

UNIVERSITÀ VITA-SALUTE SAN RAFFAELE

**CORSO DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA
IN FILOSOFIA**

**REFORMING COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION: A RESEARCH ON
INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE**

Supervisora: Bianca Cepollaro

Co-supervisora: Martina Rosola

Tesi di DOTTORATO di RICERCA di Martina Giovine

matr. 021634

Ciclo di dottorato XXXVIII

SSD M-FIL/05

Anno Accademico 2024/2025



CONSULTAZIONE TESI DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA

La sottoscritta Martina Giovine

Matricola 021634

nata Tricarico (MT)

il 22/09/1997

Autrice della Tesi di Dottorato di Ricerca dal titolo

Reforming communication in public administration: a research on inclusive language

☐ AUTORIZZA la Consultazione della Tesi

☐ NON AUTORIZZA la Consultazione della Tesi per mesi a partire dalla data di
sottomissione della domanda di conseguimento titolo

Poiché:

- ☐ l'intera ricerca o parti di essa sono potenzialmente soggette a brevettabilità;
- ☐ ci sono parti di Tesi che sono già state sottoposte a un editore o sono in attesa di pubblicazione;
- ☐ la Tesi è finanziata da enti esterni che vantano dei diritti su di esse e sulla loro pubblicazione.

È fatto divieto di riprodurre, in tutto o in parte, quanto in essa contenuto

Data 23/07/2026

Firma *Martina Giovine*

DECLARATION

This thesis has been:

- composed by myself and has not been used in any previous application for a degree. Throughout the text I use both 'I' and 'We' interchangeably.
- has been written according to the editing guidelines approved by the University.

All the results presented here were obtained by me. Portions of this research, including some ideas and analyses, have been published in journals and edited volumes in earlier drafts.

Specifically:

- 1) Giovine, M. (2026). Reconciling inclusion and accessibility: solutions for non-binary linguistic strategies in grammatical gender languages. *Language Sciences*.
- 2) Giovine, M. (2024). Gender Visibility: Linguistic Strategies to Challenge Stereotypes in Italian. *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio*.
- 3) Giovine, M. (*forthcoming*). Androcentrismo e binarismo: sfide e prospettive per l'inclusione di genere nella lingua italiana. *Rivista di Estetica*.
- 4) Giovine, M. (2026). Language and Identity: The Psychological Implications of Misgendering for Trans* Individuals. *Phenomenology and Mind*.

- 5) Giovine, M. (*under review*). Choosing Gender-Fair Strategies in Italian: A Context-Based Approach.

All sources of information are acknowledged by means of reference.

For the translation, editing, and grammatical and syntactic revision of the thesis, I used the USA English translation service provided by ChatGPT and Grammarly.

Acknowledgment

I am deeply grateful to all the people with whom I have had the fortune and pleasure of working throughout my PhD. Without them, this journey would not have been the same.

My sincere gratitude goes first and foremost to my supervisor, Bianca Cepollaro, and my co-supervisor, Martina Rosola, for their constant presence and invaluable guidance. Without them, this path would not have been nearly as rewarding. They supported every research idea I pursued, encouraging me to explore unconventional perspectives and to challenge myself continuously. They guided me step by step, first helping me find my bearings, and then accompanying me towards many academic achievements. I have treasured each of their suggestions, from the very first to the very last, always timely and enriching.

I am equally grateful to Esa Díaz-León and Teresa Marques, who welcomed and supported me during my visiting research period at the University of Barcelona. They offered me the opportunity to engage my work with new and stimulating perspectives and to present my research in their seminars. The reading groups and other activities we shared were particularly meaningful moments for my academic growth. My thanks also go to all members of the LOGOS research centre for their warm welcome and intellectual support, especially Margherita Grassi and Federico Cella, whose company and advice I appreciated immensely.

I also wish to thank the entire Faculty of Philosophy at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University, both Professors and PhD students, for making me feel, from the very first day, not only part of a stimulating academic environment but also at home. A special thanks goes to the Interfaculty Centre for Gender Studies, the group I belong to. I am sincerely grateful for the many seminars and meetings organised over the years, which have offered invaluable opportunities for both personal and academic development.

My heartfelt thanks go to SWIP Italia and all its members, with whom I completed my internship. It was a privilege to take part in the events they organised and to contribute to the research on the numerical underrepresentation of women in Academia, a topic particularly meaningful to me. I am especially grateful to those who guided me throughout this experience.

I warmly thank the entire Egalia team for believing in this important project and for the work we carried out together.

My thanks also go to the GEP team for guiding me through the development of the inclusive language guidelines.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all the faculty members and colleagues who accompanied me throughout this journey. My special thanks go to Mara Floris, Laura Caponetto, Claudia Bianchi, Francesca De Vecchi, Francesca Forlè, and Francesca Boccuni, as well as to Giorgia Adorno, Alessandro Anzà, Giulio Pennacchioni, Francesca Cesarano,

Eleonora Volta, Cristina Ganz, Chiara Borgonovo, Federico Dal Barco, Nicolò D'Agruma, Stefano Pinzan, Luca Ausili, Alessandro Volpi, Maurizio Mascitti, Matilde Ghelardini, Marco Rienzi, Federico Bina, Alessandro Volpe, Davide Battisti, Giuseppe De Ruvo, and Edoardo La Ragione. I am grateful to each of them for their valuable advice and for making me feel truly welcomed within the academic community.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the intersection of gender, language, and inclusivity in Italian. Drawing on feminist linguistics, philosophy of language, psycholinguistics, and moral and political philosophy, it examines how linguistic practices can reflect and contribute to the reproduction of gender unfairness and explores strategies for fostering gender-inclusive communication. Chapter 1 analyses the persistence of androcentrism in Italian, showing how the so-called androcentric masculine can obscure gender diversity, generate interpretative ambiguity, and shape mental representations, with potential consequences in legal, educational, and occupational domains. Chapter 2 systematises gender-inclusive strategies attested in Italian by distinguishing visibility vs. obscurity, and conservative vs. innovative approaches. It also evaluates their cognitive effectiveness in counteracting gender stereotypes, clarifying both their theoretical functioning and their empirical impact. A central contribution of the dissertation is its sustained focus on innovative strategies, that have emerged in recent Italian debate, which are designed to enable non-binary visibility and raise ethical questions about linguistic autonomy and misgendering. Building on Dembroff and Wodak's (2018), Chapter 3 assesses the feasibility of eliminating gendered forms in Italian and proposes instead a flexible, context-sensitive model that respects communicative goals and speaker self-identification. Chapter 4 addresses a gap in public debate: the role of accessibility. It examines how innovative strategies interact with assistive technologies and comprehension processes, suggesting that accessibility challenges are not intrinsic but are largely contingent and can be addressed through technological adjustment, clearer guidelines, and user education. Chapter 5 applies these insights to contextual implementation of gender-inclusive strategies. It contrasts institutional and informal communicative domains, analysing how context-related principles can guide strategy selection. The chapter develops a framework of ethical and pragmatic criteria that is intended to support a principled, case-by-case choice of inclusive forms in grammatical gender languages. Chapter 6 expands the institutional perspective through a comparative analysis of forty inclusive-language guidelines issued by Italian universities. It maps how different strategies are distributed across the guidelines analysed, identifies shared orientations, and situates them within broader European and national policy frameworks. The chapter also discusses the key challenges in developing inclusive language guidelines, with a particular focus on the case of Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele. Overall, the dissertation proposes a unified and practicable framework that integrates inclusivity and accessibility, two dimensions that are sometimes treated as competing. By combining ethical theory, linguistic structure, cognitive evidence, and applied analysis, it contributes to redefining linguistic justice in grammatical gender languages and offers concrete guidance for equitable and sustainable language reform.

ANTIGONE

Chi sa se tutto questo ha valore anche laggiù?

CREONTE

Mai il nemico, neppure da morto, diventa amico.

ANTIGONE

Non per odiare io sono nata, ma per amare.

CREONTE

E va con loro laggiù, allora, ad amare entrambi. Io vivo, non comanderà una donna.

— Sofocle, *Antigone*

A ogni Antigone della Storia

Table of contents

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>4</i>
1. Gender-Unfair Language: Issues and Perspectives.....	14
1.1 Gender and language: an introduction.....	14
1.2 Linguistic means to express gender and language categorisation.....	19
1.3 Gender-unfair linguistic uses for women in Italian.....	24
1.4 Gender-unfair linguistic uses for non-binary people in Italian.....	37
1.5 Ambiguity in interpreting the androcentric masculine.....	40
1.6 Contextual effects of the androcentric masculine.....	46
1.7 Concluding remarks.....	56
2. Gender-Inclusive Language: Countering Gender Stereotypes and Promoting Inclusivity.....	58
2.1 Countering gender-unfair language	58
2.2 Terminology: labels and approaches	61
2.3 Differentiated intervention based on language structure.....	65
2.4 Addressing different types of referents in strategy implementation.....	67
2.5 Gender-inclusive strategies in Italian	68
2.5.1 Visibility strategies.....	69
2.5.1.1 Conservative visibility strategies.....	71
2.5.1.2 Innovative visibility strategies	74
2.5.2 Obscuration strategies	77
2.5.2.1 Conservative obscuration strategies	77
2.5.2.2 Innovative obscuration strategies.....	81
2.6 Visibility vs. obscuration strategies in countering gender stereotypes	83
2.7 Concluding remarks.....	90
3. Misgendering as Microaggression and the Importance of Implementing a Non-Binary Language.....	91
3.1 Promoting linguistic inclusiveness	92
3.2 Recognition of personal identity	94

3.3	What is “microaggression”	96
3.4	Misgendering as a microaggression	100
3.5	The negative duty not to commit misgendering	104
3.6	Psychological harm	109
3.7	The duty not to use gender-specific pronouns altogether.....	112
3.7.1	Argument 1 revisited: no better alternative in Italian either?	112
3.7.2	Argument 2 revisited: is gender disclosure an unavoidable breach of privacy?	120
3.7.3	Argument 3 revisited: is the anti-essentialism argument a reason to eliminate gendered forms?	126
3.8	Concluding remarks.....	132
4.	<i>Reconciling Inclusion and Accessibility: Solutions for Innovative Linguistic Strategies</i>	134
4.1	A recap: promoting non-binary visibility	134
4.2	The challenge of inclusion vs accessibility	136
4.3	Innovative grammatical gender encoding devices and visual impairments.....	139
4.3.1	Speech synthesis	140
4.3.2	Braille display.....	141
4.4	Innovative grammatical gender encoding devices and dyslexia.....	144
4.5	Beyond categories.....	148
4.6	Concluding remarks.....	152
5.	<i>Choosing Strategies: A Context-Based Approach</i>	155
5.1	A contextual implementation of strategies	155
5.2	Communicative contexts	157
5.2.1	Institutional contexts	159
5.2.2	Informal contexts	168
5.3	Interacting principles in contexts.....	172
5.3.1	Principles in institutional contexts.....	174
5.3.2	Principles in informal contexts.....	178
5.4	Concluding remarks.....	182
6.	<i>Gender-Inclusive Language in Italian Academia: Strategies, Classifications, and Guideline Development</i>	184
6.1	The institutional domain: the case of Italian universities	184
6.1.1	Previous research on institutional gender-inclusive language guidelines.....	186
6.2	A comparative analysis of gender-inclusive language guidelines in Italian universities	189
6.2.1	Data collection.....	189
6.2.2	Analytical procedure	198
6.2.3	Results and preliminary observations	200

6.2.3.1	<i>Mentioning but not explicitly recommending</i>	203
6.2.3.2	<i>Explicitly rejecting</i>	206
6.2.3.3	<i>Context-sensitive recommendation</i>	211
6.2.3.4	<i>An Exceptional Case: The Overextended Feminine at Università di Trento</i>	213
6.2.4	<i>General discussion</i>	214
6.2.5	<i>Limitations and future directions</i>	216
6.3	Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele’s work on inclusive language guidelines and discussion points	217
6.4	Concluding remarks	225
7.	General conclusions	228
	References	232

Appendix A

Introduction

Scholars in Italy have long reflected on the relationship between gender and language, and on how certain linguistic uses can convey hierarchies of power and forms of discrimination. This line of inquiry has its roots in the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and Europe, and is closely intertwined with both European and national gender equality policies. A major turning point in the Italian context was Alma Sabatini's pioneering work *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (Sexism in the Italian language) (1987), commissioned by the National Commission for the Realisation of Equality between Men and Women and published by the Italian Prime Minister's Office (Robustelli, 2021; Cettolin, 2020; Lepschy, 1989).

Published over three decades ago, Sabatini's work must be understood within its historical and political context. As noted by Somma and Maestri (2020), its primary aim was not to provide a systematic empirical account, but rather to raise awareness that language is neither neutral nor without social consequences, and that it plays a crucial role in shaping social behaviour. While some of Sabatini's observations are supported by quantitative examples, her methodology reflects the standards and purposes of the time and would not meet current empirical expectations (Somma & Maestri, 2020). This distinction is crucial for situating her contribution: rather than offering generalisable empirical claims, her work should be read as a normative and critical intervention that opened a field of inquiry later developed through experimental and corpus-based research.

Nevertheless, her work remains foundational, both for having problematised sexist linguistic practices in Italian and for having introduced recommendations that sparked long-lasting linguistic and political debate. For instance, Sabatini (1987) highlighted the unfairness of the use of masculine professional titles to refer to female referents, e.g., "Ministro" (Minister[M]) for a female Minister. Such usage contributes to the linguistic erasure of women from positions of authority. In contrast, Sabatini (1987) proposed alternative equitable practices, such as the use of feminine forms like "Ministra" (Minister[F]) (Sabatini,

1987). Although initially met with scepticism and limited uptake (Lepschy, 1989), her work laid the foundations for subsequent developments in both academic research and public discourse (Robustelli, 2022; Somma & Maestri, 2020).

In the following decades, the issue of gender-inclusive language entered the agenda of both Italian and European institutions, which have come to recognise the role of language in promoting gender equality (Somma & Maestri, 2020; Lepschy, 1989). Over the past decades, public bodies, local administrations, and universities have produced guidelines and manuals for inclusive communication. Among these are the *Linee guida per l'uso di un linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze di genere* (Guidelines for the Use of Language Respectful of Gender Differences) (Agenzia delle Entrate, 2020), le *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo* (Guidelines for the Use of Gender in Administrative Language) (Robustelli, 2012) and documents produced by several Italian universities (e.g., Università di Bologna, 2020; Università degli Studi di Milano, 2021; Università degli Studi di Siena, 2021).¹

In parallel, the relationship between gender and language has become a field of research at the intersection of sociolinguistics, philosophy of language, and theoretical linguistics (see, for instance, European Parliament, 2018a; Gygax et al., 2008; Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015). Early debates addresses how to make women visible in discourse, as they have historically been obscured by androcentric linguistic practices (e.g., Sabatini, 1987; Giusti, 2022).

Recent research has expanded to represent of non-binary identities (see, for instance, Gheno, 2022b; López, 2020), i.e., identities that do not fit into the traditional gender categories of “man” or “woman” (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Scholars are questioning how grammatically binary systems, such as Italian, which has only masculine and feminine grammatical genders, can accommodate people who do not identify as either women or men

¹ The adoption of guidelines for gender-inclusive communication is among the objectives set out in the *Vademecum* for the development of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in Italian universities. According to this framework, universities are required to prepare a Positive Action Plan (PAP) aimed at removing barriers to the effective achievement of gender equality (Robustelli, 2021).

(Stahlberg et al., 2007; González Vázquez et al., 2024). More specifically, the literature has analysed both fair and unfair linguistic usages, exploring the features and social implications of different inclusive language strategies (e.g., González Vázquez, 2024; Rosola, 2024). One area of inquiry concerns the cognitive and perceptual effects of language, showing how certain grammatical and lexical choices can shape how speakers conceptualise gender (e.g., Gygax et al., 2008).

Contemporary research thus goes beyond identifying discriminatory and inclusive usages. It investigates their cognitive, social, and political implications, highlighting how language can not only reflect but also reinforce symbolic gender hierarchies, and, conversely, how it can serve as a tool for social transformation (e.g., Giusti, 2022; Robustelli, 2022).

My research is situated within this broader debate. Its central premise is that language both shapes and reflects social hierarchies: through linguistic choices, people can either reproduce gender stereotypes and exclusions or promote visibility, recognition, and equality. From this perspective, inclusive language is not treated as a purely formal or stylistic issue, but as a practice embedded in broader ethical and communicative considerations.

The overarching objective of this thesis is to identify, analyse, and evaluate the strategies currently available in Italian for gender-inclusive communication. More specifically, it seeks to determine which of these strategies can contribute to countering gender stereotypes and linguistic discrimination, and how public institutions (particularly public administrations) can adopt them to promote inclusivity across different groups, including non-binary individuals. To this end, the work examines the complex interaction between linguistic structures, ideological commitments, communicative constraints, and broader ideological commitments, showing how gender-inclusive language policies may reconcile symbolic recognition with practical accessibility. In addition, the thesis places a specific focus on the role of public administrations as key agents in the standardisation and dissemination of inclusive language practices and includes a comparative analysis of gender-inclusive language guidelines issued by Italian universities. This allows for an assessment of

how institutional recommendations operationalise inclusivity in practice, and to what extent they balance innovation with clarity, consistency, and accessibility. The original contribution of this work lies in its systematic evaluation of these strategies through the lens of accessibility, and in its argument for a flexible and context-sensitive approach that integrates innovation with communicative feasibility.

This thesis approaches gender-inclusive language as both a linguistic and social phenomenon, while also accounting for its ideological dimension. Following Formato (2017; 2019), language is understood as a site where social meanings are produced and negotiated, and where relations of power are both reflected and reproduced. From this perspective, linguistic forms do not simply describe reality but can contribute to shaping representations of gender and to maintaining or challenging existing social hierarchies (Formato, 2017; 2019). Crucially, positions within the debate on gender-inclusive language cannot be considered entirely ideologically neutral. Both the promotion of inclusive forms and the resistance to them are grounded in specific value systems, assumptions about language, and broader sociocultural imaginaries. What is often framed as a purely “linguistic” disagreement can therefore be understood as reflecting competing perspectives on gender, normativity, and social change.²

Within this framework, the present research adopts an explicit epistemological and ethical positioning. It assumes that linguistic practices are embedded in social and ideological structures shaped by power relations. Accordingly, the analysis is guided by normative commitments to values such as respect for individuals, self-determination, and gender equity, which inform both the formulation of research questions and the evaluation of linguistic strategies. In this respect, the thesis aligns with philosophical approaches that understand language as constitutive of social reality rather than merely descriptive of it. At the same time, the study does not aim to provide a neutral or exhaustive account of the debate. Rather,

² I am grateful to Federica Formato for her thoughtful and insightful feedback on an earlier version of this work. Her reflections on the ideological dimension of language were highly stimulating and helped shape a key component of the present analysis.

it engages critically with existing literature, considers alternative viewpoints, and addresses common objections, situating its arguments within the broader academic discussion on language, identity, and normativity. By explicitly acknowledging the ideological dimension of language, the thesis seeks not only to describe linguistic phenomena but also to examine how different strategies may reinforce or challenge androcentric norms and gender asymmetries in discourse.

Building on existing scholarship on sexism in language and recent advances in gender-inclusive policymaking, this work adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from linguistics, philosophy of language, feminist theory, and psycholinguistics. It integrates normative analysis with empirical evidence and institutional considerations, addressing both the ethical and pragmatic dimensions of linguistic inclusivity. Methodologically, the thesis progresses from a theoretical examination of gender and language systems to an applied, context-sensitive framework for evaluating inclusive strategies in Italian.

The findings of this research indicate that no single strategy can be considered universally optimal. Rather, the effectiveness of inclusive forms depends on the interaction between linguistic structure, communicative context, and accessibility constraints. Importantly, this work acknowledges that all perspectives are situated. The analysis is conducted from the standpoint of a cisgender woman born and socialised in Italy and does not claim to represent all individuals or communities affected by gendered linguistic practices. Particular attention is paid to the experiences and perspectives of non-binary individuals, and, where possible, the discussion draws on research produced by non-binary scholars. However, the interpretations offered remain partial and reflect the positionality of the researcher. Furthermore, while the thesis focuses primarily on gender as a central axis of analysis, it recognises that gender does not operate in isolation. Following Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is understood as a framework in which the experience of overlapping forms of discrimination cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts; without such a perspective, analysis risks centring the experiences of the most privileged members of a

group (Crenshaw, 1989).³ Due to the scope and specific focus of this work, however, these intersecting dimensions are not systematically addressed. In particular, the analysis concentrates on gender as the primary axis of investigation, as it is the only category among those typically involved in discrimination that is systematically encoded in the grammatical structure of Italian. This linguistic salience makes gender especially relevant for examining how structural features of language contribute to exclusionary or inclusive practices. Other axes of identity (such as race, class, disability, or sexuality) are not grammatically marked in the same way and would therefore require different analytical frameworks. While these dimensions are not the main focus of the thesis, they are considered where they directly intersect with gendered linguistic practices or where their relevance emerges in the discussion of specific cases. Chapter 1 explores the relationship between language and gender, focusing on the occurrence of gender-unfair linguistic uses in different languages. It begins by outlining the main gender-related linguistic mechanisms that contribute to the invisibility or marginalisation of certain social groups, paying particular attention to the Italian case. The chapter examines gender-unfair practices such as the use of masculine professional titles to refer to women and traces the historical roots and sociolinguistic implications of such usages. A central section is devoted to the interpretative ambiguity of the *androcentric masculine*, which is defined here as the use of masculine terms for non-male referents. It illustrates how this linguistic practice can result in male-biased interpretations and may fail to represent women and non-binary individuals adequately. Drawing on theoretical analyses (e.g., Sabatini 1987; Moulton 1981; Frabotta & Manera 2024) and experimental research (e.g., Gygax & Gabriel 2008), the analysis argues that masculine forms are not fully neutral, but instead activate gender-specific mental representations, thereby reinforcing stereotypes. The discussion also considers legal and institutional contexts where masculine ambiguity affects interpretative clarity and professional visibility. The chapter ultimately argues that

³ Crenshaw (1989) originally developed the concept of intersectionality to account for the experiences of Black women, whose forms of discrimination were often overlooked because they were treated as either analogous to those of white women or to those of Black men. In this way, the specificity of their experiences was subsumed under the broader categories of gender or race. While grounded in this context, the concept has since been extended to encompass other intersecting axes of discrimination, such as class, sexuality, and disability.

addressing masculine ambiguity is essential not only for linguistic precision but also for gender fairness and institutional accountability, laying the theoretical groundwork for Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 surveys the range of linguistic strategies proposed in Italian to promote gender-inclusive communication and evaluates their potential to counter gender stereotypes. It first clarifies key terminological distinctions and introduces a typology of gender-inclusive strategies grounded in the structural characteristics of Italian. The chapter adopts the taxonomy by González Vázquez et al. (2024), which distinguishes between visibility and obscuration approaches (those that make gender explicit vs. those that obscure it) and further divides each into conservative and innovative strategies. Conservative strategies rely on pre-existing linguistic resources, such as feminine professional titles or epicene nouns, while innovative strategies introduce new or non-traditional forms, including the use of graphic or morphological variants such as the schwa (ə) or the asterisk (*). Through this four-part classification, the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of how inclusive strategies can operate at different levels of linguistic intervention. Visibility strategies aim to increase the representation of women and, in their innovative forms, non-binary people. Obscuration strategies, by contrast, pursue inclusion through the deliberate neutralisation of gender marking. The chapter then examines the ideological and functional implications of these choices, showing that the decision between visibility and obscuration involves balancing symbolic representation, linguistic feasibility, and social acceptability. Drawing on research both theoretical and empirical (EIGE, 2019; Giusti, 2022; Gygax et al., 2008; Ronca & Moscati, 2019; Safina, 2024), the chapter shows that grammatical gender strongly shapes mental representations of gender. Visibility-oriented strategies tend to be more effective than obscuration strategies in promoting gender balance and reducing androcentric interpretations. Overall, the chapter argues that the pervasive role of grammatical gender in Italian can be both an obstacle and an opportunity: while it complicates the pursuit of neutrality, it simultaneously offers grammatical resources that can make marginalised identities visible and challenge entrenched stereotypes.

Chapter 3 expands the discussion, focusing on the inclusion of non-binary identities in language. It argues that, although binary visibility strategies promote gender equality between men and women, they are structurally exclusionary towards non-binary individuals. The discussion begins with the issue of misgendering, i.e., using pronouns or gendered forms that do not align with the gender of the referent. Drawing on philosophical and psychological research, the chapter explores misgendering as a form of linguistic microaggression that can inflict both moral and psychological harm by denying recognition and reinforcing power asymmetries. Drawing on studies such as Nadal et al. (2014, 2016), McLemore (2018), and Arijs et al. (2023), it shows that repeated misgendering can cause cumulative distress, self-doubt, and social withdrawal. The chapter then engages critically with Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) two claims: the moderate one, which establishes a moral duty not to misgender others, and the radical one, which calls for the elimination of all gendered pronouns. Building on the analyses of Cesarano (2020) and Hernandez & Crowley (2024), these claims are assessed in light of their applicability to Italian, a language deeply shaped by grammatical gender. The discussion argues that while non-binary inclusive language is important for ensuring recognition and dignity for all identities, the complete removal of gendered forms would be neither linguistically feasible nor politically desirable. Instead, the chapter advocates a flexible and self-determined use of gendered and non-gendered resources, enabling speakers to express their identities freely and inclusively.

Chapter 4 develops this argument further by examining the tension between inclusion and accessibility, a key issue in the debate on innovative visibility strategies in Italian. Specifically, it examines the objection that, while devices such as the schwa or the asterisk enhance non-binary visibility, they may present accessibility challenges for people with dyslexia or visual impairments (e.g., De Santis, 2022; Iacopini, 2021). It is important to note that these sources are not presented here as fully developed empirical studies, but rather as indicative of a broader line of argument circulating in the Italian public and semi-academic debate. Their relevance lies not in their methodological robustness, but in the fact that they articulate a position that has gained visibility in discussions on inclusive language. As such,

they are analysed as part of the discourse surrounding gender-inclusive practices, rather than as conclusive evidence of accessibility barriers. The chapter analyses this argument in depth, discussing how inclusion and accessibility represent two interdependent but sometimes conflicting ethical principles. Drawing on empirical, linguistic, and technological perspectives, it argues that a number of accessibility barriers are not intrinsic to these linguistic forms but rather from the current limitations of assistive technologies and typographic systems. The analysis, therefore, challenges the assumption that accessibility and inclusivity are mutually exclusive, suggesting that they can be reconciled through technological adaptation and context-sensitive language use. It also critically examines the “accessibility objection” as formulated in recent Italian debates, arguing that it can rely on the unrealistic expectation that linguistic strategies should be universally accessible. In its concluding section, the chapter advocates for a situated and flexible approach to inclusive language, one that promotes the coexistence of symbolic recognition and communicative feasibility by adapting linguistic choices to context, medium, and audience.

Chapter 5 applies the theoretical insights of the previous chapters to the contextual implementation of gender-inclusive strategies in Italian. Rather than simply reiterating the structural properties of each strategy, the chapter examines how contextual variables, such as communicative setting, audience, and textual constraints, shape their appropriateness and effectiveness. It distinguishes between institutional and informal contexts, showing how institutional communication is guided by principles such as clarity, simplicity, coherence, and accessibility. In contrast, informal contexts enable flexibility, experimentation, creativity and responsiveness to personal and collective motivations. Building on these distinctions, the chapter proposes a context-sensitive framework of ethical and pragmatic principles that regulates the selection of gender-inclusive strategies. This framework clarifies how factors such as morphological transparency, accessibility, inclusivity potential, and feasibility interact differently across communicative domains.⁴ The chapter ultimately argues that a

⁴ Morphological transparency refers to the extent to which a gender-inclusive form is morphologically interpretable within the grammatical system of Italian, allowing readers to readily identify its structure, agreement relations, and semantic scope.

principled, case-by-case assessment, grounded in the interplay between contextual demands and the intrinsic features of each strategy, offers a coherent framework for selecting gender-inclusive forms in grammatical gender languages.

Chapter 6 provides a comparative analysis of forty Italian university guidelines on inclusive language. It identifies convergent and divergent tendencies in the recommendations they adopt and the degree to which they accept, standardise, or reject innovative strategies. A further motivation for focusing on this domain relates to the broader research framework in which this work is situated: the project is funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research through the PNRR, which prioritises supporting Public Administrations in adopting inclusive and equitable practices. Universities, as public institutions or closely connected to the public sector, represent a relevant setting for observing how gender-inclusive linguistic principles are interpreted, negotiated, and institutionalised. This domain is also closely aligned with my own research and professional experience, particularly through my work within the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) working group at Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele. This involvement has offered an insider perspective on the concrete challenges, constraints, and practical considerations that shape the drafting of such guidelines. Chapter 6 integrates these insights by translating the comparative analysis into a set of inclusive language guidelines for Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, illustrating how research can inform institutional linguistic choices at the intersection of normativity, ideology, and administrative pragmatism. Overall, the chapter shows that examining universities as institutional actors provides a useful context for understanding the tensions, priorities, and structural dynamics that characterise the current Italian debate on inclusive language.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that promoting gender-inclusive language in Italian is both a linguistic and an ethical endeavour. It requires balancing the goals of visibility, accessibility, and contextual appropriateness within a framework that respects individual identities and communicative needs. By combining theoretical analyses, empirical evidence, and institutional perspectives, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how inclusive language can serve as a tool for social justice and equality in grammatical gender

languages. From a wider perspective, the originality of this work lies in its comprehensive integration of philosophical, psycholinguistic, and institutional approaches to gender-inclusive language. It not only maps the existing strategies in Italian but also critically engages with their cognitive and ethical implications. Importantly, this thesis does not conduct original empirical experiments; rather, it builds on and critically analyses existing empirical studies in psycholinguistics to assess how different linguistic forms shape mental representations. On the ethical side, it contributes to the ongoing philosophical debate by evaluating these strategies in light of normative considerations such as inclusion, accessibility, and fairness. A distinctive contribution of this thesis is its particular attention to innovative non-binary strategies, an emerging and underexplored area in the Italian debate. By addressing their linguistic potential alongside the ethical and practical challenges they raise, this work seeks to fill a gap in current research, especially concerning the issue of accessibility. Although this aspect remains a preliminary exploration, the analysis provides an initial framework for reconciling inclusivity and accessibility in the implementation of non-binary forms. As such, the thesis offers both theoretical insight and practical guidance for institutions, educators, and policymakers seeking to foster linguistic inclusivity in a way that is contextually sensitive, ethically grounded, and socially transformative.

1. Gender-Unfair Language: Issues and Perspectives

1.1 Gender and language: an introduction

The notion of gender is the subject of ongoing philosophical debate. Contemporary discussions disagree not only about the nature of gender itself, but also about its relationship to sex, gender identity, and social position. Different accounts emphasise different dimensions of gender, reflecting distinct theoretical aims and explanatory priorities (Mikkola, 2008). Some theorists understand gender primarily as a social position or class

shaped by systems of oppression and socialisation (e.g. Haslanger, 2000). Others argue that adequate accounts of gender should also recognise gender identity and individuals' self-understanding as central dimensions of gender (e.g. Jenkins, 2016; 2018). Since a detailed examination of these debates falls beyond the scope of this thesis, no specific account of gender will be defended here. This theoretical openness is possible because the central claims of the dissertation do not depend on the adoption of any particular metaphysical account of gender. If gender is understood primarily as a social position shaped by systems of oppression, as proposed by Haslanger (2000), the analysis concerns how linguistic practices contribute to sustaining or challenging those structures. If, instead, gender is understood primarily in terms of gender identity and individuals' self-understanding, as argued by Jenkins (2016; 2018), the discussion remains equally applicable, since it addresses the linguistic recognition of individuals' self-identified genders and the harms associated with their misrepresentation. Nonetheless, these debates provide important background for understanding contemporary discussions concerning linguistic inclusion.

Irrespective of the underlying account of gender, language plays an important role in the construction and reproduction of gendered social meanings. Sexist discrimination and gender stereotypes permeate language as a whole and are simultaneously reinforced by it (Lepschy, 1989). These dynamics are also reflected in the ways language users themselves are socially constructed and evaluated. As noted by Pauwels (2003), dominant representations have historically portrayed men as authoritative and legitimate language users, while women have often been characterised as less competent, overly talkative, or linguistically deficient. These representations were not confined to popular discourse, but were also reinforced by early academic traditions, contributing to the codification of norms that regulated women's speech more strictly than men's. At the same time, men have historically occupied central roles in processes of language standardisation and regulation, such as dictionary-making, grammar writing, and language planning, thereby consolidating their position as linguistic norm-setters (Pauwels, 2003). Within this framework, language may not always function as a neutral or universally accessible medium. As Lepschy (1989)

observes, while language appears at a surface level to offer an adaptable and universal means of communication, at a deeper level speakers, particularly those who do not belong to dominant social groups, may experience it as resistant or inadequate to express their lived experience. This sense of estrangement has been especially noted in relation to women's linguistic experience, as the supposed universality of language often fails to fully capture their specific social positioning (Lepschy, 1989). Taken together, such considerations suggest that gendered linguistic asymmetries are not only structural features of language, but also the outcome of broader cultural and discursive dynamics that shape both language use and its perceived adequacy.

A central issue in the debate about language and gender concerns how certain linguistic practices are discriminatory or unfair. These practices can contribute to the invisibility and marginalisation of women in discourse. A well-known example, observable in languages such as English, Russian, French, and Arabic, involves the use of the masculine forms not only to refer to male individuals but also to represent female individuals, those whose gender is unknown or irrelevant in context, and mixed-gender groups (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015). This is especially evident with gender-variable nouns, which are declined in masculine, feminine, and sometimes neuter forms to agree with the referent's gender. For instance, Russ. “врач” (physician[M]), Fr. “Ministre” (Minister[M]), and Arab. “muḥami” (lawyer[M]) can also be used for non-male referents, illustrating a generic use of masculine forms (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015).⁵ Similarly, the English masculine pronoun “he” is also applied generically when the referent's gender is unknown or irrelevant (Bodine, 1975).⁶ These

⁵ For typographical reasons, the convention adopted here does not follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules, which reserve square brackets for covert elements. In this work, square brackets are used instead to mark grammatical gender in the English translation: capital letters “M” and “F” indicate, respectively, masculine and feminine gendered terms, including articles and other grammatical or lexical resources.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the use of generic he in English and the socio-historical dynamics underlying its diffusion, see Ann Bodine (1975). The author shows that, prior to the rise of prescriptive grammar, “singular they” was both widely attested and accepted and argues that prescriptive grammarians' rejection of this form was socially motivated. From this perspective, the use of generic he emerges as the result of normative intervention rather than natural linguistic evolution; however, the persistence of singular they in spoken English, together with increasing feminist opposition to generic “he”, points to ongoing changes in the English pronominal system (Bodine, 1975).

practices are gender-unfair because masculine forms result in having a broader lexical and referential scope than feminine ones, which tend to be restricted to gender-specific use (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015). Beyond the exclusion of women, increasing attention is being paid to the linguistic marginalisation of non-binary individuals (De Rosa, 2024; Gheno, 2022a; López, 2020), reflecting a broader shift in the field from a primary focus on sexist language affecting women towards the incorporation of queer perspectives that question the binary structure of gender itself (Coady, 2018).⁷ The term “non-binary” refers to a range of gender identities, including those whose gender identity falls between or outside of the traditional male and female categories, those who may identify as a man or a woman at different times, and those who have no experience of having a gender (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Gender binarism divides society into masculine and feminine categories of people, a division reflected in the linguistic systems of a range of languages, which represent only two grammatical gender values (Stahlberg et al., 2007). For example, the Italian language has a grammatical gender system that formally distinguishes between masculine and feminine (Marcato & Thüne 2002).⁸

As a result, Italian lacks conventionalised linguistic resources for representing non-binary individuals. Non-binary individuals may be forced to choose between masculine and feminine grammatical gender when referring to themselves, creating a discrepancy between the grammatical gender used and their gender identity (Rosola, 2024). This linguistic gap leads to the systematic exclusion of non-binary identities. The binary gender framework is naturalised through language, reinforcing the notion that only two valid gender categories

⁷ Coady (2018) highlights the historical trajectory of research on sexist language, showing how early feminist approaches, primarily concerned with linguistic inequalities disadvantaging women, have progressively been complemented and reoriented by queer linguistics, which challenges the very binary gender categories underpinning such inequalities (Coady, 2018).

⁸ While this system is more complex than a purely semantic binary, since gender assignment is not always based on the gender of the referent and involves morphological and lexical factors, it nevertheless provides only two grammatical options for most nouns referring to human referents. It should be noted, however, that some limited resources within the language partially loosen this binary constraint. For instance, so-called epicene nouns (e.g., “persona”, “individuo”) have a fixed grammatical gender that does not necessarily correspond to the referent’s gender, thereby allowing reference without encoding gender at the level of lexical choice. These forms will be discussed in more detail in Section 2.5.

exist, a view that fails to reflect the diversity of real-life gender identities. Thus, the linguistic gap is gender-unfair, denying non-binary individuals' adequate representation.

This chapter offers an overview of the most salient gender-unfair linguistic practices in Italian, with particular emphasis on those prevalent in institutional discourse. Rather than merely cataloguing such practices, the chapter advances the argument that gender-unfair linguistic forms are not only exclusionary, but can also be structurally and interpretatively ambiguous, with consequences that extend beyond language use itself. To this end, the next section examines the different ways in which gender is expressed through language and how languages can be categorised (§ 1.2). The analysis then turns to Italian as a case study, exploring in detail the linguistic practices that disadvantage women (§ 1.3) and non-binary individuals (§ 1.4), thus providing a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon. The last two sections focus on a particularly debated issue: the use of the masculine form not in a gender-specific sense, but to refer to women, individuals whose gender is unknown or irrelevant, and mixed-gender groups. Building on the discussion developed throughout the chapter, this phenomenon is analysed not only as a case of linguistic asymmetry, but as a potential source of interpretative indeterminacy. I discuss how this use of the masculine can create ambiguity in discourse interpretation (§ 1.5) and the broader implications that follow (§ 1.6). More specifically, the analysis highlights how the dual value of the so-called “generic” masculine, simultaneously specific and supposedly inclusive, can lead to systematically biased interpretations, in which masculine forms are processed as referring primarily to male individuals. This ambiguity is not treated here as a merely theoretical issue, but as a phenomenon with measurable cognitive and social effects. Drawing on experimental and applied research discussed later in the chapter, the analysis shows that masculine forms can influence mental representations and expectations, thereby contributing to the marginalisation of women and non-binary individuals even in contexts where gender is intended to be irrelevant. By foregrounding the interaction between structural properties of Italian and their interpretative consequences, this chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the broader argument developed in this thesis: namely, that addressing gender unfairness

in language requires not only increasing visibility but also reducing ambiguity and ensuring that linguistic forms are both inclusive and communicatively effective.

1.2 Linguistic means to express gender and language categorisation

Languages employ a variety of linguistic means to express information related to gender. How gender is expressed varies across languages depending on their structural features. In “Gender Across Languages”, Hellinger and Bußmann (2015, pp. 6-11) identify four categories of gender that are relevant in linguistics: *grammatical gender*, *lexical gender*, *referential gender*, and *social gender*. These categories represent the various ways in which languages express gender information.

Firstly, *grammatical gender* is a linguistic category attested in a range of languages, involving two or three classes, such as masculine and feminine. It is defined as “an inherent property of the noun which controls agreement between the noun (the controller) and some (gender-variable) satellite element (the target) which may be an article, adjective, pronoun, verb, numeral or preposition” (Greenbergen, 1978; Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015, p. 7). Corbett (1991) describes grammatical gender as “the most puzzling of the grammatical categories (...). In some languages gender is central and pervasive, while in others is totally absent” (Corbett, 1991, p. 1).

In addition to grammatical gender, languages may also express gender lexically. *Lexical gender* refers to the gendered meaning of certain nouns, especially those that specify whether the referent is male or female, such as “mother”, “father”, “boy”, and “girl”. These nouns are “gender-specific” as they refer exclusively to either a male or a female individual. In contrast, “gender-neutral” or “gender-indefinite” nouns such as “citizen” and “parent” can refer to individuals of any gender. Gender-specific nouns “may in turn relate to the extra-linguistic category of referential gender (or “sex of referent”)” (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015, p. 7).

Along with grammatical gender and lexical gender, the authors also describe *referential gender*. Referential gender refers to the way language connects to the non-linguistic reality by identifying the referent as male, female, or gender-indefinite. It reflects the actual gender of the person being referred to, regardless of the word's grammatical or lexical gender. As the authors highlight, in gendered languages, referential gender can override grammatical rules. For example, a grammatically masculine noun might be followed by a feminine pronoun if it refers to a woman. This interaction between grammatical and referential gender can reveal deeper asymmetries, especially in how pronouns and coordinated expressions are used (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015, p. 8).

Finally, *social gender* refers to the gendered expectations and stereotypes that society attaches to certain roles, behaviours, and occupations. It explains linguistic patterns that cannot be accounted for by grammatical or lexical gender alone. For instance, in English, high-status or stereotypically male professions like “lawyer” or “surgeon” can be referred to anaphorically using the masculine pronoun “he” when the referent’s gender is unknown. In contrast, lower-status or stereotypically female jobs like “nurse” or “secretary” can be followed by “she”. These patterns reflect cultural assumptions about which roles are associated with men or women. When these assumptions are violated, speakers may insert explicit gender markers, such as “female surgeon” or “male nurse”, to clarify. This reveals an underlying prejudice regarding gendered expectations and stereotypes that shape language use (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015, pp. 10-11).

It is important to note that the notion of social gender employed by Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) differs from the way the term “gender” is often used in contemporary philosophical discussions of gender. In their framework, “social gender” refers to culturally shared expectations and stereotypes associated with women and men. In philosophical debates, by contrast, “social gender” typically refers to broader questions regarding the nature of gender, including its relation to social position, identity, and the social recognition as

women, men, or non-binary persons (Mikkola, 2008).⁹ Since later chapters discuss linguistic practices affecting individuals with diverse gender identities, the term gender in this thesis will be used in this broader sense unless otherwise specified.

To summarise, *grammatical*, *lexical*, *referential* and *social gender* represent different ways through which languages encode gender information. The presence and use of these categories vary across languages, depending on their structural characteristics. Stahlberg et al. (2007) offer a taxonomy of languages based on how gender is expressed, distinguishing *grammatical gender languages*, *natural gender languages*, and *genderless languages* (Stahlberg et al., 2007).¹⁰ *Grammatical gender languages*, such as German, French, Spanish, and Italian, have a grammatical gender system, i.e., a nominal classification system in which nouns are grouped into gender categories that affect agreement with other dependent forms, such as adjectives, pronouns, articles, and verbs (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Gender assignment in these languages may follow semantic, morphological, or formal criteria (Corbett, 1991).¹¹ Most nouns, whether animate or inanimate, are assigned a gender. For inanimate nouns, this assignment is not semantically motivated, as it does not depend on the inherent meaning or characteristics of the object. In contrast, nouns referring to animate beings are usually assigned masculine or feminine, depending on the referent's gender (Stahlberg et al., 2007, p. 164). The feminine form is used for women, and the masculine form for men. For instance, in Italian, “maestra” (teacher[F]) and “maestro” (teacher[M]) refer to female and male individuals, respectively. Furthermore, gender agreement extends to articles, adjectives, and pronouns, which align with the gender of the noun. Thus, all the dependent forms are declined in the feminine or masculine forms according to the grammatical gender of the noun they

⁹ For a more in-depth discussion of “biological sex” and “social gender”, see Mikkola (2008).

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that this tripartite distinction is not the only possible classification of gender systems. More fine-grained typologies have been proposed in the literature. For instance, Gygax et al. (2019) develop a five-type classification that builds on earlier work (e.g., Corbett, 1991; Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001–2003) and distinguishes between: (i) grammatical gender languages, (ii) languages combining grammatical and natural gender (e.g., Dutch, Norwegian), (iii) natural gender languages, (iv) genderless languages with residual gender marking, and (v) fully genderless languages (Gygax et al., 2019). This expanded taxonomy highlights intermediate systems that are not fully captured by the three-way distinction, particularly languages in which grammatical gender is only partially expressed or restricted to certain noun classes.

¹¹ For further information on grammatical gender systems, see Corbett (1991).

refer to and thus can give information about the referent's gender (Lepschy, 1989; Marcato & Thüne 2002).¹² As a result, grammatical gender languages are rich in gendered linguistic forms and provide gender information throughout the linguistic system (Stahlberg et al., 2007).

In grammatical gender languages it is difficult to avoid to express gender when using nouns referring to people (Stahlberg et al., 2007, p. 164). Masculine nouns can be used to refer to mixed-gender groups, unknown referents, or even explicitly female individuals, especially in prestigious roles (Cettolin, 2020). In Italian, the masculine “Ministro” (Minister[M]) is used for female Ministers as well, reflecting the stereotype that high-status roles are male by default. Similarly, groups of students are referred to as “studenti” (students[M]), even when female students are included, effectively rendering them invisible (Castenetto, 2020). Another issue concerns linguistic binarism. In binary languages like Italian, non-binary individuals may be forced to choose between feminine and masculine forms of nouns to refer to themselves due to the lack of non-binary linguistic resources in binary languages. This is unfair because it creates a discrepancy between their gender identity and the grammatical gender used (Rosola, 2024). This discrepancy occurs in binary grammatical gender languages, since names referring to people tend to convey gender information. These examples illustrate how grammatical gender systems can entrench gender asymmetries, making such languages key sites for analysing gender-unfair linguistic practices.

Natural gender languages like English do not exhibit a grammatical gender in the same way as grammatical gender languages, where gender is morphologically marked on nouns and other agreement targets. Instead, gender is expressed mainly through lexical choices and

¹² For a general overview of the Italian language, including its genealogical classification, sociolinguistic distribution, and morphosyntactic structure, see Gianna Marcato and Eva Thüne (2002). From a structural perspective, Italian is a pro-drop language with rich verbal inflection and a binary grammatical gender system (masculine and feminine), which is morphologically marked across several word classes (e.g. nouns, articles, adjectives, and pronouns), while verbs generally do not encode gender except in participial agreement (Marcato & Thüne 2002).

personal pronouns, rather than through a pervasive system of grammatical agreement. Consequently, many nouns referring to people do not overtly mark gender and do not reveal the gender of the referent. Terms like “student”, “doctor”, or “neighbour” are gender-neutral and can be used to refer to individuals of any gender. Gender is instead expressed through pronominal forms such as “she” and “he”, as well as through lexical gender pairs like “father” and “mother”. As a result, in natural gender languages, gender is encoded through a more limited and less pervasive set of linguistic resources than in grammatical gender languages, remaining its expression limited to a few linguistic resources (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Nonetheless, linguistic asymmetries still occur. For instance, an unfair linguistic practice in English is the use of masculine and feminine pronouns to refer to stereotypically masculine and feminine professional nouns, respectively, as previously discussed (§ 1.1) (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015).

Genderless languages, such as Turkish, Hungarian, and Finnish, do not feature grammatical gender or gender-differentiated pronouns. In these languages, nouns and pronouns do not encode gender, resulting in a structurally gender-neutral linguistic system. However, gender can still be expressed through contextual cues or lexical items. In Turkish, for example, gender is expressed lexically through terms like “erkek” (man, male) and “kız” (girl) (Stahlberg et al., 2007). These gendered terms signal the gender of the referent to which a linguistic expression refers (Doleschal, 2015).¹³ Although gender marking is not grammatically encoded in genderless languages, gender unfairness can still emerge at a non-linguistic level. For instance, sociolinguistic research has shown that the Turkish noun “kuyumcu” (gold seller), while grammatically gender-neutral, tends to be associated with men due to societal expectations and occupational stereotypes. In such cases, the gender prejudice does not arise from the grammatical structure of the language itself, but from

¹³ As discussed by Lepschy (1989), linguistic oppositions are often asymmetrical: one term functions as unmarked and can refer either to a specific category or to a more general class, while the marked term is restricted to a specific meaning. In the domain of gender, this asymmetry frequently results in masculine forms functioning as the default or unmarked option, capable of denoting both male referents and mixed or unspecified groups, whereas feminine forms are typically marked and limited to female referents. This structural asymmetry contributes to the representation of masculinity as the implicit norm (Lepschy, 1989).

culturally ingrained associations that influence interpretation and usage. This highlights how such societal expectations and occupational stereotypes can influence semantic interpretation, perpetuating gendered assumptions even in the absence of explicit grammatical markers (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015). Consequently, even in languages where gender is expressed through limited linguistic means, gender-unfair patterns can still occur. Such patterns manifest gender hierarchies and gender stereotypes, for instance, regarding roles.

In conclusion, languages differ in the extent to which gender is linguistically encoded. However, even in languages without a grammatical gender system, means for expressing gender exist. Furthermore, gender asymmetries occur in languages of any type. In some languages, such practices are more visible and easier to identify, while in others they are less overt. Their nature and spread are contingent on a range of factors, including how gender is articulated in a given language. Among these, grammatical gender languages constitute a key site for gender-unfair practices.

Italian exemplifies a grammatical gender language in which gendered forms are omnipresent and gender asymmetries are particularly pronounced. Masculine forms can be used to refer to mixed-gender groups, as well as female or gender-indefinite referents. Moreover, the Italian language lacks adequate linguistic resources to represent non-binary individuals. These practices contribute to the systematic invisibilisation of both women and non-binary people. The following two sections address these two forms of gender unfairness, beginning with the linguistic invisibilisation of women and its negative implications.

1.3 Gender-unfair linguistic uses for women in Italian

The Italian language exhibits an androcentric usage, meaning that the male is the central reference point within the linguistic domain (Sabatini, 1987). Androcentric practices should be interpreted within a broader framework of linguistic ideology, where grammatical and lexical patterns are understood as embedded in social practices, cultural norms, and power

relations. From this perspective, the so-called “androcentric usage” of Italian is not simply a feature of the linguistic system, but the result of historically sedimented ideological processes that position the masculine as the default and unmarked category (Formato, 2019). This phenomenon is particularly evident in linguistic practices such as the use of the masculine form not only for male referents but also for female, unknown, and generic referents, as well as mixed-gender groups (Pauwels, 2003; Sabatini, 1987). Sabatini (1987) identifies two main types of linguistic asymmetry: semantic and grammatical.

Semantic asymmetries refer to linguistic practices that unfairly differentiate between men and women at the semantic level. Words and expressions can reflect and reinforce traditional gender representations and stereotypes. For example, the adjective “libera/o” (free[F/M]) exhibits semantic polarisation: “un uomo libero” (a[M] free[M] man) can convey moral, political, or intellectual freedom, whereas “una donna libera” (a[F] free[F] woman) can carry implications regarding sexual behaviour. Similarly, “carina/o” (nice[F/M]) refers to physical appearance when describing a woman but to behaviour when describing a man (Sabatini, 1987, pp. 58-59).¹⁴ These are two examples of a broader phenomenon in which certain words carry different connotations depending on whether they refer to a man or a woman (Sabatini, 1987, p. 30).

Such asymmetries can be more precisely understood in terms of semantic gender, a category that highlights how lexical distinctions between masculine and feminine forms are not merely formal but encode socially constructed meanings about gender. Within this perspective, lexical pairs referring to men and women may display asymmetrical connotations, as in the case of “zitella” (spinster) and “scapolo” (bachelor): while the former typically carries negative implications associated with age and the absence of a partner, the latter denotes an unmarried man without comparable derogatory connotations and may even evoke ideas of independence. Moreover, certain lexical items exist only for one gender, particularly in the domain of insults referring to women, e.g. “puttana”, “troia”, “mignotta”

¹⁴ For a more extensive collection of other semantic gender-related examples, please refer to Sabatini (1987).

(slut), with no equivalent masculine counterparts (Formato, 2019). These patterns further illustrate how semantic asymmetries are embedded in broader social representations of gender, contributing to the reproduction of gendered stereotypes and perceived roles of women (Pauwels, 2003; Formato, 2019).

Grammatical asymmetries refer to linguistic practices that disadvantage women at the grammatical level (Sabatini, 1987). It should be noted that the terminology used to describe these grammatical asymmetries is not fully standardised and may vary across languages and scholarly traditions. In this study, I adopt the labels *generic masculine*, *overextended masculine*, and *unmarked masculine* following González Vázquez et al. (2024), and *male firstness* and *marked feminine* from Formato (2019).¹⁵

In Italian, the grammatical gender system requires gendered terms even for generic or unknown referents. Conventionally, this is done by defaulting to the masculine form (Cettolin, 2020; Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 201), a practice reinforced by the linguistic necessity of using gendered words (González Vázquez et al., 2024). A grammatical asymmetry is the *generic masculine*, i. e., the use of masculine terms to refer to generic or unknown referents (González Vázquez et al., 2024). A clear example is when the term “uomo” (man) is used to denote both the male of the species and the species as a whole, as in “i diritti dell’uomo” (man’s rights), meaning “human rights”. Here, “man” functions as a stand-in for “human in general”, implicitly including women while simultaneously rendering them invisible. This usage reinforces the idea of “man” as the central and universal reference point, a notion historically embedded in discourse (Sabatini, 1987).¹⁶

¹⁵ These terms are used as analytical categories for clarity and consistency, without implying that the cited authors originally introduced or coined them.

¹⁶ Sabatini (1987) argues that culture is dominated by the masculine. For example, “I diritti dell’uomo” (man’s rights), formulated during the French Revolution, originally excluded women. This masculine dominance also emerges in expressions like “dignità dell’uomo” (man’s dignity), which evokes a noble sense of respect and honour, whereas “dignità della donna” (woman’s dignity) tends to carry connotations linked to the sexual sphere (Sabatini, 1987, pp. 20-21). Lepschy (1989), however, criticises some of the reform proposals advanced in this context, noting that replacing “uomo” (man) with terms such as “persona” (person) or “individuo” (individual) may sound stylistically marked or inappropriate, especially in idiomatic or historically loaded expressions like “i diritti dell’uomo” (man’s rights), where substitutions such as “diritti della persona” (person’s rights) risk

This interpretation aligns with the notion of “masculine as norm”, which reflects a broader androcentric ideology, that is, a system of beliefs and representations that centres men and the masculine as the default or universal reference point. From a language ideology perspective, the dominance of the masculine as the unmarked and generic form can be seen not as an inherent property of the linguistic system, but as the outcome of a broader ideological process of standardisation. As highlighted by Coady (2018), such processes are historically and socially situated, and contribute to constructing certain linguistic forms as natural, neutral, or structurally necessary. In this sense, the generic masculine can be interpreted as the result of a discursive project that has elevated masculine forms within a hierarchical system of representation, where they acquire a seemingly generic function while simultaneously maintaining their association with male referents (Coady, 2018). This perspective allows us to understand grammatical asymmetries not merely as formal features of Italian, but as ideologically loaded conventions that both reflect and reproduce existing power relations.

An interesting explanation of this phenomenon is discussed in Formato (2019), drawing on Martin and Papadelos (2017) and Alvanoudi (2014), who analyse the “masculine as norm” as a metonymic process whereby unmarked masculine forms come to represent the prototypical member of the category “human”. In this sense, the generic masculine does not merely function as a grammatical convention but participates in the reproduction of a social order in which men are positioned as the default subjects of discourse {Citation}.

The generic masculine is also used when the referent’s gender is unknown (Cettolin, 2020; Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 199), as in “Il vincitore della sfida sarà premiato”. (The[M] winner[M] of the challenge will be rewarded[M]), where the masculine applies regardless of the winner’s gender. It also appears when gender is contextually irrelevant, as in “Fare il

introducing unintended connotations (e.g., religious or spiritual overtones) (Lepschy, 1989). Nevertheless, such resistance can be interpreted as historically situated: forms like “diritti umani” (human rights) or “diritti della persona” (person’s rights) have since become accepted in contemporary usage and no longer produce the same sense of estrangement. This is an example of expressions that initially appeared unnatural but, over time, became fully integrated into the linguistic system.

Ministro è un lavoro di responsabilità” (Being a[M] Minister[M] is a job of responsibility), where “Ministro” (Minister[M]) is treated as a gender-neutral role.

Lexical terms such as “fratellanza” (brotherhood) and “paternità” (“paternity”, also meaning “authorship”) are also used beyond male referents. Although derived from male terms, “fratello” (brother) and “padre” (father), these terms can extend to collective or female referents, as in “la fratellanza dei popoli” (the brotherhood of peoples), and “La paternità di questo lavoro è da attribuire a Maria” (The paternity of this work is to be attributed to Maria[female]) (Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 201; Sabatini, 1987, p. 24).¹⁷

Another key asymmetry is the *overextended masculine*, the use of masculine plural forms to refer to mixed-gender groups (González Vázquez et al., 2024; Cettolin, 2020).¹⁸ For example, a group of both male and female students can be referred to as “studenti” (students[M]). The overextended masculine applies regardless of the numerical gender distribution within the group. Even if there is only one man among 99 women, his presence alone is sufficient to trigger the use of the masculine form (González Vázquez et al., 2024). Similarly, this phenomenon extends to grammatical agreement. When there are specific individuals of different genders, the masculine form is used in agreement targets, as in “Maria, Lorenzo e Anna sono arrivati ed erano stanchi” (Maria[female], Lorenzo[male] and Anna[female] arrived[M] and they were tired[M]). Despite the presence of two women, the adjectives and past participles are still masculine. As in the previous case, this convention applies even when the majority of referents are female, as long as at least one male is present. This grammatical practice, whereby the masculine form dictates agreement in mixed-gender contexts, is also known as the *absorption* or *incorporation rule* [my translation] of the feminine by the masculine (Sabatini, 1987, p. 24).¹⁹

¹⁷ When pertinent, the indication of the referential masculine or feminine gender are provided by inserting “male” and “female”, respectively, in square brackets in the English translation.

¹⁸ The overextended masculine is called *versatile masculine* by Formato (2019).

