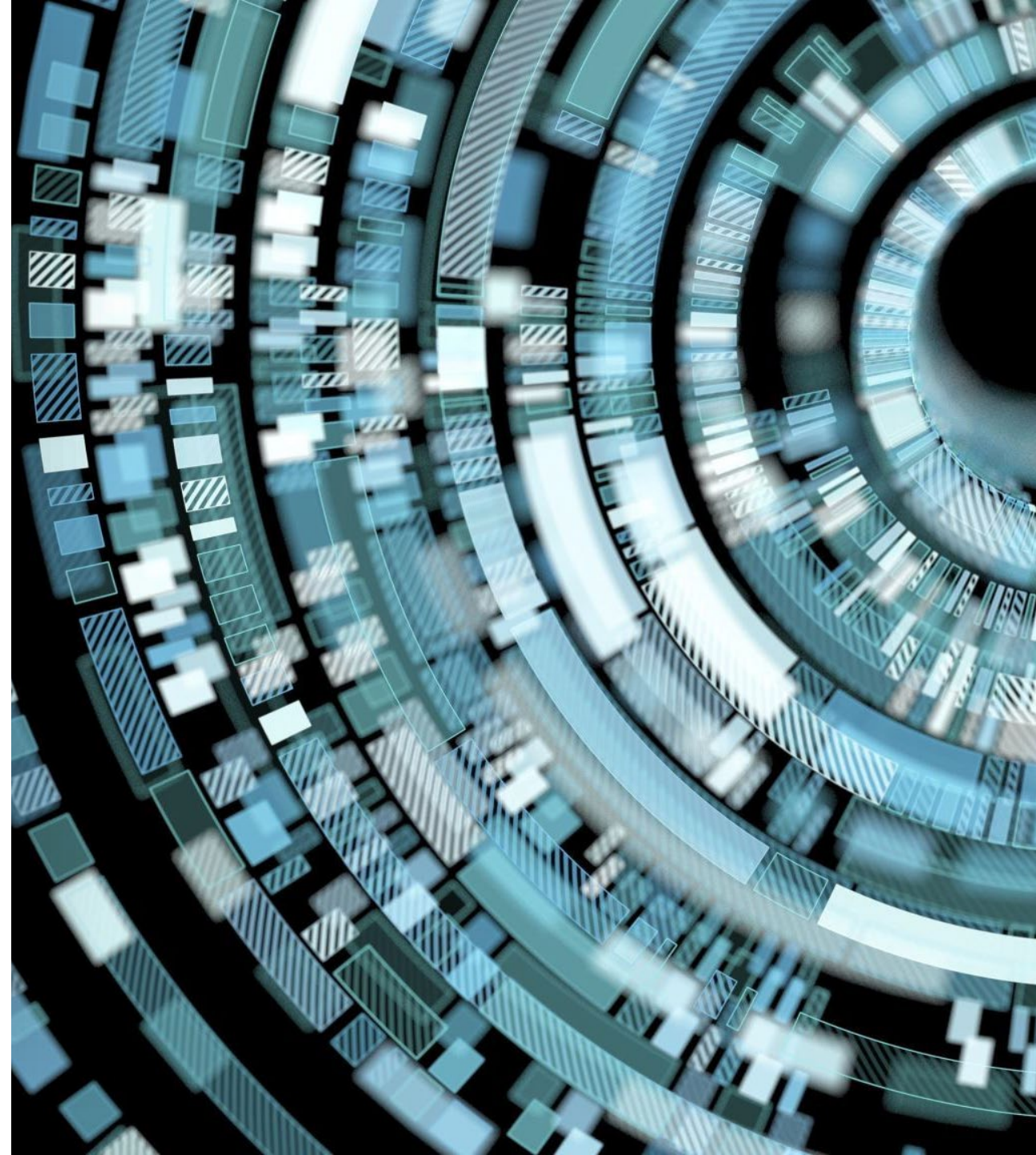
The use of inclusive, together with **gender**, might signal a political motivation for linguistic and social actions. It is something that **adds** (rather than removes as in gender neutral).

In my view, gender inclusive explains what's behind the choice of the language used.