¹⁹ It is important to note that in Italian, agreement can also follow the “closest conjunct agreement” norm. According to this rule, terms can be declined in accordance with the gender of the nearest term. As a result, both of “Il Presidente ha ricevuto le giornaliste e i giornalisti premiati” (The President received the[F]

A related phenomenon is *male firstness*, where the masculine term precedes the feminine one in oppositional pairs like “ragazzi e ragazze” (boys[M] and girls[F]) or “fratelli e sorelle” (brothers[M] and sisters[F]) (Formato, 2019).²⁰ This ordering reflects an implicit hierarchy, reinforcing the linguistic primacy of the masculine term. This convention is unfair, as it perpetuates the notion of masculine predominance over the feminine (Sabatini, 1987, p. 24; Formato, 2019).²¹ Another form of male firstness occurs when women are singled out as a distinct category in enumeration, as in “vecchi, pensionati, disoccupati e donne” (old[M] people[M], pensioners[M], unemployed[M] people[M] and women). This phrasing suggests a marginalising tendency, positioning women as a separate group, alongside vulnerable populations such as the elderly and children, rather than integrating them within the broader category being discussed (Sabatini, 1987, pp. 24-25).²²

Another grammatical asymmetry is the *unmarked masculine*, i.e., the use of masculine professional titles for women (Cettolin, 2020; Castenetto, 2020; Formato, 2019; González

journalists[F] and the[M] journalists[M] awarded[M]” and “Il Presidente ha ricevuto i giornalisti e le giornaliste premiate” (The President received the[M] journalists[M], and the[F] journalists[F] awarded[F]) are correct. However, as Giusti (2022) notes, the latter case is less acceptable because it violates the rule whereby the masculine form dictates agreement in mixed-gender contexts (Giusti, 2022, pp. 10-11).

²⁰ The order of gendered terms in pairs is a salient factor in the mental representation formed during reading. Safina’s research (2024b) on the influence of gender forms on the mental representation of names highlighted the importance of the order in which name pairs are presented. Specifically, the first term significantly influenced the perceived gender of the referents in a sentence. According to the author, this suggests that the first gender in a pair is more salient and dominant in the construction of the mental representation (Safina, 2024b). These findings are in line with previous studies in the debate. For more, see, for example, Gabriel et al. (2008) and Misersky et al., (2014).

²¹ “Signore e signori” (ladies and gentlemen) represents an exception to the common practice of giving precedence to the masculine in gendered pairs like man/woman. This usage is rooted in chivalry traditions and highlights the significance of the order of precedence in oppositional gender pairs in the language (Sabatini, 1987, p. 24). For further discussion on the masculine’s precedence over the feminine due to androcentric reasons, see also Bodine (1975, p. 134).

²² Lepschy (1989) questions Sabatini’s claim that listing women separately after a series of masculine generics necessarily entails their exclusion. According to Lepschy, such enumerations are context-dependent and may instead serve to highlight women as a socially specific and potentially oppressed group, rather than simply marginalising them. He further suggests that this practice may have been influenced by feminist discourse itself, which has often foregrounded women, alongside other marginalised groups, as subjects of structural inequality (Lepschy, 1989). However, it seems that the objection can be challenged. Even if the intention is to emphasise women’s specific condition, their systematic separation from categories expressed in the masculine reinforces an implicit norm whereby masculine forms are interpreted as default and inclusive, while women appear as an “add-on” category. A systematic empirical investigation would shed light on how such enumerations are currently used and interpreted across different contexts and speaker populations.

Vázquez et al., 2024). This is particularly evident for prestigious roles or those that are stereotypically held by men. For example, “Ministro” (Minister[M]) can be used for a female Minister, despite the grammatically valid “Ministra” (Minister[F]). Feminine forms are morphologically regular and most are historically attested (MIUR, 2018; Sabatini, 1987). Thus, this practice does not stem from any inherent characteristics of the Italian language, as feminine role nouns are attested. Moreover, when a feminine form is not historically documented, it can be formed using standard morphological rules. Nevertheless, despite the availability of gender-corresponding terms, the masculine form is still preferred (González Vázquez et al., 2024). This practice is unfair because the unmarked masculine acts as a bivalent form for both genders, while the feminine is always marked and exclusive to women. It reinforces the idea that the masculine is the norm and the feminine is the exception, further entrenching gendered linguistic invisibilisation and marginalisation (Sabatini, 1987, p. 35; Thornton, 2022, pp. 25-26; Formato, 2019, p. 50).

Historically, the practice of using masculine role nouns for female referents originates from the traditional gender-based division of labour, in which certain occupations were not only socially but also legally reserved for men, effectively excluding women from these professional domains. Over time, however, legal reforms enabled women to enter these professions, and women now hold positions of responsibility and prestige that were once male-dominated. Despite these societal shifts, there is resistance to reflecting this change in language (Scaglioso & Del Chierico, 2022; Castenetto, 2020; Sabatini 1987).²³ Such resistance should not be interpreted as a purely linguistic preference, but as part of a broader ideological and cultural landscape (Cettolin, 2020). As argued by Formato (2019), the Italian debate on gender and language is characterised by the coexistence of competing positions,

²³ The use of the masculine form of professional nouns is defended by arguments regarding the ugliness of the new feminine forms (Castenetto, 2020) or the uncertainty surrounding the adoption of new feminine forms, as compared to the well-established masculine ones (Robustelli, 2013). Another common objection to the feminine titles is the perceived awkwardness of these new variants, or the belief that the masculine form can be used as a generic form, also referring to women (Robustelli, 2013). The reluctance to use feminine grammatical gender for professional titles held by women seems to stem more from cultural rather than linguistic factors. Indeed, no such objections are raised when feminine forms are used in less prestigious professions (Cettolin, 2020; Robustelli, 2013).

ranging from advocates of gender-fair language to those who perceive existing forms as neutral and unproblematic. Crucially, these positions are not to be understood as divided between “ideological” and “non-ideological” stances; rather, all of them are embedded in specific ideological frameworks, reflecting different investments in the maintenance or transformation of the social order. Resistance to feminisation, for instance, is often justified through appeals to tradition, aesthetic judgement, or linguistic correctness, which, however, reveal underlying assumptions about gender, authority, and normativity (Formato, 2019). Resistance to feminisation, for instance, is often justified through appeals to tradition, aesthetic judgement, or linguistic correctness, which, however, reveal underlying assumptions about gender, authority, and normativity. In particular, such arguments tend to presuppose that masculine forms are more legitimate, neutral, or prestigious, thereby implicitly positioning male-associated linguistic forms as the standard against which others are evaluated. At the same time, they construct deviations from this norm, such as feminine professional titles, as marked, less appropriate, or stylistically inferior, reinforcing the association between authority and masculinity while framing alternative forms as unnecessary or excessive.

On top of that, the feminisation of professional titles is not a recent issue. As Cortelazzo (2024) has shown, feminine forms of prestigious roles like “avvocata” (lawyer[F]), “Ministra” (Minister[F]), or “deputata” (deputy[F]) have a documented history dating back centuries. Although these forms had more limited use in the past, they are attested throughout the history of the Italian language, particularly between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This historical evidence suggests that feminine forms for prestigious professions are not a modern ideological construct but rather a practice with deep roots in the Italian linguistic tradition (Cortelazzo, 2024). Thus, this resistance to acknowledging women’s presence in prestigious roles through language is rooted in a culture still largely dominated by the masculine (Castenetto, 2020); however, the feminisation of professional titles has far older roots than is assumed in public discourse (Cortelazzo, 2024).

The use of masculine titles for women has various consequences from a fairness perspective. First, it hides women's presence in high-status roles. In fact, by using male titles, women are made invisible, although they have finally managed to fill positions that were previously reserved for men (Giusti, 2022). Second, this practice impedes the widespread adoption of feminine titles (Cettolin, 2020). Although women increasingly occupy institutional and high-level positions, titles like “chirurga” (surgeon[F]), “imprenditrice” (businesswoman[F]), “Ministra” (Minister[F]), and “sindaca” (mayor[F]) are still used in the masculine form. The lack of widespread use of feminine forms for certain professional titles can create uncertainty about them and limit their adoption. The uncertainty is particularly evident when referring to women in high-ranking positions, as people may question whether terms like “Ministra” (Minister[F]) and “la Dirigente” (the[F] Manager[F]) are acceptable. The limited use of feminine titles can reinforce hesitation and inconsistency in their application, further delaying their full integration into common usage (Robustelli, 2012). Third, this practice can reinforce prestige differentials between masculine and feminine forms, also semantically (Giusti, 2022). In some cases, the same title carries prestige in its masculine form, while its feminine counterpart is associated with subordinate roles.²⁴ For example, “segretario” (secretary[M]) tend to be associated with high-ranking roles, such as the secretary of a political party, whereas “segretaria” (secretary[F]) with subordinate tasks (Sbisà, 2019; Giusti, 2022, pp. 4-5).²⁵ Referring to women in prestigious roles with masculine titles can perpetuate the idea that the masculine is appropriate for high-status professions, while the feminine is relegated to lower-ranking positions. As a result, since the masculine

²⁴ The unmarked masculine is not only a grammatically unfair usage, but it also creates a semantic asymmetry when a term's meaning shifts between its masculine and feminine forms. The feminine form can carry a different connotation in terms of prestige and societal value, which contributes to the unequal treatment of women in language (Sabatini, 1987).

²⁵ The frequent use of the masculine for prestigious roles can lead to gender-differentiated interpretations of terms. For example, in occupations such as “teacher”, “cook”, and “secretary”, the masculine form is ambiguous between a prestigious and a non-prestigious interpretation, while the feminine is used only for the non-prestigious position (a schoolteacher vs. an orchestra conductor; a cook in a domestic environment vs. a chef in a prestigious restaurant; an administrative secretary vs. a secretary of a political party). In other words, these nouns tend to carry a more prestigious connotation when used in the masculine form and a less prestigious one when used in the feminine. This ambiguity reinforces the association of the feminine with inferiority, thereby perpetuating gender unfairness in linguistic practices (Giusti 2022).

form of certain professions can convey prestige and recognition, there are women who prefer to use it to refer to themselves (Cettolin, 2020). This reluctance to adopt feminine professional titles is evident not only in everyday discourse but also in institutional settings. Public administrations, for instance, have shown hesitancy in using feminine designations for official roles. A document of guidelines for gender-inclusive language published by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (2018) highlights this resistance, which further reinforces the perception of masculine forms as the default, perpetuating gender asymmetries in professional recognition (MIUR, 2018).

Linguistic asymmetry can also occur with *marked feminine* terms, as these forms can reinforce gender stereotypes (Formato, 2019). This is particularly evident in professional titles formed with the suffix “-essa”, such as “avvocatessa” (lawyer[F]). It is unnecessary to decline morphologically the terms with “-essa” (Sbisà, 2019), as standard Italian grammar already permits a regular feminine form, such as “avvocata” (lawyer[F]). Moreover, “-essa” has been criticised for carrying derogatory or ridiculing connotations (Cortelazzo, 1995; Sabatini, 1987, p. 26; Marcato & Thüne, 2002, p. 193).²⁶

Other debated *marked feminine* terms include the titles “signora” (Mrs.) and “signorina” (Miss), which indicate a woman’s marital status, “signora” for married women and “signorina” for unmarried ones (Marcato & Thüne 2002). This practice is asymmetrical, as there is no equivalent distinction for men. Indeed, the masculine counterpart of “signorina” (Miss), i.e., “signorino” (roughly equivalent to the outdated English title “Master”), is rarely used and typically carries an ironic connotation. Another example of asymmetrical linguistic practice is when women in professional contexts are addressed as “signora” (Mrs.) or “signorina” (Miss), while men in the same roles are referred to by their professional titles,

²⁶ The suffix “-essa” originally carried an augmentative nuance, used to form the feminine of noble dignities and professional titles. However, over time, it developed a pejorative connotation. This negative nuance has gradually diminished for certain professions, particularly those with significant female representation, such as “dottoressa” (doctor[F]), “professoressa” (professor[F]), and “studentessa” (student[F]) (Sabatini 1987, pp. 26-27). As a result, the use of this suffix has become more accepted, especially for roles where the feminine form in “-essa” is now well established (see, for instance, Robustelli, 2012, p. 19; Sabatini, 1987, p. 11; Marcato & Thüne, 2002, p. 193). For a deeper analysis on the origins of this suffix see Cortelazzo (1995).

such as “Prof.” (Professor) or “Dr.” (Doctor). This discrepancy highlights the occupational status of men while diminishing that of women (Sabatini, 1987, pp. 53;106). Similarly, in English, the debate around women’s titles follows a comparable pattern. “Mrs.” (married) and “Miss” (single) refer to a woman’s marital status, while “Mr.” applies to both married and single men. These titles define a woman in relation to a man rather than as an individual, reinforcing traditional gender roles. For this reason, both feminine titles should be avoided. A neutral and accepted alternative is “Ms.”, which, like “Mr.”, does reveal marital status. Some English language guidelines recommend using “Mr.” for a man and “Ms.” for a woman while avoiding “Miss” and “Mrs.” (see, among others. EIGE, 2019; European Parliament, 2018a).

Another asymmetrical practice of *marked feminine* is the unnecessary emphasis placed on a woman’s gender, especially when she holds a profession traditionally associated with men. This is done by adding the word “donna” (woman) before or after the masculine title, such as “donna Ministro” (woman Minister[M]) or “Ministro donna” (Minister[M] woman). This practice is asymmetrical since the equivalent male word, “uomo” (man), is not used in the same way. For instance, expressions like “uomo balia” (man nurse[F]) or “uomo casalinga” (man housewife[F]) are not used (Cettolin, 2020; Marcato & Thüne, 2002, p. 193; Sabatini, 1987, p. 26).

Marked feminine can also be unfair in naming conventions when men are referred to by surnames alone, e.g., “Napolitano”, while women are identified with both first and last names, e.g., “Elsa Fornero”, or using the feminine article preceding the surname, e.g., “la Fornero” (the[F] Fornero) (Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 202). This practice can reinforce the notion that a woman’s gender is a defining characteristic, whereas men’s identities are presented as neutral or default. The feminine article preceding the surname is used to indicate the women’s gender (Sabatini, 1987, p. 27). However, Sabatini does not clarify why women’s full names are \ used unnecessarily or asymmetrically, but this might serve the same function

as the article, i.e., highlighting women's gender. In any case, both practices are asymmetrical.²⁷

It is important to note that grammatical and semantic asymmetries are not always clearly separable, as they can overlap and merge (Sabatini, 1987, p. 21). Although Sabatini (1987) does not explicitly outline the cases in which these two levels of asymmetry intertwine, a possible example might be as follows:

(1) *I prossimi figli delle sue clienti dovranno essere superuomini.*

The[M] next[M] children[M] of their clients[F] will have to be supermen[M].

‘The future children of their clients will have to be supermen.’

(‘Il Tempo, 13/23 p. 27, Sabatini, 1987, p. 41, [my translation]).

Sabatini (1987, p. 41) notes that the feminine form of “clienti” (clients[F]) suggests that parents are women, implicitly equating parenthood with motherhood. This reflects the gender stereotype that associates women with caring roles, reinforcing the societal expectation that a woman's role is associated with motherhood (Sabatini, 1987, p. 41). While Sabatini (1987, p. 41) classifies this as a grammatical asymmetry, as it involves the use of the feminine grammatical form, the example also reflects a semantic asymmetry, as it conveys a gendered

²⁷ Lepschy (1989) raises objections to recommendations against the use of the feminine article before women's surnames, arguing that such usage reflects long-standing grammatical and sociolinguistic conventions rather than necessarily constituting discrimination. In the variety of Italian, he describes forms like “la Rossi” (for Maria Rossi) versus “Rossi” (for Mario Rossi) followed systematic patterns, shaped by regional and register-based variation. From this perspective, eliminating the article (e.g., Thatcher instead of la Thatcher) may sound stylistically awkward or even ungrammatical in certain contexts, while extending the article to male referents may introduce inappropriate or marked connotations. More broadly, Lepschy emphasises that naming practices are embedded in a complex set of sociolinguistic distinctions that cannot be easily standardised through prescriptive reform (Lepschy, 1989). However, this objection can be questioned insofar as it focuses primarily on formal variation while overlooking the asymmetrical effects these conventions may produce. Even if historically motivated, the differential marking of women through the article or the more frequent use of full names contributes to making gender salient for female referents, while leaving male referents unmarked and thus implicitly normative. Moreover, as with other cases of linguistic change, what is perceived as awkward or unnatural may reflect a transitional phase, rather than a definitive argument against reform.

representation that confines women to the maternal role. However, this interpretation hinges on the assumption that the feminine plural form signals a stereotypical view of women's roles. Without broader contextual information (e.g., whether the person being quoted is a gynaecologist or works with female clients), the example may be open to alternative readings. Thus, while potentially illustrative, it may not constitute the strongest or clearest case of overlapping grammatical and semantic asymmetry.²⁸

In conclusion, both grammatical and semantic asymmetries reinforce stereotypical and reductive notions of women's identity and uphold the concept of man as the central and universal reference point. The masculine form is thus positioned as the norm, a category that subsumes all other identities, while women are rendered invisible in discourse (Cettolin, 2020; Castenetto, 2020; Sabatini 1987, pp. 20-21).²⁹

More broadly, these asymmetries can be understood as manifestations of linguistic ideologies that link grammatical structures to social meanings and power relations. From this perspective, they may not only reflect reality but also play a role in shaping and stabilising gendered representations. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that these interpretations are themselves situated within a specific analytical framework. This thesis therefore engages with existing literature not as a set of unquestioned truths, but as a field of competing perspectives that must be critically evaluated and contextualised.

While this section does not cover all cases of gender-unfair usage, it offers an overview of prominent examples cited in institutional and public contexts. These cases are particularly relevant to the upcoming discussion on institutional language guidelines in Chapter 4. The gender-unfair linguistic practices discussed here are primarily based on the research conducted by Sabatini (1987), whose findings remain relevant today and continue to be cited

²⁸ I am grateful to Bianca Cepollaro for pointing out that this example may not constitute solid arguments, as the feminine form “clienti” (clients[F]) could plausibly reflect the specific professional context (e.g., a gynaecologist with a female clientele) rather than a stereotypical association between women and motherhood.

²⁹ Giusti (2022) observes that women constitute an economically and politically marginalised group, effectively resulting in a social “minority”. This marginalisation interacts with language in complex ways, manifesting in unequal linguistic practices that render women invisible and reinforce their subordinate position (Giusti, 2022).

in recent Italian research and guidelines (see, for instance, Robustelli, 2012; MIUR, 2018). Although identified more than thirty years ago, these asymmetries persist and remain under scrutiny. In recent years, the discourse on linguistic discrimination has evolved, leading to new areas of inquiry. While historically, concerns about linguistic gender discrimination have focused primarily on women, recent discussions have expanded to include forms of linguistic discrimination affecting individuals whose gender does not conform to the traditional binary model. The following section will explore this phenomenon.

1.4 Gender-unfair linguistic uses for non-binary people in Italian

In addition to linguistic practices that are gender-unfair towards women, recent discussions have questioned the adequacy of languages with a binary gender system (those that recognise masculine and feminine genders) in representing non-binary individuals (see, for instance, De Rosa, 2024; Gheno, 2022b; López, 2020). This section explores the case of Italian, a language with binary grammatical gender, and the challenges this presents.

The difficulty of representing non-binary individuals in Italian stems from its grammatical structure, in which most nouns, adjectives, and pronouns are inflected for either masculine or feminine gender. In Italian, most nouns are assigned a gender, masculine or feminine. Nouns referring to people follow the convention whereby feminine forms refer to women and masculine forms refer to men. However, Italian lacks pronouns or grammatical gender forms that represent non-binary identities (Comadini, 2021; Thornton, 2022). Consider the following examples:

- (2) a. Lei è una brava ragazza. (She is a[F] good[F] girl).
- b. Lui è un bravo ragazzo. (He is a[M] good[M] boy).

In 2a, all gendered elements referring to the subject are feminine, in agreement with the individual's gender. In 2b, the same elements are masculine. However, if the subject were non-binary, there is not grammatically established way to reflect this identity in Italian. The

language lacks inflectional resources that align with non-binary gender. Since nouns cannot be left undeclined for gender, non-binary individuals are required to use either masculine or feminine forms, resulting in a mismatch between grammatical gender and personal identity (Rosola, 2024). Moreover, as a grammatical gender language, Italian encodes gender in agreement elements such as articles, adjectives, and past participles (Lepschy, 1989; Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 194; Formato, 2019). This means that the binary gender requirement extends to all dependent forms, thereby reinforcing a rigid structure that excludes identities beyond the masculine-feminine dichotomy.

Some androcentric practices identified by Sabatini (1987) that are gender-unfair for women can also disadvantage non-binary individuals. The use of the overextended masculine renders not only women but also non-binary people invisible. For example, referring to a mixed-gender group of students using only masculine forms conceals the presence of other identities.

Invisibilisation also occurs through the use of the generic masculine, such as employing “uomo” (man) to refer to humanity. While this practice is intended to include everyone, it implicitly excludes those who do not identify as male. Similarly, using the masculine form for referents whose gender is unknown or irrelevant erases the possibility that such a referent could be a woman or a non-binary individual. These examples reflect a broader androcentric convention: the use of the masculine form as the linguistic default for mixed-gender groups or unknown genders. As such, this practice is asymmetrical for all non-male identities and makes invisible both women and non-binary individuals.

Gender-unfair linguistic uses affecting non-binary individuals can thus be grouped into two main categories: those stemming from the conventional use of masculine forms, and those arising from structural limitations in the language. The first category stems from androcentric conventions that establish the masculine as the linguistic norm. Some instances of linguistic unfairness towards non-binary individuals align with those described by Sabatini (1987) for women. Androcentrism positions the masculine as the universal referent, erasing

other identities. The use of overextended and generic masculine forms obscure the presence of non-binary identities and reinforce a binary gender model without challenging it.

The second category concerns structural unfairness, that is, the absence of grammatical and lexical tools in Italian to represent non-binary people. When non-binary speakers must choose between masculine and feminine forms, the language imposes a binary framework that contradicts their gender identity (Rosola, 2024). In this sense, structural limitations do not merely exclude non-binary people but actively perpetuate a gender binary that fails to account for gender diversity.

It is also important to note that the Italian gender system, which affects most nouns, poses a particularly pervasive challenge in terms of linguistic unfairness, impacting both non-binary individuals and women. In both categories of gender-unfair uses discussed above, the ubiquity of gender encoding contributes to the systemic nature of these unfair practices. In the first case, i.e., those practices that involve androcentric conventions, the adoption of masculine forms as the normative standard reinforces exclusionary patterns within a highly gendered language system. In the second case, i.e., those practices that involve structural unfairness, the lack of non-binary linguistic resources creates a systemic discrepancy, as all gendered forms are tied to a binary framework that excludes non-binary identities.

In discussions on gender-unfair language in Italian, one key issue that emerges is the ambiguity of the masculine form when referring to non-male individuals. This ambiguity can lead to interpretative difficulties and lexical confusion. For example, when a woman is referred to using a masculine professional title, especially when mixed with feminine terms elsewhere in a text, can create inconsistency in interpretation (Frabotta & Manera, 2024). Similarly, the overextended masculine may be misinterpreted as referring exclusively to men (Sabatini, 1987). The ambiguity may have concrete consequences. Some studies have shown that such ambiguity can discourage women from applying for a job if the masculine form suggests that the role is reserved for men (see, among others, Gygax & Gabriel, 2008; Gygax & Gesto, 2007). The issue of masculine ambiguity has surfaced in legal contexts, where such

linguistic ambiguity has been used to deny rights to women (see, among others, Pezzini, 2015; Ritchie, 1975). These practical and serious consequences highlight the need to address the limitations of certain linguistic androcentric practices. The following two sections explore these issues in depth: in Section 1.5, I discuss how the use of the masculine form can lead to ambiguity, and in Section 1.6, I examine its potential implications.

1.5 Ambiguity in interpreting the androcentric masculine

A central issue in the Italian debate concerns the ambiguity that arises from using the masculine form with an unmarked or generic value in discourse interpretation. The ambiguity can emerge when the masculine is employed to refer to a range of non-male referents. It may lead to unclear or misleading interpretations, particularly when the masculine form is used to denote female individuals, unknown referents, mixed-gender groups, or when gender-specific terms such as “uomo” (man) are used to denote humanity. In this work, for the sake of simplification, I use the term “androcentric masculine” to refer broadly to the use of the masculine form for non-male referents. I adopt and extend Sabatini’s (1987) notion of androcentrism to coin this umbrella term to encompass several phenomena discussed in the literature, including what is referred to as generic masculine, overextended masculine, and unmarked masculine.

The ambiguity of the androcentric masculine has been discussed across both ordinary and institutional communicative contexts, including settings such as public administrations and the legal domain. In this work, “ordinary communication contexts” refers to informal or semi-informal settings, such as newspaper articles, school textbooks, and job advertisements. This section and the next explore the ambiguity of the androcentric masculine and its implications in both ordinary and institutional communicative contexts.

A potential ambiguity can arise when grammatical gender does not align with the gender of the referent. This mismatch can complicate interpretation and hinder comprehension (Cettolin, 2020; Sabatini, 1987). One example discussed by Sabatini (1987,

p. 22) is a newspaper headline: “L’uomo delle nevi esiste e non è aggressivo” (The[M] snowman exists and is not aggressive[M]), which accompanies an article reporting the discovery of a female body. While the headline may lead readers to assume the subject is male, the article clarifies that the discovered individual is a woman, potentially causing confusion and disrupting comprehension (Sabatini, 1987).

However, it is worth noting that this example may not be entirely suitable for illustrating ambiguity stemming specifically from the unmarked masculine. This is because the headline refers to the species as a whole, using the particular case of a female body as a pretext to generalise the existence and behaviour of the “snowman”. In this context, “L’uomo delle nevi” (The[M] snowman) functions as a generic designation of the species rather than a gendered reference to the individual found. In other words, this article does not focus exclusively on the discovery of a female body but rather uses this case to comment on the species as a whole, treating the individual as representative. Consequently, while the headline may indeed generate ambiguity, this can result less from the unmarked masculine form itself and more from a shift in focus between the general and the specific, from the headline’s reference to a broader category to the article’s discussion of an individual case. Thus, although this example highlights a form of interpretative ambiguity, it may not be particularly well-suited for illustrating the challenges posed by the unmarked masculine in gendered language.³⁰

A similar issue appears in English. Moulton (1981) observes that non-gender-specific uses of terms like “he” and “man” may require disambiguation. For instance, “Neanderthal man was a hunter” may be intended generically. However, if it is followed by an additional statement with a feminine noun like “Neanderthal man was a hunter. Neanderthal woman grew crops”, the previous use of “man” assumes a gender-specific interpretation (Moulton, 1981). This shift reveals the ambiguity inherent in such formulations and highlights the need

³⁰ I would like to express my gratitude to Martina Rosola for drawing attention to this issue, which pertains to the validity of Sabatini’s example of the snowman in discussing the ambiguity of the unmarked masculine.

to disambiguate the masculine form between a gender-specific and a generic interpretation.³¹ A similar ambiguity arises in Italian. “L’uomo di Neanderthal era un cacciatore” (Neanderthal man was a hunter) can be unclear due to the dual meaning of “uomo” (man), which can refer to humans in general or specifically to men. However, when followed by another statement with a feminine noun like in “L’uomo di Neanderthal era un cacciatore. La donna di Neanderthal coltivava raccolti” (Neanderthal man was a hunter. Neanderthal woman grew crops), the meaning of “uomo” (man) narrows to refer specifically to males, as it now explicitly contrasted with “donna” (woman). This suggests that, even in Italian, the term “uomo” (man) can become ambiguous, and its interpretation may shift depending on whether a feminine counterpart is overtly introduced.

Another example discussed by Sabatini (1987) is the newspaper headline “Il Primo Ministro indiano assassinato” (The[M] Indian[M] Prime[M] Minister[M] assassinated[M]). In this case, although the Prime Minister is a woman, the masculine form is used for the subject and for all dependent forms. For readers unfamiliar with the context, the exclusive use of masculine forms may obscure the fact that the Prime Minister is a woman. This can lead to confusion or misinterpretation of the subject’s gender, as the grammatical masculine is not only unmarked but also potentially misleading in this instance (Sabatini 1987, p. 25).

Ambiguity can also arise when the masculine form is used to refer to mixed-gender groups (Cettolin, 2020; Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 199; Sabatini, 1987). Without disambiguation, such usage can imply either an all-male group or a mixed group, which can lead to confusion in interpretation. Indeed, as Sabatini (1987) notes, the overextended masculine obscures both the presence and the absence of women. Consider, for example, “Gli Ateniesi avevano diritto al voto” (The[M] Athenians[M] had the right to vote). It is unclear whether “gli Ateniesi” (the[M] Athenians[M]) means both male and female

³¹ Moulton (1981) also illustrates how the use of terms such as “he” and “man” in a non-gender-specific way can yield erroneous, comedic, or offensive statements. An example of the failure of masculine gender neutrality is the assertion “Man has two sexes. Some men are female”. The use of the term “man” to denote humans fails because it seems to contradict itself in this sentence by saying that some men are women (Moulton, 1981). For additional illustrations of this phenomenon, please refer to Moulton (1981).

Athenians or just male Athenians. However, women were excluded from the franchise, and the use of the masculine in this case conceals the absence of women through its ambiguity (Sabatini 1987, p. 22). As a result, readers may mistakenly interpret the group as inclusive of women, leading to a distorted understanding of historical realities.³²

Another form of ambiguity can arise from the inconsistent use of gendered forms in the same texts, where the same individual is referred to using both feminine and masculine forms (Frabotta & Manera, 2024; Castenetto, 2020). Frabotta and Manera (2024) discuss this issue and illustrate it with a passage from a manual for learners of Italian as a foreign language, in which gendered terms are used inconsistently in reference to Cécile Kyenge. Indeed, terms that refer to the protagonist (a woman) are sometimes declined in the masculine and sometimes in the feminine grammatical gender in the same text:

(...) Cécile oggi si considera all'incrocio tra due mondi: un privilegio che spesso però ha costi elevati. Per gli italiani non è facile rapportarsi con un medico nero, per di più donna. A Cécile è successo molte volte di essere scambiata per l'infermiera, mentre l'infermiere veniva chiamato pomposamente dottore. Nel 2002 fonda l'associazione DAWA, per realizzare iniziative interculturali in Italia e progetti sociali in Africa. Diventa Ministro dell'integrazione il 28 aprile 2013.

Cécile[female] considers herself at the crossroads between two worlds today: a privilege that often comes at a high cost. For Italians[M], it is not easy to relate to a[M] black[M] doctor[M], especially a woman[F]. Cécile[female] has often been mistaken[F] for the[F] nurse[F], while the[M] nurse[M] was pompously called[M] “doctor”[M]. In 2002, (she) founded the DAWA association to carry out

³² It is worth noting that even in English, the same form of ambiguity can arise, i.e. the obscuration of both the presence and the absence of women. Since “Athenians” is a gender-neutral term, it does not specify whether it refers to both men and women, leaving gender composition of the group unclear.

intercultural initiatives in Italy and social projects in Africa. (She) became Minister[M] of integration on April 28, 2013 [my translation].

(Lingua-cultura italiana per stranieri, PRILS LAZIO, 2017, p. 96).

Although Cécile is a woman, she is referred to with the masculine forms “medico nero” (black[M] doctor[M]) and “Ministro” (Minister[M]). In the same text, she is referred to with the feminine form “infermiera” (nurse[F]). Frabotta and Manera (2024) argue that this inconsistency reflects the prestige associated with certain roles: masculine forms are used for high-status positions (i.e., “doctor” and “Minister”), while feminine forms appear in roles perceived as lower status (i.e., “nurse”) (Frabotta & Manera, 2024; Nitti, 2021).³³

Alternative explanations might attribute this grammatical gender choice to usage-based factors, such as how frequently certain forms occur or the gender distribution within professions. According to this view, terms like “medico” (doctor[M]) and “Ministro” (Minister[M]) tend to be used in the masculine because these forms are conventionally used or because men numerically dominate those fields. Similarly, the use of the feminine “infermiera” (nurse[F]) could be seen as reflecting the higher number of women in the profession or its association with a profession predominantly occupied by women. However, such hypotheses are not sufficient. In fact, consider the opposite case. Men employed in professions predominantly occupied by women are still referred to using masculine forms. For example, a male nurse is called “infermiere” (nurse[M]), not “infermiera” (nurse[F]). If grammatical gender were truly determined by frequency of use or gender distribution, this asymmetry would not be expected. The fact that if Cécile were a man, he would still be referred to using the masculine form, regardless of the profession’s actual gender

³³ Drawing on a corpus of 50 textbooks dedicated for teaching Italian as a second language, Nitti (2021) highlights a recurring pattern in the representation of professions. Non-prestigious roles such as “secretary”, “housewife”, “nurse”, “teacher”, and “office employee” are predominantly associated with women, whereas prestigious professions such as “doctor”, “engineer”, “lawyer”, and “architect” are typically linked to men (Nitti, 2021). For an overview on the literature about children textbooks see also Scaglioso & Del Chierico (2022).

demographics, suggests that grammatical gender is not determined solely by statistical predominance. Instead, it also reflects gender stereotypes associated with certain roles. Moreover, the fact that this logic does not apply equally to both genders' points to a clear case of linguistic asymmetry.

This linguistic phenomenon has been discussed by several scholars (see, among others, Sabatini, 1987; Giusti, 2019). Sabatini (1987, p. 26) already observed that in professions predominantly held by women, the masculine form continues to be used for male practitioners. For instance, “casalingo” (househusband[M]) is used, rather than “casalinga” (housewife[F]), “uomo casalinga” (man[M] housewife[F]), or “casalinga uomo” (housewife[F] man[M]) (Cettolin, 2020; Sabatini, 1987, p. 26). Similarly, Giusti (2019) notes that although obstetrics is a largely female-dominated profession, a man who practices it is referred to as “ostetrico” (obstetrician[M]), not “ostetrica” (obstetrician[F]) (Giusti, 2019). These examples suggest that the masculine grammatical gender tends to be applied to men, even when they occupy roles that are stereotypically or numerically associated with women.

Thus, in the case of the text featuring Cécile Kyenge, the most plausible explanation remains the one proposed by Frabotta and Manera (2024): that inconsistencies in using gendered forms are influenced by the perceived prestige of certain roles. Such inconsistency can be problematic both in terms of reader comprehension and from a gender-fairness standpoint. As previously discussed (§ 1.3), the use of masculine forms to denote prestigious roles regardless of the referent's gender reinforces the idea that men are the default or typical holders of such positions.

The impact of the ambiguity of the androcentric masculine has been discussed in various communicative contexts, ranging from ordinary to institutional settings. For example, scholars have examined how the use of masculine forms in job advertisements can disadvantage women by discouraging them from applying for certain roles (for an overview, see Sczesny et al., 2016). This issue also emerged in legal contexts, where the use of the masculine form in legal texts has historically been exploited to deprive women of certain

rights (see, among others, Pezzini, 2015; Ritchie, 1975). In the next section, these issues will be examined in detail.

1.6 Contextual effects of the androcentric masculine

Masculine ambiguity can generate potential challenges across different communicative contexts. One particularly illustrative domain is that of job advertisements. Job titles provide a key site for examining the interaction between linguistic and extralinguistic factors (Safina, 2024a). In this work, I discuss these studies to highlight the potential social impact of the ambiguity inherent in androcentric masculinity.

According to several experimental studies, the use of the masculine form in such contexts may be interpreted by readers as gender-specific, leading them to believe that the role is intended exclusively for men (for an overview, see Sczesny et al., 2016). Stout and Dasgupta (2011) conducted two experiments in English to examine how the use of masculine forms in job advertisements might discourage women from applying. In both experiments, male and female participants read job ads that featured either a masculine pronoun (he), a gender-inclusive form (he or she), or a gender-neutral form (one). The results showed that women felt more excluded when exposed to masculine forms than when a feminine alternative was also present. This sense of exclusion was linked to lower personal investment in the job, reduced work motivation, and weaker identification with the role. Men, by contrast, did not respond differently across the language conditions in either experiment (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

In their experimental work on French, Gygax and Gabriel (2008) show that the ambiguity of the masculine can give rise to a masculine tendency in the interpretation of professional titles. Participants were asked to associate kinship terms (such as “sister”) with professional titles (such as “nurse”, or “musician”). The results revealed a tendency to pair masculine kinship terms with masculine professional terms, particularly when participants had also been exposed to feminine professional nouns. According to the authors, a job

advertisement that uses only the masculine form tends to be interpreted in a gender-specific sense, thereby reducing the perception that the role is suitable for women. The gender-specific interpretation of the masculine is reinforced when readers are also exposed to feminine occupational terms, highlighting the contrast. To mitigate this masculine interpretation, the authors recommend the use of gender-inclusive language, such as employing both masculine and feminine forms in job advertisements. Such a strategy is hypothesised to attract a diverse pool of applicants, including both men and women. Furthermore, Gygax and Gabriel (2008) suggest that the cognitive mechanisms observed in French can be likely analogous to other grammatical gender languages (Gygax & Gabriel, 2008).³⁴ Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that in Italian as well, the use of the masculine form for professional roles in job advertisements may be interpreted as targeting male candidates. This could produce a discriminatory effect, as women may perceive themselves as non-suitable for the role and, therefore, not inclined to apply. In this way, the persistent use of the masculine form in professional contexts may reinforce exclusionary dynamics and hinder gender equity in the labour market.

Another illustrative domain in which the consequences of masculine ambiguity are pronounced is the legal context. Legal contexts are particularly significant in this respect because linguistic interpretation is not merely a matter of comprehension but has direct normative consequences. In judicial and legislative settings, the interpretation of linguistic forms determines the scope of rights and duties, including whether specific groups are recognised as legal subjects. As such, the ambiguity of the androcentric masculine acquires a heightened relevance: it can be mobilised to either include or exclude women from the application of the law. This makes legal language a particularly revealing site in which to

³⁴ Several other experimental studies have examined how the use of the masculine form in job advertisements influences readers' interpretation. Among them, Vervecken et al. (2013) conducted a research with Belgian and German male and female students, demonstrating that the grammatical form of job titles significantly affected the perception of certain professions as typically masculine. Specifically, when professions were presented only in the masculine form, female students showed lower mental accessibility compared to when feminine-masculine word pairs were used (Vervecken et al., 2013). For a comprehensive review, see also Sczesny et al. (2016).

observe how the interpretative flexibility of masculine forms can be strategically exploited, often reflecting broader ideological assumptions about gender roles and social order.

As discussed by Pezzini (2015) and Ritchie (1975), ambiguity stemming from the androcentric use of masculine forms can have serious implications in legal interpretation. Ritchie (1975), in particular, analyses cases from Canada, Ireland, and England to demonstrate how such ambiguity can create confusion, similar to what has been observed in the context of job advertisements. Moreover, she shows that legal actors can strategically exploit this ambiguity to interpret statutes according to their personal beliefs or ideological positions. Ritchie's analysis (1975) highlights the need to critically examine the practice of using masculine or gender-ambiguous terms in legislation. In legal contexts, such ambiguity has led to disputes over whether women are included when masculine forms are used, particularly in laws concerning suffrage. Ritchie (1975) observes that, throughout political history in countries like Canada, Ireland, and England, this ambiguity has at times been deliberately exploited to deny rights to women, relying on the subjective interpretations of judges (Ritchie, 1975).

A landmark case discussed by Ritchie (1975) is *Queen v. Crosthwaite*, an Irish case concerning whether women were included under the term "persons" in the context of voting rights as defined by the *Towns Improvement (Ireland) Act* of 1854. In addition to the term "persons", the Act employed masculine pronouns twice. However, it explicitly stated that masculine terms should include females unless the context dictated otherwise, excluding only the word "male".³⁵ Despite the absence of the term "male" in the statute, the judges interpreted the context to exclude women. Their reasoning was based on gender assumptions. Deasy B. argued that there was no explicit exclusion of women in the law, but that the general policy of the law excluded women with implicit assumptions about their lack of political competence. In other words, the implicit fact that political matters are beyond women's

³⁵ In the first section of the Act, there was this interpretive clarification stating that "words importing the masculine gender, except only the word 'male', shall, in the construction of the Act, unless there be something in the subject or context repugnant to such construction, include females." (quoted in Ritchie, 1975, p. 691).

comprehension cannot be countered by a glossary. Fitzgerald B. invoked legal traditions that portrayed women as physically, intellectually, and morally inferior. The argument was that the law implicitly excluded “idiots and lunatics” because they were unfit to be voters. Similarly, the law recognises differences between men and women, and the fact that women are subject to disqualification due to the lack of discretion and judgment cannot be questioned. In this dispute, it is very interesting to consider the arguments of Pigot C.B., who opposed arguments that excluded women from the franchise. The argument was that it was incomprehensible that in a country where a Queen could reign, women should be denied the vote on the grounds of mental incapacity. Pigot C.B. also argued that the law had been interpreted arbitrarily as if its words and glossary had a flexibility that allowed them to be interpreted according to the opinions of the judges. Despite dissenting opinion from Pigot C. B., who firmly rejected the notion of a common law disability affecting women, the majority ruling excluded them from voting, not due to legal necessity, but based on prevailing social attitudes (Ritchie, 1975).

Another case discussed by Ritchie (1975) is *Chorlton v. Lings*, which is a landmark case in English legal history concerning women’s suffrage. In this case, Mary Abbott and 5,346 other women sought to be included on the list of voters for Manchester under the *Representation of the People Act* (1867), which granted the vote to “every man” meeting certain qualifications. The women argued that under Lord Brougham’s Act (1850) (an early interpretation statute), words in legislation importing the masculine gender should include women unless expressly stated otherwise.³⁶ They claimed that this inclusive reading should allow them to vote. However, the four judges of the court (Bovill C. J., Willes, Byles, and Keating J.J.) rejected this argument, asserting that the word “man” could not include women in the context of voting rights. They held that such a significant change (like giving women the vote) could not be achieved through an interpretation clause alone; it would require explicit language in the statute. Bovill C. J. even reversed the presumption, arguing that

³⁶ The interpretive provision in Lord Brougham’s Act (1850) reads as follow: “(...) in all Acts, Words importing the Masculine Gender shall be deemed and taken to include Females ... unless the contrary ... is expressly provided (...)” (quoted in Ritchie, 1975, p. 694).

women had to be expressly included. The judges also relied on the idea that women were legally incapacitated under common law from exercising public functions. Even historical evidence that women had once held public roles was dismissed or explained away. For instance, Willes J. referred to the participation of women in ancient governance as either “peculiar” or purely symbolic. The court ultimately held that the masculine terms in the 1867 Act were implicitly limited by earlier laws, such as the 1832 Act, which excluded women. Thus, despite the interpretative disposition for masculine terms as inclusive of women, women were denied the right to vote. One of the most quoted remarks came from Byles J., who conceded that “man” might include men, women, and children in scientific or philosophical contexts but insisted that in everyday use, “man” excluded women.³⁷ This case became the foundational precedent in England and Canada for the principle that women could not be granted public rights like voting without explicit legislative inclusion, showcasing the deep-rooted gender prejudices of the judiciary at the time (Ritchie, 1975).

After examining cases such as *Queen v. Crosthwaite*, *Chorlton v. Lings*, and others, Ritchie (1975) concludes that the use of masculine and gender-ambiguous terms does not inherently guarantee women any rights. Indeed, due to their ambiguity, the legal interpretation of these terms remains arbitrary and heavily dependent on context. In contrast, men’s rights are recognised when laws are written using masculine forms (Ritchie, 1975).

The ambiguity of the androcentric masculine in the legal language also played a crucial role in a case reported by Pezzini (2015), concerning the *Statuto Albertino*. The *Statuto Albertino* was the constitutional charter issued in 1848 by Carlo Alberto di Savoia Carignano,

³⁷ It is interesting to consider the words of Byles J. regarding the context-dependent use of the term “man”: “No doubt, the word ‘man’, in a scientific treatise on zoology or fossil organic remains, would include men, women, and children, as constituting the highest order of vertebrate animals. It is also used in an abstract and general sense in philosophical or religious disquisitions. But, in almost every other connection, the word ‘man’ is used in contradistinction to ‘woman’. Certainly, this restricted sense is its ordinary and popular sense.” (quoted in Ritchie, 1975, p. 695). Notably, there appears to be a complete arbitrariness in determining the context in which the word “man” includes or excludes women. Byles J.’s statement fails to provide a precise or consistent criterion for interpretation. Vague expressions such as “it is also used (...)” and “in almost every other connection (...)” do not clarify where the boundaries lie. This is particularly surprising in a legal context, where words are expected to be used with clarity and precision to be correctly interpreted and applied.

King of Sardinia, and later extended to the entire unified Kingdom of Italy. Art. 24 Cost. stated that “Tutti i regnicoli (...) sono eguali dinanzi alla legge” (All[M] citizens[M] of the kingdom are equal[M] before the law [my translation]).³⁸ While the Constitution imposed several requirements for suffrage, including being over 25 years of age, literate, and possessing a certain income, it did not include gender as a criterion. In other words, there was no explicit requirement that one had to be a man to have the right to vote. Thus, although the Constitution proclaimed equality among all citizens (although with grammatically masculine terms), it remained silent on whether this included women in matters of suffrage. Maria Montessori, physician and educator, capitalised on this silence, encouraging women to register on electoral lists. Some provincial commissions accepted these registrations, prompting a series of legal disputes which ultimately culminated in the denial of voting rights to women (Pezzini, 2015, pp. 205-206).

This historical case is significant because it revolved around the implicitness of legal language and the ambiguity of the masculine form. As González Vázquez et al. (2024) observed, the use of the overextended masculine in art. 24 of the Statuto, specifically the term “regnicoli” (citizens[M] of a kingdom), is inherently ambiguous: it can be interpreted as either inclusive or exclusive of women. At the time, this ambiguity enabled divergent legal interpretations. For example, the Court of Appeal of Ancona interpreted “regnicoli” (citizens[M] of a kingdom) as including women, affirming women’s right to vote based on the constitutional principle of legal equality. In contrast, the Court of Cassation treated the masculine form as exclusive, asserting that women’s exclusion from suffrage was so self-evident it did not need to be explicitly stated (Pezzini, 2015, pp. 205-206). These cases

³⁸ The full text of art. 24 of the *Statuto Albertino* reads: “Tutti i regnicoli, qualunque sia il loro titolo o grado, sono eguali dinanzi alla legge. Tutti godono egualmente i diritti civili e politici, e sono ammissibili alle cariche civili, e militari, salve le eccezioni determinate dalle Leggi.” (All[M] citizens[M] of the kingdom, whatever their title or rank, are equal[M] before the law. All enjoy civil and political rights equally, and are eligible for civil and military office, subject to the exceptions determined by the Laws) [my translation] (Statuto Albertino, 1848).

illustrate that the ambiguity of the androcentric masculine is not merely a linguistic issue, but a mechanism through which access to rights can be negotiated, restricted, or denied.

In light of the discussion above, let us now consider the case of the Italian Constitution. While the historical legal cases discussed earlier illustrate how the ambiguity of the androcentric masculine has been used to deny rights to women, the analysis of the contemporary Italian Constitution serves a different purpose. It does not aim to show a continuity in the arbitrary denial of rights, which would no longer be plausible in the current legal and social framework, but rather to highlight how the same linguistic feature persists under significantly different conditions. As a foundational institutional text, the Constitution allows us to examine how the ambiguity of the masculine operates today, not as a mechanism of exclusion, but as a potential source of inconsistency, lack of clarity, and tension with principles of inclusivity.

Even in the current Constitution, androcentric masculine forms are still employed. Moreover, women are explicitly mentioned only in a few articles, leading to an inconsistent use of gendered terms throughout the document. Cavagnoli and Cognigni (2024) examine the Italian Constitution and observe that it is characterised by the pervasive presence of the overextended masculine throughout the text. For instance, art. 3 Cost. states:

Tutti i cittadini hanno pari dignità sociale e sono eguali davanti alla legge, senza distinzione di sesso, di razza, di lingua, di religione, di opinioni politiche, di condizioni personali e sociali. È compito della Repubblica rimuovere gli ostacoli di ordine economico e sociale, che, limitando di fatto la libertà e l'eguaglianza dei cittadini, impediscono il pieno sviluppo della persona umana e l'effettiva partecipazione di tutti i lavoratori all'organizzazione politica, economica e sociale del Paese.

All[M] citizens[M] have equal social status and are equal before the law, without regard to their sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, and personal or social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove all economic and social obstacles that, by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens[M], prevent full individual development and the

participation of all[M] workers[M] in the political, economic, and social organization of the country.³⁹

(Italian Constitution, art. 3)

As illustrated, art. 3 Cost. makes use of the overextended masculine. In contrast, other articles explicitly mention women. Specifically, in artt. 37, 48, 51 Cost., references to women appear in different forms, such as through the use of the term “donna” (woman), or by specifying that the law applies to both male and female citizens (Cavagnoli & Cognigni, 2024).

Firstly, art. 37 Cost. states: “La donna lavoratrice ha gli stessi diritti e, a parità di lavoro, le stesse retribuzioni che spettano al lavoratore” (The[F] woman worker[F] has the same rights and, for equal work, the same pay as the[M] worker[M] [my translation]). The term “donna” (woman) appears alongside “lavoratrice” (worker[F]), which already denotes a gender-specific reference. The explicit specification reinforces an already gender-specific feminine reference. By contrast, the masculine “lavoratore” (worker[M]) is employed as the unmarked or default form for comparison, maintaining its gendered connotation. The second case under consideration is art. 48 Cost., which states: “Sono elettori tutti i cittadini, uomini e donne, che hanno raggiunto la maggiore età” (Voters are all[M] citizens[M], men and women, who have reached the age of majority).⁴⁰ Here, the term “elettori” (electors), although grammatically masculine, is explicitly extended to include both “uomini” (men) and “donne” (women). The masculine plural is used in a non-gender-specific way but is supported by clarification. Similarly, art. 51 Cost. affirms: “Tutti i cittadini dell’uno o dell’altro sesso possono accedere agli uffici pubblici e alle cariche elettive in condizioni di

³⁹ The English translation of the Constitution of the Italian Republic (artt. 1-54 Cost.) is available at the following link: <https://www2.immigrazione.regione.toscana.it/sites/default/files/costituzione/Costituzioneitalianaversioneinglese.pdf>.

⁴⁰ The English translation of art. 48 Cost. has also been derived from the document available at the following link: <https://www2.immigrazione.regione.toscana.it/sites/default/files/costituzione/Costituzioneitalianaversioneinglese.pdf>.

eguaglianza, secondo i requisiti stabiliti dalla legge. A tale fine la Repubblica promuove con appositi provvedimenti le pari opportunità tra donne e uomini” (All[M] citizens[M] of one or the other sex may access public officers and elected positions on equal terms, according to the requirements established by law. To this end, the Republic promotes equal opportunities between women and men through appropriate measures).⁴¹ Once again, the masculine “cittadini” (citizens[M]) is used with a non-gender-specific value, later specified as encompassing both men and women. These examples reveal that the Constitution uses the androcentric masculine inconsistently. In some articles, the overextended masculine is used without clarification as to whether it includes women (art. 3 Cost.). In others, women are explicitly mentioned, either to refer specifically to them (art. 37 Cost.) or to clarify that the overextended masculine is meant to be inclusive of women (artt. 48, 51 Cost.). This inconsistency raises important questions about interpretative ambiguity and the inclusive reliability of the masculine form in Italian legal texts.

One might question whether the exclusive use of masculine terms without mention of women could still lead to arbitrary interpretations, as observed in legal cases reported by Ritchie (1975) and Pezzini (2015). Pezzini (2015) addresses this point, explaining that such interpretations are no longer supported within the current legal framework. The legal and social context has evolved to the point where the exclusion of women from rights, such as suffrage, would no longer be acceptable or legally viable. The interpretative discretion, once allowed by masculine-exclusive formulations, is no longer accepted in modern jurisprudence. Furthermore, the Constitution provides explicit guarantees (Pezzini, 2015). Articles 48 and 51 Cost. affirm the inclusion of both men and women in the exercise of suffrage and access to public office. This explicit inclusion could not allow for arbitrary interpretation. This marks a crucial difference from the historical cases discussed above: while in the past the ambiguity of the masculine could be mobilised to justify the exclusion of women from legal

⁴¹ The English translation of the art. 51 Cost. has also been derived from the document available at the following link:
<https://www2.immigrazione.regione.toscana.it/sites/default/files/costituzione/Costituzioneitalianaversioneinglese.pdf>.

rights, in the contemporary constitutional framework such interpretations are normatively constrained and no longer viable.

However, Pezzini (2015) raises another interesting question. While the explicit mention of women in artt. 48 and 51 Cost. ensures clarity in political participation, it may unintentionally create uncertainty in provisions where only the masculine form is used. In other words, the author asks whether the mention of women in only a few articles might lead to ambiguity between a gender-specific and a non-gender-specific interpretation of masculine terms in other articles. Pezzini (2015) argues that, although this ambiguity is linguistically plausible, it is normatively paradoxical. Once the Constitution embraces both formal and substantive equality in art. 3 Cost., it prohibits restrictive interpretations based solely on grammatical gender (Pezzini, 2015). In this sense, contemporary legal interpretations are not expected to be subject to the same arbitrariness seen under the Albertine Statute. Nonetheless, it remains crucial to ensure that legal language is as explicit as possible in order to minimise the potential for subjective or prejudiced interpretations.

To conclude this section, the use of the androcentric masculine can lead to interpretative ambiguity. In some cases, it may be interpreted as either gender-specific or inclusive of women (Cettolin, 2020). This phenomenon can have negative implications across both ordinary and institutional contexts. One such implication is the misinterpretation of masculine terms as excluding women. For example, when women read job advertisements where masculine terms are used, they may interpret such terms as gender-specific and feel inappropriate about applying for the job. This, in turn, may contribute to reinforcing gender unfairness in access to employment (e.g., Hentschel et al., 2018).⁴² Another implication

⁴² Hentschel et al. (2018) conducted a research on German job advertisements in the field of entrepreneurship, aiming to identify which cues influence individuals' willingness to apply. The authors found that both linguistic and visual elements in advertisements significantly shaped women's interest in entrepreneurship and their intention to apply for. Specifically, when ads employed the masculine term "unternehmer" (entrepreneur[M]), women reported lower levels of interest, reduced self-perceived suitability, and diminished intentions to apply. In contrast, when the feminine form was mentioned such as "unternehmerin und unternehmer" (entrepreneur[F] and entrepreneur[M]), these outcomes improved considerably. Notably, even the inclusion of a single feminine or gender-neutral cue was sufficient to enhance women's interest in the entrepreneurial program. These findings suggest that grammatically masculine terms can negatively affect women's sense of belonging and perceived

concerns the potential for arbitrary interpretations of masculine terms. Such interpretive flexibility has been used in several legal cases to deny women the right to vote. Although such arbitrariness is not expected to be the same within the current Italian legal framework, the use of the androcentric masculine in both ordinary and institutional communication contexts remains a crucial area of concern to avoid interpretive uncertainty.

The issue of masculine ambiguity is particularly relevant within the broader debate on gender-unjust language. The negative implications stemming from the ambiguity of the androcentric masculine offer a compelling reason to question its use. The importance of unambiguous language extends across all communicative contexts. In this work, which focuses on institutional settings, particular attention will be given to public administration, where the need to avoid such ambiguity is especially pressing. This topic will be explored in detail in Chapter 4, beginning with an analysis of key criteria for institutional communication, such as clarity and readability. It will be shown that the use of ambiguous masculine forms can undermine both clarity and interpretability, providing a strong argument for avoiding them in institutional language.

1.7 Concluding remarks

Androcentrism, the tendency to privilege male experiences and perspectives, emerges in linguistic practices (Sabatini, 1987), when masculine terms are treated as the default, thereby making invisible women and non-binary individuals (e.g., Gheno, 2022b; López, 2020). Androcentric linguistic practices has been documented across languages, including grammatical gender languages (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Italian, among these, offers a particularly challenging case. Unlike natural gender languages like English, which can avoid explicit gender marking in certain contexts, Italian requires grammatical agreement across nouns, adjectives, past participles, making it difficult to avoid gender specification without structural reformulation (Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 194; Formato, 2019). As discussed in

fit for a role, thereby decreasing their likelihood of applying, particularly in male-dominated fields (e.g., Hentschel et al., 2018).

this chapter (§ 1.1, 1.2), the pervasive encoding of gender information in Italian is closely associated with the persistence of gender-unfair linguistic practices (Stahlberg et al., 2007).

On the one hand, women are linguistically disadvantaged when placed in a role of subordination and marginality within discourse. Through androcentric linguistic practices, women can be rendered invisible or even symbolically devalued (Sabatini, 1987). On the other hand, non-binary individuals can face a different form of linguistic. The binary grammatical structure of Italian lacks linguistic resources necessary to fairly represent identities that fall outside the masculine-feminine opposition. Consequently, non-binary individuals can encounter a structural invisibilisation in discourse (Rosola, 2024).

While these two dimensions, sexist language affecting women and the exclusion of non-binary individuals, have often been treated separately in the literature, this chapter has shown that they are, in many cases, interconnected. In particular, androcentric linguistic practices can simultaneously disadvantage both groups by establishing the masculine as the unmarked and normative form, thereby rendering alternative identities less visible or entirely absent from discourse.

A central focus of this chapter has been the use of the masculine with an unmarked or “generic” value. This use has been debated due to its dual interpretative potential, as it can function both as a gender-specific and as a supposedly inclusive form (Sabatini, 1987; Frabotta & Manera, 2014). This thesis has argued that such duality should not be understood as a neutral or unproblematic feature of the language, but rather as a source of systematic ambiguity. More specifically, the analysis has shown that the ambiguity of the generic masculine can lead to interpretative biases, whereby masculine forms are preferentially processed as referring to male individuals, even in contexts intended to be inclusive. This demonstrates that gender-unfair linguistic practices are not only exclusionary at a representational level, but also problematic at a cognitive and interpretative level.

Crucially, this ambiguity is not merely theoretical, but has measurable consequences. Experimental studies, including those on job advertisements, have shown that masculine

professional nouns tend to be interpreted in a gender-specific sense, which can lead women to perceive themselves as less suitable for certain roles and to be less likely to apply (Sczesny et al., 2016; Vervecken et al., 2013; Gygax & Gabriel, 2008). These findings indicate that linguistic forms can influence not only perception, but also behaviour and access to opportunities. Moreover, historical cases reported by Ritchie (1975) and Pezzini (2015) illustrate how the ambiguity of the masculine has had effects in legal contexts. In such cases, the ambiguity of the masculine has enabled restrictive readings that excluded women from rights or roles, thereby demonstrating that linguistic ambiguity can have concrete institutional and legal consequences (§ 1.3, 1.4). Taken together, these observations support the central claim of this chapter: gender-unfair linguistic practices are problematic not only because they exclude, but because their structural ambiguity can systematically bias interpretation, with implications for representation, participation, and access.

2. Gender-Inclusive Language: Countering Gender Stereotypes and Promoting Inclusivity

2.1 Countering gender-unfair language

Different linguistic strategies have been proposed to challenge androcentric linguistic practices, with variations depending on the structure of each language (e.g., Stahlberg et al., 2007). These strategies have been implemented in both activist and institutional contexts. For instance, innovative uses of pronouns or neo-pronouns have been introduced to accommodate non-binary identities.⁴³ In English, the “singular they” is used as a gender-indeterminate or

⁴³ I explore the topic on how to include all individuals beyond gender binarism in Giovine, M. (*forthcoming*). *Androcentrismo e binarismo: sfide e prospettive per l'inclusione di genere nella lingua italiana. Rivista di Estetica*.

non-binary pronoun. The Swedish pronoun “hen” has been adopted for similar purposes and has even been incorporated into the official language norm (Maturi, 2020).⁴⁴

Institutions have played a role in promoting inclusive language (Pauwels, 2003; Scaglioso & De Chierico, 2022). In 2008, the European Parliament was one of the early institution to develop multilingual guidelines for non-sexist and inclusive language, recommending their use in all official publications and communications (European Parliament, 2018a).⁴⁵ Since then, other institutions have followed suit, advocating for language practices that reflect gender equality and diversity (see, among others, Council Of Europe, 2024; ECAS Brussels, 2023; NATO, 2021; UN Women, n.d.). While these initiatives contribute to the standardisation of inclusive practices, their implementation raises questions about the balance between prescriptivism, usability, and inclusivity, which this thesis addresses in later chapters.⁴⁶ As argued by Formato (2019), the identification of certain linguistic practices as “gender-unfair” cannot be understood as ideologically neutral. Rather, it reflects specific assumptions about the relationship between language, social structure, and power. In her analysis of the Italian context, Formato (2019) shows that debates around gender-inclusive language are characterised by the coexistence of competing ideological positions, which she conceptualises as part of an “ad personam sociolinguistic imaginary”, where individual beliefs and attitudes towards gender and language shape linguistic practices (Formato, 2019).

⁴⁴ For a more comprehensive overview of the topic of non-binary pronouns, see Maturi (2020).

⁴⁵ The European Parliament Guidelines, originally published in 2008, were updated in 2018 for the tenth anniversary of the document. The revised guidelines for the English language (European Parliament, 2018a) are available at the following URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf. The Italian version of the guidelines can be accessed here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/288144/GNL_Guidelines_IT-original.pdf.

⁴⁶ At the same time, the institutionalisation of gender-inclusive language should also be understood within a broader history of language regulation and contestation. As noted by Pauwels (2003), attempts to introduce non-sexist language guidelines have historically challenged the traditional dominance of male actors as linguistic norm-makers. Feminist efforts to propose alternative norms have often been perceived as a threat to established linguistic authority, prompting resistance from language academies and other normative institutions. Such resistance has frequently taken the form of questioning the legitimacy and expertise of those advocating for change, thereby framing inclusive language proposals not only as linguistically problematic, but also as lacking scientific credibility (Pauwels, 2003). This dynamic highlights how debates on inclusive language are not merely technical, but are deeply embedded in struggles over authority, expertise, and the power to shape linguistic norms.

The present study adopts a critical stance that treats both inclusive proposals and resistance to them as socially and ideologically situated, rather than as purely linguistic disagreements.

From this perspective, both the critique of androcentric language and the resistance to it must be understood as ideologically grounded. While some speakers and institutions advocate for more inclusive forms in order to challenge the historical dominance of masculine norms, others defend existing linguistic practices as neutral, natural, or non-problematic. These positions do not simply reflect different linguistic preferences, but broader commitments to either maintaining or transforming the sociolinguistic status quo (Formato, 2019).⁴⁷

This chapter aims to provide a detailed overview of the inclusive linguistic approach in Italian, focusing on its potential to challenge gender stereotypes and promote the inclusion of diverse subjectivities. More specifically, it seeks to assess which types of gender-inclusive strategies are more effective in countering gender stereotypes and fostering inclusive mental representations. In doing so, this chapter advances the original contribution of this thesis by moving beyond a purely descriptive account of existing strategies and proposing a critical and evaluative framework. This framework considers not only the inclusivity of different forms, but also their accessibility, flexibility, and degree of innovation across communicative contexts.

⁴⁷ Within this broader ideological landscape, proposals for linguistic change are also shaped by different assumptions about how language relates to social reality and how change can be achieved. As noted by Pauwels (2003), feminist language activists adopt an interactionist view, according to which language both reflects and contributes to shaping social structures, thereby justifying linguistic intervention as part of broader efforts toward gender equality. However, there is no single agreed-upon strategy for reform. Approaches vary depending on activists' motivations, their understanding of linguistic structure, and the typological characteristics of the language in question. While some advocate incremental modifications aimed at aligning language with ongoing social change, others pursue more transformative strategies designed to expose and challenge the underlying patriarchal bias embedded in linguistic systems. In this sense, linguistic reform may serve different purposes, including making women more visible in discourse, achieving greater symmetry between genders, or actively disrupting entrenched linguistic norms to raise awareness of their discriminatory effects (Pauwels, 2003).

To achieve this, I first provide a brief overview of the terminology used in the debate to refer to gender-inclusive strategies, thereby justifying the linguistic choices made in this work (§ 2.2). Subsequently, I proceed to elucidate how the inclusive linguistic approach varies according to the structure of the language (§ 2.3), establishing the typological background necessary for evaluating the applicability of different strategies. Next, I turn to the Italian case and propose a general and preliminary criterion for the implementation of strategies (§ 2.4). I then provide a comprehensive account of the gender-inclusive strategies that have been identified so far in Italian (§ 2.5). Finally, I present some arguments from scholars and institutions, supported by some results from the experimental literature, on the effectiveness of different strategies in challenging stereotypes (§ 2.6), thereby laying the groundwork for the comparative assessment developed in the concluding section.

2.2 Terminology: labels and approaches

Different terms have been used in the academic literature to refer to the set of strategies identified within each language to promote gender equality. One such term is *gender-inclusive language* (see, among others, ECAS Brussels, 2023; NATO, 2021; UN Women, n.d.; United Nations, n.d.).⁴⁸ The broader term *inclusive language* refers to linguistic practices designed to enable the participation of as many people as possible in social rights, systems, or activities. More specifically, it denotes the use of language that avoids expressions reflecting prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views related to various axes of marginalisation, such as ableism, racism, or ageism. Consequently, *gender-inclusive language* refers to linguistic practices that avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes and instead adopt a gender-aware perspective (Orrù, 2020).

⁴⁸ In accordance with the definition provided by UN Women (n.d.), the term *gender-inclusive language* refers to linguistic practices aimed at gender equality through language. It highlights the role of language in addressing systemic gender imbalances and ensuring fair representation in communication. These strategies are specifically designed to avoid any prejudice towards any particular gender and to minimise the risk of perpetuating gender stereotypes (UN Women, n.d.).

Other terms include *gender-neutral language* (e.g., European Parliament, 2018a; UNESCO, 1999), *gender-fair language* (e.g., Sczesny et al., 2016), *broad language* (e.g., Gheno, 2022b), and *gender-sensitive language* (e.g., EIGE, 2019).

The coexistence of multiple labels reflects the inherent complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. Terminological variation depends on a range of factors, including the researcher's theoretical perspective, the language under investigation, the type of data analysed, and the specific sociolinguistic context. In this sense, different terms do not merely denote the same phenomenon, but may foreground different aspects of it, such as the avoidance of the gender binary, the representation of diverse identities, or the sociopolitical motivations underlying linguistic choices (Formato, 2024). This terminological plurality is therefore not accidental, but constitutive of a rapidly evolving field shaped by ongoing social and theoretical developments.

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably. For example, the Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG) employs *gender-inclusive language*, *gender-fair language*, and *gender-neutral language* as synonymous in its guidelines (CRG, 2021).⁴⁹

In other instances, a particular term is preferred due to its specific connotations. For example, Gheno (2023) opts for *broad language* over other alternatives. She explains that while *inclusive language* suggests a dynamic in which some individuals are passively allowed access by others, *broad language* implies no such power asymmetry (Gheno, 2023). Her choice builds on a terminological critique by Acanfora (2020), who argues that the notion of “inclusion” inherently reproduces a hierarchy between those who include and those who are included. As an alternative, Acanfora (2020) proposes the concept of “convivenza delle differenze” (coexistence of differences [my translation]), which foregrounds moral, social, and political equality between individuals and groups, regardless of their characteristics (Acanfora, 2020). From this perspective, *broad language* avoids the implication of inclusion

⁴⁹ For further details, please refer to the document “Gender Inclusive Language” by The CRG (2021): https://www.crg.eu/sites/default/files/crg/man-com-003_gender-inclusive_language.pdf.

as a unilateral gesture and instead embraces diversity as an inherent and equal component of linguistic practice. Moreover, Gheno (2023) emphasises that the discourse on language and gender is constantly evolving, and these practices are not intended to replace existing forms of expression, but rather to expand the possibilities for self-expression (Gheno, 2023). However, both *broad language* and *inclusive language* are used to encompass the full spectrum of strategies without differentiating between them.

In contrast, labels can be used to refer to specific strategies, reflecting a particular linguistic approach. For instance, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) differentiates between *gender-sensitive language* and *gender-neutral language*. The former refers to strategies that explicitly ensure gender visibility and equal representation, whereas the latter denotes linguistic forms that avoid any gender reference altogether. For example, the androcentric sentence “Under the law, all men are equal” may be reformulated as “Under the law, all people are equal” using gender-neutral language, or as “Under the law, all women and men are equal” using gender-sensitive language (EIGE, 2019).

To explain my terminological choice, it is useful to distinguish the concepts of “gender inclusivity” and “gender fairness”. I use “inclusivity” in line with the terminological framework provided by EIGE (2019). As defined by the Institute, the term “inclusive” is used in a general sense to indicate any practice intended to include a category of people. In contrast, I adopt “fairness” in a more specific sense, following the Cambridge Dictionary (2024) definition as “the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable”.⁵⁰ In this sense, I use “inclusivity” as an umbrella term encompassing all strategies that aim to avoid the exclusion of individuals on the basis of gender, whereas I use “fairness” to refer to specific evaluative dimensions within these strategies, such as their accessibility, their capacity to represent non-binary identities, or their overall adequacy in promoting equitable representation. While this distinction is analytically useful, it allows for precision in identifying practices that are inclusive in general, but not necessarily fair in all

⁵⁰ The definition of “fairness” by the Cambridge Dictionary (2024) is available at the following URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fairness>.

aspects. This distinction is adopted in this thesis as a deliberate terminological choice, aimed at clarifying differences that are often treated as equivalent in the literature.

Within this broader framework, it becomes possible to classify specific strategies according to their degree of inclusivity and fairness. For example, gender-sensitive strategies, which explicitly name and represent different genders, may be considered both inclusive and fair, as they acknowledge multiple identities. In contrast, gender-neutral strategies, which omit gender reference entirely, may be inclusive in the sense of avoiding exclusion, but they do not necessarily ensure fairness, as they can obscure existing inequalities or fail to represent the diversity of identities fully. Thus, in a scale ranging from more gender-exclusive to more gender-inclusive uses of language, gender-inclusive practices refer to those that aim to prevent the exclusion of individuals based on gender, without necessarily distinguishing among specific strategies. Within the broad category, it is then possible to classify certain practices as more or less inclusive. For example, gender-sensitive strategies, which explicitly name and represent different genders, may be considered more inclusive than gender-neutral strategies, which omit gender reference entirely (EIGE, 2019).⁵¹

To further clarify with an example, Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that the binary pronouns “she” and “he”, as opposed to the non-binary “singular they”, are unfair in terms of form. The binary pronouns assign two different forms to two gender identities (male and female), whereas a single pronoun (they) is used to refer to a wide range of non-binary identities, which are diverse. Based on the definitions adopted in this work, while they can be considered a gender-inclusive strategy, since it provides non-binary individuals with a linguistic option, it may be regarded as gender-unfair due to its lack of internal differentiation (this topic will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

⁵¹ For further information and illustrative examples concerning the terminology defined by EIGE, and in particular the linguistic labels *gender-neutral language* and *gender-sensitive language*, please consult the EIGE Toolkit, accessible via the following URL: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/toolkit-gender-sensitive-communication>.

2.3 Differentiated intervention based on language structure

Feminist proposals for linguistic reform have often focused on modifying existing linguistic forms in order to achieve greater gender equality. These interventions have typically taken the form of form replacement strategies, based on two main mechanisms: gender-obscurisation (or gender-neutralisation) and gender-specification (or gender-visibility). The former aims to minimise or eliminate the expression of gender in reference to human beings, while the latter promotes the explicit and symmetrical marking of gender (Pauwels, 2003). Inclusive language interventions vary according to the linguistic structure and the pervasiveness of gendered forms in each language (Stahlberg et al., 2007; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012;).

In *genderless languages* such as Finnish and Turkish, gender is not morphologically expressed through nouns or pronouns. Lexical gender nouns constitute the primary source of gender information, e.g., Turkish terms “erkek” (man, male), “kız” (girl) (Stahlberg et al., 2007). As a result, these languages require fewer extensive inclusive language strategies (European Parliament, 2018a). Interventions focus on careful lexical choices (Rosola & Fumagalli, 2024) and avoiding unnecessary gendered terms (Pukánszky, n.d.). In Finnish, for example, the suffix “-mies” (man) is used in profession nouns involving physical labour or leadership roles (Pukánszky, n.d.) (e.g., “kaivosmies”, “mine”+“man”=“miner”). In line with the EU guidelines (2018),⁵² the use of this suffix has been considered superfluous and unfair, and it has been recommended to avoid gender-referential prefixes and suffixes (Pukánszky, n.d.).⁵³

In *natural gender languages* such as English, nouns are predominantly gender-neutral (e.g., “student”, “friend”, “neighbour”), with gender information primarily conveyed through

⁵² The European Parliament Guidelines (2018c) for the Finnish language are available at the URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/288140/GNL_Guidelines_FI-original.pdf.

⁵³ The use of unnecessary gender references is a subject of ongoing debate in discussions on inclusive language within the Finnish linguistic community. For further details on gender-inclusive practices in Finnish, see the document by Pukánszky (n.d.), available at the following URL: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/slif/linguistics/research/gender-inclusive-language/media/slif-new/gender/conference-on-attitudes/abstract-pukanszky.pdf>.

pronouns (e.g., “she”, “he”) and lexical gender nouns (e.g., “mother”, “father”) (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Pronominal forms play a key role in gender encoding, making them central to inclusive language practices. Similarly, lexical gender nouns must be handled with care to ensure fairness. Accordingly, the European Parliament (2018a) recommends reducing gender-specific terms and avoiding gender references wherever possible (European Parliament, 2018a). Interventions include adopting gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., using the “singular they” for unknown, generic, or non-binary referents) (Breccia, 2021) and replacing gendered nouns such as “chairman” with gender-neutral alternatives like “chairperson” (Maturi, 2020).

In *grammatical gender languages*, such as Italian, French and Spanish, most nouns are gendered, and gender agreement affects a wide range of linguistic elements (Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 194; Stahlberg et al., 2007). The pervasiveness of the grammatical gender system makes the implementation of gender-inclusive strategies particularly challenging. Indeed, in these languages, inclusive linguistic interventions affect a larger number of elements than in natural gender languages and genderless languages (Rosola & Fumagalli, 2024). Interventions in these languages must address multiple gendered elements, including grammatically gendered nouns, lexical gender nouns, and agreement targets such as articles, adjectives, and pronouns (Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 194; Stahlberg et al., 2007).

It is worth noting that Italian, as a pro-drop language (cf. Marcato & Thüne, 2002), allows subject pronouns to be omitted. In this respect, Italian differs from non-pro-drop languages such as English, where the use of subject pronouns, including gendered third-person pronouns, is often unavoidable. Omitting subject pronouns in Italian may therefore appear to offer a partial strategy for avoiding the expression of gender. However, this advantage is limited. Even when subject pronouns are omitted, gender marking typically re-emerges through other grammatical elements, such as past participles and adjectives, which require gender agreement (Marcato & Thüne 2002).

Therefore, Italian presents a particularly challenging case, as inclusive interventions must be applied to agreement's objectives. Moreover, the binary structure of the language can pose additional obstacles to adequately represent non-binary individuals

2.4 Addressing different types of referents in strategy implementation

Linguistic strategies can be adopted on a case-by-case basis to counteract the androcentric use of language, varying primarily according to the type of referent. Thornton (2022) proposes a taxonomy of referent types, categorising them as follows: *known specific referents*, *unknown specific referents*, *generic referents*, and *mixed-gender plural referents* (Thornton, 2022, p. 27).

Firstly, the *known specific referent* refers to an individual whose gender identity is known. For example, in “il Ministro Roberto Speranza” (the[M] Minister[M] Roberto Speranza[male]) and “la Ministra Mariastella Gelmini” (the[F] Minister[F] Mariastella[female] Gelmini), the referents are clearly a male and a female subject, respectively (Thornton, 2022, p. 27). In such cases, the grammatical gender of terms referring to the subject is expected to match the subject's gender (§ 1.2). However, as previously discussed (§ 1.3), a gender-unfair practice in Italian involves the use of masculine grammatical gender for professional titles even when referring to women, as in “il Ministro Mariastella Gelmini” (the[M] Minister[M] Mariastella[female] Gelmini). This illustrates how the masculine form may be unfairly used even when the referent's gender is both known and female.

Another referent type is the *unknown specific referent*, which refers to a single specific individual whose gender identity is unknown. Consider the question “Chi è arrivato?” (Who arrived[M]?), where the gender of the referent is unknown. Despite the ambiguity, the masculine grammatical form can be used as the default in this context, reflecting a gender-unfair linguistic convention (Marcato & Thüne 2002, p. 201; Thornton, 2022, pp. 27-28).

A third category is the *generic referent*, which denotes a person in a general or abstract sense, not tied to any specific individual or gender identity. In such instances, too, the masculine grammatical gender can function as the default, as in “il Ministro” (the[M] Minister[M]) (Thornton, 2022, pp. 27-28). This practice exemplifies a practice that fails to represent gender diversity fairly (González Vázquez et al., 2024).

Finally, *mixed-gender plural referents* concern groups or categories of people that may include individuals of different genders. For instance, when referring to a group of students, the masculine plural form can be used: “gli studenti” (the[M] students[M]). This occurs even when the group includes both men and women, with the masculine form functioning as the default (Thornton, 2022, pp. 27-28). To avoid these androcentric practices in Italian, i.e. using masculine forms for non-male referents, various gender-inclusive strategies have been discussed (see Sabatini, 1987; for more recent work, Formato, 2019; Giusti, 2022). Building on the typology of referents presented here, in the following section I present them in detail.

2.5 Gender-inclusive strategies in Italian

Gender-inclusive language in Italian encompasses a range of strategies, some aimed solely at avoiding the exclusion of women, while others extend to the inclusion of non-binary individuals. To present them, I follow the González Vázquez et al. (2024)’s fourfold taxonomy, which intersects two key criteria: whether the strategy makes gender visible or obscures it (*visibility* vs. *obscuration*), and whether it relies on existing linguistic resources or introduces new grammatical encoding devices (*conservative* vs. *innovative*).⁵⁴ In adopting this terminology, it is important to clarify that the label “conservative” is used here in a strictly descriptive sense, referring to strategies that draw on already available grammatical resources within the language system. It does not carry any evaluative or ideological implication, nor does it suggest a lower degree of inclusiveness. Indeed, strategies such as feminisation, despite being “conservative” in this technical sense, have historically played a

⁵⁴ González Vázquez et al. (2024) use the term *neutralisation* to describe linguistic strategies that avoid providing gender information (*neutralisation strategies*), which corresponds to the term *obscuration* used in the present work (*obscuration strategies*).

crucial role in increasing the visibility of women. The conservative/innovative distinction should therefore be understood as a structural rather than normative one, distinguishing between the use of existing versus newly introduced linguistic forms.⁵⁵

2.5.1 *Visibility strategies*

The primary aim of visibility strategies has been to ensure the representation of women. In Italy, the earliest institutional proposals of this kind were formulated by Alma Sabatini in the 1980s, whose work sought to foreground women's roles in response to the predominance of androcentric linguistic practices. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, Sabatini's work presupposed a binary gender framework. More recently, the discourse has evolved to encompass non-binary perspectives (see, for instance, Baiocco et al., 2023; Gheno, 2022b; López, 2020) (§ 1.1). Indeed, the increasing visibility of non-binary individuals (De Rosa, 2024) has highlighted the inadequacy of existing linguistic resources to represent identities beyond the male and female dichotomy.

To address the structural discrepancy between grammatical gender and the gender identity of non-binary referents (Rosola, 2024), new linguistic resources have been proposed since the early 2020s. These function as *alternative gender encoding devices*, that is, linguistic resources that indicate the grammatical gender in nouns, adjectives, and agreement structures. Traditionally, Italian uses endings such as -a/-e (feminine) and -o/-i (masculine) as gender encoding devices. In contrast, new forms have been introduced that do not indicate binary grammatical gender. One of the proposed forms is the use of -ə (schwa)⁵⁶ to replace

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Federica Formato for drawing my attention to the potentially negative connotations of the label *conservative* in this context, and for encouraging a more explicit reflection on its use as a purely descriptive, non-evaluative term.

⁵⁶ The use of the schwa (ə) as an inclusive strategy in Italian has been proposed by Luca Boschetto and first introduced in 2015. The schwa represents a mid-central vowel, positioned in the middle of the vowel quadrilateral of the International Phonetic Association (IPA). One of the key reasons for adopting this solution, according to Boschetto (n.d.), is that the schwa is the vowel most acoustically distinct from those already used in standard Italian, thereby ensuring a clear and recognisable pronunciation. Moreover, the schwa is already present in the phonetic systems of various Italian dialects and regional languages, and it is familiar to a number of speakers through its pronunciation in English, for instance, as the first vowel in the word “again”. To differentiate between singular and plural nouns forms, Boschetto proposed the use of the long schwa (ɜ), for plural. The long schwa is phonetically similar to the short schwa but articulated with a more open quality.

traditional gender morphemes (Thornton, 2022).⁵⁷ Other innovative devices include the asterisk (*), hyphen (-), “at” symbol (@), as well as the letters “u”, “x”, and “y”.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, these devices remain excluded from the standard orthographic and phonological system and are not acknowledged in formal grammatical instruction. Comadini (2021) calls these solutions “sub-standard”, to refer to a linguistic phenomenon that is not typical of standard or neo-standard Italian, emphasising that this term has no moral connotation (Comadini, 2021).

Importantly, these innovative forms did not emerge as top-down prescriptions. Rather, they originated as grassroots linguistic practices within socially and culturally marginalised communities. In the Italian context, gender-neutral strategies such as the schwa have been promoted and disseminated particularly within queer communities, transfeminist collectives, and other activist environments (Thornton, 2022; Facchini, 2024). Only more recently have they gained wider visibility through public figures and cultural agents (see, e.g., Baiocco et al., 2023; Thornton, 2022; Facchini, 2024). These practices can be understood as attempts by

Further details on the rationale behind the adoption of the schwa, its implementation in Italian according to Boschetto’s proposal, and the associated criticisms are available in Boschetto (n.d.).

⁵⁷ These innovative grammatical gender encoding devices are also employed in the formation of non-binary pronouns. In place of the conventional masculine pronoun “lui” (he) and the conventional feminine pronoun “lei” (she), neo-pronouns such as “l@i”, “l*i”, and “lœi” have been introduced as inclusive alternatives (Comadini, 2021). It is worth noting that, among the set of innovative encoding devices, the letter “u” is unsuitable for the formation of neo-pronouns. This is because, unlike the other alternatives, which diverge from the central vowels used in traditional gendered forms, the letter “u” is already embedded in the masculine pronoun “lui” (he), thereby failing to establish a clear departure from the masculine grammatical form (González Vázquez et al., 2024).

⁵⁸ A range of variations in the usage norms of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices has been documented (Thornton, 2022). In some instances, words are inflected irregularly, and the application of new linguistic resources can be more complex, leading to uncertainty and variability in usage. This complexity is illustrated by the case of the definite articles “il” (the[M]) and “la” (the[F]), where the application of a new, non-binary linguistic form remains uncertain. More generally, as noted by Thornton (2022), the use of the schwa raises unresolved issues at multiple levels of the linguistic system, including morphology, phonology, and orthography. In particular, forms involving schwa or the asterisk, e.g., “amich*” vs. “amic*” (friends[INN]) may display uncertainty in their morphological realisation, especially in cases involving consonantal alternations (e.g., velar vs. palatal forms), reflecting the lack of established conventions for integrating these devices into the Italian morphological system (Thornton, 2022). The underlying causes of these variations, as well as potential proposals for standardised usage norms, fall outside the scope of this work. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the usage norms proposed by Boschetto for the schwa (Boschetto, n.d.) are adopted here as a reference framework and are extended to all innovative grammatical gender encoding devices discussed.

speakers to construct alternative linguistic representations of identity in response to the inadequacy of existing grammatical systems (Facchini, 2024).⁵⁹ In Italian, where grammatical gender is obligatorily encoded and limited to a binary opposition, the emergence of forms such as the schwa, asterisk, and other symbols reflects the need to express identities that do not fit within the masculine/feminine dichotomy (Gheno, 2022a; 2022b; Comadini, 2021). These forms developed informally through decentralised linguistic practices, particularly in online and community-based contexts (Comadini, 2021). From this perspective, these innovations can be seen as part of a process through which speakers negotiate and articulate gender identity. They respond to the need for linguistic resources that allow individuals not only to be referred to, but also to self-identify in ways that resist binary categorisation.

Thus, visibility strategies have evolved and now include both those that focus exclusively on making women visible and those that also aim to represent non-binary individuals.⁶⁰ These strategies vary in their approach: some adopt existing grammatical structures conservatively, while others innovate by introducing new linguistic resources.

2.5.1.1 Conservative visibility strategies

The use of feminine forms of professional titles and role nouns when referring to women represents a foundational conservative visibility strategy. Rather than employing the androcentric masculine for prestigious roles held by women, this strategy entails adapting

⁵⁹ As Facchini (2024) argues, the development of non-binary strategies development can be situated within a broader theoretical and socio-cultural shift. Since the 1990s, with the emergence of queer theory, binary categories of identity have increasingly been called into question, highlighting the limitations of existing linguistic systems both for referring to others and for self-identification. Within LGBTQIA+ communities, this has led to the emergence of demands for new linguistic resources capable of counteracting processes of marginalisation, invisibilisation, and misgendering. As a result, speakers have begun to develop experimental strategies aimed at expressing a plurality of gender identities or reducing the salience of gender altogether. These practices are often described as “do-it-yourself” linguistic solutions, characterised by their decentralised, heterogeneous, and language-specific nature (Facchini, 2024).

⁶⁰ This claim is not uncontroversial. Some scholars have argued that even non-binary visibility strategies may not be fully equitable if used alongside masculine and feminine forms, since this asymmetry risks reinforcing the privileged status of binary identities. See Dembroff and Wodak (2018) for a detailed philosophical discussion and Rosola (2024) for a more recent treatment in the Italian context.

such terms to the feminine form (Castenetto, 2020; Sabatini, 1987).⁶¹ For example, instead of “il Ministro Elsa Fornero” (the[M] Minister[M] Elsa[female] Fornero), one can opt for:

- (1) *La Ministra Elsa Fornero*
 The[F] Minister[F] Elsa[female] Fornero
 ‘The Minister Elsa Fornero’

When the referent is a specific known individual who identifies as female, this strategy can be used to communicate in a way that aligns with her gender identity.⁶²

Another conservative visibility strategy consists of repetition of terms in both masculine and feminine forms (Cettolin, 2020; Sabatini, 1987; Robustelli, 2012; MIUR, 2018). For instance, instead of using the overextended masculine “i Ministri” (the[M] Ministers[M]), the splitting strategy can be employed to reformulate expressions as follows:

- (2) *Le Ministre e i Ministri*
 The[F] Ministers[F] and the[M] Ministers[M]
 ‘The Ministers’

⁶¹ Empirical evidence on the changing use and acceptability of feminised professional titles in Italian is provided by Castenetto (2020), who investigates both their increasing frequency in media discourse and their perceived acceptability among native speakers. Through a corpus-based analysis of online newspaper archives (e.g., Repubblica.it), the study shows a significant rise in occurrences of feminine forms. In addition, an acceptability survey based on the evaluation of journalistic texts suggests that, despite some variability across forms, feminised agent nouns are generally less strongly resisted than in the past, particularly among younger and more educated speakers (Castenetto, 2020). While the study is limited by a relatively small and demographically unbalanced sample, it nonetheless offers useful insight into ongoing changes in usage and attitudes.

⁶² Sbisà (2019) offers a pragmatic account of the implicit meanings conveyed by masculine versus feminine role titles when referring to women. She argues that expressions such as “il direttore Maria Rossi” (the[M] director[M] Maria Rossi) may highlight the noteworthiness of a woman occupying a role typically associated with men, thereby framing her achievement as exceptional and individual. By contrast, the use of the feminine form (e.g., “la direttrice Maria Rossi”) carries a different implication: it signals that such roles are not exclusively male and contributes to normalising women’s presence within them. In this sense, feminisation does not merely reflect individual identity but may also promote a broader shift in gender representation. Sbisà further notes that attempts to introduce entirely new feminine forms (e.g., “direttora”) may encounter resistance, whereas re-semanticising already existing feminine forms (e.g., “direttrice”) is more likely to succeed, as it involves modifying pragmatic inferences rather than altering the linguistic system itself (Sbisà, 2019).

This strategy has at least two alternative variants. The first is to repeat only the articles in both the feminine and masculine forms, keeping only one form of the noun, even though the noun is marked by a gender (3a).⁶³ This approach allows for the avoidance of repetition of the noun itself. The second variant makes use of a forward slash to divide the gender-marked elements, such as morphemes and articles (3b), also reducing the repetition of the entire noun twice (González Vázquez et al., 2024).

- (3) a. *Le e i Ministri*
 The[F] and the[M] Ministers[M]
 ‘The Ministers’
- b. *Le/i Ministre/i*
 The[F]/the[M] Ministers[F]/[M]
 ‘The Ministers’

It is important to note that the splitting strategy and its variants can be employed not only to represent women fairly, but also in cases where the referent’s gender is unknown (4a), generic (4b), or when a mixed-gender group (4c). The following examples illustrate this point:

- (4) a. *Chi è arrivato o arrivata?*
 Who has arrived[M] or arrived[F]?

⁶³ When employing the double form of the article while the noun remains gender-marked, two primary declension strategies are observed: *closest conjunct agreement* and use of the unmarked masculine. According to the closest conjunct agreement rule (see § 1.3), the noun agrees in gender with the article that is closest to it (Giusti, 2022, p. 10). For example, if the masculine article precedes the noun, the noun will be declined in the masculine, as in “*le e i maestri*” (the[F] and the[M] teacher[M]). Conversely, if the feminine article is the closest, the noun appears in the feminine form as in “*i e le maestre*” (the[M] and the[F] teacher[F]). Alternatively, the noun may follow the convention of using the unmarked masculine, regardless of the gender of the preceding elements. In this case, the noun remains masculine even when a feminine article is present. Thus, both of the following are possible: “*le e i maestri*” (the[F] and the[M] teacher[M]), and “*i e le maestri*” (the[M] and the[F] teacher[M]).

‘Who has arrived?’

- b. *Il/la* *Ministro/a*
The[M]/the[F] Minister[M]/[F]
‘The Minister’

- c. *Gli* *studenti* *e* *le* *studentesse*
The[M] students[M] and the[F]. students[F]
‘The students’

This approach avoids the androcentric masculine as the default form and serves to make women visible in linguistic representation.

2.5.1.2 ***Innovative visibility strategies***

Innovative visibility strategies employ innovative grammatical encoding devices alongside traditional binary ones to ensure visibility of all genders. In this case, the innovative device specifically represents non-binary referents, resulting in a tripartite system of forms to denote women, men, and non-binary individuals respectively (González Vázquez et al., 2024). For instance, rather than using the overextended masculine “tutti” (all[M]) in a standard greeting such as “Buongiorno a tutti” (Good morning to all[M]), the innovative visibility strategy reformulates the expression as follows:

- (5) a. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti, tutte, tutt**
Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]⁶⁴
‘Good morning to all’

- b. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti, tutte, tutt-*

⁶⁴ Terms with innovative grammatical gender encoding devices are glossed with the acronym “INN” in square brackets.

- Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]
‘Good morning to all’
- c. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti*, *tutte*, *tutt@*
Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]
‘Good morning to all’
- d. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti*, *tutte*, *tuttə*
Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]
‘Good morning to all’
- e. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti*, *tutte*, *tuttu*
Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]
‘Good morning to all’
- f. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti*, *tutte*, *tuttx*
Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]
‘Good morning to all’
- g. *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti*, *tutte*, *tutty*
Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]
‘Good morning to all’

Each variant in (5) represents a different innovative encoding device employed to denote the non-binary form (tutt*; tutt-; tutt@; tuttə; tuttu; tuttx; tutty), always appearing in an extended tripartite form. As with the double forms seen in § 2.5.1.1 (examples 3a and 3b), abbreviated variants may also be used in innovative visibility strategies. For example, (5a) can be reformulated using a forward slash to yield:

- (6) *Buongiorno* *a* *tutti/e/**

Good morning to all[M]/all[F]/all[INN]

‘Good morning to all’

These new linguistic resources can also be used to represent non-binary individuals in professional and institutional roles. For example, when referring to a non-binary Minister, a possible form would be the following:

(7) *L* Ministr**

The[INN] Minister[INN]⁶⁵

‘The Minister’

Furthermore, the innovative visibility strategy allows for equal representation of women and non-binary individuals in contexts where the referent’s gender is unknown (8a), generic (8b) or a mixed-gender group (8c). Consider the following examples:

(8) a. *Chi è arrivato/a/*?*

Who has arrived[M]/[F]/[INN]?

‘Who has arrived?’

c. *Il/la/l* Ministro/a/**

The[M]/[F]/[INN] Minister[M]/[F]/[INN]

‘The Minister’

c. *Gli studenti, le studentesse e l* student**

⁶⁵ It should be noted that although a number of non-binary individuals use non-binary linguistic strategies to refer to themselves, others prefer to use a binary language. The American Psychological Association suggests that individuals be asked about the pronouns they prefer to ascertain the most appropriate way to refer to them. The association emphasises that a person’s pronouns cannot be inferred from their appearance or gender identity. It is therefore recommended that individuals inquire about the preferred pronouns of the person with whom they are conversing (Matsuno et al., n.d.). For further information on recommendations regarding non-binary pronouns, please refer to the APA document at the following URL: <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/nonbinary-fact-sheet.pdf>.

The[M] students[M], the[F] students[F] and the[INN] students[INN]
'The students'

This approach thus avoids the androcentric masculine as the default form and provides the linguistic visibility for both women and non-binary individuals.

2.5.2 *Obscuration strategies*

The primary objective of obscuring strategies is to avoid linguistic elements that mark grammatical gender and thereby reveal gender information about the referent. By deliberately omitting such information, these strategies aim to foster inclusivity for all subjectivities, regardless of their gender identity. To achieve this, a variety of linguistic resources may be employed that either neutralise or abstract away from gendered forms (conservative or innovative).

2.5.2.1 *Conservative obscuration strategies*

A conservative obscuration strategy involves the use of epicene nouns such as “persona” (person) and “individuo” (individual) instead of gender-marked nouns.⁶⁶ Epicene nouns have a fixed grammatical gender, either masculine or feminine, that does not necessarily align with the gender of the referent. Consequently, both the noun itself and any agreeing elements (e.g., articles and adjectives) are grammatically gendered, but do not reflect the referent’s actual

⁶⁶ The term “epicene nouns” is not employed in a univocal manner in the literature. As Thornton (2022) observes, the term is employed in instances where it denotes nouns that possess a singular masculine or feminine form that remains unvarying, and the nouns and articles referring to them align in gender with the gender of the individual. An illustration of this is the term “persona” (person), which, despite being classified as feminine, pertains to individuals irrespective of their gender. In other cases, the term is used to denote nouns that are not marked by gender but whose nouns and articles referring to them vary in gender depending on the gender of the referent. An example of this is the term “cantante” (singer), which can be “il cantante” (the[M] singer) or “la cantante” (the[F] singer). The same phenomenon occurs with the term “common gender nouns”, which is sometimes applied to the first case of nouns and sometimes to the second. In this work, the term “epicene nouns” is employed for the former instance and “common gender nouns” for the latter, in accordance with the classification system proposed by Thornton (2022). For a detailed etymological explanation, see Thornton (2022, p. 21).

gender. For instance, to avoid using a gendered noun like “gli intervistati” (the[M] interviewees[M]), one could instead employ an epicene noun:

- (9) a. *Le persone intervistate*
 The[F] people[F] interviewed[F]
 ‘The interviewees’
- b. *Gli individui intervistati*
 The[M] individuals[M] interviewed[M]
 ‘The interviewees’

Other valuable resources are common gender nouns, such as “docente” (professor) and “preside” (principal), which have a single invariable form for the masculine and the feminine. Although these nouns do not themselves encode gender, they can trigger gender agreement in other elements of the sentence (e.g., articles and adjectives) depending on the gender of the referent (Marcato & Thüne 2002). For example, in “I docenti e il preside devono partecipare alla riunione” (The[M] teachers and the[M] principal must attend the meeting) and “Firma del docente” (The[M] teacher’s signature) articles reveal the gender of the referents. To use common gender nouns as an effective strategy for obscuration, one must also control for the gender of the agreement targets. This can be achieved by omitting gendered articles, as in:

- (10) a. *Docenti e preside devono presentarsi alla riunione.*
 Teachers and principal must attend the meeting.
 ‘Teachers and the principal must attend the meeting.’
- b. *Firma docente*
 ‘Teacher’s signature’

However, in certain contexts, the article cannot be omitted, making it difficult to apply this strategy. Additionally, some nouns do not encode gender exclusively in either the singular or plural. In such cases, they should be used with caution, and only when they function as common gender nouns. For example, “giornalista” (journalist) functions as a common gender noun in singular forms (11a and 11b) but has gender-marked plural forms (9c and 9d). Therefore, it is only possible to use this term in the singular, considering the other target elements such as articles.

- (11) a. *La giornalista*
 The[F.SG] journalist[F.SG]
 ‘The journalist’
- b. *Il giornalista*
 The[M.SG] journalist[M.SG]
 ‘The journalist’
- c. *Le giornaliste*
 The[F.PL] journalist[F.PL]
 ‘The journalists’
- d. *I giornalisti*
 The[M.PL] journalists[M.PL]
 ‘The journalists’

Other useful resources are collective nouns such as “comunità studentesca” (student community) and “personale docente” (teaching staff), which can replace overextended masculine forms like “gli studenti” (the[M] students[M]) and “i docenti” (the[M] teachers[M]). For example, “Gli studenti sono invitati a partecipare” (the[M] students[M] are invited[M] to participate) and “I docenti devono firmare il modulo” (The[M] teachers[M] must sign the form) can be formulated as follows:

- (12) a. *La comunità studentesca è invitata a partecipare.*
 ‘The student community is invited to participate.’
- b. *Il personale docente deve firmare il modulo.*
 ‘The teaching staff must sign the form.’

Pronouns that do not contain any grammatical gender encoding, such as “chi” (who), can also serve as a conservative obscuration strategy, since they do not convey gender information. For instance, instead of the overextended forms “i partecipanti” (the[M] participants[M]) and “i lavoratori” (the[M] workers[M]), one might use:

- (13) a. *Chi partecipa*
 Who participates
 ‘Participants’
- b. *Chi lavora*
 Who works
 ‘Workers’

A further solution is to reformulate sentences using the passive (14a) or impersonal (14b) voice, which removes the need to refer explicitly to the agent of the action. For example, the masculine form “gli studenti” (the[M] students[M]) can be avoided in “Gli studenti devono inviare i documenti” (The[M] students[M] must send the documents) by rewriting as follows:

- (14) a. *I documenti devono essere inviati.*
 The documents must be sent.
 ‘Documents need to be sent.’

- b. *Si devono inviare i documenti.*
 It must send the documents.
 ‘It is mandatory to send the documents.’

These conservative obscuration strategies allow for the inclusion of both women and non-binary individuals when the gender of the referent is unknown (15a), generic (15b), or a mixed-gender group (15c). Consider the following example:

- (15) a. *Chi ha vinto la partita?*
 ‘Who won the match?’
- b. *Chi amministra*
 ‘Who administers’
- c. *Le persone che studiano*
 ‘The people who study’

This approach avoids the androcentric use of the masculine form and ensures the inclusion of all gender identities.

2.5.2.2 Innovative obscuration strategies

Innovative obscuration strategies build on the same non-traditional grammatical gender encoding devices discussed in § 2.5.1.2. However, a key distinction emerges between visibility and obscuration approaches. In visibility strategies, for example, in greetings like “Buongiorno a tutti, tutte, tutt*” (Good morning to all[M], all[F], all[INN]), the innovative form appears alongside the masculine and feminine to explicitly represent men, women and non-binary individuals. In contrast, innovative obscuration strategies employ a single

innovative form to conceal gender information altogether. For instance, the greetings “Buongiorno a tutt*” (Dear all[INN]) replace the overextended masculine “tutti” (all[M]) with an inclusive form that avoids gender specification. Various innovative linguistic resources can serve this function, as illustrated below:

- (16) a. *Buongiorno a tutt**
 Good morning to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’
- b. *Buongiorno a tutt-*
 Good morning to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’
- c. *Buongiorno a tutt@*
 Good morning to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’
- d. *Buongiorno a tuttə*
 Good morning to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’
- e. *Buongiorno a tuttu*
 Good morning. to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’
- f. *Buongiorno a tuttx*
 Good morning to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’

- g. *Buongiorno a tutti*
 Good morning to all[INN]
 ‘Good morning to all’

These innovative obscuration strategies can be used to inclusively address women and non-binary individuals when the referents’ gender is unknown (17a), generic (17b), or a mixed-gender group (17c). Consider the following examples:

- (17) a. *Chi è arrivat*?*
 Who has arrived[INN]?
 ‘Who has arrived?’
- b. *L* Ministr**
 The[INN] Minister[INN]
 ‘The Minister’
- c. *L* student**
 The[INN] students[INN]
 ‘The students’

This approach avoids the androcentric use of masculine forms and promotes the inclusion of all gender identities.

2.6 Visibility vs. obscuration strategies in countering gender stereotypes

The debate over whether to prioritise obscuration or visibility strategies in inclusive language encompasses multiple perspectives and touches on crucial issues such as fairness, representation, and the potential to challenge gender stereotypes through linguistic means (see, for instance, Pauwels, 2003; Gyga et al. 2008; EIGE, 2019; Giusti, 2022, among

others).⁶⁷ Within this framework, the choice between different inclusive strategies can be shaped by both social and linguistic factors. As noted by Pauwels (2003), social considerations can be related to the perceived effectiveness of a strategy in promoting and reflecting gender equality, particularly in domains such as professional titles and occupational nomenclature. At the same time, linguistic factors concern the structural properties and typological constraints of each language, as well as the perceived acceptability of proposed forms within existing norms. Strategies that are seen as violating entrenched grammatical or prescriptive conventions may encounter resistance and be less readily adopted by the speech community (Pauwels, 2003). These competing considerations help explain why different actors may favour either visibility or obscuration strategies, depending on how they prioritise social effectiveness and linguistic viability.

In this section, the discussion will focus specifically on one key issue within this broader debate, namely the extent to which obscuration and visibility strategies differ in their ability to counteract gender stereotypes. This focus is motivated by the theoretical framework of this thesis, which prioritises the relationship between linguistic form and mental representation, and in particular the role of language in either reinforcing or challenging stereotypical associations linked to gender. Within this debate, obscuration strategies have been argued to offer several advantages. On the one hand, they are considered inclusive insofar as they ensure neutrality and avoid privileging any particular gender (EIGE, 2019). By eliminating gender distinctions, obscuration can be seen as fair not only for women but also for non-binary individuals. Moreover, proponents of gender-obscuration argue that minimising gender marking may be socially effective, as it shifts attention away from gender distinctions and reduces their salience in discourse. From this perspective, the use of a single, non-differentiated form promotes equality by avoiding the constant reinforcement of gender categories (Pauwels, 2003).

⁶⁷ I explore the efficacy of countering gender stereotypes through visibility strategies in Giovine (2024). Gender Visibility
Linguistic Strategies to Challenge Stereotypes in Italian. *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio*.

However, obscuration strategies also present limitations. For instance, they may fail to destabilise androcentric norms. Since language has historically reflected a male-centred worldview, even seemingly neutral terms may still be interpreted through a masculine lens (Giusti, 2022; EIGE, 2019). As EIGE (2019) states, “although the language may appear to be gender-neutral, custom may mean that in practice people still interpret a generic reference such as ‘people’ to mean men” (EIGE, 2019). Thus, obscuration can fail to address the underrepresentation of women or to challenge gender stereotypes effectively. Because these strategies do not explicitly signal the presence of women, they risk perpetuating their invisibility in discourse (Giusti, 2019). In this sense, while obscuration avoids explicit gender marking, it may inadvertently preserve the male default and do little to challenge unequal gender structures. On the other hand, visibility strategies have been argued to be more effective in addressing these limitations. Making non-male genders visible can challenge the male norm and disrupt entrenched stereotypes about gender roles (EIGE, 2019). For example, explicitly referring to “women and men” rather than using the generic terms like “people” can ensure women’s presence is acknowledged. Proponents argue that explicitly marking gender is necessary to counteract the historical invisibility of women and to promote more balanced representations (Pauwels, 2003; Giusti, 2019; Robustelli, 2012). Although feminine forms may carry marked connotations, these are expected to diminish through consistent use (Pauwels, 2003). From this perspective, visibility can be not only socially desirable, but cognitively necessary to counter entrenched asymmetries.

Empirical research supports this claim, showing that the absence of gender marking does not lead to neutral interpretations. Even in languages such as English, plural role nouns tend to be interpreted as masculine, particularly when referring to stereotypically male or prestigious roles (see, for instance, Gabriel et al., 2008; Misersky et al., 2014). This suggests that when gender information is absent, interpretation is guided by stereotypes rather than remaining neutral. A well-known illustration of this mechanism is the “surgeon riddle”, which has been widely used to investigate the interaction between language, gender, and mental representations (González Vázquez et al., 2024):

A father and a son are driving when a truck hits their car. When the ambulance arrived, the father was already dead. The son, seriously injured, is rushed to the hospital for immediate surgery. But the surgeon sees him and says, “I cannot operate, that’s my son”. How’s that possible?

When participants are asked to solve the scenario, only a minority identify the surgeon as a mother (Belle et al., 2021; Kollmayer et al., 2018; Skorinko, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2006) conducted empirical research asking participants to solve this riddle. Most instead propose alternative explanations (e.g., same-sex parent, adoptive father, stepfather (Belle et al., 2021)).⁶⁸ Belle et al. (2021) supposed that only a minority of participants imagined that the surgeon could be a woman because of the historically gender stereotype that associates the role of surgeon with men. However, as shown by the data reported by the authors, the presence of women in the medical field is now growing rapidly. The fact that, despite the increasing female numerical representation, there is still difficulty in imagining a female surgeon may suggest that it is challenging to overcome the gender stereotype of roles. In other words, despite the social changes, the term “surgeon” evokes a male association, making it challenging to envisage alternative possibilities, contrary to the assumption that a doctor is always male (Belle et al., 2021).⁶⁹

Psycholinguistic research provides a cognitive explanation for this pattern (see, for instance, Carreiras et al., 1996; Garnham et al., 2002; Oakhill et al., 2005). As discussed by Gygax et al. (2008), when grammatical gender information is unavailable, individuals rely on stereotypical knowledge to construct mental representations. Conversely, when grammatical gender is explicitly marked, it guides interpretation and reduces reliance on

⁶⁸ Belle et al. (2021) hypothesise that the response to the riddle, which imagines a homosexual male couple as the fathers of the boy, is influenced by a growing national focus on LGBT+ rights issues (Belle et al., 2021).

⁶⁹ The relatively low rate of participants who were able to transcend stereotypical gender patterns is a surprising finding, particularly given the current widespread presence of female surgeons in both real-life and media representations. These findings highlight the persistence of gender schemas in influencing problem-solving processes despite social changes and experiences that challenge traditional stereotypes (Belle et al., 2021).

stereotypes (Gygax et al., 2008). This supports a general principle: gender representations are shaped by grammatical cues when available, and by stereotypes when they are not. Moreover, readers tend to encode gender information even when it is not required for comprehension. In the absence of explicit cues, this information is inferred from contextual and stereotypical knowledge, reinforcing default masculine interpretations (Gygax et al., 2021).⁷⁰

These findings are relevant also for grammatical gender languages such as Italian. Gender-obscuration strategies that rely on non-gendered nouns (e.g., collective terms or epicene forms) may fail to prevent masculine interpretations, as readers continue to rely on stereotypical association (Giusti, 2022). Moreover, as argued by Sbisà (2019), masculine forms in Italian such as “il chirurgo” (the[M] surgeon[M]) are not easily interpreted as true generic, but tend to evoke a male referent (Sbisà, 2019).

In contrast, visibility strategies can directly counteract stereotypical assumptions. The use of feminine forms like “chirurga” (surgeon[F]) explicitly marks the referent as female, making women’s presence linguistically and cognitively salient. This supports the view that grammatical gender, while often seen as a constraint, can also be leveraged as a resource to challenge stereotypes (González Vázquez et al., 2024).⁷¹ Experimental evidence from Italian further confirms this interaction between grammatical cues and stereotypes. Ronca and Moscati (2019) show that readers initially rely on stereotypical expectations when processing role nouns, but these can be overridden by explicit morphological gender cues. When

⁷⁰ For an overview of the cognitive processes involved in understanding text or speech and how mental representations of the information transmitted are constructed during reading, see Gygax et al. (2021).

⁷¹ The work by Gygax et al. (2021) on the ambiguity associated with the gender interpretation of the masculine form of role nouns confirms what we can expect. The authors found that in French when a feminine role noun is employed, as in the case of the term “les chirurgiennes” (surgeons, F), there is no ambiguity as to whether the subject is a female surgeon.

Consequently, “les chirurgiennes” in “Les chirurgiennes ont réussi leurs examens” (The surgeons [F] have passed the exams), is interpreted as feminine. Conversely, when the masculine form of the same term is used, as in “Les chirurgiens ont réussi leurs examens” (The surgeons [M] have passed the exams), readers must disambiguate the masculine form. It can refer only to male surgeons, or it can refer to a group of people made up of both female and male surgeons. According to the authors, this poses a challenge to the cognitive system (Gygax et al., 2021).

feminine agreement appears early in the sentence, stereotypical inferences are effectively blocked. This demonstrates that grammatical gender marking can actively reshape mental representations in real time (Ronca & Moscati, 2019).⁷² Similarly, Cettolin (2020), through both a recall task with adults and a drawing task with children, shows that the use of the unmarked masculine leads to a lower activation of female referents, whereas explicitly gendered forms (e.g., splitting strategies) significantly increase the visibility of women in participants' responses. These findings suggest that even when the masculine is theoretically used as "inclusive", it may not be cognitively processed as such, particularly in contexts where gender stereotypes are already salient (Cettolin, 2020).⁷³

Safina's research (2024a; 2024b) lends support to these hypotheses. In a first experiment involving a text comprehension task, participants read short texts describing groups of individuals engaged in various activities and then selected the image that best represented the group from a set of options. The texts used plural forms of gender-common, such as "cantante" (singer) in three different grammatical gender encodings: masculine form, splitting strategy (feminine and masculine), and conservative obscuration strategy (epicene and collective nouns). The results diverged from previous psycholinguistic findings: contrary to expectations, masculine forms did not consistently elicit male-specific interpretations.

⁷² The manipulation focused on disambiguation timing (early vs. late). Early disambiguation involved the first clause contained a past participle, which in Italian carries morphological gender and number agreement. Example: "Diventata ingegnere, si era comprata un nuovo studio" (Having become[F] an engineer[M], she had bought[F] herself a new office). In this case, the participle introduces a feminine referent, overriding any masculine stereotype associated with "ingegnere" (engineer[M]). Late Disambiguation involved the first clause used a gerund, which is morphologically invariant. Example: "Essendo ingegnere, si era comprata un nuovo studio" (Being an engineer[M], she had bought[F] herself a new office). In this case, no grammatical gender is indicated early, so participants rely on extralinguistic stereotypes. The past participle in Clause 2 was either masculine or feminine, creating a match or mismatch with the stereotype or the grammatical gender introduced in Clause 1. This yielded a 2x2 within-subject design: early disambiguation + masculine participle; early disambiguation + feminine participle; late disambiguation + masculine participle; late disambiguation + feminine participle. For more information about this experiment, see Ronca & Moscati (2019)

⁷³ Cettolin (2020) investigates the cognitive effects of grammatical gender through two complementary studies: an online recall task with adults and a drawing task with children. Participants exposed to unmarked masculine forms produced or represented fewer female referents compared to those exposed to gender-explicit forms (Cettolin, 2020). Despite some limitations in sample size and composition, the study provides converging evidence that the masculine form, although formally inclusive, tends to reduce the cognitive salience of women, especially in stereotypically male domains.

Rather, they were often processed as ambiguous or generic. Surprisingly, male interpretations were more frequent in the conservative obscuration condition, whereas they were reduced in the splitting strategy. Safina (2024a, 2024b) suggests that these unexpected results may be due to the limited sample size and the participants' high familiarity with inclusive language issues (Safina, 2024a; 2024b).

A second experiment employed an anaphora resolution task. Participants read sentences with plural forms of gendered terms like “camerieri/cameriere” (waiters[M]/[F]) across four conditions: masculine form, splitting strategy (feminine and masculine), conservative obscuration strategy (epicene and collective nouns), and schwa-based strategy (Safina, 2024b, 2024a). In contrast to the first experiment, masculine forms here triggered a significantly stronger masculine interpretation. However, the other three strategies tend to attenuate or eliminate masculine interpretations. The schwa-based forms were particularly effective: unlike the other strategies, they entirely eliminated male-dominant readings and produced more balanced or even slightly female-leaning mental representations. Safina (2024b) attributes this to the ideological salience of these forms, which may enhance their conceptual accessibility despite their low grammatical integration (Safina, 2024b). Taken together, these findings indicate that gender visibility plays a crucial role. Obscuration strategies, although useful in some contexts, may fail to prevent masculine interpretations. Visibility strategies, by contrast, directly intervene in the formation of mental representations, making them more effective in challenging androcentric interpretations.

More recent experimental evidence in Italian further confirms the robustness of this effect and highlights the role of linguistic form in shaping interpretation. In a study by Cella, Floris, and Borgna (2026), the riddle was administered to 691 high school students using different linguistic formulations. In the standard version employing the masculine form *chirurgo*, only 18.6% of participants identified the surgeon as the mother. By contrast, in a control condition with parent-role reversal, the correct response rate rose to 91.4%, showing that the difficulty lies not in the logical structure of the riddle but in the gendered interpretation of the professional role. Crucially, modifying the linguistic form significantly

affected participants' responses. When the role noun was replaced with a neutral periphrasis, the proportion of “mother” responses increased to 37.6%, effectively doubling the baseline rate. When an innovative neutral form (chirurg*) was used, this proportion rose further to 52.5%, surpassing half of the sample. These results demonstrate that even minimal linguistic changes can substantially alter gender representations, without increasing cognitive effort.

To summarise, the pervasiveness of grammatical gender in Italian presents both challenges and opportunities. While it requires constant gender marking (§ 2.5), it also provides linguistic tools to make gender visible and to counteract stereotypes (§ 2.6). Unlike English, where terms such as “surgeon” remain ambiguous and often default to masculine interpretations Italian allows speakers to explicitly encode gender distinctions. This makes visibility strategies particularly powerful in grammatical gender languages, where they can actively reshape both linguistic representations and social perception. The broader implications of these strategies are evident in applied contexts, such as job advertisements, where linguistic choices can influence perceived accessibility and self-efficacy (see, among others, Gygax & Gabriel, 2008; Gygax & Gesto, 2007; § 2.5). In this sense, visibility strategies do not merely reflect social change but can actively contribute to it.

2.7 Concluding remarks

Several national and international institutions, including the European Parliament (2018b) and the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR, 2018), advocate for the use of gender-inclusive language as a means of challenging gender stereotypes and promoting equitable representation of diverse subjectivities. In line with issues discussed in § 2.1, this chapter has provided an overview of gender-inclusive language in Italian, highlighting its potential to contribute to these objectives.

To this end, I began by clarifying the terminology adopted throughout this work (§ 2.2), followed by an overview of how linguistic interventions vary depending on the structure of a given language (§ 2.3), both of which are essential for a precise and context-sensitive

analysis. I then addressed the classification of referent types in Italian (§ 2.4), which serves as a foundational element for identifying the context in which inclusive strategies can be implemented. The core of the chapter focused on gender-inclusive strategies that have been proposed within the Italian language. These were categorised into visibility and obscuration strategies: the former makes gender explicit, while the latter avoids disclosing gender information. Within both categories, I further distinguished between conservative strategies, those that draw on existing linguistic resources, and innovative strategies, those that introduce non-conventional or novel forms (§ 2.5). I then presented a series of arguments, supported by experimental findings, to evaluate the strengths and limitations of visibility and obscuration strategies in countering gender stereotypes (§ 2.6). On the basis of this analysis, it is now possible to draw some general conclusions regarding their relative effectiveness.

Overall, visibility strategies appear more effective in countering gender stereotypes, as they challenge the masculine norm by explicitly acknowledging gender diversity. This assessment is supported by the experimental evidence discussed in this chapter, which provides insight into how different linguistic forms influence cognitive representations and the persistence of gender stereotypes (e.g., Gyga et al., 2021; Gyga et al., 2008). More broadly, this chapter has not only reviewed existing proposals, but has also brought together theoretical perspectives and experimental results in order to assess their effectiveness in countering gender stereotypes.

3. Misgendering as Microaggression and the Importance of Implementing a Non-Binary Language

3.1 Promoting linguistic inclusiveness

The previous chapter (§ 2.6; 2.7) has shown that visibility strategies are more effective than obscuration strategies in countering gender stereotypes in mental representations. However, a crucial issue emerges, that is while binary visibility strategies (e.g., feminisation and splitting) increase the visibility of women, they systematically exclude non-binary people. This creates a structural tension between two dimensions of inclusivity: on the one hand, enhancing the visibility of women within a binary system; on the other, ensuring the inclusion of all gender identities, including non-binary ones. While these strategies are not mutually exclusive in practice, individual linguistic choices often require prioritising one dimension over the other. This chapter builds directly on this tension. If, as argued in Chapter 2, visibility plays a central role in shaping mental representations, the question arises as to whose visibility is being promoted and at what cost. In particular, can a system that relies exclusively on binary gender marking be considered fully inclusive?