Complexities in the Italian case

- Gheno, the linguist that has brought to a wide audience the schwa option, suggests that *linguaggio ampio* (broad language) or *lingua accogliente* (welcoming language) *should* replace *linguaggio inclusivo* (inclusive language)
- These considerations stem from Acanfora, an author who is interested in disability, autism and neurodivergence.



Acanfora says..

- il concetto di inclusione è discriminatorio in quanto suppone che il gruppo che include sia più potente o migliore di quello che viene incluso. È un atto che viene concesso e quindi può anche essere interrotto o revocato, sottolineando che il potere di accogliere le minoranze (e le condizioni a cui vengono eventualmente accolte) è nelle mani di chi include. Termini come diversità e inclusione sono quindi eredità di un modo di vedere la realtà che divide arbitrariamente in maggioranze e minoranze, in superiori e inferiori, alimentando un ascolto dell'altro fittizio perché avviene sempre a senso unico.
- The notion of inclusion is discriminatory, as it supposes that the group that includes is more powerful or better than the one that is included. It is an act of concession that can be interrupted or revoked, underlying that the power to welcome minorities (and the terms used to welcome them) is in the hand of those who include. Terms such as diversity and inclusion are therefore an inheritance of a way of seeing the world that arbitrarily divides in majorities and minorities, in superior and inferior, feeding a fake interaction because in reality this is a one-way street.





More thinking..

- From what Acanfora suggests, it seems that **inclusivo** is a term that only those who are allies to the cause might use, excluding the perspective of the self (re)presentation. In other terms, what are speakers asking:
 - Am I including myself?
 - Am I including others I want to show allyship to?
- By using the term gender (**gender inclusive**), are we disregarding inclusivity of other identities/communities?
- In my view, those who use gender inclusive language are aware and are willing to show this awareness about their privilege, and this is a strong motivation to continue to use these strategies.
 - Can they change their mind about the use of inclusive language? Possibly, but that's true even if we call it in any other way.
- The other question is: how do we name this in Italian? *linguaggio inclusivo di genere*? I think the (trans)national perspective here must include the name in national languages beyond English.
 - Possibly *linguaggio inclusivo* has been used in the perspective of language economy or maybe because, for Italian speakers, the gender lens foregrounds other lenses (e.g. disability)
- As for Spanish, there are two options: **lenguaje inclusivo** and **lenguaje incluyente** (that includes), but this last seems to be used more in relation to language that refers to women.



My study: the schwa in a corpus of Italian tweets

- My study (a 21.000-word corpus investigation) shows that mostly users employ schwa as a generic term to mean mixed gender (beyond the binary). 
 - The functions used through the schwa are multiple (allyship, political language, humour, idioms)
 - This is why I think gender inclusive language is the best term, with "neutral" actually deleting the political work that is being done to fight the generic masculine. This is clearly visible in the *metalinguaging* work done on Twitter 
- Sostegno **allə.INCL attivistə.INCL** che si mobilitano oggi, nella giornata mondiale dell'acqua, contro la Gigafactory Tesla a Berlino/Brandenburg!
 - (Let's) Support the activists mobilising today, on World Water Day, against the Tesla Gigafactory in Berlin/Brandenburg!
 - @mention @mention @mention Dottoressa.**FEM** è il femminile. Dottore.**MASC** se ti riferisci a un uomo, dottoressa.**FEM** ad una donna, **dottorə.INCL** se ti riferisci a un gruppo di uomini e donne o a una persona non binaria. Questa è l'idea dietro allo schwa.
 - Dottoressa is feminine. Dottore if you refer to a man, dottoressa to a woman, **dottorə.INCL** if you refer to a group of men and women or to a non-binary person. This is the idea behind the schwa.



Conclusions

- At this moment, with a wealth of literature being produced, it is important that we interrogate ourselves on what language is doing.
- As mentioned above, freedom of framing language phenomena remain while it is necessary to produce further knowledge on the connections among the existing terms. This is valid for both how we conceptualise this in academia, but also how speakers do it.
- One point that needs to be made is about internationalisation, that is also important to reflect on how English terms might not be able to cover a much deeper state of the affairs with regards to specific languages

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