To address this question, the chapter moves from women's visibility to the broader issue of the linguistic recognition of gender identity, introducing *misgendering* as a key phenomenon at the intersection of language, cognition, and social justice. Unlike the previous chapter, which was primarily grounded in psycholinguistic evidence, this chapter adopts a theoretically integrative approach, combining philosophical analysis with insights from psychology and linguistics to examine how misgendering operates in a grammatical gender language such as Italian.

The work of Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak (2018; 2021) has been central to the philosophical debate on gendered language and misgendering. Rather than offering a critical response to their framework, in this chapter I use it as a point of departure to develop an analysis tailored to the Italian context. In particular, I extend their account by examining how the constraints of grammatical gender affect both the possibility of avoiding misgendering and the implementation of non-binary linguistic strategies. This shift is essential to the overall argument of the thesis: while Chapter 2 has demonstrated that linguistic form shapes gender

representation, this chapter shows that it also carries normative implications, as certain structures may fail to recognise, or may actively misrepresent, individuals' gender identities.

Non-binary language is a point of contention in contemporary debates on linguistic inclusivity, raising questions about representation, recognition, and the limits imposed by grammatical gender systems. Several arguments have been advanced to support the importance of making non-binary people linguistically visible. Such forms are necessary not only to ensure equal representation and acknowledge all gender identities (see, among others, López, 2020), but also for the construction of personal identity and its social recognition (e.g., Kapusta, 2016). Social recognition of an individual's gender identity (understood as their internal sense of being male, female, or non-binary) is fundamental to well-being and self-construction, and is partly realised through language, including using names and pronouns that are aligned with a person's self-identified gender.⁷⁴ Research shows that these expressions function as distinctive markers of identity (Gibbs, 2024) and that using them appropriately is a key component of respectful interaction. Trans* individuals (both binary and non-binary)⁷⁵ can encounter insufficient social acknowledgement (Sevelius, 2013),⁷⁶ including the use of incorrect pronouns or names, a practice known as “misgendering”.

⁷⁴ The first names and pronouns that people use may not always match those assigned to them at birth, particularly in the case of trans* individuals. In order to respect a person's identity, people should use the name and the pronouns they use for themselves, even if their identification documents show a different name or gender. Further information can be found in the document published by the National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center at the following URL: <https://www.lgbtqihealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/>.

⁷⁵ Please note that in this work, the term “trans*” is used to refer to people whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes both binary and non-binary trans* people. The asterisk in “trans*” highlights the intentionally broad and inclusive nature of the term, covering a range of gender-diverse identities (e.g., non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid), without conflating gender identity with sexual orientation. Therefore, when referring specifically to non-binary people, I will use the expression “trans* non-binary people”.

⁷⁶ The term “gender expression” refers to the “external appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behaviour, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviours and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine” (Human Rights Campaign, s.d.). Further information is available in the glossary of terms published by The Human Rights Campaign at the following URL: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. I first examine the importance of the recognition of an individual's gender identity (§ 3.2). Second, I introduce the concept of “microaggression” (§ 3.3), and I analyse misgendering as a specific form of this linguistic act (§ 3.4). Third, I revisit Dembroff and Wodak (2018) framework, expanding their “moderate claim” (§ 3.5) and integrating empirical evidence on the psychological effects of misgendering (§ 3.6). Finally, I discuss their “radical claim” in light of the Italian linguistic system, arguing that while the obligation to avoid misgendering is compelling, the complete elimination of gender marking raises significant challenges in grammatical gender languages (§ 3.7).⁷⁷ Overall, the chapter argues that non-binary linguistic strategies are not merely optional innovations but play a crucial role in addressing structurally embedded forms of misrecognition, even though their implementation in Italian remains complex and contested.

3.2 Recognition of personal identity

The construction of personal identity unfolds within social and cultural contexts and can be influenced by prevailing conceptions of gender categories.⁷⁸ Gender categories entail specific “constraints and enablements” (Jenkins, 2023) and impose social roles, expectations, norms, and self-conceptions (Dembroff, 2018, p. 24) which individuals interpret, resist, or rework in forming their sense of self. While this process applies to both binary and non-binary individuals, it becomes particularly constrained in social contexts structured by cisnormative assumptions.⁷⁹ One form of oppression affecting non-binary individuals is conceptual erasure, namely the widespread belief that “male” and “female” exhaust the spectrum of

⁷⁷ Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6 are excerpts, with some modifications, from the article “Language and Identity: The Psychological Implications of Misgendering for Transgender Individuals”, which has been accepted for publication in *Phenomenology and Mind*.

⁷⁸ An interesting debate concerns what it means for gender categories themselves to be socially constructed, a question that raises important implications for how we understand identity, recognition, and oppression. This debate, however, falls beyond the scope of the present discussion. For a more detailed treatment, see Díaz-León (2019; 2016).

⁷⁹ Transphobia refers to “discrimination towards, fear, marginalisation, and hatred of transgender and gender diverse people or those perceived as transgender or gender diverse” (National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2024).

gender (Dembroff, 2018).⁸⁰ This can limit the intelligibility of non-binary identities and hinder their recognition in everyday interaction. Institutional constraints, such as restrictions on legal gender recognition, further reinforce these limitations by restricting individuals' capacity for self-representation (Dembroff, 2018).

Language plays a crucial role in these dynamics. As Zimman (2017) argues, language constitutes one of the primary sites through which gender identities are negotiated and socially recognised. Drawing on Ochs's (1992) notion of indexicality, he emphasises that linguistic forms do not merely reflect gender but actively participate in its construction. In this sense, the affirmation or denial of trans* identities is accomplished through everyday discourse, including the attribution of pronouns, gendered labels, and forms of address. Because gender is frequently presupposed rather than explicitly asserted in interaction, trans* individuals are often required to negotiate or correct gendered assumptions embedded in ordinary language use (Zimman, 2017).

Misgendering, including practices such as deadnaming (i.e., referring to a person by their birth-assigned name rather than their chosen one), constitutes a form of misrecognition with significant social consequences (National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2024). Members of the trans* community have emphasised that the use of accurate and affirming language is essential for achieving social recognition and respect (see, among others, Dembroff, 2018; Sevelius et al., 2020). Zimman (2017) further notes that trans-inclusive linguistic practices are grounded in the principle of self-identification, according to which individuals themselves constitute the primary authority regarding how they should be referred to linguistically, rather than anatomy, appearance, or voice (Zimman, 2017). Empirical evidence further shows that misgendering is not a neutral mistake but a socially embedded practice with cumulative effects. For instance, qualitative studies on black trans* women in the United States, describe misgendering as a form of symbolic violence associated

⁸⁰ According to Dembroff (2018), non-binary individuals face systemic misrecognition and neglect. They experience a different form of marginalisation to trans*-binary identities, which manifests in various domains, including education and medicine (Dembroff, 2018).

with emotional distress, diminished self-esteem, and experience of dehumanisation (Sevelius et al., 2020). These effects emerge within broader systems of marginalisation, where repeated misrecognition undermines both individual well-being and social inclusion.

From this perspective, misgendering should be understood not merely as an error in reference but as a practice that affects individuals' capacity to be socially recognised as who they are. It operates at both at the level of personal identity construction and at the level of social norms, reinforcing frameworks that exclude trans* identities. This argument provides the conceptual bridge to the next section: if misgendering is a form of misrecognition embedded in social structures, it becomes necessary to situate it within a broader theory of everyday discrimination. The following section therefore introduces the concept of microaggression as the analytical framework through which misgendering can more precisely understood.

3.3 What is “microaggression”

Research in psychology and social sciences has shown that many forms of everyday discrimination operate through subtle and often unintentional practices. These are commonly conceptualised under the notion of “microaggression” (see, for example, Nadal et al., 2016; Sue, 2010), which provides the broader theoretical framework for understanding misgendering. Microaggressions are widespread across everyday interactions, and their targets may not even realise they are being subjected to them. These acts can manifest in a variety of forms, including facial expressions, body language, terminology, comments, and hostile institutional policies (Nordmarken & Kelly, 2014). For example, trans* people are subjected to denigrating treatment in healthcare settings through practices such as comments and behaviours that convey otherness in relation to their gender identity, inadvertently causing feelings of humiliation and embarrassment. Such derogatory acts are rooted in dehumanising beliefs and misconceptions about trans*

individuals, including the notion that affirming a gender identity other than the one assigned at birth is unnatural or illegitimate (Nordmarken & Kelly, 2014).⁸¹

The identities of those who experience microaggressions are portrayed as undesirable within dominant cultural narratives, reflecting worldviews steeped in ethnocentric values, stereotypes, and assumptions embedded in cultural norms and behaviours. Because microaggressions are systematically reproduced against specific groups of people, they reinforce dichotomies such as inclusion-exclusion, superiority-inferiority, desirability-undesirability, and normality-abnormality (Sue, 2010). These acts make derogatory stereotypes explicit by reproducing systems of oppression on an interpersonal level (Nordmarken, 2014).

The term *microaggression*, introduced by Chester Pierce in the 1970s in the expression *racial microaggression*, describes subtle, routine, both conscious and unconscious slights and derogatory messages aimed at African Americans (Pierce et al., 1978). Subsequent work has demonstrated that such dynamics extend across a wide range of marginalised groups (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). These everyday discriminatory acts can target individuals based on gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, or other axes of inequality (Sue, 2010, p. 5).

Sue (2010) illustrates microaggressions through two brief narratives. The first concerns a classroom interaction between a *white* professor and his *black* students. After a lecture on the Greco-Roman roots of psychology, an African American student questioned the Eurocentric focus of the material and pointed out the absence of contributions from non-Western traditions. Instead of engaging with the critique, the professor asked him to “calm down” and reassured the class that universal principles would eventually be covered, subtly invalidating the student’s concerns. When another

⁸¹ It should be noted that Nordmarken and Kelly (2014) have themselves questioned the term “microaggression”, pointing out that the negative impact of individual cases may not always be minimal (Nordmarken and Kelly, 2014).

black student offered a more conciliatory comment, the professor praised him as “articulate” and “intelligent”, not realising that such compliments can be experienced as patronising because they echo racialised stereotypes. What he intended as encouragement was instead perceived as dismissive and condescending.

The second example follows Kathleen, a young woman travelling to an important job interview. On a crowded subway, a male commuter placed his hand on her lower back and guided her through the crowd without asking, an act he perceived as courteous, but that made her uncomfortable. During the interview, the vice president addressed her using her nickname rather than her preferred name (while calling male employees by formal titles) and even joked that she didn’t really need a job because she could “find a good man”. Kathleen showed her disappointment and, although the vice president later insisted that he treated women and men equally, his remarks revealed underlying gendered assumptions. In both stories, Sue (2010) shows how subtle, unintentional comments or actions can convey disrespect or reinforce stereotypes toward marginalised groups. These examples highlight a crucial feature of microaggressions: their meaning does not depend solely on the speaker’s intention, but on their social and structural context. Thus, microaggression can be understood as a communicative practice, also when committed unintentionally, that conveys hostile, derogatory, or negative messages toward an individual or group, specifically as members of a marginalised social category (Sue, 2010).

Regarding gender microaggressions, Sue (2010) primarily discusses microaggressions targeting women but also considers those affecting LGBT individuals, particularly in relation to sexual orientation. Under the heading “Sexual-Orientation Microaggressions and Heterosexism”, he shows how microaggressions against LGBT people stem from processes of erasure and discrimination tied to their sexual and gender identities. When such discrimination becomes embedded in individuals, institutions, and the broader social order, it operates as a pervasive system of oppression. It may appear in overt and intentional forms, but also operates covertly through invisibility,

underrepresentation, lack of recognition, silence, and omission. LGBT oppression can emerge at the linguistic level. It could happen with terms explicitly abusive, e.g., “dyke”, or “fag”, or take subtler forms in everyday speech, such as using “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” instead of gender-neutral alternatives like “partner”, as it implicitly excludes LGBT relationships. Likewise, an employer who continues to refer to a trans* man with “she” undermines and invalidates that person’s gender identity. In all these cases, language not only shapes perceptions but also conveys and reproduces stereotypes and beliefs about a marginalised group (Sue, 2010).

Not all incorrect assumptions, however, qualify as microaggressions. Consider, for example, everyday situations in which a young woman is addressed as “ma’am” because she appears older than her age, or when someone offers a seat to a woman wrongly assumed to be pregnant because of a prominent belly. These comments or gestures may be uncomfortable or embarrassing and may even feel humiliating when done deliberately. Yet, according to Sue’s (2010) conceptualisation, they do not constitute microaggressions. The reason is that microaggressions are defined as hostile, derogatory, or negative messages directed at individuals, specifically insofar as they belong to a marginalised social group. In the examples above, the offence arises from an incorrect inference about age or pregnancy, but the women are not being targeted because they are members of a stigmatised social category. Although they may be women, and women can indeed be the target of gender-based microaggressions, these particular acts do not occur because they are women; they occur because they are misperceived as older or pregnant, which is not, in itself, a marker of structural marginalisation.⁸²

This distinction is crucial for the analysis that follow. For an act to count as a microaggression, it must not only involve a mistake or slight, but must do so in virtue of the target’s membership in a marginalised social group. This criterion explains why

⁸² I am grateful to Bianca Cepollaro for prompting me to reflect on these two illustrative cases, which helped me clarify more precisely why misgendering qualifies as a microaggression only insofar as it targets individuals on the basis of their membership in a marginalised social group.

certain forms of misidentification fall outside this category, while others, such as misgendering, clearly fall within it. Building on this framework, the next section examines misgendering as a specific type of microaggression, analysing its mechanisms, causes, and social implications.

3.4 Misgendering as a microaggression

Building on the general framework of microaggressions outlined in the previous section, this section examines misgendering as a specific instance of this phenomenon. Misgendering is considered a form of microaggression in psychological and sociological literature (e.g., Rogers, 2021; Nadal et al., 2016). Specifically, Nordmarken (2014) frames misgendering as a form of “trans microaggression” that enacts misrecognition, denies the individual’s self-understanding, and reinforces broader cisnormative structures.⁸³ On an interpersonal level, these microaggressions do not merely reflect social prejudice but actively constitute gender-based subordination by positioning trans* people as “other” and illegitimate. It can convey the implicit message that the individual cannot self-determine their identity, that only the sex assigned at birth is valid, or that non-binary identities do not exist. In this sense, misgendering should be understood not simply as reflecting inequality, but as actively reproducing it in everyday interaction. The repetition of these acts contributes to the internalisation of stigma and the maintenance of social hierarchies based on gender identity (Nordmarken, 2014).

The occurrence of misgendering can be attributed to multiple factors, which further illuminate its status as a microaggression, including misunderstanding, misinterpretation of gender identity, or simply lacking sufficient information about a person’s gender (Nordmarken, 2014). Unintentional misgendering affects both binary and non-binary trans* individuals. It can occur when there is a misalignment between gender identity and

⁸³ Similarly, Zimman (2017) argues that the affirmation or withholding of trans* identities occurs through everyday linguistic interaction. From this perspective, misgendering functions not merely as an inaccurate description, but as a form of social misrecognition that undermines individuals’ authority over their own gendered self-definition (Zimman, 2017).

gender expression, such as when a person's appearance does not conform to stereotypical gender norms. This mismatch can lead to erroneous assumptions about the gender identity of trans* individuals (Gibbs, 2024). In the case of non-binary individuals, misgendering is further compounded by a lack of societal recognition of non-binary identities (Jacobsen et al., 2023). A binary understanding of gender remains deeply entrenched in society, making it difficult for non-binary identities to be acknowledged. An empirical work by Arijs et al. (2023) found that non-binary participants experienced higher rates of misgendering and deadnaming, especially when their gender expression aligned with the expectations for their sex assigned at birth. Participants also reported that misgendering and deadnaming produced dysphoric feelings (forms of emotional distress related to gender dysphoria) and a sense that their identities were being invalidated (Arijs et al., 2023).

A key dimension of misgendering concern the distinction between intentional and unintentional acts. Unintentional misgendering may stem from misunderstandings or limited information, making it difficult to recognise its harmful impact (Nadal et al., 2016). This dynamic is reinforced by the fact that pronoun attribution is typically rapid and automatic in everyday discourse. Speakers are generally socialised to infer gender based on appearance, embodiment, or voice, often without conscious reflection. Trans-inclusive linguistic practices therefore require speakers to bring these assumptions “above the level of awareness” and actively reconsider habitual gender attribution processes (Zimman, 2017). Perpetrators may frame their such instances as “honest mistakes” and focus on their intentions rather than the effects, thereby minimising the harm experienced by the target. This dynamic can hinder their ability to understand the victim's perspective and intensify the traumatic impact of the act (Nadal et al., 2016). Intentional misgendering, by contrast, may be motivated by transphobia, refusal to recognise someone's identity, or a desire to demean.⁸⁴ In certain contexts, it may even be performed

⁸⁴ I am grateful to Bianca Cepollaro for drawing my attention to an additional, politically charged dimension of intentional misgendering. Beyond transphobia, refusal to recognise someone's gender identity, or the desire to demean, intentional misgendering may also be used to send a prescribed political message. In such cases, the

collectively or trivialised as harmless. Notably, intentional misgendering can be perceived as more violent and harmful than its unintentional counterpart, although both forms can produce significant psychological distress (Arijs et al., 2023).

To fully understand why misgendering qualifies as a microaggression, it is useful to consider the role of structural marginalisation. Take the case of a trans* woman addressed with masculine pronouns: the act directly targets a marginalised group and reinforces a broader system in which trans* identities are denied or delegitimised. In this sense, misgendering communicates a derogatory message rooted in structural injustice, thereby meeting Sue's criteria for microaggressions.

This classification becomes more complex when considering borderline cases, which help refine the analytical framework. For instance, a cisgender man who is misidentified as a woman may experience discomfort, but this does not constitute a microaggression under Sue's (2010) definition, as cis men do not belong to a socially marginalised group based on gender identity. Indeed, their gender category is neither stigmatised nor socially devalued. As a result, the misidentification does not tap into a broader system of oppression, and its effects, while unpleasant, do not carry the structural weight that characterises microaggressions. However, this interpretation may be too restrictive when intersectional factors are considered. While cisgender men, as a group, are not structurally marginalised on the basis of gender identity, some individuals may still be targeted through overlapping axes of marginalisation. For instance, gay men and, more broadly, gender-nonconforming men, have historically been subject to verbal abuse and stigma precisely because of their perceived deviation from dominant gender norms (see, for instance, Edmondson, 2021).⁸⁵ The relevant cases here are those in which such

act is not necessarily motivated by personal animosity toward the individual concerned; rather, it functions as a strategic performance aimed at signalling one's ideological positioning within a given political context.

⁸⁵ Evidence from experimental research on LGBTQ+ slurs supports the claim that certain forms of verbal aggression are strongly gendered and disproportionately target men. For instance, Daniel Edmondson (2021) shows that highly offensive slurs such as fag, faggot, and gayboy are specifically directed at gay men, and that patterns of linguistic reclamation differ significantly across gender groups (Edmondson, 2021). This highlights

individuals are intentionally referred to using feminine forms despite their gender being known, rather than cases in which gendered language results from heteronormative assumptions (e.g., assuming that a man's spouse is a woman). In these contexts, being misgendered functions not merely as an isolated misidentification but as a form of symbolic feminisation or degradation, drawing on entrenched associations between femininity and inferiority.

Similarly, consider a cisgender woman who is mistakenly taken to be a man for her masculine manifestation of gender. Women are a socially disadvantaged group, yet the stigma they face is not rooted in the denial of their gender identity, as in the case of non-binary and binary trans* people. Rather, gender-based discrimination against women is tied to stereotypes of subordination, emotionality, care roles, and limitations in positions of authority. When a cis woman is misperceived as a man, the act is not targeting her because she is a woman, nor does it reflect societal invalidation of women's gender identities. Although such an error can be unpleasant or socially awkward, it does not carry the same psychological or structural implications as misgendering directed at trans* people. For this reason, it does not qualify as a microaggression under Sue's (2010) definition. However, this interpretation may be too narrow. Indeed, this type of misgendering can be understood as a response to gender nonconformity and may function as a form of symbolic erasure or correction, implicitly reinforcing normative expectations about how women should appear and behave. In this sense, the act is not neutral: it draws on broader structures of gender regulation that marginalise those who deviate from dominant femininity norms. From this perspective, the case may still qualify as a microaggression, as it communicates a derogatory or exclusionary message rooted in structural gender norms.

These cases indicate that Sue's (2010) framework, while analytically useful in highlighting the role of structural marginalisation, may not fully capture the complexity

the importance of considering how different axes of marginalisation, including sexual orientation and gender expression, shape experiences of linguistic harm.

of misgendering. In particular, it risks overlooking cases in which the harm does not stem from membership in a single marginalised category, but from the interaction between gender expression, sexual orientation, and broader normative expectations. A more nuanced account would therefore need to consider how misgendering operates across intersecting dimensions of identity, rather than relying on a strictly categorical understanding of marginalisation.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some limitations in the current literature on misgendering. Current psychological and medical literature focuses on binary genders. In some cases, researchers do not distinguish between binary and non-binary trans* individuals; in others, non-binary people are entirely absent. As a result, differences in the experiences of misgendering between these two groups are not adequately captured (Jacobsen et al., 2023). However, attention to this topic beyond the binary has increased in recent research. The discussion developed here paves the way for several future lines of inquiry, such as the differences in lived experiences between binary and non-binary trans* individuals. These differences could also shed light on which strategies are most effective in countering this type of microaggression and, more broadly, in challenging the perpetuation of ethnocentric beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes.

Having established misgendering as a structurally grounded form of microaggression, the next sections turn to its philosophical analysis. In particular, I revisit the framework developed by Dembroff and Wodak (2018), using it to explore the moral contestability of misgendering and its implications for linguistic practices in grammatical gender languages such as Italian.

3.5 The negative duty not to commit misgendering

The importance of using pronouns that align with an individual's gender identity has been discussed across various academic disciplines due to its moral and political implications. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) introduce two philosophical claims on this matter:

- (1) The moderate claim: there is a duty not to use gender-specific binary pronouns to refer to non-binary individuals.
- (2) The radical claim: there is a duty not to use gender-specific pronouns altogether, irrespective of the individual's gender identity.

This section focuses on the moderate claim, outlining the authors' arguments in support of it, before exploring the psychological consequences of misgendering.

The moderate claim holds that we have a negative duty not to use binary pronouns for non-binary individuals.⁸⁶ An argument from analogy supports this: just as it is wrong to refer to a trans* woman using male pronouns, it is similarly incorrect to use male or female pronouns for someone who identifies outside the binary (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). To illustrate this, the authors refer to the case of Group Captain Catherine McGregor, a trans* woman who was misgendered by Mark Latham, a former leader of the Australian Labor Party, who publicly referred to her using "he". According to Dembroff and Wodak (2018), while there is no positive duty to use the feminine pronoun "she" (as one could refer to her by name or title), there is a negative duty not to use the masculine pronoun "he". Latham thus violated this negative duty. By analogy, we have a similar duty not to refer to non-binary individuals using male or female pronouns (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

Importantly, this moderate claim serves as a premise for the radical claim, which will be discussed in the next section. For now, the moderate claim is justified by four arguments regarding the negative consequences of misgendering. These consequences pertain to respect, denial of resources, intelligibility, and reinforcement of ideologies, and they pose disadvantages to both binary and non-binary trans* individuals.

⁸⁶ Dembroff and Wodak (2018) do not explicitly discuss cases in which non-binary individuals voluntarily use binary pronouns, multiple pronouns (e.g., he/they), or fluctuating pronoun preferences. Given the heterogeneity of non-binary identities and linguistic practices, these cases would deserve further theoretical investigation, particularly regarding how the moderate claim applies when individuals partially identify with binary linguistic forms. However, a detailed discussion of these issues falls outside the scope of the present work.

Firstly, (i) misgendering a binary or non-binary trans* person expresses disrespect towards their social identity and the denial of their gender identity. Indeed, misgendering McGregor is equivalent to disrespecting her gender identity. That is, misgendering a binary trans* individual communicates disrespect for their identity, and the same goes for a non-binary trans* individual. Furthermore, the authors argue that this can also cause severe physical and psychological health problems, whether done intentionally or unintentionally (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). Zimman (2017) similarly argues that the affirmation or denial of trans* identities is accomplished through everyday discourse. Because gender attribution is embedded in routine linguistic interaction, misgendering functions not simply as an inaccurate description but as a form of social misrecognition that constrains individuals' possibilities for self-definition and social legibility (Zimman, 2017).

Secondly, (ii) misgendering implies the potential denial of resources to which one is entitled. For example, in the case of a trans* woman, classifying her as a male may prevent her from applying for positions designated for women or from accessing women-only spaces. In the case of non-binary individuals, using binary pronouns does not deny access to existing gender-specific resources, since such resources are not systematically provided for non-binary people within existing institutional frameworks. This, in turn, legitimises the ongoing failure to create or adapt institutional structures, such as restrooms, ID categories, educational programs, or supporting networks, in ways that include and serve non-binary individuals (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

A third consequence (iii) is the undermining of the intelligibility of actions and choices. Social categories such as gender provide interpretative frameworks, or blueprints, for understanding individuals' behaviour and self-presentation. For instance, the prescription for women to shave their legs is intelligible only within a framework that categorises someone as a woman. If a trans* woman is referred to with masculine pronouns, gender-specific norms are no longer recognised as applying to her. Consequently, her ability to violate or adhere to these norms is lost. This erases her ability

to express herself in socially legible ways, whether through alignment with or resistance to gender norms, thereby denying her autonomy in negotiating which interpretative blueprints apply to her. The same is true for non-binary individuals: misgendering them forces their actions to be interpreted through binary gender norms that they explicitly reject, rendering their conduct unintelligible and stripping them of an essential form of expressive and social self-determination (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). As Zimman (2017) notes, gender attribution is deeply embedded in interactional norms and is frequently presupposed rather than explicitly asserted. Because gendered assumptions are often built into ordinary linguistic practices, trans* individuals may be forced to constantly negotiate and correct forms of gender attribution that render their identities socially unintelligible (Zimman, 2017).

Finally, (iv) misgendering reinforces systems of concepts, language, and social norms that underpin the aforementioned problems. Public discourse contributes to shaping the concepts and norms that guide social understanding, but private discourse also contributes to reinforcing dominant ideologies. As Dembroff and Wodak (2018) point out, the words and concepts we use in private are not isolated from broader linguistic patterns; even private misgendering helps sustain problematic understandings of gender that marginalise non-binary identities (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

Taken together, these four consequences show that misgendering has morally significant implications that can undermine the dignity, rights, and social recognisability of both binary and non-binary trans* individuals. In light of these arguments, I argue that Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) moderate claim is not only philosophically sound but also normatively compelling: we do have a negative duty not to use binary pronouns for individuals who identify outside the gender binary. This duty is grounded in the imperative to prevent psychological harm, to foster recognition, and to dismantle unjust social structures that marginalise non-binary people. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) acknowledge that intentional misgendering causes harm, yet they maintain that even unintentional cases carry moral significance, as they communicate disrespect toward a

person's gender identity. Drawing on Kapusta's (2016) notion of microaggression, they argue that misgendering, whether deliberate or accidental, constitutes an everyday form of symbolic violence that reinforces the marginalisation of gender-diverse individuals and can lead to serious psychological and physical consequences. This distinction becomes particularly relevant when considering grammatical gender languages such as Italian, where most lexical and morphosyntactic elements are marked for binary gender. In such linguistic systems, speakers may unintentionally produce gendered expressions even when striving for inclusivity, given the structural constraints of the language. The following section will further explore this issue by assessing the feasibility of Dembroff and Wodak's moderate claim in languages where gender is a pervasive grammatical category.

Among the reasons adduced by Dembroff and Wodak (2018) to support the moderate claim, this work aims to explore the first one (i), namely, the argument regarding the psychological consequences. The topic of psychological damage is particularly interesting for highlighting the relationship between the construction of personal identity and the provision of gender information through language. This relationship between language and identity construction has also been emphasised within sociolinguistic and trans linguistic scholarship. In particular, Zimman (2017) argues that language constitutes one of the primary sites through which gender is negotiated and socially recognised. Drawing on Ochs's (1992) notion of indexicality, he observes that linguistic forms do not merely reflect gender identities but actively participate in their construction. From this perspective, pronouns and gendered forms are not neutral descriptors but mechanisms through which subjects become socially intelligible as gendered beings (Zimman, 2017). As previously stated (§ 3.1), the psychological consequences of misgendering have been investigated in the medical and psychological domains (see, for instance, Nadal et al., 2016; Sue, 2010) and are a subject of increasing interest in the philosophical literature (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018; Kapusta, 2016). Given the objective of this chapter, which is to explore the psychological implications of

misgendering in relation to the theme of identity construction, the following section will proceed to analyse the psychological implications that emerge from the extant literature.

3.6 Psychological harm

Research shows that microaggressions, in general, harm the mental health of members of marginalised social groups (for a detailed overview, see Nadal et al., 2016). They have been correlated with lower self-esteem, a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms, and lower levels of psychological well-being (Nadal et al., 2016). Nadal et al. (2014) highlighted common reactions to microaggressions among trans* individuals and identified three domains of response: emotional, behavioural, and cognitive (Nadal et al., 2014).

The emotional response domain (i) includes anger, betrayal, despair, exhaustion, and a sense of being invalidated and misunderstood. The behavioural domain (ii) comprises both active and passive strategies, including confronting the microaggressor, setting boundaries, avoiding situations where microaggressions are likely, or attempting to appease the aggressor to defuse tension.⁸⁷ The cognitive domain (iii) involves rationalisations, such as excusing the aggressor's behaviour by assuming ignorance or lack of education. Researchers have identified patterns of emotional reactions involving negative affect and emotional distress, as well as similar cognitive strategies such as rationalisation and behavioural strategies to avoid or minimise confrontation (Nadal et al., 2014).

In the specific case of misgendering, research shows that psychological consequences are consistent with studies that analyse microaggressions in general. Misgendering has been associated with psychological distress and the perception of social stigma. In this context, social support plays a buffering role: it helps to better recognise

⁸⁷ The American Psychological Association defines the coping strategy as “an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation”. For further information, see: <https://dictionary.apa.org/coping-strategy>.

prejudice and discrimination. Notably, people with higher levels of social support tend to perceive a stronger connection between the frequency of misgendering and the broader social stigma faced by trans* individuals (McLemore, 2018).

The mental health consequences of misgendering depend on several factors, including the context in which it occurs (e.g., among friends, at school, in the workplace, or explicitly hostile settings). These environments influence both the degree of the psychological impact, and the sense of vulnerability experienced. Another key factor is the centrality of collective identity to one's sense of self. This varies across individuals, depending on personal experiences, involvement in LGBTQ+ communities, and the extent to which identity categories have offered meaning, validation, or empowerment. Importantly, the perceived intent of the aggressor also shapes the experience: intentional misgendering can have a severe negative impact on the trans* person's mental health, while accidental use of incorrect pronouns may be perceived as less painful (Gibbs, 2024).

In their work on the effects of microaggressions on gender non-conforming individuals, Arijs et al. (2023) report that misgendering and deadnaming are experienced, particularly within the family context. These incidents arise in contexts characterised by a lack of acceptance or entrenched language habits. Participants described a range of reactions: some felt that being misgendered by relatives amounted to a denial of their identity, leading to feelings of gender dysphoria; others interpreted the misgendering as unintentional and attributed it to unconscious habits rather than hostility. Nevertheless, participants reported that repeated misgendering caused emotional distress, self-doubt, and reluctance to express their gender identity openly. Some also felt inhibited in their identity development or even began to question the validity of their own gender identity. As one interviewee explained: "It had the effect on me that I stopped myself to be open about my gender identity to my environment, and to myself" (Arijs et al., 2023, p. 15). Another admitted: "First I thought, am I just kidding myself, like am I being serious with myself but yeah, I know that I am still searching so then I sometimes got remarks like oh you're just confused, you know" (Arijs et al., 2023, p. 15). Ultimately, the psychological

impact of misgendering cannot be isolated from the broader social structures of oppression and discrimination that sustain it. These repeated acts of non-recognition derive their harmful force from a system in which gender diversity is still marginalised, revealing that the experience of misgendering is not merely personal, but a symptom of wider social exclusion.

In conclusion, research on misgendering highlights the negative psychological impact experienced by trans* individuals, effects that are broadly consistent with findings from research on microaggressions in general, which have been discussed previously (§ 3.3). Overall, these harms significantly affect mental health, and their severity varies depending on the aggressor's intent, the social context of the interaction, and the victim's perception of the act.

As Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue, not all four reasons (i-iv) need to apply equally, or even apply at all, in every instance of misgendering to support the moderate claim. These arguments suffice to establish the moral wrongness of misgendering, even if only some reasons are present or vary in intensity depending on the context. Their argument holds as long as enough of these reasons are in play to ground a duty not to misgender, in both binary and non-binary trans* cases (Dembroff and Wodak, 2018). The psychological and medical literature reviewed here supports this claim, as it shows that misgendering has clear negative psychological consequences for both binary and non-binary trans* individuals. These harms affect people's lived experiences and sense of identity, making gendered language a salient and potentially violent speech act when used in a way that disrespects someone's self-identification.

Note that Dembroff and Wodak (2018) frame their arguments within the context of the English language, which predominantly expresses gender through pronominal forms (§ 1.3). In contrast, in Italian, gender is extensively encoded in most nouns and agreement targets, including articles, adjectives, and pronouns (Lepschy, 1989; Stahlberg et al., 2007; § 1.3). As a result, adopting the moral duty not to use binary pronouns for non-

binary individuals in Italian (moderate claim) entails avoiding all terms that encode a binary gender when referring to non-binary people. This means avoiding not only pronominal misgendering but any linguistic mismatch between the grammatical gender used and the gender of the referent. Moreover, even more difficult may be the applicability of the moral duty to avoid any gender-specific pronoun (radical claim). In the next section, I consider whether Dembroff and Wodak's arguments (2018) can be extended to the case of Italian. While the moderate claim, and especially the radical claim, may be compelling in the context of English, they seem difficult to implement in a language like Italian. The following discussion explores whether, and to what extent, these claims can be meaningfully applied within the structural constraints of a grammatical gender language.

3.7 The duty not to use gender-specific pronouns altogether

As anticipated, Dembroff and Wodak (2018) also discuss a second claim, the radical one. The radical claim asserts that we have a moral duty not to use gender-specific pronouns altogether, including when referring to binary individuals. This means avoiding both "he" and "she", regardless of the referent's gender identity, and also rejects non-binary pronouns such as singular "they". To support this claim, the authors present three arguments. I will consider each in turn and discuss its applicability to the case of Italian.

3.7.1 Argument 1 revisited: no better alternative in Italian either?

The first argument (i) is that there is no better alternative than eliminating gender-specific pronouns altogether. According to Dembroff and Wodak (2018), once we accept the moderate claim, that we have a moral duty to avoid using binary pronouns for non-binary individuals, two main options remain if binary pronouns ("he" and "she") are to be retained:

- (1) Introducing a third, catch-all pronoun (e.g., singular "they" or "ze") for non-binary referents.

(2) Using a distinct pronoun for each non-binary identity.

Both approaches are considered problematic. The first (1) is inequalitarian: it preserves two specific pronouns (he and she) for men and women while collapsing all non-binary diversity into a single generic pronoun (singular they or ze). This reinforces the perception that binary identities are “natural” or legitimate. The second option (2) is deemed unfeasible due to the cognitive burden of learning and using an open-ended set of new pronouns, especially given that pronouns are a closed grammatical class and non-binary identities are fluid and evolving. For these reasons, the authors conclude that eliminating gender-specific pronouns altogether offers the most consistent and equitable solution (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).⁸⁸

In their later work, Dembroff and Wodak (2021) reinforce this conclusion through the analogy with “Renglish”, a fictional language that encodes race through binary pronouns (e.g., “whe” for white individuals and “ble” for Black individuals). This analogy is particularly illuminating for understanding the exclusionary effects of binary linguistic systems. In Renglish, individuals who do not fit neatly into the white/Black binary—such as people of mixed ancestry or those belonging to other racialised groups—are systematically misrepresented or erased. The language forces speakers either to assign them to an inappropriate category or to distort their identity altogether.

Dembroff and Wodak (2021) argue that the problem cannot be solved by proliferating race-specific pronouns, since this would require an impractically large and cognitively unmanageable set of forms. Moreover, because pronouns are a closed grammatical class, they are particularly resistant to expansion. As a result, any attempt to

⁸⁸ Recent empirical research on the Swedish gender-inclusive pronoun *hen* complicates a purely cognitive interpretation of the resistance to innovative pronouns. Studies by Renström and colleagues show that *hen* has become widely used and is generally perceived as grammatically acceptable, with only limited processing costs, particularly in its generic use (Renström et al., 2022). At the same time, acceptance varies significantly between generic and specifically non-binary uses of the pronoun, and resistance appears to be more strongly associated with ideological beliefs about gender binarity than with grammatical difficulty alone (Renström et al., 2022). However, these findings concern the introduction of a single additional pronoun rather than the large-scale proliferation of identity-specific pronouns discussed by Dembroff and Wodak (2018).

refine the system risks increasing both processing difficulty and the likelihood of misrepresentation. Instead, they conclude that the most viable solution is to reduce the amount of identity-marking encoded in the grammar. Crucially, the authors explicitly extend this reasoning to gender: just as a racial binary excludes those who do not fit into it, gendered language in English encodes a binary between men and women that is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Non-binary individuals, as well as those whose identities do not align neatly with binary categories, are therefore systematically excluded or misrepresented. As they note, even apparently inclusive forms such as “he or she” reproduce this exclusion by presupposing that the disjunction exhaustively covers all persons. This point resonates directly with the phenomenon of androcentric generic masculine discussed in Chapter 1: just as the generic “he” renders women invisible, binary formulations such as “he or she” render non-binary individuals invisible by excluding them from the conceptual domain of reference. This analogy strengthens the first argument by showing that the problem is not merely one of fairness between existing categories, but one of structural exclusion built into binary linguistic systems. From this perspective, the introduction of a single non-binary pronoun (option 1) does not resolve the issue, but rather reproduces it in a different form: it creates an asymmetrical system in which binary identities are lexically specified, while all other identities are grouped into a residual category. Similarly, proliferating pronouns (option 2) would attempt to capture diversity but would ultimately fail due to cognitive and structural constraints.

As Dembroff and Wodak (2018) note, their argument is developed with English in mind, a language that has gender-specific pronouns but does not explicitly encode gender pervasively. They acknowledge that their radical proposal might be easier to implement in English than in languages with a pervasive gender system, such as Portuguese, and leave open whether it could apply to them (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether their reasoning can extend to a language like Italian, a grammatical gender language. Italian poses a particular challenge. Like English, it has gender-specific pronouns, “lei” (she) and “lui” (he), but unlike English, grammatical

gender pervades the language, appearing across a wide range of nouns and agreement targets like articles, adjectives, and verbs (Lepschy, 1989). This raises a key question: could the radical proposal reasonably apply to a language like Italian?

Cesarano (2020) engages critically with Dembroff and Wodak's proposal (2018), focusing on the feasibility of the implementation of their proposal in the context of a grammatical gender language. Drawing on Southwood's (2016) definition, Cesarano (2020) understands *feasibility* not merely as what agents can do, but as what they can bring themselves to do, that is, what they are rationally and volitionally motivated to enact (Southwood, 2016). This shifts the focus from theoretical possibility to what is realistically actionable in a given sociolinguistic context. Using this lens, she evaluates Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) rejection of both options discussed (1; 2), (universalising a third pronoun or proliferating pronouns) as unfeasible, and she questions whether their preferred radical alternative (eliminating gender-specific pronouns altogether) is feasible in Italian.

According to Cesarano (2020), the problems identified by Dembroff and Wodak (2018) are exacerbated in Italian. Pronoun proliferation is even more difficult to implement, due to the pervasiveness of its grammatical gender system. Similarly, eliminating all gender-specific pronouns is impractical, as grammatical gender is embedded not just in pronouns but in a wide range of nouns and their dependent forms. Implementing the radical claim would therefore require both the implementation of a new pronoun and a full restructuring of the morphosyntactic system. This would mean not just adding forms but dismantling fundamental components of the Italian language. Cesarano (2020) concludes that, while Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) reasoning may be compelling within English, it leads to different conclusions when applied to Italian (Cesarano, 2020).

Italian is a pro-drop language, allowing subject pronouns to be omitted (Marcato & Thüne 2002). One might therefore object that this feature reduces reliance on gender-specific pronouns. While this is correct, such a strategy offers only a partial and context-

dependent solution. The omission of subject pronouns is not always syntactically or pragmatically available, and even when it is, gender marking typically re-emerges through other grammatical elements, such as past participles and adjectives, which require agreement. Consequently, the pro-drop property of Italian does not provide a sufficient strategy for systematically reducing gender marking in discourse.

Beyond cognitive and linguistic costs, Cesarano (2020) also warns of unintended consequences for gender representation. A fully neutral system might obscure the visibility of women, particularly in contexts where naming gender explicitly serves a symbolic or political purpose. For example, replacing “Ministra” (Minister[F]) with a gender-neutral term could erase hard-won feminist gains in linguistic visibility, especially in traditionally male-dominated domains.⁸⁹ Thus, while neither pronoun proliferation nor radical elimination is viable, Cesarano (2020) argues that speakers of grammatical gender languages are still morally accountable for avoiding misgendering. Drawing again on Southwood’s (2016), she invokes the notion of the *hypological ought*, a moral imperative that remains valid even if it is not yet fully achievable. From this perspective, the moderate claim retains normative value despite its practical limitations and calls instead for gradual, context-sensitive interventions in languages like Italian (Cesarano, 2020).

Let us turn to the first option derived from the moderate claim (1): introducing a single non-binary pronoun while maintaining binary ones. In Italian, non-binary pronouns can be created through innovative gender encoding devices (e.g., “lœi”, which could be seen as a counterpart to the English singular they). Meanwhile, “lui” (he) and “lei” (she) continue to refer to binary individuals.⁹⁰ Yet, as in English, collapsing all non-binary identities under a single generic pronoun fails to capture their internal diversity and

⁸⁹ In this work, I use the term “neutral” to refer to linguistic forms that do not convey any gender-related information, whether relating to binary (i.e., male or female) or non-binary identities. The aim of neutral expressions is to omit gender information entirely, rather than replacing binary categories with non-binary markers.

⁹⁰ For a discussion of the formation of neo-pronouns using innovative linguistic devices such as the schwa and the asterisk, see Chapter 2 (§ 2.5.1).

reinforces asymmetrical treatment. Whereas “lui” (he) and “lei” (she) refer specifically to men and women, “lɔi” (non-binary pronoun) becomes a catch-all for everyone else. Therefore, this inequality also occurs in Italian. As Cesarano (2020) notes, this asymmetry would not be confined to pronouns. In Italian, it would ripple more widely through the grammar, affecting most nouns referring to people and their dependent forms (Cesarano, 2020). Thus, if one chooses a schwa-based pronoun to refer to a non-binary individual, agreement targets need to be uniformly marked with the same morphological form, resulting the unfairness in a number of elements of the sentence.

Turning to the second option (2), proliferating pronouns to reflect the full spectrum of non-binary identities is impractical in Italian. It would not only require inventing new pronouns but also generating entirely new grammatical gender classes and agreement rules, something for which Italian lacks a productive framework. Unlike English, where nouns lack grammatical gender marking and new pronouns can function independently, Italian demands gender agreement across multiple constituents in the clause. Each new pronoun would therefore necessitate an entire paradigm of agreement forms, a task that would significantly increase the complexity of morphological processing for speakers and hearers. In a language like Italian, where agreement operates across multiple elements within the clause, the multiplication of gender classes would require speakers to acquire, store, and consistently apply a large number of additional agreement patterns. This would likely pose substantial challenges in terms of processing, learnability, and communicative efficiency.

Finally, even the radical claim proves unworkable in Italian. As Cesarano (2023) argues, eliminating all gender-specific pronouns would require replacing a wide range of gender-marked elements in the language that refers to any person (Cesarano, 2020). For example, referring to someone without gender-specific pronouns would also require neutralising terms such as *ragazzo/ragazza* (boy/girl), *amico/amica* (friend[M]/[F]), as well as corresponding adjectives and participles like *stanco/stanca* (tired[M]/[F]) or *andato/andata* (gone[M]/[F]). This would necessitate a full reworking of the agreement

system, such that even simple utterances like “Lui è andato a casa perché era stanco” (He[M] went[M] home because he[M] was tired[M]) would no longer be grammatically expressible without new neutral markers (e.g., schwa, asterisk) or radical restructuring. One possible strategy would be to adopt a gender-neutral pronoun (e.g., “lœi”) where it is necessary, and rely on conservative obscuration strategies, such as epicene or collective nouns, or impersonal constructions, to avoid providing gender information. However, these strategies are difficult to apply consistently, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.⁹¹ For instance, impersonal constructions may compromise clarity and naturalness in spontaneous or dialogic speech. In healthcare settings, for example, where quick, clear, and personalised communication is essential, avoiding gendered language may result in vagueness or reduced communicative efficiency. In everyday interaction, it risks producing speech that feels awkward or artificial. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, gender visibility, particularly through strategies of feminisation, can enhance the visibility of marginalised groups and actively counteract stereotypical male representation. In contrast, obscuration strategies could not be effective for these aims. Thus, the implementation of the radical claim remains unviable in Italian, both in terms of communicative practicability and in terms of its potential for social change.

In this context, it is useful to clarify what is meant by “forced disclosure”, by distinguishing it from related notions such as coming out and outing. Coming out is typically understood as a process through which individuals recognise, construct, and assert a non-normative sexual or gender identity within a heteronormative cultural context (Chirrey, 2003). It is often described as a significant moment of identity formation (Zimman, 2009). Importantly, coming out is generally conceived as an agentive act, in which individuals choose when and how to disclose aspects of their identity. By contrast, outing refers to situations in which a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity is disclosed by others without their consent, often raising concerns related to privacy, autonomy, and potential harm (Kumar, 2022). In this case, disclosure is externally

⁹¹ For a more in-depth look at what innovative strategies are, please refer to the previous chapter (§ 2.5).

imposed and may occur publicly, regardless of the individual's willingness to reveal such information.

The phenomenon described by Dembroff and Wodak (2018) as “forced disclosure” appears to occupy an intermediate position between these two notions. On the one hand, it can resemble coming out when marginalised individuals actively use linguistic resources, such as gender-specific pronouns, to assert their identity. For instance, a trans* woman who insists on being referred to with the pronoun “she” may be engaging in a form of self-disclosure that is structurally similar to coming out, in that it involves making one's gender identity linguistically visible. On the other hand, this disclosure is not always fully voluntary. In many cases, individuals are placed in communicative situations where they must either correct others or accept being misrepresented. In this sense, “forced disclosure” shares certain features with outing, insofar as it can pressure individuals to reveal aspects of their identity that they might otherwise prefer to keep private. However, it remains distinct from outing proper, as the disclosure is not performed by a third party, but arises from the interaction between linguistic conventions and social expectations.

Therefore, “forced disclosure” can be understood as a specific kind of pragmatically induced self-disclosure: it is neither a fully agentive act of coming out nor a non-consensual act of outing, but rather a situation in which the structure of linguistic interaction constrains individuals' ability to control when and how they disclose their identity.

In conclusion, neither of the two options derived by the moderate claim proposed by Dembroff and Wodak (2018) (introducing a single non-binary pronoun and proliferating identity-specific ones) proves viable in Italian. The same unfairness and impracticalities the authors identify in English are magnified by Italian's grammatical structure, where gender agreement permeates across a wide range of elements in the sentence. Nor is the radical claim (elimination of gender-specific forms altogether) a realistic solution. To implement it consistently, not only in pronouns but across the entire

system of personal references. Obscuration strategies might offer partial workarounds, but these are linguistically demanding and difficult to sustain across different communicative contexts. Thus, while Italian shares some of the representational challenges found in English, it offers even fewer actionable alternatives. Both moderate and radical strategies, when applied to Italian, turn out to be inequalitarian, unfeasible, or excessively costly to implement.

3.7.2 Argument 2 revisited: is gender disclosure an unavoidable breach of privacy?

The second argument (ii) that Dembroff and Wodak (2018) discuss in support of the radical claim is that providing gender information can compromise the referent's privacy. They argue that the use of gender-specific pronouns (such as "he" and "she") can place individuals in a morally problematic position they call "Disclose or Deceive": they must either disclose private information about their gender identity or sexual orientation, or deceive others, explicitly or implicitly, about these aspects of themselves. Through illustrative examples, they show how individuals like Asher (a trans man) or John (a gay man) may be forced to correct others' assumptions to avoid misgendering or heteronormative assumptions, thereby revealing sensitive information they may prefer to keep private. Alternatively, by remaining silent, they risk misleading others and potentially being perceived as dishonest if later "outed" (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

The authors further argue that even adopting gender-neutral pronouns (like singular "they" or "ze") does not fully solve the issue, as these forms can carry pragmatic implications, for instance, suggesting that someone is non-binary or hiding something, thus still putting pressure on individuals to disclose. Importantly, they reject the idea that this is merely a symptom of broader discrimination: gender-specific pronouns themselves exacerbate the problem by embedding assumptions about gender and making them harder to challenge. Even in a world without discrimination, they argue, individuals have a legitimate autonomy-based interest in controlling when and how to disclose intimate

aspects of their identities. Ultimately, they contend that because pronouns are pervasive and presuppose gender information, they contribute to the reproduction of discriminatory norms and thus represent not just a symptom but part of the cause (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

Dembroff and Wodak (2021) further develop also this point by introducing the extended analogy with race-based language. In their discussion of what they call “Renglish,” they illustrate how linguistic systems can generate systematic dilemmas of disclosure and privacy (Dembroff & Wodak, 2021). In one example, a speaker refers to their partner without initially disclosing their race, only for an interlocutor to use an incorrect race-specific pronoun. At this point the speaker faces a dilemma structurally identical to the one described above: they must either correct the interlocutor, thereby revealing both their partner’s race and the fact that they are in a mixed-race relationship, or remain silent and tacitly endorse a misrepresentation. Attempting to avoid race-specific language altogether proves equally problematic, as the effort to circumvent such forms becomes pragmatically marked and may itself indirectly reveal the very information the speaker intended to withhold.

Dembroff and Wodak (2021) argue that this dilemma is not merely hypothetical but closely parallels everyday experiences in English. For instance, speakers in non-heterosexual relationships are often required to choose between disclosing the gender of their partner or misleading their interlocutor, since the use of third-person pronouns such as “he” or “she” presupposes gender information. Similar constraints arise in other contexts where gender disclosure may be inappropriate or risky, such as job applications or institutional settings. In these cases, the pervasiveness of gender-specific terms makes it difficult to refer to individuals without simultaneously revealing socially salient information about them. The key insight of this analogy is that the moral problem does not arise solely from individual acts of disclosure, but from the structure of the linguistic system itself. When a language systematically encodes identity categories such as race or gender, it places speakers in situations where they must either disclose or misrepresent

information that they may have legitimate reasons to keep private. As the authors emphasise, this constitutes a violation of both privacy and autonomy: speakers should have greater control over whether, when, and how such information is communicated. Importantly, this argument applies regardless of whether gender is understood in terms of identity or biological traits. In both cases, requiring speakers to encode gender through pronouns effectively forces the constant communication of personal information that is not always relevant to the communicative context. This extension reinforces the original “Disclose or Deceive” argument by showing that the problem is not specific to gender, but rather a general feature of linguistic systems that grammatically encode socially sensitive categories. At the same time, it strengthens the claim that gender-specific pronouns are not merely a reflection of existing social norms, but actively contribute to structuring situations in which privacy is compromised.

A further concern, related to but distinct from the privacy-based argument advanced by Dembroff and Wodak (2018), concerns the epistemic burden generated by gender-specific linguistic systems. The use of gender-specific pronouns and other gender-marked expressions often requires speakers to determine, or at least assume, the gender identity of the individuals to whom they refer. In many communicative situations, however, this information is not readily available. As a result, speakers are frequently led to rely on bodily appearance, names, voice, clothing, patterns of gender expression, or other socially salient cues in order to select the appropriate linguistic form. This practice risks reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about gender and encourages the treatment of gender identity as something that can be reliably inferred from outward characteristics. In this respect, gender-marking systems generate not only risks of misgendering and unwanted disclosure, but also a more general pressure to categorise individuals within gender frameworks even when such categorisation may be unwarranted or epistemically unsupported.⁹²

⁹² I thank Professor Esa Díaz-León for encouraging me to reflect on the epistemic burden associated with the need to infer others' gender identities in gender-marking linguistic systems.

Cesarano (2020) challenges the idea that the use of gender-specific pronouns inherently violates privacy. She argues that disclosing one's gender identity or sexual orientation is morally problematic only because certain identities are socially stigmatised. In her view, if society did not consider identities such as lesbian or genderqueer to be deviant or controversial, revealing them would carry no weight. The real issue, she contends, is not the disclosure itself, but the social discrimination that makes such information sensitive and potentially dangerous to reveal (Cesarano, 2020).

This line of reasoning can also be extended heuristically to other forms of linguistic disclosure, such as using the term “partner” to avoid assuming heterosexuality. The moral and social significance of these linguistic choices emerges not from the words themselves but from the social structures in which they operate. In other words, the negative consequences associated with misgendering, forced disclosure, or heteronormative assumptions are inseparable from the broader systems of oppression that render certain identities vulnerable. While these structural inequities persist, the ethical and practical analyses on linguistic choices remain both relevant and necessary for understanding how language mediates power, recognition, and social justice.⁹³

While Dembroff and Wodak (2018) maintain that gender-specific pronouns would still be problematic even in a non-discriminatory society, because they reveal personal information, Cesarano (2020) disputes this. She argues that such information only appears “intimate” because marginalised identities are excluded from the societal norm. For instance, a cisgender man or a heterosexual person would not feel their privacy was violated by being referred to with gender-specific pronouns, precisely because their identities are part of the accepted standard. Therefore, Cesarano (2020) concludes that the core problem is not the grammatical presupposition of gender, but the unequal social status of certain identities. If all gender identities and sexual orientations were equally normalised, revealing them through language would not constitute a privacy issue. What

⁹³ I would like to thank Bianca Cepollaro for providing this example and for prompting me to reflect on this issue, i.e. the relation between language mediates power, recognition, and social justice.

may remain problematic, however, is the context in which such information is disclosed, which she explores further in the following section (Cesarano, 2020).

In my view, the obligation to disclose one's gender identity through language can indeed constitute a violation of personal privacy, as Dembroff and Wodak (2018) convincingly argue. Forcing individuals to choose between revealing sensitive information or tacitly deceiving others places a disproportionate burden on those whose identities do not align with social expectations about gender. This argument is particularly compelling when considered alongside the binary systemic organisation of spaces. For example, binary-gendered spaces such as restrooms compel individuals to publicly align themselves with one of two gender categories. This can cause discomfort and distress for trans* people and for anyone whose gender expression does not conform to normative expectations, effectively violating their privacy. To prevent this, people should not be required to disclose information about their gender unless it is strictly necessary.

At the same time, I agree with Cesarano's (2020) insight that the root of the problem lies in structural inequality. Revealing one's gender identity or sexual orientation is not intrinsically problematic; it becomes so in a society that devalues and stigmatises non-normative identities. In a world where all identities were equally recognised and respected, this kind of disclosure would not entail any risk. Thus, the issue lies not in the act of disclosure itself, but in the societal conditions that make certain disclosures risky or burdensome.

This argument also raises an important question about languages in which gender disclosure is grammatically mandatory. While non-binary identities clearly face a form of oppression when linguistic systems force them into categories that do not recognise them, one might argue that women are also structurally discriminated against, yet it is not a standard claim in the literature that grammatical gender constitutes an unjust violation of their privacy. There is, however, an important difference. Within the binary gender framework that structures different societies, the female gender is socially recognised as

a valid and intelligible category. Thus, revealing gender information through language does not, for women, threaten the kind of ontological erasure or misrecognition experienced by non-binary people. At the same time, obligatory gender disclosure can still disadvantage women in specific contexts, precisely because they belong to a socially discriminated group. For example, in applying for a stereotypically male-coded job position, such as in the scientific or technological fields, the explicit marking of a candidate as female through grammatical gender in a CV may reinforce biases and result in the preferential selection of a male candidate perceived as more suited to the role. In this sense, while the privacy concerns differ, the structural vulnerabilities exposed by gender-revealing linguistic practices affect women and non-binary individuals in distinct yet interconnected ways.

However, even if the root of the problem is social rather than strictly linguistic, the solution proposed by Dembroff and Wodak (2018) for English, i.e., implementing the radical claim, is unfeasible in Italian, for the reasons discussed in the previous section (§ 3.6.1). Therefore, fully implementing their proposal in a linguistically coherent and widespread manner is not a viable option for Italian. A feasible approach would be a compromise: on the one hand, minimising gender disclosure in linguistic contexts where it is unnecessary or where the referent's gender is unknown, by selectively employing obscuration strategies and avoiding assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation; on the other, eliminating gender distinctions in extra-linguistic domains where gender information is not functionally relevant, such as the binary organisation of certain public spaces (e.g., restrooms) or the requirement to specify gender in contexts like CV's or administrative forms. A combined effort that embraces both linguistic compromise and structural reform of spaces could offer a realistic and inclusive path forward for safeguarding individual privacy and promoting gender inclusivity. In conclusion, while completely avoiding linguistic violations of privacy may be difficult for speakers of a grammatical gender language like Italian, these can be mitigated by refraining from disclosing gender information when it is unsafe or avoidable, both in

linguistic and in extralinguistic domains, such as through the removal of unnecessary binary distinctions in restrooms or administrative forms.

3.7.3 Argument 3 revisited: is the anti-essentialism argument a reason to eliminate gendered forms?

Finally, the third argument (iii) advanced by the authors to support the radical claim concerns the harmful cognitive and social effects associated with the use of gender-specific pronouns and other gendered linguistic markers. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that linguistic devices such as pronouns, gendered suffixes (e.g., “-ess” in *hostess*), and grammatical gender in general do not merely reflect but actively shape social beliefs about gender. In particular, they claim that gendered language contributes to the reinforcement of essentialist beliefs, i.e., the idea that gender is an intrinsic and explanatory feature of individuals, shaping psychological traits and social roles (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

To illustrate this point, the authors present a thought experiment: imagine a fictional world where people use different pronouns depending on body weight, “*fee*” for thin individuals and “*fum*” for fat individuals. In such a world, even those who usually accept gender-specific pronouns would find this linguistic system objectionable, since it implies that body weight is always relevant to communication. The example demonstrates how pronoun systems can make certain traits permanently salient, reinforcing their perceived importance in all social contexts. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that gender-specific pronouns in our world work similarly: by invoking gender in discourse, they convey the implicature that gender is a meaningful and explanatory feature of people’s behaviour and social identity, even when it is not (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

This claim is further supported by empirical studies showing correlations between the degree of grammatical gender in a language and the prevalence of essentialist gender beliefs among speakers. For example, Guiora (1983) found that children learning languages with a pervasive gender system, such as Hebrew, have been shown to

internalise gender categories earlier and exhibit stronger gender stereotypes than children learning languages with a non-pervasive gender system, such as Finnish (Guiora, 1983). Moreover, Dembroff and Wodak (2018) propose a pragmatic explanation for this phenomenon: invoking gender information through pronouns triggers an implicature that gender is always relevant to what is being said, thus reinforcing the perception that gender explains all aspects of a person's identity and behaviour. In contrast, gender-neutral pronouns like singular "they" convey that gender is irrelevant to the context (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

While acknowledging that eliminating gender-specific pronouns would not eradicate gender-based prejudice, the authors argue that doing so would constitute a meaningful step toward reducing the salience and normative force of gender in everyday discourse. Importantly, they distinguish between advocating for gender-neutral pronouns and promoting gender-blind language overall (language that systematically avoids reference to gender): their proposal targets situations in which gender is linguistically marked even when it is irrelevant, and calls for a cautious and selective use of references to gender (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). Cesarano (2020) critically engages with Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) anti-essentialist argument by questioning the moral relevance they attribute to gender-specific pronouns. While acknowledging that pronouns may activate harmful stereotypes, such as the association between women and poor driving skills, Cesarano (2020) argues that the moral issue does not lie in the pronouns themselves, but in the value judgments that speakers and listeners project onto them. She challenges the analogy between gender-specific pronouns and the fictional pronouns "fee" and "fum" (used to denote body weight) by pointing out that body weight is a socially stigmatised trait, and the problematic nature of such pronouns stems from this stigma rather than from the inherent relevance of the information. To illustrate this, she reconfigures the example using neutral physical features (e.g., elbow or ear shape), showing that such classifications could serve a purely identificatory function without triggering moral discomfort. On this view, the role of pronouns should be assessed primarily in terms of

communicative efficacy, clarity, conciseness, and referential precision, rather than moral implications. Therefore, she contends that gender-specific pronouns are not intrinsically essentialist or morally objectionable; rather, essentialist interpretations arise from prejudicial inferences made by language users, not from the pronouns themselves (Cesarano, 2020).

Although the use of gendered language can reinforce essentialist assumptions, it is important to acknowledge the positive and empowering roles that gendered linguistic resources can play, particularly for trans* individuals. As previously discussed (§ 3.1), pronouns and proper names are fundamental to affirming gender identity and social inclusion (Gibbs, 2024). Far from being mere expressions of a binary system, these linguistic elements are actively used by trans* people to assert agency, affirm identity, and foster joy. In this regard, Hernandez and Crowley (2024) have criticised the tendency, common in philosophical debates on gender and language, to focus primarily on the potential harms of gendered language while overlooking how trans* individuals themselves use such language in constructive and life-affirming ways. According to the authors, trans* people engage with language through what they call “recognition use”, “playful use”, and “joyful use”, three modes of linguistic agency that contribute meaningfully to personal and collective well-being (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024). I will explore these uses in the following.

The recognition use involves employing gendered linguistic resources, such as pronouns, labels, and names, to accurately represent one’s gender identity and to be recognised as such by others. For instance, in a society where binary gender norms prevail, the creation and use of labels like non-binary provide individuals with the terminology necessary to name themselves and be understood, fostering both self-definition and mutual understanding (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Hernandez and Crowley (2024) present a series of pertinent examples that demonstrate how speakers can use gender linguistic resources to recognise different identities, even in the absence of gender pronouns. In some

The playful use, drawing on Lugones's (2003) notion of "playfulness", refers to the subversive and creative appropriation of gendered language undertaken from the perspective of the speaker themselves, that is, by individuals who choose these linguistic strategies to explore and express their gendered experience on their own terms (Lugones, 2003). Importantly, this dimension concerns the linguistic agency of the subjects involved, rather than the language used about them by others. To illustrate this point, Hernandez and Crowley (2024) give the example of trans* individuals who use gendered anatomical terms in non-standard ways, for instance, to refer to their bodies regardless of surgical status. A case in point is that of some trans* male people who refer to their genitals as "dicks" or "cocks" without having undergone genital surgery, thereby reclaiming and re-signifying these terms in a way that affirms their gender identity without conforming to cisnormative expectations (see also Zimman, 2014). This recontextualisation allows them to explore gendered language creatively, without adhering to its normative "rules", and to engage critically with dominant gender ideologies. For instance, by using terms like "dick" to refer to a vulva or by reclaiming traditionally gendered anatomical labels in ways that affirm their own embodied experiences, trans* individuals unsettle the assumed correspondence between language, anatomy, and identity, revealing the contingency and normativity of dominant linguistic conventions (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).

Finally, the joyful use refers to the profound sense of euphoria that trans* people report when addressed with gender-affirming names and pronouns. Studies have shown that the use of appropriate gendered language is closely linked to psychological well-being and gender euphoria (Beischel et al., 2022; Hernandez, 2021). As Hernandez and Crowley observe, this dimension of language use highlights its capacity not only to validate but to generate joy and self-affirmation. Consequently, as the authors observe, the use of gender-appropriate language in expressing one's gender can elicit profound

cases, they employ these linguistic resources to challenge traditional gender expectations. For a more comprehensive overview, please refer to Hernandez and Crowley (2024).

feelings of joy. This joy is not merely affective but politically significant: it emerges as a form of embodied affirmation that resists cisnormative structures and affirms the legitimacy of one's self-identification. In this sense, joy becomes a transformative affect that challenges the marginalisation of non-normative identities and asserts the right to linguistic and existential self-determination (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).

Although this dimension concerns affective experience, it cannot be understood solely in psychological terms. The joy elicited by being recognised linguistically is inseparable from the broader political conditions that make such recognition precarious. Crucially, the moral wrongness of misgendering does not depend merely on whether it causes distress in a given individual. Even in a hypothetical world in which all trans* people were unaffected or untroubled by misgendering, the practice would remain wrong because it constitutes a violation of their authority over self-definition and enacts a form of linguistic domination. Indeed, misgendering is a violation of a person's authority over their own self-identification. Gendered terms function not only as descriptors but as vehicles of social recognition. To disregard someone's stated gendered terms is to override their epistemic authority regarding who they are. Hence, even in an imagined world where misgendering caused no emotional distress, it would remain a morally objectionable practice because it denies individuals the social authority to define themselves.

Taken together, these forms of engagement show that gendered language is not inherently oppressive or reductive, but rather a flexible and powerful tool. Trans* individuals use it in ways that range from affirming identity to critiquing and reimagining normative structures. This calls into question the radical proposal advanced by Dembroff and Wodak (2018) to eliminate gendered pronouns altogether. While their concerns about essentialism are valid, the perspective that Hernandez and Crowley (2024) offer suggests that such a move would erase valuable forms of expression and empowerment (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024). In conclusion, the diverse and agentive uses of gendered

language documented by Hernandez and Crowley (2024) affirm the crucial role language plays in shaping personal identity and resisting oppression.

Dembroff (2018) notes that trans*-inclusive and queer communities offer valuable insights into how linguistic and social practices can be reconfigured to support gender diversity. In particular, trans*-inclusive communities have developed gender-neutral linguistic systems, designated inclusive physical spaces, and practices centred on the use of self-chosen names and pronouns. These structures foster autonomy in gender expression and challenge normative gender roles, thereby creating social environments in which individuals can affirm and reclaim their identities (Dembroff, 2018). However, one could imagine a compromise position in which gendered language remains available as an expressive resource specifically for those who need it to affirm or negotiate their gendered subjectivity, such as members of trans* communities, while the general linguistic system moves toward non-gendered forms as the default. Such a model could, in theory, preserve the liberatory and self-affirming functions of gendered language while simultaneously addressing the structural concerns raised by Dembroff and Wodak (2018), such as the involuntary disclosure of gender identity or the reproduction of binary norms. In this scenario, the use of gendered forms would shift from being a systemic requirement to an optional and self-determined act, contingent on the speaker's needs and position. This would not only mitigate the risks of misgendering and essentialisation but also redistribute linguistic agency equitably. Whether such a differentiated system is feasible in practice remains an open question. Moreover, it also remains to be seen whether the expressive and affirming potential of gendered language would retain the same symbolic and pragmatic force if its use became optional rather than systemic, i.e., whether the shift in linguistic structure would alter the value currently attributed to gendered forms. Nonetheless, the model offers a compelling philosophical middle ground between radical elimination and uncritical preservation of gendered language.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ I am grateful to Martina Rosola for suggesting the possibility of a differentiated linguistic scenario in which gendered language is an optional, self-determined resource rather than a systemic requirement.

To conclude, language functions as a crucial tool of self-determination and representation for both binary and non-binary trans* individuals. Moreover, it appears unfeasible to avoid any reference to gender in Italian. A compromise could be to provide gender information about people where it is necessary and when you are sure of their gender identity, trying to avoid misgendering them. In other cases, where possible, this can be avoided with innovative or conservative obscuration strategies. This approach aligns with what Zimman (2017) identifies as one of the central principles of trans-inclusive language reform, namely the recognition of self-identification as the primary criterion for gender attribution. Rather than treating anatomy, appearance, or voice as authoritative indicators of gender, trans-inclusive linguistic practices prioritise individuals' own self-definitions and their authority over how they are referred to linguistically (Zimman, 2017).

3.8 Concluding remarks

To summarise, in the present chapter, I have explored the importance of ensuring visibility for non-binary individuals, focusing on the intersection between personal identity construction, social recognition, and gender representation. As argued, linguistic practices are not merely descriptive but play a central role in enabling or denying social recognition (§ 3.1, 3.2). Within this framework, misgendering emerges as a form of microaggression that can produce psychological harm and reinforce broader structures of exclusion (§ 3.3, 3.4). Building on Dembroff and Wodak (2018), I have argued in favour of their moderate claim: we have a negative duty not to misgender both binary and non-binary trans* individuals. This claim is supported not only by philosophical arguments, but also by empirical evidence on the psychological and social impact of misgendering. Importantly, I have shown that this obligation is practically implementable in Italian, through strategies such as the use of proper names, pronoun awareness, and, where necessary, obscuration strategies (§ 3.5, 3.6). By contrast, I have argued that the radical (eliminating all gender-specific pronouns) is considerably more problematic, especially

in grammatical gender language such as Italian. Here, gender marking is pervasive and cannot be easily removed without significant communicative and structural costs (§ 3.7).

The central contribution of this chapter lies in showing that avoiding misgendering is not equivalent to ensuring inclusion. While strategies such as obscuration can reduce the risk of harm, they do not necessarily guarantee the positive recognition of non-binary identities. In this sense, there is a crucial tension between harm-avoidance and identity visibility, which parallels the distinction introduced in Chapter 2 between obscuration and visibility strategies. This tension becomes particularly evident in the Italian context. On the one hand, speakers can avoid misgendering through neutral or indirect forms. On the other hand, for many non-binary individuals, inclusion requires not only the absence of error, but the presence of recognition, that is, the use of linguistic forms that explicitly reflect their identity. Failing to do so may result in a more subtle form of invisibilisation, even when no explicit misgendering occurs.

In Italian, such explicit representation currently relies on innovative visibility strategies, including forms with schwa (ə) or asterisk (*). These strategies, which are increasingly used in informal and activist contexts (Comadini, 2021) attempt to overcome the structural dimension limitations of a binary grammatical system. However, they also introduce new challenges, particularly in terms of standardisation, acceptability (see, among others, D'Achille, 2021), and accessibility. A key issue concerns the potential tension between inclusivity and accessibility. Non-standard forms may create difficulties for some users, including individuals with dyslexia or visual impairments, raising important questions about their broader usability in institutional contexts. This reveals that inclusive language reform is not a unidimensional process, but involves trade-offs between competing values (see, for instance, De Santis, 2022; Iacopini, 2021). At the same time, diverse objections to these forms remain ideological and not supported by empirical data or detailed cognitive analyses. A more nuanced and evidence-based assessment is required to understand both the practical limitations and the potential of non-binary visibility strategies in Italian. For this reason, in the next chapter I investigate

these tensions more closely, discussing the conceptual foundations of both inclusion and accessibility to lay the groundwork for a more precise understanding of their potential conflict.

4. Reconciling Inclusion and Accessibility: Solutions for Innovative Linguistic Strategies

4.1 A recap: promoting non-binary visibility

To recap the preceding discussion, in Chapter 2 I argued that promoting the visibility of different gender identities is essential to counteract gender stereotypes embedded in language. While obscuration strategies can be useful in some respects, they may fail to destabilise the status quo and may contribute to the invisibilisation of both non-binary people and women. For this reason, I proposed that innovative visibility strategies, explicitly encoding non-binary form, play a crucial role in disrupting the male-as-default pattern. Building on this, in Chapter 3, I argued that avoiding gender marking in grammatical gender languages such as Italian can be challenging, and in some contexts, it may even be less effective, as gendered forms can serve important practical and identity-affirming purposes for trans* speakers. Through the analysis of misgendering, I argued that harm avoidance (i.e. not misgendering) is not sufficient for inclusion, since linguistic practices also serve important identity-affirming functions. This led to the proposal of a context-sensitive approach: making gender invisible when it is unknown, but visible when it is relevant to the speaker's identity

The present chapter develops this argument further by focusing on a central but underexplored problem: the tension between non-binary visibility and accessibility. While innovative forms such as the schwa (ə) or the asterisk (*) have been proposed to represent non-binary identities in Italian, they have also been criticised for potentially creating barriers to comprehension, particularly for individuals with dyslexia or visual impairments (see, for

instance, De Santis, 2022; Iacopini, 2021). De Santis (2022) and Iacopini (2021)’s contributions are not treated here as fully developed or empirically validated academic studies, but rather as representative articulations of a line of argument that has gained visibility in the Italian public and semi-academic debate. Their relevance lies in the fact that they explicitly formulate what can be termed the “accessibility objection”, namely the claim that innovative forms such as the schwa or the asterisk may create barriers for individuals with specific reading or visual processing conditions. While these claims have not yet been systematically verified within the academic literature, they provide a useful starting point for identifying a set of concerns that have become salient in discussions of gender-inclusive language. Accordingly, this chapter does not assume their validity, but takes them as a starting point for critical and empirical examination. Its aim is precisely to assess whether the accessibility concerns they raise are supported by linguistic, technological, and empirical evidence, or whether they stem from more general assumptions about language, readability, and standardisation. The main aim of this chapter is thus twofold: first, to clarify the conceptual relationship between inclusion and accessibility; second, to assess whether and to what extent innovative non-binary forms actually create accessibility barriers. In doing so, I shift the debate from purely normative or ideological claims to an evidence-oriented analysis of linguistic practices.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by discussing the conceptual foundations of both inclusion and accessibility to lay the groundwork for a precise understanding of their potential conflict (§ 4.2). I then examine how the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices may pose challenges for two groups of users: people with visual impairments (§ 4.3) and individuals with dyslexia (§ 4.4). In each case, I identify obstacles related to digital accessibility and explore possible solutions or mitigation strategies, drawing from both existing research and practical proposals. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a

philosophical discussion on the inclusion-accessibility dilemma, offering some critical insights that will serve as a bridge to the next chapter (§ 4.5; 4.6).⁹⁶

Given that the focus of this chapter is primarily on innovative non-binary visibility strategies, it is important to clarify that feminisation will not be considered here as a main object of analysis, as it has already been extensively discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the visibility of women and the critique of androcentric masculine forms. The present chapter therefore concentrates on innovative non-binary forms, while acknowledging feminisation as part of the broader system of gender-inclusive linguistic strategies. Moreover, it is important to note that the discussion in this chapter abstracts from the specific communicative contexts in which non-binary language is used. The aim here is to explore the intrinsic tension between accessibility and visibility at a general level. The following chapter (Chapter 5) will recontextualise the insights developed thus far by examining how these challenges manifest in concrete communicative domains, most notably, that of formal and institutional communication, such as public administration.

4.2 The challenge of inclusion vs accessibility

The accessibility objection raised regarding the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices identifies a range of potential difficulties. Concerns have been raised in non-academic discussions (e.g., Kerch, 2021) that the use of schwa and asterisk can present challenges, particularly in writing, for specific groups such as those of people with visual impairments and dyslexia. Regarding individuals with visual impairments, the use of digital assistive tools is a common method for reading digital texts. However, some of these assistive tools are unable to accurately interpret the schwa and the asterisk in Italian texts. Instead, individuals with dyslexia can use specific fonts that facilitate reading. Nevertheless, a number of these fonts do not include the schwa among their characters (Kerch, 2021).

⁹⁶ Sections 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 include excerpts, with some modifications, from Giovine, M. (2025) Reconciling inclusion and accessibility: solutions for non-binary linguistic strategies in grammatical gender languages, *Language Sciences*.

Before proceeding, a clarification is required regarding the use of the source attributed to Kerch (2021). Given the absence of identifiable academic credentials, peer-review validation, or contextual information about the author, this source cannot be considered reliable in itself as an academic reference. For this reason, it is not used here as evidentiary support, but rather in a heuristic sense, as an initial indication of concerns that appear to circulate in online and non-academic discussions of gender-inclusive language. These concerns have subsequently been examined through a more systematic analysis drawing on linguistic, technological, and empirical considerations. In this sense, the reference to Kerch serves only as a point of departure for identifying a line of inquiry, rather than as a source supporting the claims under discussion.⁹⁷

De Santis (2022) and Iacopini (2021) also identify the incompatibility between assistive devices and innovative solutions as an accessibility issue. De Santis argues that the use of screen readers hinges upon the software's capacity to discern and analyse words and their morphological properties. Nevertheless, current screen readers do not reliably support the aforementioned linguistic solutions (De Santis, 2022). Taking these issues into account, Iacopini (2021) observes that the use of the schwa and the asterisk serves to illustrate the tension that currently exists between inclusion and accessibility. The concepts of inclusion and accessibility are inextricably linked, yet they are not synonymous: the notion of *inclusion* is predicated on the idea that it should be possible for all individuals to participate actively in social life; *accessibility* means achieving full participation by removing barriers. Consequently, the notion of inclusion represents a conceptual horizon that is attained through the implementation of measures that ensure accessibility (Iacopini, 2021).

According to AGID (2024),⁹⁸ the term *barriers* is used to describe obstacles that impede the usability of physical or digital spaces. They may be classified according to their

⁹⁷ More generally, this chapter prioritises peer-reviewed and empirically grounded research wherever available. However, in areas where such research remains limited, it becomes necessary to engage with public and semi-academic discourse to identify emerging issues and guide further investigation.

⁹⁸ In March 2024, I participated in the basic, intermediate and advanced levels of the AGID (Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale) courses on accessibility to identify the tools employed to facilitate communication and to investigate

sensorial, architectural, psychological, or communicative nature. A context is defined as accessible if it is free from barriers.⁹⁹ The dismantling of such barriers can be achieved through the implementation of inclusive legislation, universal design principles, cultural shifts, training initiatives, awareness-raising campaigns, strategic investments, and the development of innovative solutions. Furthermore, these solutions are beneficial to users, including those who have not a disability. Indeed, they facilitate the use of digital content in general (AGID, 2024).¹⁰⁰

Considering the aforementioned factors, it is reasonable to assume that the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices may present accessibility challenges, potentially acting as a barrier to communication. Specifically, according to the accessibility objection, it seems that such challenges would result in a disadvantage for individuals who experience difficulties in reading written texts, including those with visual impairments and those with dyslexia. If this is indeed the case, it raises questions about the tension between the objective of including all individuals beyond the gender binary and the necessity of ensuring the accessibility of the aforementioned categories of people, which is not yet fully guaranteed. However, it is important to acknowledge that these issues persist particularly in the absence of appropriate solutions. As will be demonstrated in the following sections (§ 4.3, 4.4), a number of the accessibility challenges can be overcome by adapting specific solutions. Considering that, in agreement with Iacopini, the inclusion of all can be achieved by adopting accessibility measures, in what follows, I will discuss the obstacles in detail and consider to what extent they can be addressed in practice.

the digital accessibility issues that emerge. The course provided an overview of the relationship between digital dynamics and disability and facilitated an in-depth exploration of the regulatory, managerial, and technical aspects of digital accessibility.

⁹⁹ The concept of *accessible context* as an enabling context is specific to the biopsychosocial model. Indeed, it considers a multitude of factors, both influencing and influenced by others, including health conditions, bodily functions, activities, participation, contextual factors, environmental factors and personal factors. From this perspective, disability is contingent upon the individual relationship with these factors, including environmental ones (AGID, 2024).

¹⁰⁰ The information presented in this paper was sourced from a digital accessibility training curriculum developed by AGID (Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale), entitled *Corso Base - Contenuti Accessibili* (Basic Course - Accessible Content), which was conducted on 5 March 2024.

Given the different nature of the difficulties faced by the two mentioned categories, I divide the analysis into two parts. In the next section, I describe the difficulties for people with visual impairments (§ 4.3); subsequently, I discuss the difficulties for people with dyslexia (§ 4.4). However, it should be noted that the aforementioned categories of people are not homogeneous when it comes to encountering accessibility challenges, since the experiences of different members may be diverse. For instance, testimonies from some individuals with dyslexia indicate that they may experience challenges in interpreting innovative grammatical gender encoding devices, whereas others do not encounter such difficulties. Therefore, accessibility challenges may differ in the experiences of members of the same group, e.g., dyslexic people or people with visual impairments (Gheno, 2022b). Notably, while a rigorous quantitative investigation would be necessary to fully understand these issues, the following discussion advances some observations based on anecdotal evidence, acknowledging the limitations inherent in this approach.

4.3 Innovative grammatical gender encoding devices and visual impairments

According to the accessibility objection, the use of innovative solutions creates difficulties for people with low vision and blind individuals (see, for example, De Santis, 2022).¹⁰¹ The objection raised against the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices for visual impairments concerns its incompatibility with the assistive technologies used by blind and visually impaired individuals.

To access digital texts, people with visual impairments can use screen readers. A screen reader is a software application used as assistive technology that identifies and interprets text on a screen to provide information on icons, menus, windows, and digital texts. This hardware can provide information through non-visual means, such as speech synthesis or a

¹⁰¹ Low vision is an irreversible condition characterised by reduced visual capacity, while blindness refers to the total absence of visual capacity. For more about visual impairments, see the *Relazione del Ministro della Salute sullo stato di attuazione delle politiche inerenti la prevenzione della cecità, l'educazione e la riabilitazione visiva* (Legge 284/97) (Report of the Minister of Health on the state of implementation of policies concerning blindness prevention, visual education, and visual rehabilitation (Law 284/97)] (2023). https://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pubblicazioni_2727_allegato.pdf.

Braille display. In the former case, the screen reader translates on-screen information into sound using text-to-speech systems. In the latter case, the screen reader translates information into the Braille alphabet on a Braille display (Nomensa, 2005). The Braille display is a tactile electronic device which is connected to computers and mobile devices and transmits the text interpreted by the screen reader in Braille. Next, I analyse both cases in turn.

4.3.1 *Speech synthesis*

In the case of speech synthesis, difficulties in reading innovative grammatical gender encoding devices are, in some cases, linked to the intrinsic characteristics of such solutions and, in other cases, to the inadequacy of assistive technologies. For example, the asterisk is a graphic sign that does not have a corresponding sound and, therefore, cannot be read in any way. Thus, no adopted solution to the asterisk issues is currently available, given that it is inherently illegible. For instance, VoiceOver Utility, the screen reader included in the iOS and macOS operating systems, reads the asterisk in Italian words as *stella* (star). Thus, this software reads, e.g., “Car* tutt*” (Dear[INN] all[INN]) as “carstella tuttstella” (dearstar allstar).

The incompatibility between the speech synthesis technology and the asterisk is structural since it does not have an associated sound. It can be hypothesised that this incompatibility could be overcome by associating a sound with the symbol. For example, the asterisk could be associated with the same sound as the schwa. However, this solution may create conflicts in contexts where the asterisk already has established uses, such as in mathematics, philosophy, or linguistic notation, potentially leading to ambiguity in the speech output. In addition to associating a sound with the asterisk, the screen reader must be trained to interpret the use of the asterisk in Italian texts as an innovative grammatical gender encoding device to read it correctly. However, this should also be done with the schwa, which, despite having an associated sound, is not read correctly by speech synthesis technology. For instance, when there is the schwa in a text, VoiceOver Utility doesn't

pronounce any sound and creates a sudden interruption, reading, e.g., “Carə tuttə” [‘karə ‘tuttə] (Dear[INN] all[INN]) as “Car tutt” [‘kar ‘tutt].¹⁰²

To recap, the asterisk is inherently incompatible with speech synthesis because it has no corresponding sound, while the schwa is incompatible due to a limitation of screen readers in correctly reproducing it when used as an innovative grammatical gender encoding device. According to Boselli (2021), difficulties related to the schwa may be overcome. The author, a visually impaired person, argues that the solution is to insert the sound linked to the schwa into a database to allow those who use this software to listen to a fluid reading. In other words, the solution to difficulties related to visual impairments lies in adapting assistive technologies that are currently not programmed to read the schwa in Italian words. Furthermore, the *Informare con un’H* Center, which deals with disability policies, has emphasised that in a number of the software tested by the Center, the pronunciation of the schwa is not correct, but the meaning is still understandable. Therefore, in some cases, the reading is incorrect, but this does not limit the comprehensibility of the text (Lancioni, 2021). Consequently, it can be assumed that, as for the speech synthesis systems, incompatibilities with the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices can be overcome. Moreover, despite these difficulties, understanding is not currently radically impeded.

4.3.2 Braille display

Let us consider the Braille system. Braille is a tactile writing system employed by visually impaired and blind people, transcribed onto raised paper or other tools. The Braille alphabet is constituted of cells comprising six or eight raised dots,¹⁰³ which are perceptible to touch. Each dot combination is associated with a specific character, whether a letter, number, or symbol. This means that the combinations of dots are limited, so it is not possible to add

¹⁰² I tested VoiceOver Utility’s reading of asterisk and schwa as an innovative grammatical gender encoding device on May 20, 2024.

¹⁰³ The traditional Braille code has cells of 6 raised dots, with a total of 63 possible combinations (64 if we include the total absence of dots). With the spread of Braille displays, which can be used in an updatable and interactive way to read the information on the computer screen, the use of 8-dot Braille has become widespread, which increases to 255 the possibilities of combinations (Dyxon, 2007).

combinations at will. Moreover, the process of decoding a text written in Braille is contingent upon the use of a specific alphabet, which may be Latin, Greek, or other.

To read digital text in Braille, blind individuals may use a Braille display, which constitutes the alternative output for screen readers. The screen reader interprets the digital text, converts it into Braille characters, and transmits it to the Braille display (Shalini et al., 2020). Thus, the Braille display allows one to read the text by electronically raising and lowering different combinations of pins in Braille cells.¹⁰⁴

In this case, the issue of accessibility may not be primarily associated with the Braille display but rather with the Braille system itself. Indeed, no combination of dots in the Latin Braille alphabet corresponds to the schwa.¹⁰⁵ Currently, since the schwa does not have a corresponding set of dots in Braille, screen readers render the schwa present in digital text as Ô (the letter “o” with a circumflex accent) on the Braille display (Stilla, p.c.).¹⁰⁶ In contrast, a combination of dots does exist that corresponds to the asterisk. It can, therefore, be concluded that the asterisk can be used in Braille, whereas the schwa cannot. It is crucial to emphasise that, as a writing system, Braille does not necessitate the representation of sound; rather, it requires the configuration of dots that correspond to specific characters. This avoids the asterisk problem with Braille displays that occur with text-to-speech systems.

Parimbelli (p.c.)¹⁰⁷ suggests that a potential solution to overcome the incompatibility between the Braille system and the schwa would be to identify a conventional dots combination to represent the schwa in Braille. This can be achieved despite the restricted number of potential combinations of dots, which represents a limitation of the current Braille system. Indeed, in general, a single combination of dots can correspond to multiple linguistic elements. Note that the possible combinations of six dots in a cell are constrained in

¹⁰⁴ For more information on how Braille displays work, visit the page of the *American Foundation for the Blind*. <https://www.afb.org/node/16207/refreshable-braille-displays>.

¹⁰⁵ See all the combinations present in the Braille alphabet in this publication by the Istituto dei Ciechi Francesco Cavazza: <https://www.cavazza.it/invitoalbraille/html/table6.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Stilla, President of Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti, personal communication, 08 May 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Parimbelli, personal communication, 13 May 2024.

comparison to the potential uses that the writing system can accommodate, given the plethora of letters, numbers, and symbols that can be represented. Because of that, a single combination of dots may be associated with multiple signs, and the context permits to disambiguate its meaning. In addition to associating a Braille dot combination with the schwa, screen readers should be updated to transmit this association to the Braille display.

To recap, the asterisk is compatible with the Braille display because it has a corresponding dot combination, while the schwa is incompatible because it does not. This incompatibility could be overcome by first associating a combination of Braille dots to the schwa and then updating the assistive devices. The evolution of such software is rapid, and future updates may include schwa decoding (Parimbelli, p.c.). Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that, as for the Braille display, incompatibilities with the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices can be overcome.

To conclude the discussion on visual impairments, speech synthesis programs and Braille displays pose different challenges. While the former has the potential to accommodate the schwa, it is unable to accommodate the asterisk. Conversely, Braille can accommodate the asterisk but not the schwa. Thus, the use of both tools in the rendering of digital text could result in the text becoming inaccessible in one or the other systems, depending on the innovative solutions used. In both cases, however, some measures can be taken to overcome these challenges. The solutions identified so far to overcome the incompatibilities with speech synthesis programs consist of associating a sound with the asterisk and updating screen readers to interpret schwa and asterisk as innovative grammatical gender encoding devices to read them correctly with text-to-speech technology. Instead, the solution identified so far for Braille displays consists of associating a combination of dots with the schwa and adapting screen readers to its interpretation as well as to the correct transmission to Braille displays.

In this section, I have examined the accessibility challenges faced by visually impaired individuals, specifically in relation to the use of the schwa and the asterisk as innovative

grammatical gender encoding devices. The following section will examine the accessibility challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia.

4.4 Innovative grammatical gender encoding devices and dyslexia

According to some scholars, innovative solutions can also pose challenges to dyslexic individuals (see, for example, De Santis, 2022). As for the schwa, the resulting challenge for dyslexic people can be attributed to the absence of the schwa among the character sets of fonts used by people with dyslexia to facilitate reading.

Dyslexia is a neurodivergent condition characterised by potential reading difficulties that may manifest as challenges in decoding texts (Giuliani, 2021). The dyslexic population varies greatly in the difficulties encountered. Dyslexic individuals may experience difficulties in reading words as a whole and tend to break them down into smaller parts. Those with a reading disorder may tend to confuse visually similar letters such as *p* and *q*, *b* and *d*, *m* and *n*, and closed and semi-closed letters like *e*, *c*, and *o*. These and other challenges can slow down reading and compromise text comprehension (Madeo, 2021).

The visual aspect of the text contributes to graphic readability.¹⁰⁸ Factors such as font size, contrast, background, font type, spacing, and page layout can influence the readability of printed and electronic texts (Madeo, 2021).¹⁰⁹ For instance, some fonts (e.g., *Times New Roman*) have characteristics, such as initial and final strokes of characters that tend to curl, close, and confuse shapes, which make them less readable compared to others.¹¹⁰ Considering these elements, typography has developed fonts specifically for dyslexic individuals, such as *Biancoenero*, *EasyReading*, and *Opendyslexic*.¹¹¹ These solutions

¹⁰⁸ *Graphic readability* refers to the ease of identifying, recognising, and deciphering communication based on symbols and characters (Baracco, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ For more about factors that influence readability, see website of the British Dyslexia Association. British Dyslexia Association. <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>.

¹¹⁰ For further information on how type influences readability, see the Google Fonts website. https://fonts.google.com/knowledge/readability_and_accessibility/how_type_influences_readability.

¹¹¹ It is important to note that not all individuals with dyslexia prefer dyslexia-friendly fonts. I was informed by individuals with dyslexia that some of them may prefer standard fonts such as *Times New Roman*, even though

consider factors that can be problematic for individuals with dyslexia, such as letter size, contrast, line spacing, letter spacing, and word spacing. Taking these variables into account serves to circumvent the impediment of visual clutter, which hinders the act of reading. Consequently, this could facilitate the interpretation of the text in question (Madeo, 2021).

112

The incompatibility between some of the dyslexia-friendly fonts and the schwa, exemplified by *Biancoenero*,¹¹³ may be attributed to the absence of the schwa among their character sets. Thus, the absence of the schwa among the font characters precludes the use of the accessible solution in accordance with gender-fair practices that involve the schwa as an innovative grammatical gender encoding device (Kerch, 2021). However, other fonts explicitly designed for dyslexic individuals, for example, *EasyReading* (Alfonsetti, p.c.)¹¹⁴ and in almost all its versions, *OpenDyslexic* (Gonzalez, p.c.)¹¹⁵, include the schwa among their characters.

The use of dyslexia-friendly fonts on computers may result in incompatibility issues when the files are loaded in .doc format rather than .pdf. This is because these fonts are not included by default in many word-processing programs. This issue can be resolved by using standard fonts. A number of writing programs already include a number of standard fonts that, although they were not created with the specific needs of dyslexic people in mind, possess characteristics, such as the shape of the letters, that facilitate reading.¹¹⁶ Moreover,

these fonts do not possess the characteristics that are typically associated with accessibility. This preference may be attributed to the influence of habit, as standard fonts are more prevalent and may imply a certain degree of familiarity with reading texts that are written in those fonts.

¹¹² Different fonts consider different factors. For a comparison of some dyslexia-friendly fonts, see <https://www.dyslexia-reading-well.com/dyslexia-font.html>.

¹¹³ This information was provided to me by *Biancoenero* font referents (p.c., 10/05/24).

¹¹⁴ Alfonsetti, creator of *EasyReading*, personal communication, 10 May 2024.

¹¹⁵ Gonzalez, creator of *OpenDyslexic*, personal communication, 10 May 2024.

¹¹⁶ This is a suggestion from the Università di Perugia. In its guidelines on Specific Learning Disorders (DSA), the Università di Perugia (n.d.) recommends the use of the *Verdana*, *Arial*, *Helvetica*, and *Courier New* fonts for open electronic documents (.doc, etc.), citing their accessibility and the advantage of their compatibility with all operating systems. This approach allows one to circumvent incompatibility issues that may arise when the file is accessed on disparate computers. Alternatively, the Università di Perugia (n.d.) also suggests the use of dyslexia-friendly fonts, such as *Biancoenero* and *Open-Dyslexic*, which are highly readable fonts. However,

among these standard fonts, already easy to read, some contain the schwa character.¹¹⁷ By employing these fonts, it is possible to circumvent the challenge of limited access to the schwa character, as well as the incompatibility issues between fonts and word processing software.

It should be noted that in both dyslexia-friendly fonts and standard fonts, the lack of schwa between characters is not a huge accessibility issue: it does not prevent reading the text. This lack has the effect of adapting only the schwa character to another font. This effect does not appear to significantly hinder reading. To illustrate, consider the Italian expression “Ciao a tuttə” (Dear all). If the text is written in a digital document using a font that incorporates the schwa, for example, *Arial*, the entire text would be rendered in the same font. Conversely, if the same phrase is rendered in a font that does not include the schwa, for example, *Avenir*, the schwa is automatically incorporated into an alternative font. For instance, in the expression “Ciao a tuttə” (Dear all), only “Ciao a tutt” is rendered in the *Avenir* font, while the “ə” is automatically written in *Times New Roman*, resulting in stylistic inconsistency. Consequently, in cases where the schwa is missing between the characters of the font, it can be argued that there is an incompatibility between the use of these fonts and the schwa.

Nevertheless, in the absence of systematic empirical evidence, it remains unclear to what extent this incompatibility may affect reading, although it can plausibly be assumed that its most immediate impact is stylistic, resulting in visual inconsistency within the text. This interpretation may be further supported by observing that accessible fonts, both standard ones and those specifically programmed for dyslexic people, are designed to facilitate reading but are not a necessary condition for it. Furthermore, potential solutions to the lack of schwa are

it is recommended that these fonts be used exclusively for files published in PDF format to obviate incompatibility concerns with computers where those fonts have not been installed (Università di Perugia, n.d.).

¹¹⁷ Even among the standard fonts, as well as among the dyslexia-friendly fonts, not all fonts include the schwa among their characters. The *Avenir* font is an example of this. In contrast, other standard fonts, including *Verdana*, *Arial*, *Courier New* and *Helvetica*, are compatible with the schwa. I tested *Verdana*, *Arial*, *Courier New*, *Helvetica* and *Avenir* on Microsoft Word on the 13th of September 2024.

relatively straightforward, such as expanding the character set of existing fonts or opting for fonts that already include the schwa and are designed to enhance readability.

To conclude the discussion on dyslexia concerning the issue of digital accessibility, I have identified an incompatibility between the use of the schwa and the use of certain fonts. However, this is a problem with relatively simple practical solutions. In such cases, the most optimal solution would be to use highly readable fonts that already encompass the schwa within their character set. An additional potential solution to this issue could be the incorporation of the schwa within the character set of fonts that do not currently include it. Secondly, I have identified additional interpretative issues that extend beyond the realm of digital accessibility in its strict sense. These are issues pertaining to the interpretation of the schwa and the asterisk as an innovative grammatical gender encoding device in their own right. One difficulty may be related to the confusion experienced with mirror letters, given that the schwa shares a similar shape to that of the letter “e”. Another difficulty in interpreting innovative solutions may be linked to their familiarity or distinctiveness. There are currently no specific solutions for these challenges. A detailed investigation of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, which aims to focus on the challenges of digital accessibility. Nevertheless, they are of central importance to this debate and could be expanded upon in future research.

To ascertain the veracity of the accessibility objection, two further questions must be analysed in light of the findings presented thus far. As Gheno (2022a) observes, the objection posits that the deployment of innovative solutions, which may present accessibility challenges, entails the exclusion of specific categories of individuals. The objective of including non-binary people has the consequence of excluding those with dyslexia and visual impairments who experience difficulties in interpreting the non-binary strategy. Secondly, the objection presupposes that a proposal is only deemed valid if it is universally inclusive and accessible (Gheno, 2022a). To evaluate the feasibility of reconciling accessibility and inclusion, it is crucial to consider these two issues. In light of the analysis presented above, the following section presents a discussion of these two arguments.

4.5 Beyond categories

In this section, I discuss two key issues identified by Gheno (2022a) that emerge from the accessibility objection, whether explicitly or implicitly. The first issue concerns the assumption that the use of the non-binary linguistic strategy inevitably results in the opposition of categories of individuals. The second issue pertains to the presupposition that a solution must be universally implementable to be considered valid.

According to the first argument, the use of innovative solutions, which may entail accessibility difficulties, implies the inclusion of non-binary individuals while excluding those with dyslexia and visual impairments. This suggests that while a particular group of people is included, another is excluded. However, there are several reasons why the category of non-binary individuals should not be considered in opposition to the category of individuals with reading difficulties. Firstly, the exploration of linguistic solutions to transcend gender binaries does not occur in direct opposition to the legibility practices of other marginalised categories. These are distinct issues, but in some specific cases, they may be incompatible. This incompatibility depends on different factors, such as the innovative grammatical gender encoding device used, the tool used to communicate, and the difficulties that the people in question experience. Moreover, there are individuals with dyslexia or visual impairments who encounter difficulties in interpreting the schwa and the asterisk due to their condition. In contrast, other individuals with dyslexia or visual impairments may not face such challenges (Gheno, 2022b). Consequently, it can be argued that there is no category of people, namely non-binary people, that is contrasted with another category of people, those with dyslexia and visual impairment, in every respect and in general. From this, it follows that it is inaccurate to argue that the use of innovative solutions implies the inclusion of one category to the exclusion of another. Secondly, although accessibility and gender inclusion are two distinct issues, they can also be intertwined in some cases. For example, some individuals are dyslexic or visually impaired and who simultaneously identify as non-binary (Gheno, 2022a). Moreover, there are individuals with dyslexia or visual impairments who, despite not identifying as non-binary, may still elect to use the schwa and the asterisk to

demonstrate their alignment with the gender-fair movement.¹¹⁸ It follows that there are no systematically opposing categories since the need to use non-binary strategies can be transversal to these categories.

Let us now consider the second argument, which regards the presupposition that a proposal is only deemed valid if it is universally inclusive and accessible, that is, if it can be a solution usable without negative implications for the entire population. This assumption suggests that anything that is not universally accessible should not be used. However, this is atypical to be achieved in the digital world. It is important to acknowledge that a considerable number of the tools and resources employed in our everyday communication are not universally accessible. To illustrate, in addition to the innovative grammatical gender encoding devices, symbols are not correctly interpreted by screen readers, thereby failing to guarantee accessibility. For instance, some screen readers are capable of interpreting emojis,¹¹⁹ while others are not (Tuke, 2021). Folcarelli, a digital trainer, has observed that other symbols and words that are not native to the selected language are also not read entirely or are read incorrectly. This phenomenon is also observed in the case of dialects and languages with limited usage (Folcarelli, p.c.)¹²⁰. Moreover, also the misuse of punctuation and other special characters (e.g., the ampersand)¹²¹ can impede the comprehension of text read by screen readers. It follows that if we were to apply the idea of using only universally inclusive and accessible things, we would have to avoid the use of a large number of elements that are widespread on the web. This is unreasonable in the digital environment, where new ways of communicating continue to emerge. Instead, an intermediate solution could consist in trying to make the tools we have as inclusive and accessible as possible. For example, we

¹¹⁸ A testimony can be offered by the Færocia collective. It has collected the signatures of several neurodivergent people, both from the LGBT+ community and simple allies of the cause, who find it important to use the schwa. <https://www.facebook.com/f3rocia/posts/146983904419483/?paipv=0&eav=AfZ4suniyBHerZuyCIEWNaZdGZ6eb9uKV4VuXqd2tx9LQAemVQAtn6KBrIhOvZ-i7uc&rdr>.

¹¹⁹ *Emojis* are small images that depict an emotion, an animal, a person, an object, etc. They are very common in social media communication and messaging.

¹²⁰ Folcarelli, personal communication, 14 May 2024.

¹²¹ *Special characters* are all those elements that represent something other than a letter or a number (Tuke, 2021).

could update screen readers to program them to interpret the symbols and emojis that currently cause difficulties. It may, therefore, be proposed that the schwa should be added to the list of elements to be considered in the programming of screen readers.

Both for the first and the second argument, the solution does not lie in the suppression of all content that does not guarantee accessibility. In the first case, given that there are no categories of people directly in opposition, it is preferable to adopt a solution that reconciles both accessibility and inclusion instances the most optimally. In the second case, given the absence of universal solutions in the digital domain, it is not feasible to eliminate all communicative elements that are not interpreted by assistive tools. It would, therefore, be more reasonable to attempt to comprehend the nature of the accessibility challenges and to identify ways of overcoming them.

Nevertheless, one might contend that incorporating the schwa and the asterisk into the development of assistive technologies would entail a cost. The landscape of these proposals is constantly evolving, and so this cost may prove unsustainable. Furthermore, it seems unfeasible to expect screen readers to be reprogrammed on an ongoing basis in response to each new solution that emerges. Nevertheless, to overcome the accessibility issues that arise alongside the advancement of digital communication, assistive technologies must evolve following the latest developments with the adoption of new applications . Otherwise, assistive technologies may inadvertently impede the ability of a subset of digital users to engage with these tools. It follows that although the constant updating of digital tools seems impracticable and expensive, it is a necessity that concerns the digital world in general. If you want to make the digital environment accessible and inclusive, you must try to constantly update the tools used for this purpose.

From an accessible and gender-fair perspective, certain precautions can be taken when writing digital text, such as limiting the use of special characters. However, emojis and special characters are used in online communication, and it is unreasonable to expect that they will be truly avoided altogether. For example, using emojis is useful to better express

an emotion, as in the case of emojis representing an emotional state. The schwa and the asterisk are also used in online contexts, especially in queer and deliberately gender-fair contexts, as well as in certain university emails and institutional communications. They are used not only to make one's non-binary gender identity visible but also to explicitly signal support for inclusive practices. So, the problem that, in some cases, communication may not be accessible and inclusive remains. On the other hand, continuous updating is essential to overcome or at least mitigate some of these cases.

Considering the relationship between the concepts of accessibility and inclusion discussed above (§ 3.8), it can be argued that it is essential to guarantee accessibility in all contexts to achieve comprehensive inclusivity. From this, it can be assumed that innovative solutions should not be used, as they cause accessibility difficulties in some cases. Nevertheless, there are grounds for the argument that the suppression of the non-binary instance is not an optimal solution. It can be argued that the optimal solution for all cases considered is to implement effective solutions to overcome accessibility difficulties wherever possible. However, it is important to acknowledge that these difficulties currently persist. According to Gheno (2022a), an intermediate solution would be to use innovative solutions where necessary, considering the specific case from time to time. She suggests using these linguistic solutions thoughtfully, considering different factors without having to abandon them altogether. Specifically, these proposals may be employed with careful attention to context, intentions and interlocutors. For instance, it may be optimal to use the schwa and asterisk in accordance with the referent, that is, to refer to non-binary individuals, contingent on their preferences. Moreover, the deployment of such solutions may be appropriate in informal contexts or in situations where it is essential to convey the intention to make all genders visible. It may be crucial to identify which factors should be taken into consideration when weighing the use of non-binary strategies. The factors to consider when choosing inclusive strategies in Italian will be explored in the next chapter.

4.6 Concluding remarks

In Italian, the use of innovative strategies to give visibility to non-binary people remains controversial, particularly in institutional contexts (see, for instance, D'Achille, 2021). Within this debate, the so-called accessibility objection has often been invoked, yet rarely examined in a systematic and empirically grounded way. This chapter has addressed precisely this gap by offering, to my knowledge, the first structured analysis of the accessibility implications of innovative non-binary forms in Italian. Starting from the tension between inclusivity and accessibility (§ 4.2), I have provided a detailed examination of the challenges that innovative grammatical gender encoding devices pose for two groups that are central to accessibility debates: visually impaired users (§ 4.3) and dyslexic individuals (§ 4.4). Rather than treating accessibility as a generic concern, I have identified specific, technically grounded obstacles and distinguished between different types of constraints.

Regarding visual impairments, I have analysed the incompatibility with screen readers. Screen readers can translate digital information into sound using text-to-speech programs or into Braille on specific displays. With text-to-speech programs, the asterisk is inherently incompatible because it has no sound. One solution could be to associate a conventional sound with it to make the symbol pronounceable. While having a corresponding sound, the schwa is currently incompatible with some text-to-speech programs because it is not interpreted correctly and with the right sound by the software. One solution could be to adapt screen readers to pronounce it when used as a gender-fair strategy in Italian words (§ 4.3.1). As for the Braille translation on displays, the asterisk can already be used as an innovative grammatical gender encoding device, unlike the schwa, which does not have a corresponding Braille dot combination. One solution could be to associate a conventional combination of dots with it to make it writable in Braille and update screen readers to convey this change correctly to the Braille display (§ 4.3.2).

Regarding dyslexia, I have identified an incompatibility between the schwa and digital fonts as the main accessibility challenge for the use of this innovative grammatical gender

encoding device. One solution could be to incorporate the schwa into the character set of the fonts in question or to use a standard font that is already highly readable and that includes the schwa among its characters. Based on my analysis, I have identified two additional challenges that extend beyond digital accessibility. The first concerns the confusion between the schwa and the letter “e”. The second concerns the difficulty in interpreting the schwa and the asterisk due to the familiarity or distinctiveness that one has concerning the linguistic solution. In both cases, there are different possible scenarios: some people may experience different challenges than others, and no universal solutions are currently identifiable (§ 4.4).

As previously stated (§ 4.5), it was beneficial to differentiate between accessibility challenges associated with visual impairments and those pertaining to dyslexia, as they necessitate distinct analytical approaches. Nevertheless, the use of screen readers and highly readable fonts is advantageous for the aforementioned categories and the linguistic community in general. These solutions are beneficial to all users, including those who have not a disability (AGID, 2024). For instance, even people who have no difficulty reading can benefit from using an easier-to-read font or reading text with a screen reader. Moreover, even though assistive devices are usually designed to help people with specific difficulties, they can also be useful to people with other difficulties. For example, highly readable fonts may help dyslexic individuals as well as visually impaired individuals.¹²² Screen readers are used by blind and visually impaired individuals but may also help dyslexic individuals or, more generally, those with learning difficulties.¹²³ It is essential to recognise the cross-over aspect

¹²² There are also accessible fonts designed specifically for visually impaired people. For example, the Braille Institute in cooperation with Applied Design Works has developed a typeface for people with low vision, the *Atkinson Hyperlegible* font. It can be difficult for visually impaired readers to distinguish certain letters and numbers. To make it easier for them, the design of this font differentiated between similar letter pairs such as *i* and *l*, eliminated ambiguities such as that between *O* and *0*, clearly defined character outlines, and paid attention to the shape, graces, and tails of the letters. This font takes specific characteristics into account and is designed to facilitate reading for visually impaired people. However, it can also facilitate reading for dyslexic persons. For more about the *Atkinson Hyperlegible Font*, see the website of Braille Institute. <https://brailleinstitute.org/freefont>.

¹²³ For more about compensatory tools, which are devices (e.g., the speech synthesis program) that each person can use to achieve their goal by compensating for specific difficulties, see the website of the Associazione Italiana Dislessia (AID). <https://www.aiditalia.org/gli-strumenti-compensativi>.

of assistive tools to acknowledge that an accessible environment can enhance the lives of all individuals, not just specific categories.

Beyond the difficulties related to assistive tools, other issues should be considered. The limitations of using the asterisk and the schwa are not exhausted by those related to digital accessibility. Their use, for example, may generate challenges for non-native Italian speakers (De Santis, 2022), elderly individuals (Gheno, 2022b), and those unfamiliar with the gender-fair language debate. The use of gender-fair language, and especially the use of strategies that are not part of ordinary language use, may require effort in understanding and prior knowledge of the function of such strategies, which may be a barrier for those new to the language. In such cases, individuals may struggle to decode the text (Gheno, 2022b). One solution could consider adding a note in texts written explaining the meaning of the gender-fair linguistic strategy. A note could inform the reader of the function of the linguistic strategy used, clarifying its inclusive function. Furthermore, this issue should be addressed by raising awareness in the linguistic community about gender non-binarism and, more generally, the importance of using gender-respectful language. This awareness is also spreading with the propagation of gender-fair language itself. Other issues arise with the use of gender-fair language.

Overall, the findings of this chapter support a nuanced conclusion: the accessibility objection is only partially justified. While innovative grammatical gender encoding devices may currently imply accessibility problems in certain contexts, some of these are contingent and solvable. Notably, in this work, I have addressed the issue of accessibility in the context of digital communication, with a particular focus on schwa and asterisk. Further research may extend the analysis beyond the digital context and focus on other innovative grammatical gender encoding devices to identify the challenges they present. Additionally, the validation of the hypotheses I have discussed so far may be contingent upon further research examining the accessibility difficulties encountered when innovative grammatical gender encoding devices are encountered in text. This is a topic that remains understudied in the Italian debate and requires further investigation.

To conclude this chapter, this discussion has highlighted the importance of giving visibility to different identities in contemporary linguistic practices. With respect to the Italian case, the use of the innovative visibility strategy presents various difficulties. This must be considered in the implementation of strategies, especially in institutional contexts. The next chapter aims to explore the factors that can be considered in the choice of inclusive strategies in Italian, based on the communicative contexts. Particular attention will be paid to institutional and administrative contexts.

5. Choosing Strategies: A Context-Based Approach

5.1 A contextual implementation of strategies

Building on the previous discussion, this chapter aims to identify and analyse the key contextual variables that may influence the choice of gender-inclusive strategies in Italian. While in Chapters 2-4 I have analysed the cognitive, linguistic, and accessibility-related features of different strategies, what remains underexplored is how these features interact with specific communicative contexts this chapter addresses that gap by proposing a principled, context-based framework for strategy selection. Rather than assuming that any single strategy is universally preferable, I argue that the appropriateness of a given form depends on the interaction between its linguistic properties and the constraints of the context in which it is used.

To this end, I first explore the different characteristics of communicative contexts, distinguishing between institutional and informal settings. In institutional contexts, requirements of clarity, precision, coherence, simplicity, and linguistic economy, highlighted by ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca (2011), accessibility, inclusivity, institutional authorship play a role in shaping which strategies are viable. These demands align with forms whose structural and functional features, discussed in earlier chapters, support transparent interpretation and ease of processing, such as conservative strategies. Conversely, strategies

that introduce visual or phonetic opacity or accessibility issues may be less suitable in such settings, such as innovative strategies. In informal contexts, by contrast, no single or standardised set of criteria exists. Without these institutional constraints, features that might be problematic in formal communication, such as innovative gender encoding devices and creative morphological operations, can become acceptable. As will be shown, these strategies may respond well to communicative goals tied to personal motivation, social affiliation, or political positioning (§ 5.2).

Building on these distinctions, I propose a context-sensitive framework of principles to guide the selection of gender-inclusive strategies across different communicative domains. This model does not assume that any strategy is universally preferable; instead, it clarifies how features previously analysed, such as morphological transparency, phonetic realisation, inclusivity potential, or accessibility constraints, become relevant depending on the contextual variables at play (§ 5.3).

I aim to make explicit which factors interact with the inherent features of different strategies. In doing so, I offer an exploratory contribution to how contextual variables may shape the appropriateness of gender-inclusive strategies.

The chapter concludes that the selection of gender-inclusive linguistic strategies should be grounded in a principled case-by-case assessment that considers both the communicative context (e.g., setting, audience, textual constraints) and the specific interaction between these contextual features and the characteristics of each strategy. In doing so, the proposed framework offer a structured and contextually adaptable model for the effective implementation of gender-inclusive language in Italian.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Sections 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 are excerpts, with some modifications from Giovine, M. (*under review*). Choosing Gender-Fair Strategies in Italian: A Context-Based Approach.

5.2 Communicative contexts

The term “communicative context” refers to a set of circumstances in which a communicative act takes place. These include not only the spatial, temporal, and sociocultural setting, but also the roles of the interlocutors and the degree of formality and informality of the exchange. Equally relevant are cognitive aspects, such as participants’ knowledge of the topic being discussed (Ferrari, 2010). Furthermore, the communicative context encompasses the broader interactional frame shaped by the ongoing conversation, the physical environment, the identities of the participants, and the network of intentions, beliefs, desires, concerns, biases, and shared knowledge that inform the exchange (Bianchi, 2003, p. 10).¹²⁵

In this section, I focus on those contextual features that are considered to have a direct influence on the choice of inclusive strategies. This selection is guided by the principle that a feature is relevant when it constrains or facilitates the application of specific strategies in a given context, affecting their clarity, accessibility, feasibility, or social appropriateness. Other features, such as the physical environment, are not examined in detail here, since their influence on strategy selection tend to be indirect and mediated by other factors. Based on this criterion, the features I examine include the mode of communication (written vs. spoken), the degree of formality, the relationship between participants, and the social and ideological dimensions of the interaction.

My analysis addresses communicative contexts in broad terms, focusing on a distinction between institutional and informal domains. By institutional contexts, I refer to professional and official settings, such as academic, administrative, and governmental environments. Institutional Italian does not constitute a single homogeneous variety, but rather a constellation of institutional sub-varieties adapted to different functional domains,

¹²⁵ For a general overview of key concepts in text linguistics across various theoretical models, from cognitive approaches to systemic-functional linguistics and gender analysis, see Ondelli (2013). The work outlines basic notions such as text type, pragmatic function, register, linguistic variation, speech act, and discourse community, and compares different models to develop a suitable framework for classifying the diverse range of text types used by EU institutions.

including administrative, legal, academic, journalistic, and public communication contexts (Riccio, 2024). In this sense, institutional communication is shaped not only by formal linguistic conventions, but also by the pragmatic goals and communicative functions associated with specific institutional settings. These may include both written documents (e.g., reports, regulations, forms) and spoken interactions (e.g., presentations, meetings, policy announcements). By informal contexts, I refer to social and everyday communicative situations, including exchanges with friends, family, or colleagues, as well as activist and community settings. This distinction is adopted as a functional and operational tool for analytical purposes, rather than a rigid or universally valid typology, and serves to anticipate the link between contextual features and the suitability of different gender-inclusive strategies.

In institutional contexts, communicative demands such as clarity, precision, coherence, simplicity, and linguistic economy are emphasised (ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011), which in turn influences the selection of strategies. Informal contexts, by contrast, are characterised by linguistic flexibility, creativity, and subjectivity. Here, the choice of strategies can be shaped by personal or group-based motivations, including political positioning, self-identification, or affiliation with activist communities, rather than by institutional conventions. However, the appropriateness of a given strategy also depends on subjective perceptions and interactional norms: for example, forms such as “Car* tutt*” (Dear[INN] all[INN]) may feel overly formal or stilted even in informal exchanges. In some intimate or familiar settings, standard forms like “Cari tutti” (Dear[M] all[M]) may sound natural, even when referring to a mixed-gender group.

The boundary between institutional and informal contexts can be fluid and context-dependent, shaped by factors such as normative constraints, expected register, degree of editorial control, and communicative purpose. Despite this lack of a clear-cut separation, distinguishing these two domains remains analytically useful, as it allows us to examine how markedly different communicative demands shape the selection of inclusive strategies. For

this reason, I dedicate a section to each domain below, while acknowledging the existence of hybrid and intermediate cases that exhibit characteristics of both.

5.2.1 Institutional contexts

By “institutional contexts”, I refer to professional and official settings such as academic, administrative, and governmental environments. These contexts may involve both written communication (e.g., academic documents, forms, calls for tenders, official reports, regulatory texts) and spoken communication (e.g., official speeches, academic presentations, policy announcements, or professional meetings).¹²⁶ In institutional communication, principles such as clarity, precision, coherence, simplicity, and linguistic economy are expected.¹²⁷ These principle can ensure that messages are understandable, accessible, and usable by a broad and non-specialist audience (see, for instance, FNOPI, 2019; ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011; Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2004). However, these requirements can come into tension with the use of gender-inclusive language (Cortelazzo, 2015).

Recent linguistic research has tended to conceptualise inclusion in relation to two main domains: on the one hand, the need for individuals to see their gender identity recognised through language; on the other, the need for institutions to communicate in a clear and accessible way in order to guarantee effective administrative citizenship, understood as the right of citizens to participate in public administrative processes in the interest of the

¹²⁶ It is important to emphasise that institutional contexts are not limited to written communication: spoken interactions also occur and are subject to similar communicative demands. Institutional texts and utterances are communicative acts whose effectiveness depends on clarity, accessibility, and usability. Highlighting both written and spoken forms clarifies that the distinction between institutional and informal contexts is independent from the written/spoken distinction.

¹²⁷ The notions of “clarity” and “accessibility” invoked in institutional communication are not entirely neutral or universally shared categories. Institutional texts, particularly legal and administrative ones, are often characterised by linguistic and structural complexity that may limit comprehension for many readers. Moreover, prevailing standards of readability and accessibility frequently presuppose neurotypical processing and communicative norms, potentially marginalising neurodivergent readers. A fuller discussion of the relationship between accessibility, inclusivity, and neurodivergence lies beyond the scope of the present analysis. I am grateful to Federica Formato for drawing my attention to this important issue.

community. These two dimensions, while both grounded in principles of inclusion, may place competing demands on institutional communication (Molinelli & Stanga, 2024). Riccio (2024) further emphasises that institutional language performs a socially and politically consequential function, since it mediates the relationship between public institutions and citizens. From this perspective, institutional communication is not merely descriptive, but performative in nature: through language, institutions regulate access to public information and contribute to the enactment of principles such as equality, justice, and inclusion (Riccio, 2024). Inclusive formulations, while essential to avoid invisibilisation and to promote equity, may lengthen texts, reduce conciseness, or challenge clarity, either structurally (e.g., by introducing longer or complex forms) or temporarily, depending on readers' familiarity with new usages (e.g., feminine professional titles). In this sense, the key issue is not whether tensions exist, but how they can be negotiated without undermining the communicative function of the text.

A review of the main principles of institutional writing illustrates these challenges. Administrative and institutional bodies have issued guidelines for effective communication in institutional contexts (Scaglioso & De Chierico, 2022). A number of these guidelines specifically address gender-inclusive language (e.g., Agenzia delle Entrate, 2020; Cancelleria federale, 2023; Città Metropolitana di Milano, 2023; European Parliament, 2018a; MIUR, 2018; Musei Reali di Torino, 2022; Robustelli, 2012). Whether focused on institutional communication in general or on gender-inclusive communication in particular, these documents share a commitment to core principles, namely clarity, readability, and accessibility.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, readability can be defined as the ease with which a text can be processed and understood, as determined by its linguistic features (Crossley et al., 2023). More specifically, readability depends on factors such as lexical familiarity and concreteness, syntactic complexity, and the cohesion of discourse structures, all of which contribute to the construction of meaning during reading. Texts that rely on familiar vocabulary, shorter and less embedded sentence structures, and clear connections between

ideas are generally processed more efficiently and understood more accurately (Crossley et al., 2023).

Across these guidelines, institutional communication is described as adhering to principles that guarantee accessibility for a wide and non-specialist audience. These principles include clarity, precision, coherence, simplicity, and linguistic economy (ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011). According to ITTIG and Accademia della Crusca (2011), a text is *clear* when its informational content is immediately recognisable and easy to interpret for the intended reader. This involves structuring information in a logical and gradual sequence, considering the reader's prior knowledge and expectations. Clarity is achieved by addressing key elements such as who is issuing the communication, what it is about, why it is relevant, and where and when it applies.¹²⁸ *Precision* refers to the unambiguous use of words and explicit logical connections between sentences. Vague or ambiguous language can lead to uncertainty in interpretation, while overly complex or archaic syntactic structures can slow down comprehension and should be avoided. *Coherence*, on the other hand, ensures that readers can follow the logical development of the argument and recognise referential continuity throughout the text. This internal consistency is crucial to avoid confusion and promote reader engagement. *Simplicity* in this context does not mean oversimplification, but rather the use of simple, non-technical language, straightforward sentence structures, and an effort to explain or paraphrase unavoidable technical terms using synonyms or concrete examples. The goal is to avoid nested subordinate clauses and instead construct sentences that are linear and easy to process (ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011).¹²⁹ This recommendation is consistent with findings from

¹²⁸ From a broader cognitive perspective, textual comprehension involves the construction of mental representations based on semantic connections within the text, through which linguistic input is decoded and integrated into meaningful structures (Ribeiro et al., 2019). In this sense, understanding a text is not merely a function of surface difficulty, but of how effectively linguistic elements are organised to support the integration of information.

¹²⁹ While principles such as clarity, simplicity, and readability are widely treated as fundamental in institutional communication, they may be not entirely neutral or universally measurable properties. Rather, they may reflect normative assumptions about language, cognition, and the “ideal reader”. In this sense, what counts as “clear” or “simple” is partly shaped by dominant expectations about standard language use and processing ease. Efforts to operationalise these notions, such as the ISO standard ISO 24495-1:2023 (Plain language, Part 1: Governing

readability research, which show that shorter sentences and reduced syntactic embedding facilitate faster parsing and comprehension, allowing readers to more easily identify thematic roles and relationships within the text (Crossley et al., 2023).

Notably, the Agency for Digital Italy (AGID, 2024) explicitly recommends using “simplified language”, understood as a way of structuring texts so that they are easier to read, process, and understand for a wide audience. In practice, this involves preferring the active voice over the passive, affirmative over negative constructions, and the indicative mood over the subjunctive, while avoiding uncommon vocabulary, parentheses, and overly embedded structures (AGID, 2024).¹³⁰ Finally, linguistic economy refers to the idea that texts should include all and only the information necessary to achieve their communicative goal. This means avoiding redundancy and repetition of concepts that have already been clearly expressed (ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011).

Other dimensions further complicate this balance. One is the collective *nature of institutional authorship*: texts do not reflect individual stances but the voice of the institution.¹³¹ This limits the space for experimental or controversial solutions, yet it can also be an argument in favour of innovation, since institutions, by virtue of their normative authority, can legitimise new practices and accelerate their acceptance. Notably, in a number of guidelines on gender-inclusive language, innovative strategies are explicitly discouraged or entirely neglected (see, for example, Città Metropolitana di Milano, 2023; MIUR, 2018; Università di Bologna, 2020). Institutional conservatism may partly explain the general

principles and guidelines), define them in functional terms, for instance by assessing whether readers can easily find, understand, and use the information they need. While this user-oriented approach provides a valuable framework, it also highlights how such criteria may privilege certain cognitive styles and literacy practices. From this perspective, ideals of clarity and simplicity may carry ableist implications, insofar as they prioritise ease of processing and standardised reading abilities over more diverse ways of engaging with texts. I am grateful to Federica Formato for prompting this reflection. For further details on the ISO plain language standard, see: <https://www.iplfederation.org/iso-standard/>.

¹³⁰ This information was presented during the AGID – Agenzia per l’Italia Digitale online course “Contenuti accessibili”, held on 5 March 2024. The course materials are not publicly available.

¹³¹ I am grateful to Martina Rosola for suggesting the important distinction between individual and institutional authorship. Her insight prompted me to reflect on how, in institutional contexts, authors do not write in their own name but on behalf of the institution they represent, a factor that has significant implications for the use and selection of inclusive language strategies.

reluctance to adopt innovative gender-inclusive strategies in institutional texts. At the same time, Italian institutional discourse on gender-inclusive language has progressively expanded over the past decades, particularly through the publication of administrative guidelines and university recommendations. Universities have increasingly framed inclusive language as part of broader commitments to equal opportunities, visibility, and non-discrimination, especially through documents produced by Committees for Equal Opportunities and related institutional bodies (Riccio, 2024).

However, there are notable exceptions that demonstrate how institutions can take innovative stances. For instance, the Università di Trento (2024) adopted the overextended feminine (*femminile sovraesteso*) in its General Regulation. It is the first document of its kind at the university, in which all references to positions and roles are written in the feminine form but intended to include all individuals, regardless of gender (Università di Trento, 2024). This choice, strongly symbolic, aimed to provide discontinuity with standard practices and to highlight the issue of gender visibility in official documents. By adopting a single gender form consistently across the nearly fifty-page document, the university sought both to streamline the text and to signal a commitment to inclusivity, demonstrating that institutional authority can be leveraged to introduce innovative, non-standard linguistic practices in formal communication. Università di Trento's guidelines (2024) are discussed in detail below (§ 6.2.3.4).¹³²

Another dimension is the visual and structural *organisation of documents*: layout, punctuation, and typographic cues are integral to readability and must be considered when integrating inclusive strategies (ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011). When implementing inclusive strategies in these contexts, communicators may need to balance the

¹³² For further details on the innovative use of the extended feminine adopted by the University of Trento (2024), see the press release available at the following link: <https://pressroom.unitn.it/alfresco/download/workspace/SpacesStore/a63572e3-8d23-47e4-ac25-160f9eb7a5b5/cs%20Regolamento%20generale%20al%20femminile.pdf>.

need for inclusivity with constraints related to accessibility, clarity, and economy (European Parliament, 2018a; Robustelli, 2012).

These criteria provide the framework within which inclusive strategies are evaluated. In institutional contexts, communicative standards such as clarity, readability, and linguistic economy guide the assessment of gender-inclusive strategies. Within this setting, conservative visibility strategies operate differently depending on their structural demands. The splitting strategy, for instance, is compatible with institutional requirements of clarity and accessibility, as it specifies referents without introducing innovative devices. However, the repetition of terms in the masculine and feminine forms increases textual length, rendering the text verbose (i.e., involving a higher number of words).¹³³ This can be problematic in institutional communication, where excessive length may hinder readability, slow down information processing, and reduce overall communicative efficiency.¹³⁴

At the same time, it is important to critically assess the extent to which concerns about verbosity reflect actual linguistic constraints. Empirical research on gender-inclusive language has shown that common criticisms, such as the claim that inclusive forms make

¹³³ I would like to thank Martina Rosola for suggesting the terminological clarification regarding the use of *redundancy* versus *verbosity* in the context of inclusive language strategies. While the term *redundant* implies a repetition of equivalent elements that add no new meaning, thus suggesting unnecessary duplication, *verbose* or *verbosity* refers more precisely to the quantity of linguistic material (e.g., number of words or syllables) without implying semantic redundancy. In this work, I adopt *verbosity* to describe the extent to which certain inclusive strategies may lengthen a text, in terms of word count or syntactic complexity, regardless of whether the added material contributes new information. This choice aims to reflect more accurately the specific type of textual expansion associated with some inclusive strategies.

¹³⁴ Verbosity constitutes a potential drawback in institutional communication because it directly affects text processing, comprehension, and adherence to communicative principles. From a psycholinguistic perspective, longer and more redundant formulations increase the cognitive load required to parse and interpret a text, thereby slowing down processing and reducing efficiency (Crossley et al., 2023; Crossley, 2024). Moreover, textual comprehension relies on the construction of coherent mental representations based on clear semantic connections; excessive or repetitive information may interfere with this process by introducing unnecessary informational load (Ribeiro et al., 2019). In addition, verbosity may disrupt the perceived cohesion and linearity of discourse, as repeated forms do not always contribute new information but may instead fragment the flow of the text. From a functional perspective, this runs counter to the principle of linguistic economy, according to which institutional texts should include all and only the information necessary to achieve their communicative goal (ITTIG & Accademia della Crusca, 2011). For these reasons, verbosity is not merely a stylistic issue but a functional constraint that must be carefully managed when implementing gender-inclusive strategies in institutional contexts.

texts significantly longer or less readable, are often not supported by quantitative evidence (Müller-Spitzer et al., 2024). For instance, corpus-based analyses suggest that only a relatively small proportion of textual material is affected by gender-inclusive reformulations, and that many inclusive strategies do not necessarily increase textual length or complexity. Moreover, experimental studies indicate that while inclusive forms may initially slow down processing, readers tend to adapt quickly, and comprehension is not significantly impaired over time (Gygax and Gesto 2007; Müller-Spitzer et al., 2024). These findings suggest that perceived verbosity may partly reflect unfamiliarity rather than inherent processing difficulty.

This conclusion is further supported by experimental research on text comprehension, which shows that gender-fair language does not necessarily impair readers' understanding. For instance, Pabst and Kollmayer (2023) found that the use of gender-inclusive forms, including the gender asterisk, did not negatively affect subjective comprehensibility, syntactic processing, or the ease of assigning meaning to words, regardless of participants' educational background. More generally, previous studies have shown that several gender-fair strategies, such as pair forms and neutral formulations, do not reduce comprehensibility, although certain forms (e.g., complex singular constructions or slashes) may have more limited usability (Pabst & Kollmayer, 2023). These findings suggest that the impact of inclusive language on readability depends not only on verbosity or structural complexity *per se*, but also on the specific linguistic strategy employed.

By contrast, the use of feminine professional titles fits institutional constraints seamlessly: it avoids non-standard symbols and does not add significant verbosity, making it an easily adaptable option across institutional contexts.¹³⁵ The choice of conservative obscuration strategies is similarly shaped by institutional communicative expectations. Their reliance on periphrastic constructions may result in longer, less direct formulations,

¹³⁵ This is particularly problematic in contexts that require brevity, such as titles, slogans, or word-limited formats. Similarly, the innovative visibility strategy, tripling terms, also increases verbosity in texts, making them unsuitable for contexts that require conciseness (González Vázquez et al., 2024).

potentially reducing clarity and fluency (González Vázquez et al., 2024). Innovative strategies, despite their potential to enhance inclusivity by encompassing all genders, encounter challenges in institutional settings. Their use of non-standard symbols raises accessibility concerns in digital environments, as screen readers, Braille displays, and standard fonts do not yet consistently support such forms (§ 4.3, 4.4). For this reason, their suitability is highly dependent on the communicative function of the institutional text. Limited use, such as in the greeting line of an email, may be relatively easy to interpret and therefore acceptable. By contrast, in more extended and textually dense contexts, such as lengthy regulatory or normative documents, the repeated use of such forms may pose challenges for comprehension and accessibility, making the strategy less compatible with institutional communicative requirements.

A final point concerns the mode of communication: whether the context is *spoken* or *written*. In spoken interaction, immediate linguistic production predominates and leaves little room for careful planning or reformulation. Consequently, strategies that impose *greater cognitive load*, such as those requiring syntactic restructuring to obscure gender information, may be impractical in spontaneous speech. Likewise, innovative strategies that rely on typographic markers, such as the asterisk (*) and the “at” symbol (@), are unsuitable for oral contexts because they *lack phonetic realisation* (§ 4.3). Finally, strategies involving *verbosity*, such as the splitting strategy, while clear in reference, can produce lengthy utterances that may sound cumbersome in conversation.

Written contexts, on the other hand, afford time for thoughtful review and editorial control, which changes the calculus of suitability. Writers can evaluate clarity and stylistic impact, and manage repeated gender markings economically (for example, by summarising or abbreviating), so strategies that increase textual *verbosity* are better accommodated in writing than in speech.¹³⁶ This makes splitting acceptable in written contexts where explicit reference and transparency of address are priorities. Conservative visibility via feminine

¹³⁶ I am grateful to Bianca Cepollaro for suggesting this point, which helped me refine the distinction between written and spoken uses of inclusive strategies.

professional titles appears to be compatible with written institutional texts because it does not introduce non-standard symbols or substantial prolixity. Unlike more innovative strategies, feminisation operates within the existing grammatical system of Italian and is therefore less likely to interfere with readability, standardisation, and accessibility requirements that typically govern institutional communication. Conservative obscuration strategies can function in writing as well, though their periphrastic nature may still reduce clarity in dense or prescriptive documents. Finally, innovative graphic devices enhance inclusive coverage by encompassing all genders, but their current digital accessibility issues, screen readers, Braille displays, and standard fonts do not always support non-standard symbols, limiting their suitability for written institutional texts (§ 4.3, 4.4). Thus, while occasional use of such devices (e.g., in an e-mail initial greeting) may be acceptable in writing, extensive deployment in regulatory documents risks impairing comprehension and accessibility.

Writers are faced with a trade-off: whether to prioritise inclusivity or adhere to criteria such as clarity, simplicity, and accessibility (Cortelazzo, 2015). The central challenge for institutional communication is thus to reconcile inclusivity with formal constraints, and no single strategy can satisfy all requirements simultaneously: enhancing visibility may compromise economy, while promoting inclusivity may complicate fluency. The most effective approach is therefore not a one-size-fits-all rule but a context-sensitive compromise. By aligning linguistic strategies with the type of document, its communicative purpose, and its intended audience, institutions can adopt solutions that respect both formal requirements and gender-inclusive practices.

This raises a broader question: if the final decision must always be made on a case-by-case basis, what is the value of distinguishing institutional from non-institutional contexts in the first place? The distinction is analytically useful because institutional settings are characterised by relatively stable norms, such as transparency, accessibility, and legal or bureaucratic precision, which systematically constrain the range of feasible linguistic options. By contrast, non-institutional contexts are defined loosely, essentially “by negation”:

they encompass all communicative situations that fall outside the institutional domain and are therefore internally heterogeneous. Precisely because of this heterogeneity, they allow for flexibility and for experimental or community-driven inclusive practices. Acknowledging this, the institutional/non-institutional divide should not be taken as a rigid classification but rather as a heuristic tool: it highlights the different pressures that communicative contexts impose on linguistic choices, without predetermining which strategy must be used. Ultimately, the distinction clarifies the kinds of constraints at play, while the concrete implementation of gender-inclusive strategies remains necessarily context-dependent. In the Italian university context in particular, institutional reflection on gender-inclusive language has increasingly centred on concepts such as inclusivity, visibility, non-discrimination, and gender equality (Riccio, 2024). The terminology adopted in university guidelines reflects this evolution and demonstrates how linguistic choices are increasingly framed as part of broader institutional commitments to equity and representation.

5.2.2 *Informal contexts*

By “informal contexts”, I refer to social, familiar, and everyday communicative situations that allow for a spontaneous and flexible use of language. These include interactions with friends, family, or colleagues, as well as casual exchanges in day-to-day settings, regardless of the level of familiarity between interlocutors. Informal contexts also encompass social and activist spaces in which language assumes an explicitly political function. Such environments are characterised by an informal register, everyday vocabulary, and sometimes slang or colloquial expressions. It is important to stress, however, that these contexts are extremely diverse and do not share a uniform set of communicative norms, purposes, or registers; what unites them is largely the fact that they do not fall within the institutional domain. Precisely because of this heterogeneity, informal contexts offer multiple possibilities for linguistic choice, creativity, and experimentation.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Given the considerable heterogeneity of informal contexts, it would be desirable to refine in my future research the present analysis by examining more closely the different types of communicative situations that

Although they are not subject to prescriptive institutional rules, informal communications still adhere to shared, albeit flexible, norms concerning tone, form, and appropriateness. It is not the absence of rules that defines informal communication, but the presence of different, less standardised ones. Informal contexts are especially visible in many digital environments, such as social media interactions, messaging platforms, or online community spaces. This does not mean that all digital communication is informal, since institutional, professional, and highly regulated interactions also take place online. Rather, digital media often facilitate communicative practices characterised by immediacy, relational proximity, and expressive creativity. This flexibility is particularly evident in digital communication when emoticons, emojis, abbreviations, and creative punctuation are used to convey tone, emotion, or group affiliation.¹³⁸ These features may reflect a communicative style that can prioritise immediacy, relational proximity, and expressive creativity over a strict adherence to prescriptive norms. Unlike institutional domains, where institutional norms and communicative conventions shape the adoption of gender-inclusive strategies, informal contexts offer speakers flexibility in linguistic choice. In these settings, the choice of inclusive strategies can be guided by personal sensibilities, political commitment, and group dynamics (see, for instance, Non una di meno, 2017; Pusterla, 2019).

A first motivation is *practical necessity*. Evidence from the CoGeNSI corpus (Comandini, 2022), which documents online discussions in queer Facebook communities, shows that innovative strategies such as the schwa or the asterisk are used for this purpose. These strategies appear in both collective reference (e.g., addressing heterogeneous groups that include non-binary individuals) and singular reference (e.g., referring to a hypothetical

fall under this label. Such a more fine-grained articulation would make it possible to capture more precisely how gender-inclusive linguistic practices vary according to the communicative goals and social dynamics specific to each sub-context.

¹³⁸ *Emoticons* and *emojis* are visual elements used in digital communication to convey emotions, attitudes, or contextual nuances that may not be easily expressed through text alone. Emoticons originated as typographic symbols composed of keyboard characters, while emojis are graphic icons integrated into digital platforms and messaging systems. Although technically distinct, the two terms can be used interchangeably in popular discourse. Both forms play an important role in enhancing expressivity, managing tone, and facilitating interpersonal understanding in online interactions.

or unspecified person, or to a non-binary individual). Innovative strategies are also used in explicit self-reference by non-binary speakers or to obscure their self-identity. Importantly, such practices are strongly tied to the immediacy and informality of online writing, and they represent a clear expression of the ideals and sensibilities of their users. Even when inconsistently applied, they are motivated by a desire to include people of all genders in conversation and to acknowledge non-binary identities rather than render them invisible. In this sense, they amount to acts of social support, which, according to psychological research, can positively affect the well-being of non-binary individuals (Comandini, 2022).¹³⁹

A second motivation relates to *political positioning* and *affiliation with specific social groups*. Gender-inclusive language may be adopted to signal a political stance on linguistic gender discrimination and to affirm one's membership in a community that embraces this choice. The Italian transfeminist collective *Non una di meno*, for instance, explicitly promotes inclusive language as a tool for building collective cohesion and new imaginaries, i.e., new alternative representations to the standard ones. For example, the collective adopts innovative grammatical gender encoding devices as a means to give linguistic visibility to the multiplicity of gender identities and to allow for individual self-expression beyond the constraints of gender binarism (Non una di meno, 2017). This mechanism can be illuminated through Nunberg's (2018) notion of ventriloquistic implicature, a subtype of manner implicatures, recently applied to inclusive language by Fumagalli and Rosola (2024). According to Nunberg (2018), the use of a marked form, i.e., a form that carries additional connotations, can associate the speaker with the attitudes of a group whose norms would not ordinarily govern the speech situation. Crucially, what triggers this implicature is not merely the markedness of a linguistic form, but the fact that the form is characteristic of the linguistic practices of a specific group. Using such forms can implicitly align the speaker with that community, even in contexts where those norms would not ordinarily apply (Nunberg, 2018). Thus, adopting inclusive strategies can implicitly align speakers with transfeminist and queer

¹³⁹ The link between language, gender, and the well-being of trans* people is discussed in more detail in author (forthcoming), which examines how inclusive linguistic practices can contribute to reducing marginalisation and supporting the mental health of trans* communities.

communities, while refusing them where they are expected may convey affiliation with conservative stances that reject inclusive language (Fumagalli and Rosola, 2024).

A third motivation is *linguistic creativity*. CoGeNSI shows instances where innovative strategies are applied to words that would not require them in standard usage, e.g., “donnə” (women), “famigliə” (families). In these cases, the choice signals an anti-patriarchal or non-heteronormative stance and reflects the creative potential of inclusive practices (Comadini, 2021). Speakers experiment with neologisms, reworked endings, or novel pronouns to narrate their identities and experiences in ways that resist or subvert dominant binary norms. As Pusterla (2019) notes, such practices can contribute to constructing alternative imaginaries, enabling the representation of realities that diverge from the standard binary system (Pusterla, 2019).¹⁴⁰

In practice, when addressing a mixed-gender group of friends in an informal setting, such as a casual social gathering or a group chat, the linguistic strategies adopted may vary considerably depending on the speaker’s awareness and the collective dynamics of the group. A speaker with a strong personal commitment to gender inclusivity may choose to use innovative grammatical gender encoding devices, such as the schwa or asterisks, even in spontaneous speech or casual writing, as a way to reflect their sensitivity to non-binary identities, their desire not to reproduce gender-based exclusions, or to signal their position on this. The choice of which strategy specifically to adopt here could be particularly linked to personal preferences. However, the linguistic choices may also be shaped by the social context in which the interaction takes place. For instance, if the speaker belongs to a

¹⁴⁰ The CoGeNSI corpus (Corpus of Gender Neutralisation in Social Italian) was compiled by Comadini (2022) and consists of informal public communications collected from Facebook pages connected to queer communities. It comprises 347 discussion threads produced between March and May 2021, amounting to about 126,000 tokens, and represents the first systematic collection on the use of gender-neutralisation strategies in informal Italian online communication.

Currently, the use of innovative grammatical gender encoding devices has transcended the confines of activism in the strict sense and has appeared in cultural venues (e.g., *Musei Reali Torino*, 2022), independent publishers (e.g., Effequ), and municipal communications (e.g., Comune di Castelfranco Emilia). Another example of the use of gender encoding devices outside of activist circles is the decision by an Italian municipality to use the schwa in its social media communications.

politically engaged collective, such as *Non una di meno*, their use of inclusive forms may be reinforced by a shared community ethos that embraces inclusive language as part of its identity and political stance. In such environments, gender-inclusive strategies not only reflect personal sensitivity but also serve to signal belonging and solidarity. The choice of which strategy specifically to adopt here could be particularly linked to personal preferences.

Conversely, in a group where inclusive language is not common or where the use of such forms might generate misunderstanding or discomfort, a speaker might choose neutral or conventional expressions, even if personally committed to gender inclusiveness. Thus, linguistic choices in informal contexts can result from a dynamic negotiation between personal motivations and the perceived norms or expectations of the immediate social environment.

To conclude, linguistic choices in informal contexts are not governed by written institutional prescriptions but emerge from a complex interplay of practical, political, and creative motivations. This allows for expressive freedom and innovation but also places the burden of decision-making on the speaker, who must navigate value-laden choices. Importantly, the element of negotiation, though visible in informal settings, also exists in institutional contexts, where authors balance partially conflicting priorities such as clarity, inclusiveness, neutrality, and brevity. Seen in this light, inclusive language, across both formal and informal domains, emerges not as a matter of fixed rules but as a dynamic space of negotiation. It is precisely this negotiative character that makes it socially and politically meaningful.

5.3 Interacting principles in contexts

The analyses of institutional (§ 5.2.1) and informal (§ 5.2.2) contexts have shown that the adoption of inclusive strategies is governed by partially overlapping but ultimately distinct sets of priorities. What emerges clearly is that a constellation of principles shapes communicative choices in both domains, and that these principles may come into tension

with one another. Rather than proposing a fixed hierarchy among them, I propose understanding them as part of a context-sensitive configuration: a dynamic interplay of principles whose relative relevance shifts according to the communicative goals and structural features of the context in which the interaction takes place. The key insight is that communicators can determine the most appropriate strategy only by identifying how different principles interact within a specific communicative situation. The framework proposed here is intended to support this process, providing a structured reference through which communicators can reflect on the contextual constraints. The aim is therefore not to establish universal priorities, but to offer an analytical tool for understanding how communicative decisions are negotiated in practice when different contextual factors pull in different directions.

Because gender inclusion is a central concern of this analysis, the framework explicitly integrates inclusivity as one of the relevant communicative principles. However, inclusivity is not assumed to automatically override all other considerations. Rather, its role depends on how it interacts with other communicative requirements and on the structural constraints of the specific context.

An important aspect of this framework is its potential applicability beyond the present analysis. The principles identified here are not intended as prescriptive rules to be mechanically applied. Rather, they are analytical dimensions derived from recurring patterns observed in institutional guidelines and communicative practices discussed in Section 5.2.1. Their applicability lies in providing institutional actors with a reflective framework for evaluating the potential effects, limitations, and tensions associated with different gender-inclusive strategies in specific communicative contexts.

In this sense, the model may contribute socially by encouraging more transparent and context-sensitive linguistic decision-making, particularly in institutional communication where language choices shape public representation, accessibility, and inclusion. By making explicit the tensions underlying debates on gender-inclusive language, the framework may

also contribute to a more nuanced public discussion, showing that disagreements often emerge not from the rejection of inclusion itself, but from different evaluations of competing communicative requirements.

5.3.1 Principles in institutional contexts

As discussed in Section 5.2.1, institutional communication is characterised by a set of communicative requirements (e.g., clarity, precision, coherence, simplicity, accessibility, inclusivity, linguistic economy, institutional authorship). Rather than being understood as abstract principles organised in a stable order of importance, these should be conceptualised as interacting constraints that shape the range of linguistically acceptable options in institutional discourse.

In line with Herijgers and Maat (2017), a *constraint* can be defined as a limitation on the set of possible utterances available to participants in interaction. In institutional contexts, communicative choices can be made within a space of possibilities structured by multiple, and often competing, constraints deriving from the communicative purpose, organisational norms, audience design, and broader social expectations. Drafting an institutional text therefore involves navigating a constrained design space in which not all communicative goals can be simultaneously maximised. Tensions between constraints are thus not exceptional but constitutive of institutional communication (Herijgers & Maat, 2017). The set of constraints identified here is derived from the analysis of institutional guidelines discussed in Section 5.2.1. As such, it does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of all factors shaping institutional discourse, but rather a representative selection of recurrent constraints that are particularly relevant to the adoption of gender-inclusive language. The framework does not claim that these principles are universally applicable in identical ways across all institutional contexts; rather, it proposes them as recurring dimensions that can help analyse how communicative decisions are justified and negotiated in practice.

These constraints interact dynamically and may come into conflict. For instance, inclusivity may interact problematically with accessibility when innovative forms reduce

readability, or with clarity when forms are unfamiliar to the intended audience. In such cases, institutional actors must navigate tensions through contextual judgment and professional practice. In many communicative situations there may be no single option that satisfies all constraints simultaneously. Communicators must therefore negotiate the interaction between partially competing communicative requirements (Herijgers & Maat, 2017) such as clarity, accessibility, inclusivity, and institutional norms, in ways that are appropriate to the communicative situation.

Moreover, institutional communication is also shaped by broader processes of language policy and ideology. Language policy documents can be understood as manifestations of underlying ideological positions, reflecting assumptions about what counts as appropriate, legitimate, or desirable language use (Karlsson and Karlsson, 2019). From this perspective, the constraints operating in institutional discourse are not purely functional, but also ideological: promoting or excluding certain forms of gender-inclusive language may contribute to broader dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and representation. The following constraints can therefore be understood as recurring dimensions of institutional communication whose interaction varies depending on context:

(1) *Institutional authorship* - the text must represent the institution rather than individual preferences, including choices regarding inclusive language.

E.g., determining whether institutional guidelines prioritise the inclusion of non-binary people in addition to women.

(2) *Clarity* - the text should have the potential to be understood without ambiguity by all intended readers, including when gender-inclusive forms are used.

E.g., using “Ministra” (Minister[F]) instead of “Ministro” (Minister[M]) for a woman can increase clarity by specifying the referent’s gender.

(3) *Accessibility* - the communication should minimise potential barriers or unnecessary cognitive effort for the intended audience, including when using gender-inclusive forms.

E.g., using strategies that are not conventional in that specific context may create accessibility difficulties for those who use screen readers or for non-native speakers.

(4) *Inclusivity* - gender diversity should be made visible wherever possible, insofar as this remains compatible with other communicative requirements.

E.g., making women visible using “studentesse e studenti” (students[F] and students[M]) when compatible with the communicative context.

(5) *Precision* - texts should rely on explicit and unambiguous lexical choices and logical relations between sentences.

E.g., specifying “le dirigenti” (the[F] managers[F]) vs. “i dirigenti” (the[M] managers[M]) when gender is relevant to avoid ambiguous reference.

(6) *Coherence* - logical and referential continuity must be maintained, including consistent use of gender-inclusive strategies throughout the text.

E.g., choosing one strategy and applying it consistently rather than alternating arbitrarily between “studenti” (students[M]), “studenti e studentesse” (students[M] and students[F]), and “corpo studentesco” (student body).

(7) *Simplicity* - syntactic and lexical choices should facilitate comprehension without oversimplifying content, including for readers unfamiliar with inclusive strategies.

E.g., using a simpler inclusive form like “il personale docente” (the teaching staff) rather than complex periphrases such as “Le persone che esercitano la professione docente” (People engaged in the teaching profession).

(8) *Linguistic economy* - communication should avoid unnecessary informational or structural complexity while preserving communicative effectiveness. What counts as unnecessary informational complexity is not objectively determined, but emerges from context-dependent evaluations shaped by institutional norms, communicative goals, audience expectations, and ideological assumptions.

E.g., using collective terms like “la cittadinanza” (the citizens) may reduce linguistic economy while maintaining broad gender inclusiveness.

In practical terms, selecting gender-inclusive forms means operating within a limited set of viable options and choosing those that best accommodate the interaction of constraints that become salient in a given situation. No single configuration is universally optimal.

Crucially, when communication is perceived as unsuccessful, for example when inclusive forms are criticised as unclear, ideologically excessive, or inaccessible, this should not be interpreted as a failure of implementation. Rather, such reactions may indicate that different actors evaluate and negotiate communicative constraints differently, thereby revealing underlying tensions in institutional discourse. For example, in a ministerial circular, it is essential that the text has the potential to be immediately understandable (clarity) and accessible (accessibility) to all citizens. For this reason, such context may favour relatively conventional strategies. Gender-neutral expressions, such as “la cittadinanza” (the citizenship) or paired forms such as “le cittadine e i cittadini” (the[F] citizens[F] and the[M] citizens[M]) can be used, especially where precision of reference is required, without substantially reducing readability. By contrast, innovative solutions like “l* Cittadin*” (the[INN] citizen[INN]) may create accessibility problems for readers.

A similar interaction applies to university regulations. In this type of document, it is important both to ensure broad accessibility (accessibility) and to guarantee the visibility of women in accordance with institutional guidelines (inclusivity). For this reason, feminine professional titles such as “la retttrice” (the[F] rector[F]) are fully compatible with institutional communication. By contrast, strategies such as the asterisk or schwa, although potentially more inclusive, are not adopted because they may create tensions with accessibility requirements.

However, even within institutional settings, communicative priorities may interact differently depending on the communicative purpose. In awareness campaigns, for instance, visibility and symbolic inclusion (inclusivity) may become particularly salient

communicative goals. In such cases, innovative gender encoding devices like “Car* cittadin*” (Dear[INN] citizens[INN]) can be acceptable in slogans or posters precisely because the rhetorical function of the text allows for greater interpretative effort and tolerates a lower degree of immediate accessibility.¹⁴¹ Innovative forms may function precisely by challenging expectations and prompting reflection, even if this partially complicates immediate comprehension.

5.3.2 *Principles in informal contexts*

As discussed in Section 5.2.2, informal communication is characterised by the absence of institutional authorship and codified norms. Linguistic choices are therefore shaped by a different configuration of constraints, including personal motivations (practical, political, or creative), group norms, and the expressive affordances of specific communicative environments. In these contexts, inclusivity is not constrained by institutional requirements and may become a particularly salient communicative value. At the same time, other factors such as clarity, simplicity, and linguistic economy remain relevant, but unlike in institutional settings they are negotiable and may be adjusted in light of audience, purpose, and social alignment.

In this sense, the core challenge in informal contexts is not to balance inclusivity against institutional constraints, but to navigate the interaction between inclusivity, group identity, and communicative effectiveness, and interpersonal relationships. Speakers may foreground inclusivity or political signalling even at the cost of reduced transparency or

¹⁴¹ An interesting case is that of the municipality of Castelfranco Emilia in Modena, Italy. In 2021, it sparked a public debate when it introduced the schwa (“ə”) on social media. The administration explained that the aim was to make the language more inclusive by replacing traditional masculine plural endings (e.g., “tutti”) with neutral forms (e.g., “tuttə”). This decision attracted both praise and criticism, sparking political and social controversy. The municipal communications officer defended the measure as an exercise in care, explaining that the intention was not to radically alter the language, but rather to symbolically and politically acknowledge all gender identities. For further information about this case, see: https://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/04/14/news/castelfranco_emilia_uso_schwa_e_rovesciata_inclusione-296445030/.

standardisation, an option that would be unacceptable in institutional communication but is fully legitimate in personal or community-based discourse.

The aim of the framework proposed below is therefore not to impose prescriptive rules or to establish a stable hierarchy of principles, but rather to clarify how the main motivations identified in Section 5.2.2 may interact in informal communication and how this interaction can shape the choice of gender-inclusive strategies in different contexts. The following dimensions can therefore be understood as recurring motivations that can influence informal communicative practices:

(1) *Practical necessity* – linguistic strategies are selected to refer accurately and respectfully to individuals or groups.

E.g., using an innovative form preferred by a non-binary individual, or by a mixed-gender group including non-binary participants.

(2) *Political positioning and social affiliation* - inclusive strategies are adopted to signal a political stance or to align with the linguistic norms of a specific community.

E.g., using schwa or asterisks to mark solidarity with queer or transfeminist movements and to participate in their alternative imaginaries.

(3) *Linguistic creativity* - speakers experiment with form for expressive, playful, or subversive purposes, resisting standard norms or broadening representational possibilities.

E.g., applying innovative strategies to destabilise linguistic norms.

These dimensions reflect the different types of communicative motivations that may coexist, overlap, or come into tension in informal communication. Practical necessity concerns the need to refer to people in ways perceived as respectful and appropriate within a specific interpersonal context. In particular, when individuals explicitly state preferred forms of address, speakers may orient their linguistic choices accordingly in order to avoid misrecognition or exclusion. Political positioning and social affiliation, by contrast, concern alignment with communities, ideological stances, or shared linguistic practices. Linguistic

creativity instead foregrounds experimentation, expressive play, and the symbolic destabilisation of normative linguistic expectations. Importantly, these motivations should not be understood as fixed levels within a rigid hierarchy. Their relevance varies depending on the communicative situation, the relationship between participants, the communicative medium, and the social meanings attached to specific forms. In some contexts, practical necessity may become particularly salient; in others, community affiliation or creative experimentation may shape linguistic choices more strongly. Informal communication is therefore characterised less by stable prioritisation than by ongoing negotiation between partially overlapping communicative goals.

Understanding these interactions helps explain how speakers navigate potentially competing objectives in informal contexts. For example, a speaker may simultaneously attempt to respect a person's self-identified gender, align with the linguistic practices of a political community, and experiment creatively with language. In other cases, these motivations may pull in different directions, leading speakers to adopt more conventional or more innovative strategies depending on the communicative situation. The framework proposed here is therefore intended not as a predictive model capable of determining which strategy speakers will necessarily adopt, but as an analytical tool for understanding the range of motivations that may shape informal gender-inclusive language practices.

The interaction of these motivations can be observed in a variety of communicative practices. A first illustration comes from a mixed-gender group chat that includes a non-binary participant: here, a speaker committed to inclusivity may choose innovative visibility strategies or conservative obscurity strategies in order to linguistically include this non-binary person (practical necessity). A second example concerns a Facebook group of a feminist collective whose linguistic policy explicitly requires the visibility of women. A contributor wishing to signal adherence to this policy may consistently use feminine role names and explicitly mention women when referring to mixed-gender groups (political positioning and social affiliation). A third example is a poster advertising an event against gender violence organised by a transfeminist collective. Its author may write "Sorell* non

sei sol*” (Sister[INN], you are not alone[INN]) and add an asterisk even to already feminine forms, not out of grammatical necessity but to foreground openness to a broader range of identities and to index the collective’s non-binary orientation through the unconventional use of innovative strategies (linguistic creativity).¹⁴² These examples do not aim to demonstrate that the proposed framework functions universally or exhaustively in practice. Rather, they illustrate some ways in which different communicative motivations may become salient in specific informal contexts. A more systematic validation of this framework would require broader empirical investigation across different communities, communicative media, and interaction settings.

In all three cases above, gender-related motivations are foregrounded, and other communicative needs, such as clarity or readability, may become less central for the speakers involved. Yet even within the same informal contexts, different communicative needs may emerge depending on the participants and the situation. For instance, in a group chat where one member relies on a screen reader, accessibility may become particularly salient. Likewise, in an online space explicitly organised around anti-ableist principles, speakers may avoid linguistic solutions perceived as creating barriers, even if they are otherwise committed to innovative gender-inclusive forms.

Wrapping up, the choice of strategies depends on how speakers negotiate different communicative motivations within specific contexts. In activist blogs or collective platforms such as *Non una di meno*, experimental strategies, including neologisms and reworked endings, may be recognised as acceptable within communities where such practices are expected and valued. Here, immediate readability in the strict institutional sense may be less central than community cohesion and ideological signalling: using innovative strategies can strengthen community belonging and expresses alignment with non-binary inclusive norms. By contrast, in informal contexts involving broader or less specialised audience, such as a

¹⁴² This third example is inspired by a poster produced for an event organised by *Non Una Di Meno*. The original poster can be consulted at the following link: https://www.instagram.com/p/DRFVaiKjGUs/?img_index=1&igsh=Y3F1cDdtZmhyb29y.

public social-media post, speakers may adopt more conservative strategies in order to remain inclusive while reducing the risk of excluding readers unfamiliar with innovative forms. Thus, even in informal contexts, linguistic choices emerge from the interaction between practical necessity, political positioning and social affiliation, linguistic creativity, and other communicative needs such as accessibility and clarity discussed in § 5.3.1.

This context-sensitive framework therefore avoids both rigid prescription and arbitrary relativism. Rather than determining which principles should always prevail, it provides an analytical perspective for examining how speakers negotiate competing communicative motivations in different informal contexts and how these negotiations shape the adoption of gender-inclusive strategies in practice.

5.4 Concluding remarks

This context-sensitive framework offers an analytical approach to understanding how tensions between different communicative principles are navigated in practice. For instance, in a ministerial report, institutional authorship and clarity interact with the adoption of inclusive forms, often making experimental strategies less compatible with the communicative setting. In an activist blog post, by contrast, inclusivity, identity expression and community cohesion may interact more strongly with communicative goals, even when this reduces readability for audiences outsider of the community. Rather than resolving conflicts between principles, the framework highlights how they are jointly negotiated in relation to specific communicative situations. It therefore avoids both rigid prescription and arbitrary relativism by providing a structured way of analysing how communicative decisions emerge from the interaction of multiple constraints.

This chapter has proposed a contextual framework for understanding and implementing gender-inclusive linguistic strategies in Italian. Building on the premise that each strategy presents different features, challenges, and trade-offs, I have argued that inclusive practices must be examined not only in terms of their structural properties but also

in relation to the communicative contexts in which they are used. The chapter has therefore advanced the idea that the choice of inclusive strategies depends on the interplay between contextual variables, such as communicative goals, institutional constraints, and personal motivations, and the functional and ideological characteristics of each strategy, with a central focus on promoting of gender inclusivity.

The discussion began by outlining the need for a systematic contextual model in the research of inclusive language, addressing a gap in current scholarship, which has not yet offered a detailed context-sensitive analysis of how Italian strategies are selected (§ 5.1). A distinction was drawn between institutional and informal communicative contexts. In institutional contexts, strategy selection is shaped by interacting constraints such as institutional authorship, clarity, precision, coherence, simplicity, accessibility, and linguistic economy. In informal contexts, by contrast, linguistic choices may be shaped by individual or group motivations, such as personal sensitivity, political positioning, or creative language use, rather than by codified institutional constraints (§ 5.2).

To account for the coexistence of these diverse pressures, the chapter has proposed a context-sensitive framework for analysing how communicative principles interact when inclusive strategies are selected (§ 5.3). This framework does not prescribe outcomes or establish fixed priorities among principles, but instead provides a structured way of examining how different communicative factors become more or less salient depending on the situation. It thereby supports interpretative analysis of cases in which inclusivity, accessibility, clarity, and other communicative requirements interact in potentially divergent ways.

Overall, this chapter has shown that gender-inclusive language in Italian cannot be approached as a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, strategy selection emerges from the interaction of contextual variables, communicative purposes, and ideological orientations. A context-based approach enables a more fine.-grained understanding of linguistic choices, highlighting how inclusive practices are shaped by the dynamic interaction of communicative

principles across different settings, and how these practices contribute to evolving social understandings of gender and language.

6. Gender-Inclusive Language in Italian Academia: Strategies, Classifications, and Guideline Development

6.1 The institutional domain: the case of Italian universities

In the previous chapter, I distinguished between institutional and informal contexts in order to identify the main factors that shape the adoption of one gender-inclusive linguistic strategy over another. Building on that distinction, I have chosen to narrow the focus of the present chapter to a specific type of institutional setting: universities. My choice is based on the view that higher education institutions constitute a particularly relevant domain for examining how gender-inclusive language is interpreted, negotiated, and implemented in formal contexts.

I consider universities a significant case study for at least three reasons. First, universities do not merely produce and disseminate knowledge; through their policies, regulations, and communication practices, they also contribute to shaping norms about legitimate forms of linguistic and social behaviour. As institutions with recognised symbolic authority, they can influence broader understandings of what counts as an appropriate or progressive approach to gender-inclusive communication. Second, universities often act as models for other public institutions, meaning that their internal policies may contribute to the wider circulation and standardisation of specific linguistic practices. Third, analysing university guidelines allows me to examine not only which strategies institutions recommend, but also how they justify these choices and how they negotiate potential tensions between competing values, such as inclusivity, accessibility, and institutional clarity.

This perspective is consistent with previous research on institutional discourse. Riccio (2024), for instance, argues that institutional discourse constitutes a crucial site in which gender identities and social norms are continuously negotiated through socially and culturally regulated linguistic practices (Riccio, 2024). While I draw on this theoretical perspective, in

this chapter I apply it specifically to the analysis of gender-inclusive language guidelines adopted by Italian universities. I therefore approach institutional language not as a neutral instrument of communication, but as a domain in which linguistic choices reflect broader assumptions about representation, accessibility, and social inclusion.

A further reason for focusing on universities derives from the broader research framework in which this work is situated. My project is funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research through the PNRR, which places particular emphasis on supporting Public Administrations in adopting inclusive and equitable practices. I have therefore chosen universities as a particularly appropriate context for investigating how principles of gender-inclusive communication are translated into institutional recommendations. Universities, as public institutions or closely integrated with the public sector, provide a valuable setting for observing how such principles are negotiated, formalised, and justified.

At the same time, this choice is also connected to my own research experience. My applied work within the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) working group at Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele has given me direct experience of the practical challenges involved in drafting institutional guidelines. This experience informs my analysis by providing insight into the types of decisions, constraints, and competing priorities that may emerge during the development of such documents. However, I do not use this experience as a basis for generalisation; rather, I consider it a complementary perspective that allows me to interpret broader institutional trends through an understanding of the concrete processes behind guideline production.

Against this background, I have structured this chapter as follows. After a brief overview of previous research on institutional gender-inclusive language guidelines (§ 6.1.1), I first present a comparative analysis of the gender-inclusive language guidelines published by Italian universities before November 2025, examining which strategies they recommend, how these strategies are categorised, and what motivations underlie institutional choices (§

6.2).¹⁴³ Subsequently, the discussion turns to the process through which the Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele (2023) guidelines were developed, a process in which I was directly involved (§ 6.3). This experience serves to illustrate and discuss some key decision points and challenges that emerge during the development of institutional guidelines. This twofold approach makes it possible to connect macro-level institutional trends with the concrete dynamics of guideline production, thereby offering an in-depth understanding of how gender-inclusive language is shaped within the Italian academic context. Overall, the analysis suggests a predominantly conservative orientation in the strategies adopted by universities, though some guidelines and the debates surrounding their drafting also show openings toward innovative and experimental approaches.

6.1.1 Previous research on institutional gender-inclusive language guidelines

Research on gender-inclusive language in institutional and academic contexts has increasingly examined how public institutions and universities develop linguistic policies aimed at promoting more equitable and non-discriminatory forms of communication. This growing body of literature reflects a broader interest in the role of institutional discourse in shaping representations of gender and in negotiating the relationship between linguistic practices, social change, and institutional values.

Within higher education, several studies have investigated the role of universities in promoting gender equality through institutional policies and communication practices. One relevant contribution is Mihaela Miroiu (2011), who proposes practical guidelines for integrating gender perspectives into university curricula and institutional policies. Although her work does not focus specifically on gender-inclusive language, it situates universities as important actors in implementing broader gender-mainstreaming strategies, providing a

¹⁴³ The university guidelines discussed in this section were published across different institutional phases of the Italian education ministry. Some were issued during the mandate of Valeria Fedeli, when the ministry was still officially named MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca). Others were published under subsequent governments, after the ministry underwent a series of reorganisations: in 2020, MIUR was split into MI (Ministero dell'Istruzione) and MUR (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca).

wider institutional framework for subsequent research on inclusive practices in academic contexts (Miroiu, 2011).

Research has also examined institutional approaches to gender-inclusive language in broader European and multilingual contexts. In particular, the work of Daniel Elmiger and collaborators at University of Geneva has contributed to the study of gender-fair language, institutional communication, and linguistic standardisation.¹⁴⁴ In a recent project, Elmiger (2024) compiled an extensive collection of gender-inclusive language guidelines issued by universities, public administrations, and other organisations, providing a broad overview of existing institutional documents.¹⁴⁵ By gathering bibliographic information and descriptive metadata, the collection represents an important resource for research on institutional gender-inclusive language policies and their diffusion across different contexts.

Beyond the collection and documentation of institutional guidelines, recent studies have also investigated these documents through comparative and corpus-based approaches. Ivanov and Lieboldt (2023), for example, examined German university gender-inclusive language guidelines in relation to institutional communication practices, combining content analysis with corpus-based investigation. Their study contributes to understanding the relationship between institutional attempts to regulate gender-fair language and the variation that characterises language use across different contexts and text types (Ivanov & Lieboldt, 2023).

Similarly, Crestani et al. (2026) contributed to this emerging line of research by providing a large-scale contrastive analysis of 287 university gender-inclusive language guidelines issued in German-, Italian-, and English-speaking contexts. Combining manual

¹⁴⁴ For an overview of Daniel Elmiger's research on gender-inclusive language and related topics, see his profile page at University of Geneva at the following link: <https://www.unige.ch/lettres/alman/enseignants/linguistique/elmiger>

¹⁴⁵ The collection, created by Daniel Elmiger, includes bibliographic information and metadata on institutional gender-inclusive language guidelines from different contexts and countries. is publicly accessible through this link: <https://airtable.com/apppAskDcts8X7m2b/shrLfUavJqISnRPEf/tblvyN8VYOfHILRmG/viwANpiwBh2v9qMGQ>

annotation with quantitative comparison, the study examines how different institutions formulate recommendation for administrative and pedagogical communication and highlights the variation that exists across different linguistic and institutional contexts (Crestani et al., 2026).

Other research has explored the broader sociopolitical dimensions of institutional inclusive language practices. In their corpus study of Parisian university brochures, Heather Burnett and Cécile Pozniak (2021) analysed how different forms of inclusive language are associated with broader ideological and institutional dynamics, including political orientation, university prestige, disciplinary cultures, and attitudes towards activism. Their work highlights how institutional language choices may also function as indicators of institutional positioning and broader debates concerning legitimacy and authority (Burnett & Pozniak, 2021).

In the Italian context, Riccio (2024) provides an important contribution to the study of gender-inclusive language in higher education through a corpus-based analysis of university normative documents. By constructing the Corpus Normativo Universitario (CNU), which includes statutes, regulations, and codes issued by Italian universities, Riccio investigates the linguistic strategies adopted in institutional texts to represent gender, focusing on strategies of gender visibility and gender generalisation. Her analysis offers valuable insights into how gender-related linguistic practices are realised within Italian university documents and contributes to the broader study of gender, language, and institutional discourse in academic contexts (Riccio, 2024).

However, despite this growing attention to institutional gender-inclusive language policies, a comparative analysis specifically focused on Italian university guidelines as institutional documents remains lacking. Existing research on the Italian context has examined linguistic practices within university texts, while broader international studies have investigated guidelines across different national and linguistic settings. What remains underexplored is how Italian universities themselves formulate gender-inclusive language

guidelines, which strategies they recommend, how they justify these choices, and how they negotiate competing considerations such as conservative and innovative approaches, non-binary inclusion, accessibility, and institutional legitimacy.

The present chapter seeks to address this gap by offering a comparative analysis of gender-inclusive language guidelines issued by Italian universities. By examining these documents as institutional artefacts, the analysis aims to investigate not only which strategies are recommended, but also the rationales underlying institutional choices and the tensions that emerge in the Italian academic context.

6.2 A comparative analysis of gender-inclusive language guidelines in Italian universities

This chapter presents a comparative analysis of the gender-inclusive language guidelines issued by Italian universities. The aim is to identify recurring recommendations, divergences, and areas of ambiguity in how Italian universities formulate and implement inclusive linguistic practices.

6.2.1 *Data collection*

The *first step* of the methodological process consisted in the systematic data collection of institutional guidelines across the Italian higher-education system. The data collection began with a systematic mapping of all Italian universities recognised by the Ministry of Universities and Research (MUR): sixty-one state universities, twenty non-state universities,

eight universities with special status (istituti universitari a ordinamento speciale), and eleven online universities (università telematiche)^{146, 147}.

For each institution, I first conducted systematic searches through institutional websites, particularly the sections dedicated to equal opportunities, diversity and inclusion offices, linguistic guidelines, administrative transparency, and internal regulations. When necessary, additional targeted searches were carried out using institutional search engines and keyword combinations, e.g., “linguaggio inclusivo” (inclusive language), “linguaggio non sessista” (non-sexist language), “linee guida per la comunicazione” (guidelines for communication), and related terms. Only documents officially published or explicitly adopted by the universities were included; draft documents, informal recommendations, teaching materials, or non-institutional resources were excluded. For universities that did not make any guidelines publicly available online, I contacted the relevant offices directly and requested the documents via email. Not all institutions responded: some did not reply to the request, others stated that their university had not yet drafted any gender-inclusive language guidelines, and others reported that guidelines were still under development. Only the documents that were actually provided were included in the corpus, and they were treated according to the same inclusion criteria as the publicly available ones.

The final corpus comprises forty-six guidelines, distributed as follows: thirty-four state universities, eight non-state universities, three university with special status, one online university.¹⁴⁸ This corpus includes both the guidelines retrieved online and those provided

¹⁴⁶ The official list of state universities recognised by MIUR is available at the following link: <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/le-universita/universita-statali>. The list of non-state universities recognised by MIUR can be accessed at: <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/le-universita/universita-non-statali-riconosciute>. The list of the universities with special status is available at: <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/le-universita/istituti-universitari-ordinamento-speciale>. Finally, the list of online universities is available at: <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/le-universita/universita-telematiche>.

¹⁴⁷ The Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (*Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca*, MIUR) was the Italian government body responsible for national education policy, including higher education and scientific research.

¹⁴⁸ The category “universities with special status” refers to Italian higher education institutions that operate under a specific legal framework and have autonomy and organisational structures regulated by special statutes,

directly by universities that I contacted and that supplied their documents via email by November 2025. Table 1 provides the complete list of universities included in the analysis together with relevant metadata, including the year of publication.

University	Guidelines Title	Year	URL
Università degli Studi dell'Aquila	<i>Per un uso della lingua italiana rispettoso dei generi</i>	2020	https://www.univaq.it/include/utilities/blob.php?item=file&table=allegato&id=4925
Università della Calabria	<i>Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo e nella comunicazione istituzionale</i>	2021	https://www.unical.it/media/m medias/2022/Linee_guida_Linguaggio_di_genere_Unical_marzo_2021.pdf
Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria	<i>Indicazioni per un uso del linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze.</i>	2018	https://www.unirc.it/sites/default/files/2024-11/File_allegato_2.pdf
Università degli Studi di Napoli	<i>Linee guida per un linguaggio di genere nella comunicazione istituzionale</i>	2022	https://www.uniparthenope.it:8443/ParthenopePortaleDidatticaRest/rest/render/media/61084e3792674232bb0bdf26a5fa92c8
Università degli Studi del Sannio	<i>Linee guida per il linguaggio di genere</i>	2024	https://www.unisannio.it/sites/default/files/sito/ateneo/amministrazione/avvisi/uo-web-e-

such as the Scuola Normale Superiore, the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, and the International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA).

			comunicazione/it/Linee Guida linguaggio %20genere.pdf
Università degli Studi di Salerno	Linee guida per l'uso del genere nei testi istituzionali dell'Università di Salerno	2022	https://reterus.it/public/files/GdL/Inclusione e GS/LLGG Linguaggio di Genere GEP UNISA.pdf
Università di Bologna	Linee guida per la visibilità del genere nella comunicazione istituzionale dell'Università di Bologna	2020	https://www.unibo.it/it/ateneo/chi-siamo/linee-guida-per-la-visibilita-del-genere-nella-comunicazione-istituzionale-universita-di-bologna
Università degli Studi di Ferrara	<i>Prontuario dell'Università degli Studi di Ferrara per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo e per la redazione di documenti accessibili</i>	2018	https://www2.unife.it/ateneo/uffici-old/cnapi/coordinamento-politiche-pari-opportunita-e-disabilita/prontuario-dell2019universita-degli-studi-di-ferrara-per-l2019uso-del-genere-nel-linguaggio-amministrativo-e-per-la-redazione-di-documenti-accessibili
Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia	<i>Linee guida per una comunicazione inclusiva</i>	n.d.	https://www.ingmo.unimore.it/sites/dip02/files/2025-02/linee_guida_DE%26I_DIEF_2025.pdf
Università degli Studi di Parma	<i>Linguaggio di genere. Linee guida</i>	2023	https://www.unipr.it/sites/default/files/2024-01/Linee%20guida%20Linguaggio%20di%20genere.pdf
		2023	

Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata	<i>Una scrittura correttamente “vergata”. Linee guida per un uso della lingua italiana inclusivo e attento al genere</i>		https://web.uniroma2.it/contenuto/una-scrittura-correttamente-vergata-un-corso-di-formazione-e-divulgazione-ci-insegna-lutilizzo-di-un-linguaggio-rispettoso-del-genere
Università degli Studi di Genova	<i>Linee guida per l'utilizzo di un linguaggio inclusivo</i>	2023	https://cpo.unige.it/sites/cpo.unige.it/files/2023-03/Linee_guida_linguaggio_inclusivo.pdf
Università degli Studi di Milano	<i>Vademecum sul linguaggio di genere.</i>	2021	https://www.unimi.it/sites/default/files/2021-12/Vademecumlinguaggio%20di%20genere_Università%20degli%20Studi%20di%20Milano.pdf
Università degli Studi di Brescia	<i>Vademecum sul linguaggio di genere</i>	2025	https://www.unibs.it/it/vademecum-linguaggio-di-genere
Università Politecnica delle Marche	Linee guida per l'utilizzo del linguaggio di genere nelle comunicazioni istituzionali dell'Università Politecnica delle Marche	2022	https://www.univpm.it/Entra/Engine/RAServeFile.php/f/Operazione_trasparenza/altri_contenuti/LINEE-GUIDA-LINGUAGGIO.pdf
Università degli Studi di Camerino	Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo dell'Università di Camerino	2022	https://www.unicam.it/sites/default/files/documenti-pag/2022/linee_guida_linguaggio_24ottobre2022.pdf
Università degli Studi di Macerata	<i>Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio accademico e amministrativo</i>	n.d.	https://www.unimc.it/it/ateneo/organismi-di-consulazione-garanzia-valutazione-e-

			controllo/cug/progetti/lineeguidaodelgenere_cug.pdf
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo	<i>Linee guida - Regole per un linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale rispettoso dell'uguaglianza dei generi nell'Università degli Studi di Urbino</i>	2023	https://trasparenza.uniurb.it/gest/wp-content/files_mf/1685109114lineeguida_linguaggio_di_generi_e_per_sito_web.pdf
Università degli Studi di Torino	<i>La lingua estesa in UniTO. Toolkit</i>	2025	https://www.unito.it/servizi/generi-e-pari-opportunita/linguaggio-di-generi
Politecnico di Torino	<i>Guida pratica per una comunicazione inclusiva</i>	2023	https://www.polito.it/sites/default/files/2023-07/vademecum%20agile%20bn.pdf
Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale	Manuale di comunicazione efficace dell'Università del Piemonte Orientale	2020	https://www.uniupo.it/sites/default/files/2020-12/manuale_comunicazione_efficace_2020.pdf
Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro	<i>Linee guida per l'adozione di un linguaggio ampio rispettoso delle differenze</i>	2025	https://www.uniba.it/it/centri/interdipartimentali-di-ricerca/culture-di-generi/portlet-general/linee-guida-per-un-linguaggio-rispettoso-delle-differenze
Università degli Studi di Foggia	<i>Il linguaggio e il genere. Raccomandazioni per un uso del linguaggio rispettoso del genere</i>	2025	https://www.unifg.it/sites/default/files/2025-07/cug-raccomandazioni-linguaggio-generi.pdf

Università degli Studi di Sassari	<i>Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo in Accademia</i>	2024	https://www.uniss.it/sites/default/files/2025-01/vademecum-2024_GEP_con_Copertina.pdf
Università degli Studi di Pisa	<i>Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo</i>	2019	https://cug.unipi.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo.pdf
Università degli Studi di Siena	<i>Generi e linguaggi. Linee guida per un linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale inclusivo</i>	2021	https://www.unisi.it/sites/default/files/allegatiparagrafo/LINEE GUIDA Linguaggi e Generi.pdf
Università per Stranieri di Siena	<i>Linguaggio amministrativo e differenze di genere</i>	2020	https://www.unistrasi.it/public/articoli/318/Files/DR%20396.%2020%20Linee%20guida%20linguaggio%20rispettoso%20del%20genere.pdf
Università degli Studi di Trento	<i>Per un uso del linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze</i>	2017	https://www.unitn.it/sites/default/files/2024-11/documentolinguaaggio29mar%20%281%29.pdf
Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca' Foscari	<i>Linee guida di Ateneo 2024 per un linguaggio non discriminatorio e rispettoso del genere</i>	2024	https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/comunicazione/sostenibile/doc/Inclusione/Linee guida di Ateneo 2024 per un linguaggio non discriminatorio e rispettoso del genere.pdf
Università Iuav di Venezia	<i>Linee guida per una comunicazione inclusiva e accessibile.</i>	2023	https://www.iuav.it/sites/default/files/2024-

			04/linee_guida_comunicazione_inclusiva_accessibile.pdf
Università degli Studi di Padova	<i>Generi e linguaggi. Linee guida per un linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale attento alle differenze di genere</i>	2018	https://www.unipd.it/sites/unipd.it/files/2017/Generi%20e%20linguaggi.pdf (now inactive)
Università degli Studi di Verona	<i>Linee guida per il linguaggio di genere</i>	2020	https://docs.univr.it/documenti/Documento/allegati/allegati811927.pdf
Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa	<i>Linee guida per il corretto uso di un linguaggio inclusivo</i>	2023	https://www.unisob.na.it/ateneo/lineeguida_linguaggio_inclusivo.pdf
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore	<i>Vademecum al linguaggio inclusivo. Sessismo, ageismo, abilismo, razzismo. Come evitare di replicare gli stereotipi attraverso le parole che usiamo in Ateneo</i>	2025	https://www.unicatt.it/landing/istituzionale/pari-opportunita-e-inclusione/linee-guida/vademecum-al-linguaggio-inclusivo.html (now inactive)
Università degli Studi Link	Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale dell'Università degli Studi Link	n.d.	https://www.unilink.it/ateneo/linee-guida-per-luso-di-genere-nel-linguaggio
LUISS Libera Università Internazionale Studi Sociali Guido Carli	<i>Linee Guida per un Linguaggio Inclusivo.</i>	2024	https://www.luiss.it/sites/default/files/2024-11/Linee%20Guida%20per%20un%20Linguaggio%20Inclusivo.pdf
Università Medica	<i>Guida pratica per la promozione del linguaggio inclusivo</i>	2024	https://unicamillus.org/wp-content/uploads/governance/comitato-unico-di-garanzia-per-

Internazionale Camillus			le-pari-opportunita/it/guida-pratica-promozione-linguaggio-inclusivo-2024-unicamillus.pdf?x31484
Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele	<i>Linee guida per l'utilizzo di un linguaggio inclusivo</i>	2023	Private / provided by institution
Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa	Guida all'uso del linguaggio esteso	2025	https://www.sns.it/it/guida/guida-alluso-del-linguaggio-esteso
Università telematica "Pegaso"	Linguaggio inclusivo ed equo. Principi e pratiche per una comunità scientifica inclusiva	2024	https://assets.ctfassets.net/5bcqzxwt09xw/4AxLWAXfMVqhxi9h5uEpY6/97d84a3c791b29605371323c5b186717/Linguaggio_Inclusivo_e_Equo_2024.pdf
Università degli Studi di Palermo	<i>Manuale di stile. Scrivi bene e parla chiaro</i>	2011	https://www.sns.it/sites/default/files/2021-05/2011%20Manuale-di-Stile%20Unipa.pdf
Scuola Superiore di Pisa "Sant'Anna"	<i>Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo</i>	2022	Private / provided by institution
Sapienza Università di Roma	<i>Scrivere con Sapienza. Manuale per testi chiari, corretti ed efficaci</i>	2021	https://www.uniroma1.it/it/pagina/linguaggio-inclusivo-nei-casi-studio-di-valorizzazione-delle-conoscenze
Università commerciale "Luigi Bocconi"	<i>Linee guida per la comunicazione inclusiva</i>	2024	https://www.unibocconi.it/it/ch-i-siamo/diversita-equita-e-inclusione/non-

			discriminazione/linee-guida-della-comunicazione-inclusiva
Università degli Studi di Trieste “Sissa”	<i>Linee guida per un uso non discriminatorio della lingua italiana</i>	n.d.	Private / provided by institution
Libera Università di Bolzano	<i>Vademecum per l’uso del linguaggio di genere in unibz</i>	n.d.	Private / provided by institution

Table 1. Overview of the institutional corpus analysed

6.2.2 Analytical procedure

The *second step* of the methodological process consisted in a mixed-methods analysis combining quantitative mapping and qualitative document analysis based on the taxonomy on gender-fair strategies adopted in this dissertation. Methodologically, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative corpus mapping with qualitative document analysis. The quantitative component focuses on identifying the distribution and frequency of the different gender-inclusive strategies recommended across Italian universities, allowing for a systematic comparison of institutional tendencies. The qualitative component consists of a close reading of the guidelines aimed at analysing argumentative patterns, ideological orientations, justificatory frameworks, and contextualised uses of inclusive strategies. All documents were analysed manually through qualitative coding based on the taxonomy of gender-fair strategies adopted in this dissertation (§ 2.5). The coding focused on both explicit recommendations and implicit orientations emerging from examples, explanatory notes, formulations, and contextual restrictions. Particular attention was devoted to how institutions framed the relationship between inclusivity, readability, accessibility, institutional legitimacy, and linguistic normativity.

Each document was examined to identify: (i) explicit recommendations: cases in which a strategy is prescribed, encouraged, discouraged, or rejected; (ii) implicit orientations: indications emerging from tone, examples, cautionary notes, or references to institutional values; (iii) argumentative justifications: linguistic, ideological, empirical, or accessibility-related reasons used to support or oppose particular strategies; (iv) contextual framing: how guidelines define “institutional communication”, “formal contexts”, and “appropriate use” of strategies.

First, I classified the recommended strategies of each document according to the fourfold typology adopted in this work (§ 2.5): conservative visibility strategies, innovative visibility strategies, conservative obscuration strategies, and innovative obscuration strategies (cf. González Vázquez et al., 2024).¹⁴⁹ In practice, this meant coding all documents according to this taxonomy even when the guidelines grouped all innovative forms under broader labels such as *neutralisation*, *non-binary strategies*, or *experimental strategies*. The original terminology adopted by each guideline was recorded during the coding process and subsequently mapped onto the analytical categories used in this dissertation. This choice allows the analysis to remain structurally aligned with the broader theoretical framework of the thesis while preserving the terminology employed by the institutions themselves. Classifying the universities’ recommendations was relatively straightforward, as a large portion of the documents relied on the same framework adopted by MIUR (2018) for visibility and obscuration strategies, although they showed some variation in terminology: for instance, some documents referred to “neutralisation” rather than “obscuration”. By contrast, innovative strategies were described with variation, using labels such as “non-binary strategies” or “experimental strategies”, and none of the guidelines distinguished between innovative visibility and innovative obscuration strategies.

¹⁴⁹ As none of the guidelines examined explicitly distinguishes between innovative visibility and innovative obscuration strategies, I applied the fourfold typology introduced in Chapter 2 for the sake of precision and coherence.

After coding and categorising the recommended strategies, I focused on interpretive cues, argumentative structures, and implicit orientations. Finally, I compared tendencies across institutions, which allowed me to identify three clusters of universities. These clusters were established by examining both the commonalities and differences in the ways institutions addressed innovative strategies. This analysis revealed shared patterns, points of divergence, and key aspects that could inform broader discussions on the adoption and limitations of gender-inclusive language in Italian universities (§ 6.2.3). This analytical procedure enabled a systematic comparison across institutions and provided a clear overview of how gender-inclusive language is conceptualised, justified, and operationalised within the Italian university system.

6.2.3 Results and preliminary observations

The quantitative mapping of the corpus reveals a high degree of consistency in the adoption of conservative strategies across all Italian universities. All forty-six institutions included in the analysis (100%) recommend conservative visibility strategies, while forty-five out of forty-six universities (97.8%) also endorse conservative obscuration strategies. Only one institution (2.2%) focuses exclusively on visibility-oriented approaches without mentioning obscuration strategies. This university does not provide an explicit justification for this choice. Instead, the document focuses exclusively on strategies aimed at enhancing women's visibility, which tends to be underrepresented in linguistic forms. As a result, women's visibility appears to be implicitly prioritised over the use of obscuration strategies.¹⁵⁰ Overall, these findings highlight a high level of convergence across Italian universities regarding the adoption of conservative strategies, underscoring the uniformity of institutional guidance in this domain.

Regarding innovative strategies, variation emerges across universities. While conservative strategies are recommended in all the cases analysed, innovative strategies are not uniformly endorsed. Twenty-one out of forty-six universities (45.7%) do not include any

¹⁵⁰ The case in question is that of Università del Piemonte Orientale (2020).

reference to these strategies. In these cases, it is not possible to determine the reasons why such strategies were not considered. By contrast, twenty-five of them address innovative strategies in some form (54.3%).¹⁵¹ Of these, twenty either mention the strategies without recommending them or explicitly reject them (43.5%). Only five explicitly recommend innovative strategies, albeit in a context-sensitive manner rather than across all institutional contexts (10.9%). This indicates that a significant number of institutions engage with the topic. At the same time, gender-inclusive language remains the subject of ongoing public and academic debate in Italy, and the majority of institutions do not formally endorse these strategies in their official communications.¹⁵²

Category	Number	Percentage
Universities recommending conservative visibility strategies	46	100%

¹⁵¹ Among the universities that referred to innovative strategies, most only mentioned the use of schwa (ə) and the asterisk (*): Scuola Superiore di Pisa “Sant’Anna” (2022), Università degli Studi di Sassari (2024), Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (n.d.), Università Politecnica delle Marche (2022), Università degli Studi di Foggia (2025), Università degli Studi di Genova (2023), Università “Pegaso” (2024), Università Medica Internazionale “Camillus” (2024), Università degli Studi di Pisa (2019), Università degli Studi di Salerno (2022), Università degli Studi di Milano (2021), Università degli Studi di Macerata (n.d.), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (2025), and Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa (2023). A few universities mentioned only the asterisk: Libera Università di Bolzano (2024), Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale (2020), Università degli Studi di Ferrara (2018), and Università per Stranieri di Siena (2020). One university mentioned the schwa only: Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (2025). Two universities referred to the schwa, the asterisk, and the letter “u”: Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele (2023) and Università Iuav di Venezia (2023). Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia (2024) referred more generally to the possibility of adopting respectful and inclusive linguistic solutions, including for those who do not identify within the binary genders, without specifying particular forms for doing so. By contrast, some universities listed a broader set of solutions, including the space, the asterisk, the letter “u”, the schwa, the underscore, the letter “x”, the “at” symbol and the “a–o” form: Politecnico di Torino (2023) and Università degli Studi di Torino (2015).

¹⁵² The geographical location or size of the universities, whether North, South, Centre, islands, large or small cities, large or small institutions, public or private, does not appear to significantly influence their approach to gender-inclusive language. For the same reason, the year of publication of the guidelines also seems largely irrelevant. In general, the guidelines are remarkably consistent across these variables, and the few exceptions are too rare to allow meaningful differentiation or statistical analysis.

Universities recommending conservative obscuration strategies	45	97.8%
Universities mentioning innovative strategies	25	54.3%
Universities explicitly rejecting innovative strategies	20	43.5%
Universities recommending innovative strategies contextually	5	10.9%

Table 2. Overview of the results

As shown in Table 2, conservative visibility and obscuration strategies dominate across the corpus, whereas innovative strategies remain comparatively marginal and unevenly distributed. The complete list of all universities included in the final analysis, together with their respective recommendations, is provided in Appendix A.

To identify recurring patterns in how universities approach innovative strategies, I divided them into three groups: (1) those that mention innovative strategies without explicitly recommending them, (2) those that mention and explicitly reject them, and (3) those that mention and explicitly recommend them, either fully or with context-sensitive caution.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ In identifying which universities explicitly recommend innovative strategies, I only considered those institutions that both mention and recommend them, even if in a context-sensitive manner (e.g., suggesting their

6.2.3.1 *Mentioning but not explicitly recommending*

A first group of universities mention innovative gender-inclusive strategies, but refrain from explicitly recommending their use (Università degli Studi di Salerno, 2022; Università degli Studi di Milano, 2021; Università degli Studi di Macerata, n.d.; Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca' Foscari, 2024; Scuola Superiore di Pisa "Sant'Anna", 2022). In their documents, these forms are presented as objects of public debate or ongoing experimentation rather than as viable solutions to be institutionally endorsed. The tone adopted is framed in a diplomatic manner: universities signal awareness of current sociolinguistic developments without taking a prescriptive stance. A closer reading, however, reveals that not all institutions adopt the same evaluative orientation. Some appear to take a cautiously favourable view of innovative strategies, others maintain a strictly neutral position, and others express a clearly negative evaluation of such forms.

Scuola Superiore di Pisa "Sant'Anna" (2022) recognises the relevance of non-binary identities and explicitly condemns forms of discrimination arising from their exclusion. The guidelines describe the binary structure of Italian as potentially "limiting for gender identities that do not recognise themselves within the gender binary" ("limitante rispetto alle identità di genere che non si riconoscono nella dicotomia dei generi"), thereby framing non-binary inclusion as a linguistic as well as institutional issue.¹⁵⁴ At the same time, the document acknowledges that innovative solutions (e.g., asterisk, schwa) have been proposed but are "not without problematic aspects" ("non scevre da profili di problematicità"). Rather than endorsing these forms, the guidelines adopt a cautious but inclusion-oriented stance, stressing that "the debate on the topic [is] still ongoing" ("il dibattito sul tema [è] ancora in corso")

use only in emails, websites, or other specific settings). Other universities mention innovative strategies but do not explicitly recommend them, adopting an ambiguous or diplomatic stance. This ambiguity sometimes makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between guidelines that recommend and those that do not recommend innovative forms. Methodologically, I classified innovative strategies as "recommended" only when this was explicitly stated, even if limited to specific contexts or communicative situations. It should also be noted that none of the analysed guidelines recommends these solutions in absolute terms, that is, without any contextual restrictions. These ambiguous or non-committal cases were therefore not included in the numerical count of recommendations, but they are nonetheless discussed in this chapter, where their approach is analysed in detail.

¹⁵⁴ All translations from Italian-language institutional guidelines are my own unless otherwise specified.

and presenting the document itself as provisional and revisable. Importantly, the text explicitly states that it is written “without any prescriptive intent” (“senza alcuna pretesa di prescrittività”), positioning the guidelines as flexible recommendations rather than binding institutional norms (Sant’Anna, 2022).

A similarly cautious but openness-oriented position emerges in the guidelines of Università degli Studi di Salerno (2022). The document recognises the growing awareness surrounding gender identities and frames “the recognition of the free expression of one’s personality” (“il riconoscimento della libera espressione della propria personalità”) as essential to “the well-being and quality of study and work within the university” (“il benessere e la qualità dello studio e del lavoro in Ateneo”). The guidelines further note that some Italian and international public administrations have already adopted inclusive language and acknowledge that “in Italy, some solutions have been proposed and are becoming established, while a broad public debate on their uses is ongoing” (“in Italia sono state proposte e si stanno attestando alcune soluzioni per le quali è in corso un ampio dibattito pubblico sui loro usi”). The text specifically refers to the use of the schwa, the so-called “schwa lungo,” and the asterisk as possible orthographic solutions currently under discussion.¹⁵⁵ Although the university does not formally endorse these forms, it declares its intention to “initiate a dialogue with student associations on the resources of inclusive language in new forms of public communication” (“avviare un dialogo con le associazioni studentesche sulle risorse del linguaggio inclusivo nelle nuove modalità di comunicazione pubblica”). This dialogue is explicitly framed around “the democratic principles of self-determination, equality, and inclusivity” (“i principi democratici dell’autodeterminazione, della parità e dell’inclusività”), suggesting a generally favourable orientation towards experimentation with innovative inclusive forms.

¹⁵⁵ See § 2.5.1 for a discussion of Boschetto’s proposal. The expression *long schwa* is used here only because it is the conventional label in the literature and public debate; technically, the symbol employed for the plural is /3/, not a phonetically lengthened schwa.

A comparable position can be observed in the guidelines by Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca' Foscari (2024). While refraining from recommending specific innovative forms, the document explicitly acknowledges both the complexity and the evolving nature of the debate on gender-inclusive language. The guidelines state that “these guidelines should not be understood as a definitive text” (“queste linee guida non vanno intese come un testo definitivo”) and explain that the working group is “continuing to discuss and evaluate other possible respectful and inclusive linguistic solutions also for those who do not identify within the gender binary” (“continuando a confrontarsi e a valutare altre possibili soluzioni linguistiche rispettose e inclusive anche nei confronti di chi non si riconosca nel genere binario”). The document therefore adopts a non-prescriptive and open-ended approach, presenting institutional language policy as an evolving process rather than a fixed norm.

Other universities adopt a neutral stance. Università degli Studi di Milano (2021) adopts a non-prescriptive approach towards gender-inclusive language. The guidelines explicitly clarify that “the linguistic strategies proposed in the handbook are not binding and do not aim to assume an imperative value” (“le strategie linguistiche proposte nel Vademecum non sono vincolanti e non ambiscono ad assumere un valore imperativo”). At the same time, the document acknowledges “the existence of further linguistic mechanisms aimed at ensuring gender equality in language” (“l’esistenza di ulteriori meccanismi linguistici preordinati a garantire la parità fra i generi nel linguaggio”), explicitly mentioning the asterisk and schwa among the available options. A similarly cautious and reflective stance is adopted by Università degli Studi di Macerata (n.d.). The text situates the guidelines within the broader ongoing debate on “discursive injustice” (“ingiustizia discorsiva”) and self-representation, while acknowledging “the complexity of the issues connected to the different uses of endings (asterisks, schwa, and other solutions)” (“la complessità delle questioni connessi ai differenti usi delle desinenze (asterischi, schwa e soluzioni altre”). Importantly, the document further recognises “the potential risks of linguistic underrepresentation” (“i potenziali rischi di una sottorappresentazione linguistica”), thus presenting innovative

gender-inclusive forms as part of a broader effort to address exclusion and representational inequality, while avoiding explicit institutional endorsement.

Overall, while these universities converge in mentioning innovative strategies without prescribing them, their underlying orientations show variation. Some present these forms as promising avenues for future exploration, others as neutral objects of debate, and still others as unsuitable for institutional communication. This divergence reflects the broader sociolinguistic landscape in Italy (Scaglioso & Del Chierico, 2022), where innovative strategies are associated with increased visibility, public debate, and institutional discussion.

6.2.3.2 *Explicitly rejecting*

A second group of universities explicitly reject the adoption of innovative strategies. These rejections are based on different types of justifications, primarily linguistic legitimacy, accessibility, empirical validity, or ideological concerns. In some cases, no explicit rationale is provided. Highlighting these differing grounds for rejection is analytically relevant, as it reveals the variety of factors that universities weigh when assessing the appropriateness of innovative linguistic forms.

A first subset of this group grounds its rejection in *linguistic arguments*, asserting that solutions such as the schwa and the asterisk are extraneous to the Italian graphemic system and may compromise textual clarity or comprehensibility (Università Commerciale “Luigi Bocconi”; Università degli Studi di Pisa, 2019; Università per Stranieri di Siena, 2020; Università degli Studi di Ferrara, 2018; Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa, 2023). Their stance aligns with a conservative understanding of linguistic normativity, emphasising the preservation of communicative transparency and stylistic coherence. Università Commerciale “Luigi Bocconi” states that gender-neutral forms using asterisks and schwa “should be avoided because they are not part of the Italian language” (“vanno evitate, perché non sono presenti nella lingua italiana”), while Università degli Studi di Ferrara (2018) similarly argues that the asterisk “is not part of the Italian graphemic system” (“non fa parte del sistema grafematico della lingua italiana”). Along similar lines, Università per Stranieri

di Siena (2020) defines the asterisk as “a forcing/artificial imposition” (“una forzatura”) and “a symbol that is not part of the Italian language” (“un simbolo che non fa parte della lingua italiana”). The guidelines of Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa (2023) likewise describe the schwa and asterisk as “experimental solutions” (“soluzioni sperimentali”) that raise “problems of systemic linguistic coherence” (“problemi di coerenza linguistica di sistema”) and implicitly introduce a neuter gender “not envisaged by the Italian language” (“non previsto dalla lingua italiana”). The most articulated rejection within this subset is found in the guidelines of Università degli Studi di Pisa (2019), which reproduce extensive considerations from the Accademia della Crusca. The document argues that the asterisk is unsuitable for “legal texts, notices, or public communications” (“testi di legge, avvisi o comunicazioni pubbliche”), where it could generate “bewilderment and misunderstanding” (“sconcerto e incomprensione”), and defines such forms as “inappropriate (and useless) forcings of the linguistic system” (“inopportune (e inutili) forzature al sistema linguistico”). Similarly, the schwa is described as “even less practicable than the asterisk” (“ancora meno praticabile rispetto all’asterisco”), both because it does not belong to standard Italian phonology and because of the ambiguities it introduces regarding number marking and pronunciation. The rationale provided for considering the schwa less practicable than the asterisk, however, is not entirely clear. The same objections largely apply to the asterisk, which likewise has no corresponding phonological realisation in Italian and raises comparable ambiguities concerning pronunciation and number marking, since it does not encode whether the intended referent is singular or plural. The conclusion explicitly warns against attempts to “force language [...] into the service of an ideology” (“forzare la lingua [...] al servizio di un’ideologia”), thereby framing innovative gender-inclusive forms not merely as linguistically problematic but also as ideologically motivated interventions into the linguistic system.

A second subset rejects innovative strategies primarily on grounds of *accessibility* (Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, 2025; Università Medica Internazionale “Camillus”, 2024; Università “Pegaso”, 2024; Università degli Studi di Genova, 2023; Università degli

Studi di Foggia, 2025; Università Politecnica delle Marche, 2022). Their guidelines stress that such solutions are not recognised by screen readers or optical reading systems and may hinder readability for individuals with visual impairments, specific learning disorders, or neurodivergent profiles. Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (2025), for instance, states that the schwa “may not be correctly interpreted by assistive reading software” (“può non essere interpretato correttamente dai software di lettura assistita”) and may create difficulties for “neurodivergent individuals” (“persone con neurodivergenze”). Similar concerns are raised by Università Medica Internazionale “Camillus” (2024), which describes these strategies as “not ideal from the point of view of accessibility and textual clarity” (“poco ideali dal punto di vista dell’accessibilità e della chiarezza del testo”), and by Università degli Studi di Genova (2023), whose guidelines define them as “unsatisfactory from the point of view of accessibility” (“poco soddisfacenti dal punto di vista dell’accessibilità”). Università “Pegaso” (2024) likewise discourages the use of schwa and asterisks in institutional communication because they “generate accessibility problems for digital texts” (“generano infatti problemi di accessibilità dei testi in formato digitale”). In a similar vein, Università degli Studi di Foggia (2025), citing the Accademia della Crusca, argues that symbols such as the asterisk and schwa are “artificially introduced” (“introdotti artificialmente”) and risk making texts difficult to understand or access for people with visual impairments or DSA. As discussed in Chapter 4, these accessibility-based concerns are only partially supported. While some innovative forms currently present challenges for assistive technologies, many of the reported difficulties reflect the current limitations of digital tools rather than intrinsic properties of the linguistic strategies themselves, and some innovative strategies are already compatible with accessibility requirements (§ 4.3; 4.4). Università Politecnica delle Marche (2022), while discouraging these forms on accessibility grounds, nevertheless acknowledges that semantically gender-neutral expressions may already include non-binary subjectivities and presents the reduction of the generic masculine as “a first, important step” (“un primo, importante passo”) within the current norms of Italian. From this perspective, inclusivity in form is seen as potentially exclusionary in practice, reinforcing the tension between linguistic innovation in terms of inclusion and the principle of accessibility.

A third subset, represented by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (2025), adopts a sceptical stance toward innovative strategies for the *empirical validity i.e., their effectiveness, in reducing perception of gender inequality*. The guidelines describe solutions such as schwa or the asterisk as forms whose effects are “too controversial to be considered effective” (“troppo controversi per poter essere considerati efficaci”). To support this claim, the document refers to “a recent study” (“uno studio recente”) comparing binary splitting, traditional neutral forms, and innovative neutral forms, arguing that only binary masculine/feminine duplication reduces perceptions of gender inequality. The guidelines therefore recommend “the exclusive use of masculine and feminine forms according to the most commonly accepted uses of Italian” (“l'utilizzo esclusivo del maschile e femminile secondo gli usi più comunemente accettati dell'italiano”) and discourage “graphic devices” (“espedienti grafici”) such as schwa or the asterisk (p. 13). However, the document does not provide any bibliographic reference for the study mentioned, making it impossible to verify the validity of the claim or assess the methodology on which this conclusion is based.¹⁵⁶

A fourth subset, represented by Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale (2020), raises more explicitly *ideological concerns*. The guidelines strongly discourage the use of forms such as “Car* tutt*”, arguing that their effect is not neutrality or impartiality but rather “depersonalisation, censorship, [and] omission” (“spersonalizzazione, censura, [e] omissione”), meanings that the document explicitly associates with the asterisk through a reference to its use in *I promessi sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni (p. 36). Beyond this literary analogy, however, the document does not provide a detailed linguistic explanation for why innovative gender-inclusive forms would necessarily produce these effects.

Finally, other universities advise against the use of innovative strategies, yet do so without offering explicit justification (Università di Modena and Reggio Emilia, n.d.; Politecnico di Torino, 2023). The Politecnico di Torino (2023, p. 20), acknowledges the

¹⁵⁶ The guidelines refer to a recent study comparing masculine-feminine double forms, traditional neutral forms, and innovative neutral forms (e.g., the Swedish “hen”), but no corresponding bibliographic entry is included in the reference list. As a result, it is not possible to identify the source or evaluate the empirical basis for the claim.

“experimental legitimacy” (“dignità anche sperimentale”) of these strategies, but considers them more suitable for informal contexts such as social media rather than “institutional language” (“il linguaggio istituzionale”). Similarly, Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (n.d., p. 8) simply states that “graphic devices such as asterisks or schwa should instead be avoided” (“sono invece da evitare espedienti grafici, quali asterischi o schwa”), without further explanation. In both cases, innovative forms are implicitly framed as incompatible with the conventions and expectations associated with formal institutional communication, despite the absence of a detailed linguistic or accessibility-based rationale.

Overall, these universities attend to adopt a relatively prescriptive approach toward institutional language use, framing innovative strategies as incompatible with institutional communication due to their perceived opacity, technological limitations, lack of empirical support, ideological implications, or uncertain status within the linguistic system. Although the specific justifications differ, these guidelines generally privilege linguistic stability, readability, and conformity with established norms over experimentation with emerging inclusive forms.

Beyond the explicit arguments advanced in the guidelines, these rejections also reveal the broader role played by language ideologies in shaping institutional attitudes toward inclusive language. In many cases, innovative forms are represented not simply as unfamiliar linguistic devices, but as elements perceived to challenge the stability, recognisability, or legitimacy of standard Italian. The recurrent emphasis on concepts such as “correctness”, “naturalness”, and “compatibility” with the Italian linguistic system reflects underlying assumptions regarding what counts as acceptable institutional language. From this perspective, resistance to innovative strategies may also be interpreted through the lens of linguistic purism, namely the tendency to defend a conception of linguistic integrity against forms perceived as externally imposed, artificial, or socially disruptive.

6.2.3.3 *Context-sensitive recommendation*

A third group of universities adopts a context-dependent stance toward innovative gender-inclusive strategies, acknowledging their social relevance while restricting their use to informal or non-institutional settings (Libera Università di Bolzano, 2024.; Università degli Studi di Sassari, 2024; Università degli Studi di Torino, 2025; Università Iuav di Venezia, 2023; Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, 2023).¹⁵⁷

For instance, Università degli Studi di Sassari (2024) recognises that creative solutions (such as the schwa and the asterisk, as well as the creation of neo-pronouns) can mark gender differences, but simultaneously notes that “these are solutions that make use of a graphemic system external to Italian orthography” (“si tratta di soluzioni che fanno uso di un sistema grafematico estraneo all’ortografia italiana”), which may create interpretative and usability challenges. Consequently, the use of such techniques is left to individual choice and is recommended primarily in emails, short non-institutional texts, digital communication, or posters. The guidelines further stress that these forms are not suitable for formal or judicial documents, echoing the position of the Accademia della Crusca. Overall, Sassari emphasises that innovative strategies remain under debate and insufficiently established to be formally prescribed, framing them as optional, context-sensitive resources rather than standard institutional practices.

Libera Università di Bolzano (2024) adopts a context-sensitive approach that distinguishes between institutional and non-institutional communication. In legal and administrative texts, the university prescribes the use of gendered forms in the feminine and masculine, stating that “gender symbols (e.g. colons, asterisks) are not used in these texts” (“i simboli di genere (ad esempio i due punti, l’asterisco) non vengono utilizzati in questi testi”). By contrast, in internal and external communications that allow for flexibility, the university encourages the use of the asterisk as an inclusive alternative to binary marking.

¹⁵⁷ This group of universities is listed in Appendix A as those whose guidelines recommend, or allow in specific contexts, the use of innovative gender-inclusive strategies.

This solution is presented as a way to address and respect individuals who do not identify within the gender binary. The guidelines emphasise that the choice of strategy should be guided by the communicative purpose and the target audience, in order to ensure clarity, effectiveness, and respectful representation.

Università degli Studi di Torino (2025) provides a descriptive overview of several innovative strategies, noting that “it is often the communicative context that guides the choice among different linguistic strategies” (“spesso è il contesto comunicativo a indirizzare la scelta tra le diverse strategie linguistiche”). For formal texts, such as regulations or competition announcements, gendered double forms may be preferred, whereas in press releases or semi-formal communications they may reduce text readability, making alternative non-binary forms more suitable. In informal contexts, expressive and alternative forms marking gender can be used. The guidelines also caution that in all contexts, the use of such innovative strategies can present accessibility challenges, particularly for screen readers.

Università Iuav di Venezia (2023) allows for the use of schwa (ə) and other symbols (*, u...) “if the context allows it (non-institutional email, chat)” (“se il contesto lo permette (e-mail non istituzionale, chat)”), while simultaneously emphasising that such forms present accessibility and readability issues. For administrative or institutional documents (e.g., decrees, resolutions, official acts), the use of such symbols is discouraged, following the general recommendations of the *Accademia della Crusca* on gender-sensitive writing.

Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele (2023) adopts a comparable but more explicitly supportive orientation, acknowledging that linguistic practices beyond gender binarism can be implemented through innovative strategies that “visibly include non-binary people” (“includono visibilmente anche le persone non binarie”). Although not adopted as primary institutional standards, these strategies are explicitly encouraged as inclusive linguistic devices in appropriate contexts. Overall, this group adopts a flexible approach and context-sensitive approach: while none of these institutions fully institutionalise innovative strategies, they recognise their social relevance and potential for inclusivity, framing them as

legitimate, though contextually limited, resources for inclusive communication in settings that allow linguistic flexibility and experimentation.

6.2.3.4 An Exceptional Case: The Overextended Feminine at Università di Trento

An exception within the corpus concerns the Università di Trento, which adopted the use of the overextended feminine in a single institutional document with symbolic significance: the *Regolamento generale di Ateneo* (General University Regulations), approved in March 2024. The decision was explicitly framed as innovative at institutional level, introducing for the first time a text written using the “overextended feminine” (“femminile sovraesteso”) for institutional roles and references, described as a “novelty” (novità) within the university’s communicative practices. The symbolic nature of this choice is emphasised in both institutional communication and internal justification. The official presentation of the regulation highlights that “the document is written using the overextended feminine for institutional roles and gender references” (“il documento è scritto usando il ‘femminile sovraesteso’ per le cariche e i riferimenti di genere”), and explicitly frames the initiative as “a symbolic act to demonstrate equality starting from the language of our documents” (“un atto simbolico per dimostrare parità a partire dal linguaggio dei nostri documenti”). The regulation further clarifies its scope through a defining clause stating that “the feminine terms used in this text refer to all people” (“i termini femminili usati in questo testo si riferiscono a tutte le persone”) (Titolo 1, art. 1, comma 5), thereby establishing an explicit semantic extension of grammatical gender.

It is important to note that the adoption of the overextended feminine at Università di Trento (2024) remains strictly limited to this specific regulatory document and has not been extended to other institutional texts or everyday communication practices. The initiative is explicitly framed as “a choice with a strongly symbolic value” (“una scelta che ha una valenza fortemente simbolica”), situated within a broader institutional trajectory of attention to gender-inclusive language since the 2017 adoption of guidelines on respectful language use. The case is therefore best understood as an exceptional and experimentally framed

intervention, aimed at producing visibility and reflexive awareness around gender representation within institutional discourse, without altering the universities' linguistic policy. This case suggests that, even within a predominantly conservative institutional landscape, universities may experiment with exceptional strategies in carefully circumscribed contexts. By using emblematic texts, they can signal inclusivity and foster attention on gender representation without fully institutionalising such practices across all communications.¹⁵⁸

6.2.4 *General discussion*

Wrapping up, when innovative strategies are addressed, they are presented as controversial or experimental rather than as viable institutional options. This widespread caution seems to indicate that, while Italian universities have embraced inclusivity as an institutional value, they tend to operationalise it within the boundaries of morphosyntactic and sociolinguistic conservatism.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative analysis of Italian universities' gender-inclusive language guidelines shows a cautious and heterogeneous landscape. While all institutions recognise the importance of inclusive communication and explicitly promote conservative strategies of visibility and obscurity, approaches toward innovative strategies remain fragmented and in certain cases hesitant. Approximately 54.3% of the universities mention the existence of non-binary linguistic forms, such as the schwa or the asterisk. Around 10.9% mention these innovative solutions but refrain from explicitly recommending them, adopting an ambiguous or diplomatic stance. Others, corresponding to approximately 32.6%, explicitly reject their use: about 28.3% provide justifications for their rejection, while approximately 4.3% do so without offering reasons. Finally, around 10.9% of the universities recommend the use of innovative strategies, albeit cautiously and with sensitivity to contextual factors.

¹⁵⁸ The Università di Trento's choice (2024) to adopt the extended feminine form has sparked discussions and controversy. For further details, see the article at the following link: <https://www.ilpost.it/2024/03/30/universita-trento-femminile-sovraesteso/>.

Collectively, these findings suggest that Italian academia, while embracing principles of gender inclusivity, continues to operate within a framework that prioritises linguistic stability, accessibility, and institutional legitimacy over innovation and non-binary visibility. This prioritisation implicitly assumes a tension between these goals, treating inclusivity and accessibility as if they were in conflict. Yet, as argued throughout this dissertation (and in particular in Chapter 4), such a conflict is not structurally unavoidable: a number of the perceived obstacles to innovative strategies stem from contingent technological or sociolinguistic factors rather than intrinsic incompatibilities. The university landscape, therefore, reflects not only caution but also the persistence of a dichotomy that may no longer fully capture current developments.

These findings become particularly meaningful when compared with the broader recommendations issued by major European and national institutions. Both EIGE (2019) and MIUR (2018) adopt a contextual approach, but they converge in emphasising the importance of gender visibility. EIGE (2019) adopts an open and innovative stance among the three, as it explicitly acknowledges the importance of non-binary-inclusive language and highlights how gender-sensitive formulations, those that render gender visible, are described as more effective than gender-neutral expressions in challenging androcentric defaults, especially in public and legislative communication. Both MIUR (2018) and the European Parliament (2018a), by contrast, do not address non-binary inclusion at all and adopt a strictly binary framework. Despite these differences, EIGE (2019) and MIUR (2018) converge in emphasising the importance of visibility: MIUR (2018) notes that in texts requiring clarity and unambiguous interpretation, visibility strategies are preferable to obscurity, as they reduce interpretative ambiguity and improve readability (MIUR, 2018). The European Parliament (2018a) takes a cautious position: although it recognises the desirability of enhancing gender visibility, it recommends duplicating feminine and masculine forms mainly in short texts and discourages doing so in longer or normative documents, where it instead favours obscurity strategies or even the use of the masculine as a “neutral” form, accompanied by explanatory notes (European Parliament, 2018a).

When placed against this institutional backdrop, the Italian universities' recommendations appear broadly aligned with this general orientation, adopting a predominantly conservative and contextual approach that resembles the caution of the European Parliament more than the openness of EIGE (2019). Unlike EIGE (2019), university guidelines rarely address non-binary inclusion explicitly and show little inclination towards innovative or non-binary linguistic strategies, reinforcing an overall preference for traditional, low-risk solutions.

6.2.5 Limitations and future directions

This discussion presents a first systematic comparative analysis of gender-inclusive language guidelines across Italian universities. The corpus focuses specifically on publicly available guidelines issued by Italian universities, and all such documents accessible at the time of data collection were included. For universities whose guidelines were not publicly available, I directly contacted the institutions, that responded in different ways. In some cases, documents were provided for this study, in other cases, institutions indicated that their guidelines are still in preparation or that no guidelines are currently available. Consequently, while this study captures the current landscape of published guidelines, it could be extended in the future as additional documents become available. Indeed, while the current corpus is already representative of the Italian higher-education system, it would benefit from periodic updates to incorporate newly released or revised institutional guidelines. Another promising direction for the future would be to track the evolution of institutional guidelines over time, which could shed light on shifts in attitudes toward non-binary inclusion and changing approaches to experimental linguistic strategies.

Notably, the primary aim of this study was to compare the strategies adopted across institutions. However, where relevant and useful for the analysis, I also considered the motivations underpinning the choice of specific strategies. In cases where justification is absent, the documents list strategies and examples without explicitly explaining the reasoning

behind them. Exploring these underlying motivations could be an interesting direction for future research, although it falls outside the scope of the present study.

The present study can be further strengthened by complementing the analysis of what institutions prescribe with an examination of how these prescriptions are developed. This perspective is especially valuable for understanding how universities negotiate competing principles such as visibility, accessibility, tradition, and linguistic innovation. The following section takes a first step in this direction by analysing the development process of the gender-inclusive language guidelines drafted for Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele. By tracing how they are developed, it becomes possible to appreciate the complexities and constraints underlying institutional language planning in the Italian academic context, offering insights that cannot be captured through the documents alone.

6.3 Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele's work on inclusive language guidelines and discussion points

This section presents the development process of the gender-inclusive language guidelines drafted for Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele (2023).¹⁵⁹ It offers an opportunity to examine the internal dynamics, methodological choices, and linguistic debates that informed their development.¹⁶⁰ As a member of the working group responsible for drafting these guidelines, I participated directly in the process, which began in 2022 and culminated in the official approval of the document in December 2023. Importantly, the drafting process did not consist in the direct application of a pre-existing theoretical model, nor was it shaped by a single authorial perspective. Rather, the guidelines emerged through collective negotiation involving multiple institutional actors with partially different priorities, including inclusivity, institutional coherence, accessibility, readability, clarity, and reputational considerations. My role within the working group was therefore not that of a sole decision-maker, but rather of

¹⁵⁹ For ease of reading, Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele will henceforth be referred to as UniSR.

¹⁶⁰ This section discusses only the set of features that are directly relevant to my analysis; the guidelines include additional recommendations that, although important for practical implementation, fall outside the scope of the present discussion.

a contributor and consultant participating in an ongoing process of institutional mediation. Consequently, the final document reflects a series of compromises between theoretical aspirations, practical constraints, and the broader communicative priorities of the university. The initiative formed part of the institutions' broader Gender Equality Plan (GEP) 2022-2024, motivated by a commitment to align with the European Parliament's recommendations on gender equality and with the European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE, 2016) principles on non-discriminatory communication practices.¹⁶¹

To analyse the development of UniSR's gender-inclusive language guidelines, I first conducted a comparative review of the guidelines issued by other Italian universities. This review aimed to identify areas of convergence and divergence in terms of strategy selection, the rationale provided for these strategies, and the overall structure of the guidelines. During the drafting meetings for the UniSR guidelines, particular attention was devoted to the points where the other universities' guidelines diverged and to issues requiring discussion to establish an institutional stance. I took detailed notes throughout these meetings and subsequently synthesised and elaborated the discussions. Due to the internal and institutional nature of part of the drafting process, it is not always possible to reproduce excerpts from intermediate drafts or internal deliberations. Consequently, the discussion presented here is based primarily on the officially approved version of the guidelines, complemented by reflective notes produced during the drafting process. The present section presents an account of this process, highlighting the methodological choices, internal debates, and rationale that shaped the final version of the San Raffaele guidelines.

The drafting process was guided by the primary objective of counteracting androcentric linguistic practices and promoting the visibility of gender diversity within institutional

¹⁶¹ A Gender Equality Plan (GEP) is a strategic document adopted by universities and research institutions to promote gender equality and inclusion within their organisations. It typically includes measures and objectives aimed at eliminating gender bias, improving work-life balance, ensuring equal opportunities in recruitment and career progression, integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching, and fostering a gender-sensitive institutional culture. Since 2022, the adoption of a GEP has been a mandatory eligibility criterion for public institutions applying for Horizon Europe funding.

communication, both written and oral. To this end, the group engaged in sustained collective discussions and iterative revisions, informed by national and international research, including Sabatini (1987), Robustelli (2012), the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR, 2018), the Council of the European Union (2018), and guidelines adopted by other Italian universities. From the outset, it became clear that the main challenge centred on balancing inclusivity, readability, accessibility, and institutional coherence, a tension that pervaded much of the debate.

One central point of discussion concerned the role of disclaimers, i.e., explanatory notes stating that the use of a single grammatical gender (usually masculine) is intended to refer to individuals of all genders. This raised two distinct questions for the UniSR working group. The first question was whether disclaimers should be recommended at all. Guidelines differ in how disclaimers are treated: in some cases, their use is restricted to specific contexts (e.g., in very long or highly formal documents), whereas in other cases they are recommended independently of the textual context. After evaluating these approaches, the UniSR working group decided that disclaimers should be permitted only when strictly necessary, namely in verbose or legal-administrative texts where alternative inclusive strategies would compromise clarity or readability. The second question concerned how disclaimers should be formulated. In Italian guidelines where disclaimers are included, they specify that the masculine form “also refers to women”, thereby implicitly excluding non-binary people. The UniSR group therefore discussed whether the disclaimer could instead be reframed to include all genders, so as to avoid presenting the issue solely as the exclusion of women. The preferred solution was to adopt a wording that states explicitly that masculine forms, when used, refer to all persons regardless of gender, thus implicitly including non-binary individuals. The final decision was therefore twofold: to retain disclaimers only when required for communicative reasons, and to adopt an inclusive formulation that avoids the traditional woman-only framing (2023, p. 11):

UniSR sensibilizza tutto il personale tecnico-amministrativo, il corpo docente e ricercatore e il corpo studentesco ai fini del contrasto agli stereotipi di

genere, anche a livello di visibilità linguistica, ove possibile. Tuttavia, in alcuni casi – come in questo documento – unicamente a scopo di semplificazione, è usata la forma maschile in modalità sovraestesa ma è da intendersi riferita in maniera inclusiva a tutte le persone, al di là del loro genere.

UniSR invites all technical-administrative staff, faculty, researchers, and students to counter gender stereotypes, including through linguistic visibility wherever possible. However, in some cases – such as in this document – for the sole purpose of simplification, the masculine form is used in an overextended manner. Still, it should be understood as referring inclusively to all individuals, regardless of their gender [my translation].

The retention of the overextended masculine in specific contexts should therefore not be interpreted as the uncritical endorsement of androcentric language practices, but rather as the outcome of institutional negotiation within a highly formal communicative setting. In particular, legal-administrative and highly standardised institutional texts were perceived by several actors involved in the drafting process as requiring solutions prioritising textual economy, interpretative stability, and institutional recognisability. The final formulation thus reflects the tensions discussed throughout this dissertation between visibility, accessibility, readability, institutional legitimacy, and sociolinguistic innovation.

Another issue concerned the grammatical gender to recommend for titles and professional roles referring to women. Within the working group, there was full agreement on this point: the guidelines should explicitly recommend the use of feminine forms for professional titles when the referent is a woman. This choice aligned with the visibility-based strategies adopted by most Italian universities and with long-standing linguistic recommendations in Italy, e.g., “la rettrice” (the[F] rector[F]), “la professoressa” (the[F] professor[F]), “la Ministra” (the[F] Minister[F]). However, a further consideration emerged only at a later stage, during the approval process of the document. Some members of the approving bodies requested that the guidelines clarify that individual women retain the right to opt for the masculine form if they personally prefer it. This request reflects an ongoing debate in the Italian context, where a minority of women in high-ranking positions, in contexts where factors such as professional identity, perceived prestige, or tradition are at

stake, still choose to be referred to with masculine titles. Given the existence of this practice, the guidelines were revised to include an explicit recognition of women's autonomy in selecting the linguistic form they wish to be addressed by, thereby integrating the principle of linguistic self-determination alongside the broader normative commitment to gender visibility.

At the same time, this point generated broader theoretical and political reflections within the working group. While respecting individual self-determination was considered essential, several participants also noted that linguistic choices are never entirely neutral at the collective level. In particular, the continued preference for masculine professional titles by some women occupying positions of authority may contribute, even unintentionally, to reinforcing the symbolic association between masculinity, prestige, institutional authority, and professional legitimacy. From this perspective, the issue extends beyond individual preference and becomes connected to broader feminist debates concerning visibility, representation, and the social effects of linguistic normativity. The discussion therefore highlighted a persistent tension between protecting individual linguistic agency and recognising the collective political implications of maintaining masculine forms as the implicit standard within institutional communication.

A particularly debated topic was the inclusion of non-binary identities and the mention of innovative forms such as schwa (ə), the letter “u”, or the asterisk (*). The discussions mirrored broader sociolinguistic tensions: on the one hand, the need to acknowledge and make visible non-binary individuals; on the other hand, concerns about readability, accessibility (especially for screen readers), and collective comprehensibility. The group decided to address non-binary inclusion and to explicitly encourage the use of innovative strategies. The final wording states that “UniSR, while not adopting them as primary reference measures, encourages the use of these linguistic devices that visibly include non-binary people” [my translation]. In this way, the guidelines promote awareness and experimentation with innovative solutions while, given the ongoing debate and open questions, refraining from providing normative prescriptions.

Further linguistic factors involved plural agreement for nouns referring to mixed-gender groups, i.e., whether to past agree participles with the majority gender, e.g., “Carla, Maria e Giacomo sono arrivate” (Carla, Maria e Giacomo arrived[F]) or with the gender of the last noun in the series, e.g., “Carla, Maria e Giacomo sono arrivati” (Carla, Maria e Giacomo are arrived[M]).¹⁶² The group also discussed the ordering of binary forms, considering whether to adopt alphabetical order, e.g., “Care tutte e cari tutti” (Dear[F] all[F] and dear[M] all[M]) or another consistent principle, such as alternating the order across different documents to avoid establishing a fixed hierarchy. It was ultimately recommended that, in cases of splitting, the feminine and masculine forms should be ordered alphabetically.

The group also debated the treatment of the “-essa” suffix, e.g., in “professoressa” (professor[F]) and “dottoressa” (doctor[F]). This derivative suffix has long been controversial: scholars and activists have pointed out its historical connotations of diminutiveness or ridicule, especially in professions traditionally associated with male authority. From a strictly morphological perspective, the regular feminine forms of these nouns would end in “-a”, and several scholars favour alternatives such as “dottora” (doctor[F]) and “professora” (professor[F]) over the corresponding “-essa” forms. However, the group acknowledged that not all “-essa” forms have the same status: some of these forms are well established in contemporary usage and have largely lost the pejorative nuances that once accompanied them. The final decision was to adopt an inclusive and flexible approach: the guidelines accept the widespread “-essa” forms where they are firmly embedded in common usage, while also recognising the legitimacy of other feminine regular forms.¹⁶³ This allows the document to reflect both the historical critiques of the suffix and the linguistic realities of contemporary Italian.

¹⁶² The last case mentioned, namely, the rule whereby the grammatical gender of a noun phrase agrees with the gender of the last noun in the series, is known as *closest conjunct agreement*. For further discussion, see Section 1.3.

¹⁶³ For a detailed discussion on the use of the suffix “-essa” and its derogatory connotations, see chapter one of this thesis (§ 1.3).

A further stage of the work involved mapping specific communicative contexts and determining which inclusive strategies could be most readily adapted to each.¹⁶⁴ Documents such as forms and templates were recognised as easily modifiable, as they allow for structural changes that prevent binary formulations (e.g., leaving gendered endings blank or requesting gender information only when necessary). By contrast, formal documents such as calls and regulations pose complex challenges due to their length and bureaucratic rigidity, requiring a balanced use of visibility and obscurity strategies to maintain both inclusivity and readability. Particular attention was given to symbolic and ceremonial contexts, such as degree conferrals or official assemblies, where visibility strategies, e.g., the use of the feminine title “Dottor^{ess}a in Filosofia” (Doctor[F] in Philosophy) and the splitting form “Benvenute e benvenuti” (Welcome[F] and welcome[M]), carry a strong performative value, actively enacting institutional recognition. The document thus organises communicative contexts by typology (e.g., calls for applications, regulations, resolutions vs. assemblies, conferences, ceremonies) to reflect their differing degrees of flexibility and to highlight that inclusive language is not a uniform prescription but a situated practice requiring sensitivity to both textual conventions and the social meanings of linguistic visibility.

Importantly, the UniSR guidelines emphasise that any form of communication, including visual images, can function as a vehicle for stereotypes. Therefore, UniSR recommends paying attention to inclusivity across all semiotic levels. Moreover, the document expands the scope of inclusive recommendations beyond gender, discussing

¹⁶⁴ The contextual analysis developed in this work (Chapter 5) is also informed by my experience in drafting the UniSR guidelines. While examining guidelines from other universities, I observed that some documents distinguished between communicative contexts, whereas others offered general recommendations without specifying how strategies should vary across textual genres. This prompted me to approach contextual variation more systematically. For the UniSR guidelines, we mapped a wide range of documents, in order to identify differing degrees of flexibility and define context-sensitive strategies (ID badges, emails, regulations, resolutions, calls for applications, forms, website content, contracts, procurement documents, rectoral and managerial decrees, appointment letters, committee nominations, certificates and self-certifications, theses and degree conferrals, assemblies, guidelines, manuals, notices, circulars, posters, programmes for academic events, third-mission initiatives, conferences, lectures, meetings, institutional greetings, brochures, service guides, and reports). This mapping served as a conceptual starting point for the analysis presented in Chapter 5: although the categories do not fully coincide, they partially overlap, and the contextual perspective developed for the UniSR guidelines contributed to shaping the chapter’s classification.

representations related to ethnicity, disability, geographical origin, religion, age, and LGBTQIA+ identities. For instance, it explicitly recommends avoiding language that reduces individuals to a single characteristic (e.g., referring to someone as a disabled person) or that implies passivity or victimhood (e.g., suffers from or is afflicted by). Similarly, to avoid language that presupposes or discloses a person's sexual or romantic orientation, it stresses the importance of using relationship-neutral terms (e.g., "partner").¹⁶⁵ The guidelines also call for sensitivity in describing geographical origin and ethnicity, warning against unnecessary or inaccurate references that reinforce essentialist associations between physical traits, nationality, and cultural identity. Regarding religion, they caution against implicit assumptions based on geographical background or clothing, and recommend replacing expressions that presuppose Christian norms, e.g., using "nome proprio" (first name) instead of "nome di battesimo" (Baptismal name).

The final phase of the work focused on the structure and organisation of the document. The guidelines were divided into several sections: an introductory section presenting the rationale and institutional framework; a section outlining recommended inclusive strategies, distinguishing between visibility-oriented and gender-neutral approaches; a section specifying linguistic adjustments according to communicative contexts; a section suggesting forms of inclusive communication beyond gender, such as references to disability or cultural diversity; and, finally, the development of a dictionary of professional titles and roles and a glossary of key terms to promote terminological consistency across institutional communication.

Importantly, many of the reflections developed throughout this dissertation emerged precisely from the tensions, limitations, and unresolved questions encountered during the drafting process itself. The experience of negotiating institutional language policies made particularly visible the difficulties involved in reconciling gender visibility, non-binary

¹⁶⁵ However, attention should be paid to articles, as a gendered determiner may undermine the neutrality of the term. This is the case with "il partner"/"la partner" (the[M] partner/the[F] partner), for example, where the masculine or feminine article discloses the gender of the person to whom the term "partner" refers.

inclusion, accessibility, readability, and institutional feasibility within a grammatical gender language such as Italian. In this sense, the UniSR case did not simply apply the theoretical framework discussed in previous chapters; rather, it actively contributed to shaping and refining several of the critical perspectives developed throughout this work.

Overall, the drafting of the UniSR inclusive language guidelines illustrates the internal choice patterns and tensions that characterised the process. As shown in the previous analysis (§ 6.2), institutions frame inclusivity as a guiding principle while navigating it within the boundaries of linguistic stability and institutional legitimacy. The UniSR case reflects this broader tendency: institutional policymaking on language operates at the intersection of linguistic normativity, ideological negotiation, and administrative pragmatism. The process highlights how efforts to implement gender-inclusive and non-binary inclusive language must continually mediate between symbolic representation, communicative feasibility, and sociocultural readiness. Therefore, this case not only documents the creation of a specific policy but also illustrates the broader challenges faced by Italian academia in reconciling inclusivity with accessibility within a grammatical gender language.¹⁶⁶

6.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has offered a detailed examination of gender-inclusive language in the Italian university context. This was achieved by combining a comparative analysis of institutional guidelines with an in-depth illustration of the UniSR case. The applied component of this chapter has demonstrated the importance of contextual reasoning in the design and implementation of inclusive language strategies. By analysing forty-six university guidelines, it was possible to identify both dominant trends and the rationales underpinning institutional choices. The classification of these guidelines according to which strategies they

¹⁶⁶ The contents of this section were presented and discussed by the author, as a member of the working group responsible for drafting the Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele's guidelines (2023), at the Annual Conference of the National Network of Gender Equality Bodies of Italian Universities (*Conferenza Nazionale degli Organismi di Parità delle Università Italiane*), held at Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Modena, on 15-16 December 2023, entitled "Gender, Intersectionality, and the Metamorphosis of Rights: The Role of Gender Equality Bodies."

endorse offered insight into how universities operationalise inclusivity while balancing normative constraints, institutional legitimacy, and communicative effectiveness (§ 6.2).

The comparative analysis revealed dominant trends: all institutions (100%) endorse conservative visibility strategies, and approximately 97.8% recommend conservative obscuration strategies. By contrast, engagement with innovative strategies remains limited, with the majority of universities either explicitly rejecting them or addressing them only cautiously. A smaller subset of universities (10.9%) adopts a context-sensitive stance, acknowledging the social relevance of non-binary and innovative forms while restricting their application to flexible or non-institutional settings. This typology highlights the ways in which universities implement inclusive practices while navigating institutional requirements such as readability, accessibility, and adherence to formal norms. Rejections of innovative strategies are justified on linguistic, accessibility-related, empirical, or ideological grounds, reflecting a conservative approach that prioritises textual comprehensibility and institutional constraints. Universities that merely mention innovative strategies without endorsing them demonstrate awareness of ongoing sociolinguistic debates while maintaining a neutral or non-prescriptive stance. On the other hand, exceptional cases such as the Università di Trento's adoption (2024) of the overextended feminine in the General Regulation document illustrate how individual initiatives can symbolically foreground inclusivity, even if broader institutionalisation remains limited or controversial.

Finally, context-dependent recommendations, as illustrated by UniSR, indicate that some institutions differentiate the application of inclusive strategies according to communicative context. In particular, innovative strategies are discouraged in formal documents, particularly in contexts requiring high levels of clarity, readability, and institutional standardisation. The case of Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele offered a particularly valuable perspective on how guidelines are drafted in practice. The experience highlighted the negotiation between normative objectives and practical challenges, showing how decisions about strategy adoption reflect both guiding commitment and contextual feasibility. These examples emphasise that the implementation of inclusive language

involves multiple constraints and trade-offs, requiring careful calibration between symbolic visibility, functional clarity, and institutional acceptability (§ 6.3).

Overall, this chapter confirms that Italian universities are characterised by a predominantly conservative approach when implementing gender-inclusive language, balancing the need for inclusivity with institutional expectations of clarity, coherence, and accessibility highlighted also in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals openings for innovation, as the context-sensitive approach (e.g., differentiated recommendations for formal and informal documents) and the exceptional intervention (e.g., the sanctioned use of innovative strategies in specific circumstances) examined here demonstrate the capacity to experiment, adapt, and progressively expand the inclusivity of their linguistic practices. These findings support the argument, put forward in Chapter 5, that a context-based, case-sensitive perspective is essential for understanding and evaluating gender-inclusive strategies, as it accounts for the interplay between communicative constraints, institutional mandates, and evolving social understandings of gender. By combining a macro-level analysis of guidelines with a micro-level examination of a case study of a drafting process, this chapter provides a nuanced picture of how gender-inclusive language is negotiated within Italian higher education. It also offers insights that can inform both scholarly research and practical policy-making, by clarifying which factors shape institutional decision-making, identifying recurrent challenges in the adoption of inclusive strategies, and highlighting the conditions under which innovative practices can be introduced in formal settings.

7. General conclusions

This dissertation has examined the complex relationship between gender, language, and inclusivity within the context of the Italian grammatical gender system. While it builds on the shared premise that language is not a neutral medium but a social instrument that can reproduce gender hierarchies, this premise serves primarily as the background against which the analysis unfolds. In grammatical gender languages such as Italian, this dynamic manifests structurally, as linguistic forms encode gender information as part of their grammatical structure and privilege the masculine as the default. The core aim of this work, however, has been to identify, classify, and critically evaluate linguistic strategies that can counteract gender-unfair linguistic uses and foster more inclusive and fair communication practices, with particular attention to institutional and administrative contexts.

From a broader perspective, the originality of this research lies in its comprehensive integration of philosophical, psycholinguistic, and institutional approaches to gender-inclusive language. The dissertation not only maps the strategies available in Italian but also evaluates their cognitive, ethical, and practical implications, with particular attention to innovative non-binary strategies, an emergent area within the Italian debate that has received comparatively limited attention. Furthermore, it addresses the gap concerning the accessibility of these linguistic solutions, offering a preliminary contribution toward reconciling inclusivity with accessibility. These guiding objectives frame and motivate the analyses developed throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 1 established the theoretical foundation of the research by examining the phenomenon of androcentrism in language and its specific manifestations in Italian. Rather than advancing a prescriptive argument, the chapter traced how gender-related linguistic asymmetries have developed historically and how they surface in contemporary Italian usage. It explored the mechanisms through which the androcentric masculine contributes to the invisibilisation of women and non-binary individuals, highlighting its role in generating

interpretive ambiguity and illustrating the kinds of implications this may have in legal, social, and occupational contexts.

Building on this analysis, Chapter 2 provided a systematic classification of gender-inclusive strategies in Italian, distinguishing between visibility and obscuration approaches, and between conservative and innovative forms. The discussion highlighted the potential of visibility strategies to disrupt androcentric norms by explicitly marking gender diversity, while also acknowledging the complementary role of obscuration strategies in avoiding gender disclosure. Furthermore, it concludes that, of the various visibility strategies, conservative ones can promote the visibility of women, but do not provide resources for representing non-binary individuals. Conversely, innovative strategies are designed to include all genders, albeit at the cost of presenting linguistic and pragmatic challenges.

Chapter 3 focused specifically on non-binary inclusion, examining the ethical, philosophical, and psychological dimensions of gender representation. Drawing on Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) framework, it argued for the moral necessity of avoiding misgendering and for the linguistic recognition of non-binary identities. Moreover, the analysis showed that visibility is a central aspect of identity construction and that strategies based solely on gender obscuration, while preventing harm, may inadvertently erase non-binary identities. Consequently, it concludes that innovative visibility strategies may represent important tools for affirming non-binary existence, despite their contested status in Italian public discourse.

Chapter 4 addressed the most prominent objection to these strategies, namely their alleged lack of accessibility. Through a detailed examination of the interaction between innovative forms and assistive technologies, the chapter showed that accessibility issues can depend on technological adaptation, rather than being intrinsic flaws of the linguistic forms themselves. It also emphasised the broader social dimension of accessibility, suggesting that awareness-raising and user education are play a key role in ensuring that inclusive language remains both comprehensible and usable for all. This discussion revealed that the tension between inclusion and accessibility is not an impasse but a dynamic space of negotiation that

requires continuous interdisciplinary dialogue among linguists, technologists, and policymakers.

Chapter 5 integrated the preceding observations into a contextual model for implementing gender-inclusive language in Italian. It argued that the choice among different linguistic strategies should be informed by contextual variables such as communicative purpose, institutional authorship, and audience characteristics.

Chapter 6 then surveyed the guidelines of forty Italian universities, showing that, in the guidelines analysed, while institutions endorse conservative forms of inclusivity, innovative strategies remain marginal and are approached with caution or ambivalence. I focused in particular on the guidelines of Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, to which I contributed, to illustrate that, even within formal contexts, inclusive innovation is possible when guided by pragmatic flexibility and context-sensitive reasoning.

Taken together, this dissertation suggests that inclusive language in Italian can be understood as a continuum of practices rather than a set of prescriptive norms. Each strategy, whether conservative or innovative, represents a situated response to the structural constraints of the language and to evolving social understandings of gender. The work thus contributes theoretically to the debate of linguistic gender inclusivity by: (1) offering a structured taxonomy of Italian strategies; (2) providing a normative-ethical framework for evaluating their fairness; and (3) proposing a contextual model that reconciles inclusivity with accessibility and communicative effectiveness.

In addition, the dissertation provides a concrete descriptive contribution by mapping how Italian universities interpret and operationalise inclusive communication and by analysing in detail the technological and practical factors underlying perceived accessibility challenges. These observations complement the theoretical framework by showing how inclusive practices are negotiated and implemented in real institutional contexts.

In conclusion, the Italian case exemplifies the broader challenge faced by grammatical gender languages worldwide: how to balance linguistic stability and social innovation in order to ensure equitable representation for all gender identities. The path toward gender-inclusive Italian is necessarily gradual and negotiated, requiring awareness, institutional commitment, and technological support. Yet, as this research has shown, inclusive linguistic change is not only possible but already underway, driven by a recognition that language, is a dynamic practice capable of evolving to reflect changes in society.

References

- Acanfora, F. (2020). La diversità è negli occhi di chi guarda: Superare il concetto di inclusione della diversità sul lavoro [E-book]. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.fishcalabria.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Fabrizio-Acanfora_La-diversit%C3%A0-%C3%A8-negli-occhi-di-chi-guarda_compressed.pdf
- Agenzia delle Entrate. (2020). Linee guida per l'uso di un linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze di genere. https://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/portale/documents/20143/1742359/Linee_guida_linguaggio_genere_2020.pdf/0327598d-9607-4929-ceae-a3760b081ab4
- AGID - Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale. (2024). Corso Base – Contenuti Accessibili [Basic Course – Accessible Content] [Training curriculum].
- American Psychological Association. (2018). Coping strategy. APA dictionary of psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/coping-strategy>
- Associazione Italiana Dislessia (AID). (n.d.). Dislessia che fare: Gli strumenti compensativi. [Blog post]. <https://www.aiditalia.org/gli-strumenti-compensativi>
- Alvanoudi, A. (2014). Grammatical Gender in Interaction: Cultural and Cognitive Aspects. In Grammatical Gender in Interaction. Brill. <https://brill.com/display/title/26830>
- Arijs, Q., Burgwal, A., Van Wiele, J., & Motmans, J. (2023). The Price to Pay for Being Yourself: Experiences of Microaggressions among Non-Binary and Genderqueer (NBGQ) Youth. Healthcare (Basel, Switzerland), 11(5), 742. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11050742>
- Baiocco, R., Rosati, F., & Pistella, J. (2023). Italian proposal for non-binary and inclusive language: The schwa as a non-gender-specific ending. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 27(3), 248–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2023.2183537>
- Baracco, L. (Ed.). (2005). Questione di leggibilità: Se non riesco a leggere non è solo colpa dei miei occhi. Progetto Lettura Agevolata, Direzione Centrale Relazioni Esterne e Comunicazione, Regione Veneto.

- Beischel, W. J., Gauvin, Stéphanie E. M., & van Anders, S. M. (2022). “A little shiny gender breakthrough”: Community understandings of gender euphoria. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 23(3), 274–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2021.1915223>
- Belle, D., Tartarilla, A. B., Wapman, M., Schlieber, M., & Mercurio, A. E. (2021). “I Can’t Operate, that Boy Is my Son!”: Gender Schemas and a Classic Riddle. *Sex Roles*, 85(3), 161–171. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01211-4>
- Bianchi, C. (2003). *Pragmatica del linguaggio*. Editori Laterza.
- Bodine, A. (1975). Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular «They», Sex-Indefinite «He», and «He or She». *Language in Society*, 4(2), 129–146
- Boschetto, L. (n.d.). *Italiano Inclusivo. Una lingua che non discrimina per genere*. <https://italianoinclusivo.it/perche/>
- Boselli, M. (2021, aprile 29). LINGUAGGIO NON BINARIO E DIFFICOLTÀ DI LETTURA. La Falla. <https://lafalla.cassero.it/linguaggio-non-binario-e-difficolta-di-lettura/>
- Breccia, C. (2021). A study of THEY - exploring a singular pronoun. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360898139_A_study_of_THEY_-_exploring_a_singular_pronoun
- British Dyslexia Association. (n.d.). Home page. <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>
- Burnett, H., & Pozniak, C. (2021). Political dimensions of gender inclusive writing in Parisian universities. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 25(5), 808–831. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12491>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2024, dicembre 11). Fairness. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fairness>
- Cancelleria federale (2023). *Linguaggio inclusivo di genere. Guida all'uso inclusivo della lingua italiana nei testi della Confederazione*. https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/CAN/SGCDS/pari_opportunita/download/Guida_al_linguaggio_inclusivo_di_genere.pdf

- Carreiras, M., Garnham, A., Oakhill, J., & Cain, K. (1996). The use of stereotypical gender information in constructing a mental model: Evidence from English and Spanish. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology. A, Human Experimental Psychology*, 49(3), 639–663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713755647>
- Castenetto, G. (2020). Avvocato, avvocatessa o avvocatessa? Cosa ne pensano i/le parlanti. In S. Ondelli (Ed.), *Le italiane e l'italiano: Quattro studi su lingua e genere* (pp. 79–106). EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste
- Cavagnoli, S., & Cognigni, E. (2024). Educazione linguistica, potere e consapevolezza di genere. In *Educazione all'uguaglianza di genere ed educazione linguistica*. Elisabetta Jafrancesco, Ivana Fratter, Ida Tucci. <https://art.torvergata.it/handle/2108/394235>
- Cesarano, F. (2020). On misgendering and the feasibility of changing grammar rules to respect all gender identities. IUSS, Scuola Universitaria Superiore Pavia.
- Cettolin, C. (2020). Ma se parlo al maschile, le vedi le donne? Maschile non marcato e visibilità femminile. In S. Ondelli (Ed.), *Le italiane e l'italiano: Quattro studi su lingua e genere* (pp. 49–77). EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste
- Chirrey, D. A. (2003). “I hereby come out”: What sort of speech act is coming out? *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(1), 24–37
- Città Metropolitana di Milano. (2023). Linee guida per un linguaggio amministrativo rispettoso del genere.
<https://www.cittametropolitana.mi.it/export/sites/default/newsletter/doc/Opuscolo-linguaggio.pdf>
- Coady, T. (2018). *The origins of sexism in language*. Lexington Books.
- Comadini, G. (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. <https://testoesenso.it/index.php/testoesenso/article/view/524>
- Corbett, G. (1991). *Gender*. Cambridge University Press.

- Cortelazzo, M. (2015). Il cantiere del linguaggio istituzionale. A che punto siamo? *Gesetzgebung Heute Mitteilungsblatt Der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft Für Gesetzgebung = Législation d'aujourd'hui = Legislazione d'oggi*, XXVI.
- Cortelazzo, M. A. (2024). La femminilizzazione dei nomi di professione e di cariche. Un problema recente? In *Educazione all'uguaglianza di genere ed educazione linguistica* (pp. 43–52). Elisabetta Jafrancesco, Ivana Fratter, Ida Tucci.
- Cortelazzo, M. (1995). Perché non si vuole la presidentessa? In G. Marcato (Ed.), *Donna & linguaggio* (pp. 49–52). Cleup.
- Council Of Europe. (2024). Guidelines for the use of language as a driver of inclusivity. <https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-for-the-use-of-language-as-a-driver-of-inclusivity/1680aec235>
- Council of the European Union. (2018). Inclusive communication in the SGC. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/resources/publications/inclusive-comm-gsc/>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Crestani, G., Pedrini, M., Pellegrino, E., & Saracco, M. (2026). Gender-inclusive language in university communication: A contrastive analysis of gender-inclusive guidelines in German, Italian, and English. *Linguistik Online*, 131(1).
- CRG. (2021). Gender-Inclusive Language.
- Crossley, S., Heintz, A., Choi, J. S., Batchelor, J., Karimi, M., & Malatinszky, A. (2023). A large-scaled corpus for assessing text readability. *Behavior Research Methods*, 55, 491–507. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-022-01802-x>
- D'Achille, P. (2021). Un asterisco sul genere. *Accademia della Crusca*. <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/un-asterisco-sul-genere/4018>
- De Santis, C. (2022). L'emancipazione grammaticale non passa per una e rovesciata—Treccani. https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/scritto_e_parlato/Schwa.htm
- l

- Dembroff, R. (2018). Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender. *Philosophical Topics*, 46(2), 21–50.
- Dembroff, R., & Wodak, D. (2018). He/She/They/Ze. *Ergo*, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy, 5(20201214). <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.014>
- Dembroff, R., & Wodak, D. (2021). How much gender is too much gender? In J. Khoo & R. Sterken (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of social and political philosophy of language* (pp. 362–376). Routledge.
- De Rosa, E. (2024). Non-binaryism and challenges for social research. *AboutGender*, 13(25), 160–197.
- Díaz-León, E. (2016). Woman as a politically significant term: a solution to the puzzle. *Hypatia*: 31(2):245–258.
- Díaz-León, E. (2019). On how to achieve reference to covert social constructions. *Studia Philosophica Estonica*: 12,34-43.
- Dixon, J. (2007). Eight-dot Braille (Position statement). Braille Authority of North America. <https://www.brailleauthority.org/eight-dot-braille>.
- Doleschal, U. (2015). Gender marking. https://www.academia.edu/9991836/Gender_marking
- ECAS Brussels. (2023). Gender-inclusive language guidelines—ECAS. <https://ecas.org/publication/gender-inclusive-language-guidelines/>
- Edmondson, D. (2021). Word norms and measures of linguistic reclamation for LGBTQ+ slurs. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 28(1), 193–221. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.00023.edm>
- EIGE. (2019). Toolkit on gender-sensitive communication: A resource for policymakers, legislators, media and anyone else with an interest in making their communication more inclusive. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2839/589287>
- Elmiger, D. (2024). *Collection Guides de langue non sexiste / inclusive* (Version 3.0). Université de Genève, Département de langue et littérature allemandes.
- European Parliament. (2018a). La neutralità di genere nel linguaggio usato al Parlamento europeo. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/288144/GNL_Guidelines_IT-original.pdf

- European Parliament. (2018b). Gender-Neutral Language in the European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf
- European Parliament. (2018c). Sukupuolineutraali kielenkäyttö Euroopan parlamentissa. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/288140/GNL_Guidelines_FI-original.pdf
- Facchini, I. (2024). Can the schwa be used in speech? Feasibility study on non-binary language in conference interpreting. *AboutGender*, 13(25), 128–159.
- Ferrari, A. (2010). Contesto. *Enciclopedia dell’Italiano* Treccani.
- FNOPI - Federazione Nazionale Ordini Professioni Infermieristiche. (2019). La comunicazione istituzionale (a cura di P. Del Bufalo, Ufficio stampa e comunicazione FNOPI).
- Formato, F. (2019). *Gender, Discourse and Ideology in Italian*. Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- Formato, F. (2017). “Ci sono troie in giro in Parlamento che farebbero di tutto”: Italian female politicians seen through a sexual lens. In *Proceedings/volume details da verificare*.
- Formato, F. (2024). [Intervento al convegno Terminology Conference]. Queen Mary University of London. <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/arts/linguistics/research/gender-inclusive-language/research-networking-project/conferences--events/terminology-conference/>
- Frabotta, S., & Manera, M. (2024). Linguaggio inclusivo: Limiti e potenzialità di uso nei manuali di italiano L2/Ls. In *Educazione all’uguaglianza di genere ed educazione linguistica* (pp. 83–95). Elisabetta Jafrancesco, Ivana Fratter, Ida Tucci.
- Fricker, M. (2006). Powerlessness and interpretation. *Episteme* 3 (1/2): 96–108. 2012. *Silence and institutional prejudice. Out from the shadows: Analytical feminist contributions to traditional philosophy*, ed. S. L. Crasnow and A. M. Superson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fumagalli, C. & Rosola, M. (2024). The Case for a Duty to Use Gender-Fair Language in Democratic Representation, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 74(4), October 2024, Pages 1159–1181.

- Gabriel, U., Gyga, P., Sarasin, O., Garnham, A., & Oakhill, J. (2008). Au pairs are rarely male: Norms on the gender perception of role names across English, French, and German. *Behavior Research Methods*, 40(1), 206–212.
<https://doi.org/10.3758/BRM.40.1.206>
- Garnham, A. (2001). *Mental models and the interpretation of anaphora*. Psychology Press.
- Garnham, A., Oakhill, J., & Reynolds, D. (2002). Are inferences from stereotyped role names to characters' gender made elaboratively? *Memory & Cognition*, 30(3), 439–446.
<https://doi.org/10.3758/bf03194944>
- Gheno, V. (2022a). Questione di privilegi: Come il linguaggio ampio può contribuire ad ampliare gli orizzonti mentali. *AG About Gender - International Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(21), Articolo 21. <https://doi.org/10.15167/2279-5057/AG2022.11.21.1982>
- Gheno, V. (2022b). *Schwa: Storia, motivi e obiettivi di una proposta*. Treccani.
https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/Schwa/4_Gheno.html
- Gheno, V. (2023). *Linguaggio ampio: Una possibile strada verso la convivenza delle differenze* [Text]. (Florence). Quanti generi di diversità?
<https://books.fupress.com/catalogue/linguaggio-ampio-una-possibile-strada-verso-la-convivenza-delle-differenze/14864>
- Gibbs, M. (2024). Misgendering as a Microaggression: Gender Expression and Trans Pedagogy. *McNair Research Journal SJSU*, 20(1).
<https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/mcnair/vol20/iss1/6>
- Giovine, M. (2024). Gender Visibility: Linguistic Strategies to Challenge Stereotypes in Italian. *Rivista Italiana Di Filosofia Del Linguaggio*, 161-171.
<https://doi.org/10.4396/SFL202307>
- Giovine, M. (2025). Reconciling inclusion and accessibility: solutions for non-binary linguistic strategies in grammatical gender languages. *Language Sciences*, 113.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2025.101778>
- Giovine, M. (forthcoming). Androcentrismo e binarismo: sfide e prospettive per l'inclusione di genere nella lingua italiana, *Rivista di Estetica*.

- Giovine, M. (forthcoming). Language and Identity: The Psychological Implications of Misgendering for Trans* Individuals. *Phenomenology and Mind*.
- Giovine, M. (under review). Choosing Gender-Fair Strategies in Italian: A Context-Based Approach.
- Giuliani, G. (2021). I Migliori Font e Caratteri per Aiutare Le Persone Con Dislessia. AccessiWay.
https://www.google.com/search?q=Giuliani+Guido.+2021.+%C2%ABIMigliori+Font+e+Caratteri+per+Aiutare+Le+Persone+Con+Dislessia&oq=Giuliani+Guido.+2021.+%C2%ABIMigliori+Font+e+Caratteri+per+Aiutare+Le+Persone+Con+Dislessia&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBBzE1NGowajSoAgCwAgE&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8
- Giusti, G. (2022). Inclusività nella lingua italiana: Come e perché. Fondamenti teorici e proposte operative. <https://iris.unive.it/handle/10278/5001231>
- González Vázquez, I. G., Klieber, A., & Rosola, M. (2024). Beyond Pronouns: Gender Visibility and Neutrality Across Languages. In E. Lepore & L. Anderson (A c. Di), *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language* (pp. 320–346). Oxford University Press.
- Greenbergen, J. (1978). How Does a Language Acquire Gender Markers? In *Universals of human language*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 47–82. Grimm, Jacob. 1831. *Deutsche Grammatik III*. 3. Theil, 3. Buch: Von der.
- Guiora, A. Z. (1983). Language and Concept Formation: A Cross- Lingual Analysis. *Behavior Science Research*, 18(3), 228–256.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/106939718301800304>
- Gygax, P. M., Elmiger, D., Zufferey, S., Garnham, A., Sczesny, S., von Stockhausen, L., Braun, F., & Oakhill, J. (2019). A language index of grammatical gender dimensions to study the impact of grammatical gender on the way we perceive women and men. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, Article 1604. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01604>
- Gygax, P., & Gabriel, U. (2008). Can a Group of Musicians be Composed of Women? Generic Interpretation of French Masculine Role Names in the Absence and Presence

- of Feminine Forms. *Swiss Journal of Psychology* (67(3)), 143–151.
<https://doi.org/10.1024/1421-0185.67.3.143>
- Gygax, P., Gabriel, U., Sarrasin, O., Oakhill, J., & Garnham, A. (2008). Generically intended, but specifically interpreted: When beauticians, musicians, and mechanics are all men. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 23(3), 464–485.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01690960701702035>
- Gygax, P., & Gesto, N. (2007). Feminisation of language and hindering reading. *L'Année psychologique* (107(2)), 239–255.
- Gygax, P., Sato, S., Öttl, A., & Gabriel, U. (2021). The masculine form in grammatically gendered languages and its multiple interpretations: A challenge for our cognitive system. *Language Sciences*, 83, 101328.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2020.101328>
- Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be? *Noûs*, 34(1), 31–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00201>
- Hellinger, M., & Bußmann, H. (2015). Gender across languages: The linguistic representation of women and men*. In M. Hellinger & H. Motschenbacher (Eds.), *Gender Across Languages. Volume IV.* (pp. xii, 328). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.9>
- Hellinger, M., & Motschenbacher, H. (2015). Gender Across Languages. In *Impact.36*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://benjamins.com/catalog/impact.36>
- Hentschel, T., Horvath, L. K., Peus, C., & Sczesny, S. (2018). Kick-Starting Female Careers: Attracting Women to Entrepreneurship Programs. *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 17(4), 193–203. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1866-5888/a000209>
- Herijgers, M. C., & Pander Maat, H. L. W. (2017). Navigating contextual constraints in discourse: Design explications in institutional talk. *Discourse Studies*, 19(6), 661–682.
- Hernandez, E. M. (2021). Gender-Affirmation and Loving Attention. *Hypatia*, 36(4), 619–635. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.45>

- Hernandez, E. M., & Crowley, A. (2024). How to Do Things with Gendered Words. In E. Lepore & L. Anderson (A c. Di), *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*. Oxford University Press. <https://philarchive.org/rec/HERHTD-3>
- Human Rights Campaign. (s.d.). Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions. HRC. Recuperato 17 giugno 2025, da <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>
- Iacopini, L. (2021, aprile 15). Lo schwa (ə) che rende l'inclusione inaccessibile. Webaccessibile.org. <https://webaccessibile.org/approfondimenti/lo-schwa-a-che-rende-linclusione-inaccessibile/>
- ITTIG, & Accademia della Crusca (2011). Guida alla redazione degli atti amministrativi. Regole e suggerimenti.
- Ivanov, O., & Lieboldt, S. (2023). Von „Studierenden“, „Mitarbeiterinnen“ und „Professoren“ – Geschlechtergerechte Personenbezeichnungen zwischen Varianz und Normierung. *Linguistik Online*, 119(7).
- Jacobsen, K., Davis, C. E., Burchell, D., Rutherford, L., Lachowsky, N., Bauer, G., & Scheim, A. (2023). Misgendering and the health and wellbeing of nonbinary people in Canada. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 25(4), 816–830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2023.2278064>
- Jenkins, K. (2023). *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, K. (2016). Amelioration and inclusion: Gender identity and the concept of woman. *Ethics*, 126(2), 394–421. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683535>
- Jenkins, K. (2018). Toward an account of gender identity. *Ergo*, 5, Article 27. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.027>
- Kapusta, S. J. (2016). Misgendering and Its Moral Contestability. *Hypatia*, 31(3), 502–519.
- Karlsson, S., & Karlsson, T. S. (2019). Language policy as ‘frozen’ ideology: Exploring the administrative function in Swedish higher education. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 20(5), 469–485.

- Kerch, B. (2021, settembre 22). Lo schwa e i suoi problemi | Io Sono Minoranza. <https://iosonominoranza.it/lo-schwa-e-i-suoi-problemi/>
- Kollmayer, M., Pfaffel, A., Schober, B., & Brandt, L. (2018). Breaking Away From the Male Stereotype of a Specialist: Gendered Language Affects Performance in a Thinking Task. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00985>
- Kumar, S. (2022). What is outing and why is it harmful? LGBTQ and All. <https://www.lgbtqandall.com/what-is-outing-and-why-is-it-harmful/>
- Lancioni, S. (2021). Un linguaggio accessibile e inclusivo delle differenze tra i generi. Centro Informare con un'H. Centro Gabriele e Lorenzo Giuntinelli.
- LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. (2024). LGBTQIA+ Glossary of Terms for Health Care Teams » LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. <https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/>
- Lepschy, G. (1989). Lingua e sessismo. In G. Lepschy (Ed.), *Nuovi saggi di linguistica italiana* (pp. 61–84). Il Mulino.
- Libera Università di Bolzano. (2024). Vademecum per l'uso del linguaggio di genere in unibz.
- Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli (LUISS). (2024). Linee Guida per un Linguaggio Inclusivo. <https://www.luiss.it/sites/default/files/2024-11/Linee%20Guida%20per%20un%20Linguaggio%20Inclusivo.pdf>
- López, Á. (2020, ottobre 7). You, Me, Hir, and Non-Binary Language. ATA Spanish Language Division. <https://ataspd.org/2020/10/07/you-me-hir-and-non-binary-language/>
- Lugones, M. (2003). *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. Rowman & Littlefield. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780742514584>
- Madeo, C. <1991>. (2021). LETTURA AD ALTA ACCESSIBILITA'. Easyreading, il font inclusivo a supporto della dislessia evolutiva. <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/19572>
- Marcato, G., & Thüne, E.-M. (2002). The linguistic representation of women and men. In M. Hellinger & H. Bußmann (Eds.), *Gender across languages* (Vol. 2). John Benjamins.

- Martin, P., & Papadelos, P. (2017). Who stands for the norm? The place of metonymy in androcentric language. *Social Semiotics*, 27(1), 39–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2016.1145371>
- Matsuno, E., & Budge, S. L. (2017). Non-binary/Genderqueer Identities: A Critical Review of the Literature. *Current Sexual Health Reports*, 9(3), 116–120.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-017-0111-8>
- Matsuno, E., Webb, A., Hashtpari, H., Budge, S., Krishnan, M., & Basam, K. (n.d.). Nonbinary Fact Sheet. American Psychological Association (APA).
<https://www.apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/nonbinary-fact-sheet.pdf>
- Maturi, P. (2020). Qual è il tuo pronome? Riflessioni su questioni di genere nelle lingue europee. *Fuori Luogo. Rivista di Sociologia del Territorio, Turismo*, 67-74
Paginazione. <https://doi.org/10.6092/2723-9608/7154>
- McLemore, K. A. (2018). A minority stress perspective on transgender individuals' experiences with misgendering. *Stigma and Health*, 3(1), 53–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000070>
- Mikkola, M. (2008). Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (A c. Di), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/feminism-gender/>
- Miroiu, M. (2011). Guidelines for promoting gender-inclusive curriculum in higher education. In *From gender studies to gender in studies* (pp. 229–246).
- Misersky, J., Gyga, P. M., Canal, P., Gabriel, U., Garnham, A., Braun, F., Chiarini, T., Englund, K., Hanulíková, A., Öttl, A., Valdrova, J., Von Stockhausen, L., & Sczesny, S. (2014). Norms on the gender perception of role nouns in Czech, English, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, and Slovak. *Behavior Research Methods*, 46(3), 841–871.
<https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-013-0409-z>
- MIUR. (2018). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del Miur—
Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del Miur. Mi -

- Ministero dell'istruzione. <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/linee-guida-per-l-uso-del-genere-nel-linguaggio-amministrativo-del-miur>
- Molinelli, P., & Stanga, S. (2024). Scrivere bene per includere... meglio. Scrittura leggibile e comprensibile per l'inclusione: Tematiche di genere e disturbi del neurosviluppo.
- Moulton, J. (1981). The Myth of the Neutral «Man». In M. Vetterling-Bruggin (A c. Di), Sexist language: A modern philosophical analysis (pp. 100–116). Littlefield, Adams.
- Müller-Spitzer, C., Ochs, S., Koplenig, A., Rüdiger, J. O., & Wolfer, S. (2024). Less than one percent of words would be affected by gender-inclusive language in German press texts. PLOS ONE, 19(2), e0299897.
- Musei Reali di Torino. (2022). Linee guida per una comunicazione rispettosa delle differenze di genere al museo. <https://museireali.beniculturali.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Linee-guida-linguaggio-PDF-Musei-Reali.pdf>
- Nadal, K. L., Davidoff, K. C., Davis, L. S., & Wong, Y. (2014). Emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions to microaggressions: Transgender perspectives. Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 1(1), 72–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000011>
- Nadal, K. L., Whitman, C. N., Davis, L. S., Erazo, T., & Davidoff, K. C. (2016). Microaggressions toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and genderqueer people: A review of the literature. Journal of Sex Research, 53(4–5), 488–508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1142495>
- National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. (2024). LGBTQIA+ Glossary of Terms for Health Care Teams » LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. <https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/>
- NATO. (2021). NATO Gender-Inclusive Language Manual. Office of NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security In cooperation with the International Staff Translation Service. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pictures/images_mfu/2021/5/pdf/210514-GIL-Manual_en.pdf

- Nitti, P. (2021). Il sessismo linguistico nei manuali di italiano per la scuola secondaria di secondo grado. *Testo e Senso*(23), 97–108.
- Nomensa. (2005, novembre 22). What is a screen reader? Nomensa.
<https://www.nomensa.com/blog/what-screen-reader/>
- Non una di meno (2017). Abbiamo un piano. Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere.
- Nordmarken, S. (2014). Microaggressions. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(1–2), 129–134. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399812>
- Nordmarken, S., & Kelly, R. (2014). Limiting Transgender Health: Administrative Violence and Microaggressions in Health Care Systems. 143–166.
- Nunberg, G. (2018). The Social Life of Slurs. In: *New Work on Speech Acts*. Ed. by Daniel W. Harris Daniel Fogal and Matt Moss. Oxford Academic.
- Oakhill, J., Garnham, A., & Reynolds, D. (2005). Immediate activation of stereotypical gender information. *Memory & Cognition*, 33(6), 972–983.
<https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193206>
- Ochs, E. (1992). Indexing gender. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 335–358). Cambridge University Press.
- Ondelli, S. (2013). Introduzione. Per una linguistica dei testi. EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste.
- Orrù, A. (2020). Linguaggio inclusivo: Cos'è e perché non è solo una questione di genere.
<https://www.aliceorru.me/definizione-linguaggio-inclusivo/>
- Pabst, L. M., & Kollmayer, M. (2023). How to make a difference: The impact of gender-fair language on text comprehensibility amongst adults with and without an academic background. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1116110.
- Pauwels, A. (2003). Linguistic sexism and feminist linguistic activism. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 550–570). Blackwell.
- Pezzini, B. (2015). Implicito ed esplicito nel rapporto circolare tra genere e diritto. In *Questioni di genere nel diritto: Impliciti e crittotipi* (pp. 201–234). Giappichelli.

- Pierce, C., Carew, J., Pierce-Gonzalez, D. & Willis, D. (1978). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. In C. Pierce (Ed.), *Television and education* (pp. 62-88) Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Politecnico di Torino (2023). Guida pratica per una comunicazione inclusiva. https://www.polito.it/sites/default/files/2023-07/vademecum%20agile%20b_n.pdf
- Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. (n.d.). Constitution of the Italian Republic (Articles 1–54) (Official English translation). Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato. <https://www2.immigrazione.regione.toscana.it/sites/default/files/costituzione/Costituzioneitalianaversioneinglese.pdf>
- Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione. (2004). *Gli stili della comunicazione istituzionale*.
- Prewitt-Freilino, J. L., Caswell, T. A., & Laakso, E. K. (2012). The gendering of language: A comparison of gender equality in countries with gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages. *Sex Roles*, 66(3–4), 268–281. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0083-5>
- PRILS LAZIO. (2017). *Lingua-cultura italiana per stranieri* (Roma Tre-Press)
- Pukánszky, A. (n.d.). Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language in Finland
- Pusterla, Michela (2019). *Parlare femminista: La lingua di «Non una di meno»*. EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste.
- Reynolds, D. J., Garnham, A., & Oakhill, J. (2006). Evidence of immediate activation of gender information from a social role name. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2006), 59(5), 886–903. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02724980543000088>
- Renström, E. A., Lindqvist, A., & Gustafsson Sendén, M. (2015). The multiple meanings of the gender-inclusive pronoun hen: Predicting attitudes and use. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 56(5), 587–596.
- Ribeiro, L. B., Rodrigues, A. R., Costa, K. M., et al. (2019). Quantification of textual comprehension difficulty with an information theory-based algorithm. *Palgrave Communications*, 5, Article 103. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0311-0>

- Riccio, A. (2024). Strategie linguistiche per la valorizzazione delle differenze di genere nei testi normativi delle università italiane. In E. Carosso & G. Zaganelli (Eds.), *La lingua italiana e le sfide dell'inclusione*. Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
- Ritchie, M. E. (1975). Alice through the Statutes. 21-4 McGill Law Journal 685, 1975 CanLIIDocs 84.
- Robustelli, C. (2012). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo. Progetto Genere e Linguaggio Parole e immagini della Comunicazione.
- Robustelli, C. (2013). Infermiera sì, ingegnera no? Accademia della Crusca. <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/contenuti/infermiera-s-ingegnera-no/7368>
- Robustelli, C. (2022). Femminismo e linguistica accademica: Il rapporto fra lingua, linguaggio, sesso e genere. ITA. <https://iris.unimore.it/handle/11380/1301065>
- Robustelli, C. (2021). Promozione della parità e discriminazione linguistica nel percorso di emancipazione femminile in Italia. *LI'dO Lingua Italiana Oggi*, XVIII, 21–38
- Rogers, M. M. (2021). Exploring the Domestic Abuse Narratives of Trans and Nonbinary People and the Role of Cisgenderism in Identity Abuse, Misgendering, and Pathologizing. *Violence against Women*, 27(12–13), 2187–2207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220971368>
- Ronca, D., & Moscati, V. (2019). The Interaction of Morphological Gender With Stereotypical Information: An Eye Tracking Study on Gender Inferences. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 11(4), 111. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v11i4.15169>
- Rosola, M. (2024). Which is the Fairest of Them All? *Phenomenology and Mind*, 27, 1. <https://doi.org/10.17454/pam-2701>
- Rosola, M., & Fumagalli, C. (2024). *The Case for a Duty to Use Gender-Fair Language in Democratic Representation* (1st edition). *The Philosophical Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqae041>
- Sabatini, A. (1987). *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (Ristampa 1993). Commissione nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'editoria.

- Safina, E. S. (2024a). Effects of Grammatical Gender on Gender Inferences: Experimental Evidence From Italian Common Gender Nouns. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 16(3), Articolo 3. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v16i3.21824>
- Safina, E. S. (2024b). Exploring the applicability and effectiveness of gender-sensitive language: Usage, attitudes, and cognitive aspects of grammatical gender neutralisation strategies in written Italian [Tesi di dottorato]. Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II. <http://www.fedoatd.unina.it/2343/>
- Sapienza Università di Roma. (2021). Scrivere con Sapienza. Manuale per testi chiari, corretti ed efficaci.
- Sato, S., Gabriel, U., & Gygax, P. (2016). Altering Male-Dominant Representations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 35, 667–685. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X15625442>
- Sato, S., Gygax, P. M., Gabriel, U., Oakhill, J., & Escasain, L. (2025). Does Inclusive Language Increase the Visibility of Women, or Does It Simply Decrease the Visibility of Men? A Missing Piece of the Inclusive Language Jigsaw. *Collabra: Psychology*, 11(1), 128470. <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.128470>
- Sbisà, M. (2019). Il genere tra stereotipi e impliciti. In F. Formato, A. L. Somma, & G. Maestri (Eds.), *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana. Trent'anni dopo Alma Sabatini*. Cesati.
- Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa (2025), Guida all'uso del linguaggio esteso. <https://www.sns.it/it/guida/guida-alluso-del-linguaggio-esteso>
- Scuola Superiore di Pisa “Sant’Anna” (2022), Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo.
- Sczesny, S., Formanowicz, M., & Moser, F. (2016). Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00025>
- Sevelius, J. M. (2013). Gender Affirmation: A Framework for Conceptualizing Risk Behavior among Transgender Women of Color. *Sex roles*, 68(11–12), 675–689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0216-5>
- Sevelius, J. M., Chakravarty, D., Dilworth, S. E., Rebhook, G., & Neilands, T. B. (2020). Gender Affirmation through Correct Pronoun Usage: Development and Validation of

- the Transgender Women's Importance of Pronouns (TW-IP) Scale. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(24), 9525. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249525>
- Shalini, K. V., Keerthi, B., Manasa, B., Padmashree, & Ashritha, K. G. (2020). Design and Implementation of Digital Braille System for The Visually Impaired. *International Journal of Computer Trends and Technology*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Pp. 80-83, 2020. Crossref, 10.14445/22312803/IJCTT-V68I3P116. <https://dev.ijcttjournal.org/archives/ijctt-v68i3p116>
- Skorinko, J. L. M. (2018). Riddle Me This: Using Riddles That Violate Gender Stereotypes To Demonstrate The Pervasiveness Of Stereotypes. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 17(2), 194–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475725717752181>
- Somma, A. L., Maestri, G., & Formato, F. (Eds.). (2019). *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana. Trent'anni dopo Alma Sabatini*. Cesati.
- Southwood, N. (2016). Does «Ought?» Imply «Feasible»? *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 44(1), 7–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12067>
- Stahlberg, D., Braun, F., Irmen, L., & Sczesny, S. (2007). Representation of the Sexes in Language. In *Social communication* (pp. 163–187). Psychology Press.
- Statuto Albertino. (1848). [Manoscritto].
- Stout, J. G., & Dasgupta, N. (2011). When He Doesn't Mean You: Gender-Exclusive Language as Ostracism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(6), 757–769. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167211406434>
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* | Wiley. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Microaggressions+and+Marginality%3A+Manifestation%2C+Dynamics%2C+and+Impact-p-9780470491393>
- The reading well. (n.d.). Dyslexia font and style guide. <https://www.dyslexia-reading-well.com/dyslexia-font.html>

- Thornton, A. M. (2022). Genere e igiene verbale: L'uso di forme con ə in italiano. *Annali del Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati. Sezione linguistica*, 11-54 Paginazione. <https://doi.org/10.6093/2281-6585/9623>
- Tuke H. (2021). How special characters and symbols affect screen reader accessibility. *Scope*. <https://business.scope.org.uk/article/accessibility-screen-readers-special-characters-and-unicode-symbols>.
- UN Women. (n.d.). Gender-inclusive language guidelines. Promoting gender equality through the use of the language. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Gender%20Inclusive%20Language%20Guidelines.pdf>
- UNESCO. (1999). Guidelines on gender-neutral language—UNESCO Digital Library. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377299>
- United Nations. (n.d.). UNITED NATIONS Gender-inclusive language. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml>
- Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale Amedeo Avogadro. (2020). Manuale di comunicazione efficace dell'Università del Piemonte Orientale. https://www.uniupo.it/sites/default/files/2020-12/manuale_comunicazione_efficace_2020.pdf
- Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. (2025). Vademecum al linguaggio inclusivo. Sessismo, ageismo, abilismo, razzismo. Come evitare di replicare gli stereotipi attraverso le parole che usiamo in Ateneo. <https://www.unicatt.it/landing/istituzionale/pari-opportunita-e-inclusione/linee-guida/vademecum-al-linguaggio-inclusivo.html>
- Università Commerciale “Bocconi”. (2024). Linee guida per la comunicazione inclusiva.
- Università degli Studi dell'Aquila. (2020). Per un uso della lingua italiana rispettoso dei generi. <https://www.univaq.it/include/utilities/blob.php?item=file&table=allegato&id=4925>
- Università degli Studi del Sannio. (2024). Linee guida per il linguaggio di genere. https://www.unisannio.it/sites/default/files/sito/ateneo/amministrazione/avvisi/uo-web-e-comunicazione/it/Linee_Guida_linguaggio_%20genere.pdf

- Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro. (2025). Linee guida per l'adozione di un linguaggio ampio rispettoso delle differenze. <https://www.uniba.it/it/centri/interdipartimentali-di-ricerca/culture-di-genere/portlet-general/linee-guida-per-un-linguaggio-rispettoso-delle-differenze>
- Università degli Studi di Brescia. (2025). Vademecum sul linguaggio di genere. <https://www.unibs.it/it/vademecum-linguaggio-di-genere>
- Università degli Studi di Camerino. (2022). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo dell'Università di Camerino. https://www.unicam.it/sites/default/files/documenti-pag/2022/linee_guida_linguaggio_24ottobre2022.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Ferrara. (2018). Prontuario dell'Università degli Studi di Ferrara per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo e per la redazione di documenti accessibili. <https://www2.unife.it/ateneo/uffici-old/cnapi/coordinamento-politiche-pari-opportunita-e-disabilita/prontuario-dell2019universita-degli-studi-di-ferrara-per-l2019uso-del-genere-nel-linguaggio-amministrativo-e-per-la-redazione-di-documenti-accessibili>
- Università degli Studi di Foggia. (2025). Il linguaggio e il genere. Raccomandazioni per un uso del linguaggio rispettoso del genere. <https://www.unifg.it/sites/default/files/2025-07/cug-raccomandazioni-linguaggio-genere.pdf>
- Università degli Studi di Firenze. (2020). Linee guida per promuovere l'equilibrio di genere e l'inclusione negli eventi scientifici dell'Università di Firenze.
- Università degli Studi di Genova. (2023). Linee guida per l'utilizzo di un linguaggio inclusivo. https://cpo.unige.it/sites/cpo.unige.it/files/2023-03/Linee_guida_linguaggio_inclusivo.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Macerata. (n.d.). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio accademico e amministrativo. https://www.unimc.it/it/ateneo/organi-di-consulazione-garanzia-valutazione-e-controllo/cug/progetti/lineeguidausedelgenere_cug.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Milano. (2021). Università degli Studi di Milano (2021) sul linguaggio di genere. <https://www.unimi.it/sites/default/files/2021->

- 12/Vademecumlinguaggio%20di%20genere_Università%20degli%20Studi%20di%20Milano.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia. (n.d.). Linee guida per una comunicazione inclusiva. https://www.ingmo.unimore.it/sites/dip02/files/2025-02/linee_guida_DE%26I_DIEF_2025.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope. (2022). Linee guida per un linguaggio di genere nella comunicazione istituzionale.
- Università degli Studi di Padova. (2018). Generi e linguaggi. Linee guida per un linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale attento alle differenze di genere. <https://www.unipd.it/sites/unipd.it/files/2017/Generi%20e%20linguaggi.pdf>
- Università degli Studi di Parma. (2023). Linguaggio di genere. Linee guida. <https://www.unipr.it/sites/default/files/2024-01/Linee%20guida%20Linguaggio%20di%20genere.pdf>
- Università degli Studi di Perugia. (n.d.). I disturbi specifici di apprendimento (DSA): Linee guida per i docenti dell'ateneo. http://www.dcbb.unipg.it/images/DOCS/dsa_linee_guida_per_i_docenti_dellateneo.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Pisa. (2019). Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo. https://cug.unipi.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Linee_guida_per_un_linguaggio_inclusivo.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata. (2023). Una scrittura correttamente “vergata”. Linee guida per un uso della lingua italiana inclusivo e attento al genere.
- Università degli Studi di Palermo. (2011). Manuale di stile. Scrivi bene e parla chiaro. <https://www.sns.it/sites/default/files/2021-05/2011%20Manuale-di-Stile%20Unipa.pdf>
- Università degli Studi di Salerno. (2022). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nei testi istituzionali dell'Università di Salerno.

- Università degli Studi di Sassari. (2024). Linee guida per un linguaggio inclusivo in Accademia. https://www.uniss.it/sites/default/files/2025-01/vademecum-2024_GEP_con_Copertina.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Siena. (2021). Generi e linguaggi. Linee guida per un linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale inclusivo. https://www.unisi.it/sites/default/files/allegatiparagrafo/LINEE_GUIDA_Linguaggi_e_Generi.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Torino. (2025). La lingua estesa in UniTO. Toolkit. <https://www.unito.it/servizi/genere-e-pari-opportunita/linguaggio-di-genere>
- Università degli Studi di Trento. (2017). Per un uso del linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze. <https://www.unitn.it/sites/default/files/2024-11/documentolinguaaggio29mar%20%281%29.pdf>
- Università degli Studi di Trento. (2024). UniTrento vara il Regolamento di Ateneo. Tutto al femminile. <https://pressroom.unitn.it/alfresco/download/workspace/SpacesStore/a63572e3-8d23-47e4-ac25-160f9eb7a5b5/cs%20Regolamento%20generale%20al%20femminile.pdf>
- Università degli Studi di Trieste “Sissa”. (n.d.). Linee guida per un uso non discriminatorio della lingua italiana
- Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo, (2023). Linee guida - Regole per un linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale rispettoso dell’uguaglianza dei generi nell’Università degli Studi di Urbino. https://trasparenza.uniurb.it/gest/wp-content/files_mf/1685109114lineeguida_linguaggio_di_genere_per_sito_web.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca’ Foscari. (2024). Linee guida di Ateneo 2024 per un linguaggio non discriminatorio e rispettoso del genere. https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/comunicazione/sostenibile/doc/Inclusione/Linee_guida_di_Ateneo_2024_per_un_linguaggio_non_discriminatorio_e_rispettoso_del_genere.pdf
- Università degli Studi di Verona. (2020). Linee guida per il linguaggio di genere. <https://docs.univr.it/documenti/Documento/allegati/allegati811927.pdf>

- Università degli Studi Link. (n.d.). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale dell'Università degli Studi Link
- Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria. (2018). Indicazioni per un uso del linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze. https://www.unirc.it/sites/default/files/2024-11/File_allegato_2.pdf
- Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa. (2023). Linee guida per il corretto uso di un linguaggio inclusivo. https://www.unisob.na.it/ateneo/lineeguida_linguaggio_inclusivo.pdf
- Università della Calabria. (2021). Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo e nella comunicazione istituzionale. https://www.unical.it/media/medias/2022/Linee_guida_Linguaggio_di_genere_Unica_l_marzo_2021.pdf
- Università di Bologna (2020). Linee guida per la visibilità del genere nella comunicazione istituzionale dell'Università di Bologna. <https://www.unibo.it/it/ateneo/chiamo/linee-guida-per-la-visibilita-del-genere-nella-comunicazione-istituzionale-universita-di-bologna>
- Università Iuav di Venezia. (2023). Linee guida per una comunicazione inclusiva e accessibile. https://www.iuav.it/sites/default/files/2024-04/linee_guida_comunicazione_inclusiva_accessibile.pdf
- Università Medica Internazionale Camillus. (2024). Guida pratica per la promozione del linguaggio inclusivo. <https://unicamillus.org/wp-content/uploads/governance/comitato-unico-di-garanzia-per-le-pari-opportunita/it/guida-pratica-promozione-linguaggio-inclusivo-2024-unicamillus.pdf?x31484>
- Università per Stranieri di Siena. (2020). Linguaggio amministrativo e differenze di genere.
- Università Politecnica delle Marche. (2022). Linee guida per l'utilizzo del linguaggio di genere nelle comunicazioni istituzionali dell'Università Politecnica delle Marche. https://www.univpm.it/Entra/Engine/RAServeFile.php/f/Operazione_trasparenza/altri_contenuti/LINEE-GUIDA-LINGUAGGIO.pdf

- Università telematica “Pegaso”. (2024). Linguaggio inclusivo ed equo. Principi e pratiche per una comunità scientifica inclusiva.
- Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele. (2023). Linee guida per l'utilizzo di un linguaggio inclusivo.
- Vervecken, D., Hannover, B., & Wolter, I. (2013). Changing (S)expectations: How gender fair job descriptions impact children's perceptions and interest regarding traditionally male occupations. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 82(3), 208–220.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2013.01.008>
- Zimman, L. (2014). The discursive construction of sex: Remaking and reclaiming the gendered body in talk about genitals among trans men: Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality (pp. 13–34). L. Zimman, J. L. Davis, & J. Raclaw.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299892505_The_Discursive_Construction_of_Sex
- Zimman, L. (2017). Transgender language reform: Some challenges and strategies for promoting trans-affirming, gender-inclusive language. *Journal of Language and Discrimination*, 1(1), 84–105.
- Zimman, L. (2009). The other kind of coming out: Transgender people and the coming out narrative genre. *Gender and Language*, 3(1), 53–80.

Martina Giovine

Dedication

In questi tre anni ho avuto la fortuna di essere accompagnata da persone che hanno reso questo percorso più leggero, mentre lo arricchivano ogni giorno. A loro va tutta la mia gratitudine.

Un grazie speciale va alle mie coinquiline e amiche di Via Dei Benedettini, Anita, Erica, Greta e Ludovica, per essere sempre state pronte ad ascoltarci a vicenda. Grazie per tutte le cene, i brindisi per festeggiare ogni soddisfazione, le tisane d'inverno e i gelati d'estate; ma anche per la compagnia nei momenti difficili e per il supporto reciproco nonostante le altalene emotive individuali. La mia vita a Milano non sarebbe stata la stessa senza di voi.

Ringrazio di cuore Camilla ed Emanuela, tra le amiche più care che ho: sempre presenti nonostante la distanza. Siamo cresciute insieme sotto i portici bolognesi e, contro ogni aspettativa, siamo riuscite a vederci periodicamente e a non mancare mai agli eventi importanti. Fate diventare familiare ogni ambiente in cui ci riuniamo. Grazie per far funzionare così bene un'amicizia nonostante i chilometri che ci separano.

Ringrazio Nicole e Francesca: siete la mia famiglia e la mia costante, da sempre e per sempre. Siete le persone a cui penso quando mi chiedo su chi potrei contare nella vita. Sarete la mia casa ovunque andrete, e io sarò sempre con voi. Avere voi due al mio fianco è una delle fortune più grandi.

Delle mie giornate milanesi sono grata per la compagnia costante di Giovanni, che ho scoperto somigliarmi molto (nel bene e nel male), e questo è un valore, perché ti ammiro profondamente. Alla mia collega preferita, Giorgia: non dimenticherò mai la prima chiamata in cui ci siamo congratulate per aver vinto la posizione di dottorato. Avevo già capito che saremmo diventate inseparabili. A Federico, Alessandro e Rosario, per avermi portata in giro per Milano e soprattutto in Sicilia: di voi ammiro la pazienza di essere riusciti a sopportare una persona con la testa così tanto tra le nuvole. Un grazie speciale a Giulio, che fino all'ultimo è rimasto al mio fianco. Finisco di scrivere queste righe appena dopo il caricamento della tua tesi, con l'emozione ancora stampata in volto. Grazie per le serate leggere e per quelle più intense, per le discussioni infinite sui massimi sistemi, per il supporto intellettuale ed emotivo. E grazie per aver costruito insieme il nostro percorso milanese. Avervi accanto ha attutito molte cadute.

Un pensiero dolce va ad Alessandro, che è entrato nella mia vita e mi ha trovata immersa nella frenesia della fine di questo percorso. Grazie per aver sopportato i miei sbalzi d'umore e per capirmi sempre al volo, con delicatezza anche nelle intemperie. Grazie per trasmettermi serenità nei giorni di sole e nei giorni di pioggia. La tua presenza riesce a farmi apprezzare anche i secondi. Ogni confronto con te è stato prezioso: dai discorsi più profondi a quelli più leggeri, parlare con te è sempre stimolante. Sei stato il sospiro di sollievo in queste giornate intense, e spero che cammineremo insieme ancora per molti chilometri.

Grazie anche a Margherita, che a Barcellona non è stata solo la collega che mi ha accolta, ma un'amica e una confidente importante. Tra una tapa e l'altra, mi hai fatto scoprire la città e un nuovo modo di viverla. Spero che la nostra amicizia continui ancora a lungo.

Ringrazio profondamente Giancarlo, che mi ha accompagnata fin dal primo giorno. Hai sopportato pianti e lamentele, ma anche condiviso mille risate e abbracci che mi hanno scaldato il cuore. Grazie per essere stato accanto a me nei momenti più belli e in quelli più difficili, per avermi ascoltata e per aver pianto con me. Grazie per la Repubblica Ceca, per Naye, e per le infinite cose "nostre" che non saprei mettere in ordine di importanza.

Un grazie va anche a tutte le persone nel bolognese e nell'ex bolognese, in particolare Edoardo, Arturo, Hiba, Arianna, Giulia, Basma, Lucia e Roberto. Mi avete vista cambiare negli anni più belli della mia vita, quelli in cui mi sono avvicinata sempre di più a ciò che volevo diventare. Per chi è rimasto/a a Bologna: siete il motivo per cui tornare.

Grazie alle mie amiche e ai miei amici "di giù", che rivedo con trepidazione ogni volta che arriva il momento dell'anno in cui posso abbracciarvi. In particolare, grazie ad Alessia, Arcangela, Barbara, Daniele: ci conosciamo nel profondo e, anche se riusciamo a vederci poche volte all'anno, quando ci raccontiamo non abbiamo bisogno di molte spiegazioni. La nostra amicizia è così solida che, anche quando non vi vedo da molto, vi sento con me. Sono immensamente grata che dopo tutti questi anni siate ancora parte della mia vita.

Ale, io non sono molto brava con le parole sdolciate. Sei la persona che mi ha vista crescere, a cui rivolgo il mio pensiero quando devo ricordarmi chi sono, e di cui non posso dubitare che sarà al mio fianco per sempre. Mi dispiace per tutti questi anni di lontananza, spero che torneremo a vivere nello stesso posto un giorno.

Il grazie più grande va ai miei genitori, Patrizia e Piero. Tra mille turbolenze ed errori umani, siete stati le fondamenta della persona che sono oggi. Mi avete insegnato a non dare nulla per scontato, a essere una brava persona nonostante il mondo, a coltivare l'umiltà e la cura verso ciò che mi circonda. Mi avete mostrato come si possa fare tanto pur avendo poco. Ma, soprattutto, mi avete trasmesso la caparbia di resistere alle ingiustizie: senza gli anni trascorsi con voi, i miei ideali non sarebbero così forti e non vivrei con così tanta passione le lotte che sento mie. Siete il luogo a cui tornare e le prime persone a cui voglio raccontare ogni soddisfazione, perché so che gioirete sinceramente come se fosse vostra. Tutto questo non avrebbe lo stesso significato senza di voi.

Infine, grazie a nonna Maria, una presenza costante sin dai miei primi anni di vita. I tuoi insegnamenti sono stati preziosi e continueranno ad accompagnarmi per sempre: sono le cose più importanti che io abbia mai imparato. Mi sento molto fortunata ad averti ancora qui, anche se i tuoi ricordi cominciano ad annebbirsi. Ti abbracerò sempre come se fosse l'ultima volta.

Appendix A

Table A1. Gender-inclusive communication guidelines across Italian universities

✓ = recommended*; ✗ = not recommended

Universities	Conservative <i>visibility</i> strategies	Innovative <i>visibility</i> strategies	Conservative <i>obscuration</i> strategies	Innovative <i>obscuration</i> strategies
Università degli Studi dell'Aquila	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università della Calabria	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Napoli	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi del Sannio	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Salerno	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università di Bologna	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Ferrara	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Parma	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Genova	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Milano	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università degli Studi di Brescia	✓	✗	✓	✗
Università Politecnica delle Marche	✓	✗	✓	✗

Università degli Studi di Camerino	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Macerata	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Torino	✓	✓	✓	✓
Politecnico di Torino	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale	✓	X	X	X
Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Foggia	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Sassari	✓	✓	✓	✓
Università degli Studi di Pisa	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Siena	✓	X	✓	X
Università per Stranieri di Siena	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Trento	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca' Foscari	✓	X	✓	X
Università Iuav di Venezia	✓	✓	✓	✓
Università degli Studi di Padova	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Verona	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa	✓	X	✓	X
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi Link	✓	X	✓	X
LUISS Libera Università Internazionale Studi Sociali Guido Carli	✓	X	✓	X
Università Medica Internazionale Camillus	✓	X	✓	X
Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa	✓	X	✓	X
Università telematica "Pegaso"	✓	X	✓	X

Università degli Studi di Palermo	✓	X	✓	X
Scuola Superiore di Pisa “Sant’Anna”	✓	X	✓	X
Sapienza Università di Roma	✓	X	✓	X
Università commerciale “Luigi Bocconi”	✓	X	✓	X
Università degli Studi di Trieste “Sissa”	✓	X	✓	X
Libera Università di Bolzano	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tot.	46/46 100%	5/46 10,9%	45/46 97,8%	5/46 10,9%

* “Recommended” refers to categories of strategies whose use is *explicitly* suggested by universities, either as a generally advisable option or as a preferred choice in specific communicative contexts.

* Thirty-four state universities, eight non-state universities, three universities with special status, one online university.

This thesis was produced using resources from **Ministerial Decree No. 351 of April 9, 2022**, under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU – Mission 4 “Education and Research,” Component 1 “Enhancement of the education services offer: from early childhood to university” –

Investment 4.1 “Extension of the number of PhD courses and innovative PhDs for public administration and cultural heritage” PhDs for Public Administration



Martina Giovine