Gender Visibility: Linguistic Strategies to Challenge Stereotypes in Italian

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Abstract In this paper I present an analysis of gender-unfair usages and gender-fair strategies as they may be observed in the Italian language. First, I contextualize the topic within the contemporary debate and analyze how linguistic uses are unfair and become vehicles of stereotypes. Subsequently, I provide an overview of the strategies that can be adopted in Italian, which may be broadly categorized as either giving visibility to or obscuring genders. Next, I present a series of compelling arguments in favor of the use of visibility strategies. I conclude by arguing that the most effective strategy for challenging androcentrism in language and gender stereotypes is to make gender identities visible.

0.   Introduction

Recently, there has been growing interest in issues concerning the relationship between language and gender. Generally, "gender" refers to a set of characteristics that, in a given historical, social, and cultural context, develop from the sex assigned at birth, giving rise to the concepts of femininity and masculinity (see, among others, Spallaccia 2020). In most Western societies, the assumption of gender binarism is pervasive. This social construct is based on the idea that only two genders exist in society: male and female. However, there is a growing recognition of the existence of non-binary individuals who identify with genders other than these two, or who identify with no gender (Independent Lens 2015).[1]

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[1] Non-binary identities are numerous and diverse. For example, a non-binary person may experience multiple genders (bigender and pangender), a fluctuation between different genders (genderfluid), identify with a gender different from the binary ones (for example, genderqueer and third gender), partially identify with male or female gender (demiboy or demigirl), or identify as without gender (agender). For further information, see: https://www.opl.it/public/files/18877-OPL_Dossier_No-Binary_COL.pdf.

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In linguistics, "gender" refers to the grammatical category used for the classification of nouns.[2] There are languages such as Finnish and Turkish, referred to as "genderless languages", which lack a grammatical gender system altogether. Conversely, other languages such as Italian and Spanish, labeled as "grammatical gender languages", possess a grammatical gender system (Maturi 2020).[3] In these languages, most terms are marked by grammatical gender. For inanimate entities, gender is determined arbitrarily. However, for animate beings, gender is not arbitrarily assigned, as it often specifies the gender of the person being referred to (Gygax et al. 2021). For instance, in the Italian language, the feminine grammatical gender is generally used for feminine referents, and the masculine grammatical gender for masculine referents. Thus, for words varying in gender, we would say, for example, "maestra" (teacher, F) and "maestro" (teacher [M]). Besides grammatical gender, other linguistic resources indicating the gender of individuals include lexically gendered terms such as "madre" (mother) and "padre" (father). Furthermore, personal pronouns and other grammatical forms agree with the gender of the noun, thus also conveying information about the gender of the person to whom the noun refers (Stahlberg et al. 2007). Languages like Italian, therefore, are characterized by the pervasive presence of linguistic resources providing information on people's gender. However, certain uses of these resources have been questioned and considered inadequate for the fair representation of the plurality of existing gender identities (see, among others, Sabatini 1987).

Sabatini (1987) emphasizes that specific linguistic practices can contribute to the erasure of certain social groups from discursive spaces. In particular, she identifies a series of inequities in Italian usage from both a grammatical and semantic standpoint. Concerning instances of grammatical inequality, one illustrative example is the overextended masculine, which consists of the use of the masculine plural to refer to heterogeneous groups, e.g., "gli studenti" (students [M]) to refer to a student community. Concerning instances of semantic inequity, one example is the semantic polarization of terms such as "libero" (free [M]) and "libera" (free [F]). While the expression "un uomo libero" (a free man) tends to characterize moral, political, or intellectual aspects of man, "una donna libera" (a free woman) often evokes the sexual behavior of the woman. According to Sabatini, on the one hand, semantic and grammatical inequalities could express stereotyped and reductive notions of the image of women. On the other hand, these unfair usages could erase or marginalize women in discourse. Furthermore, they reiterate the concept of the centrality and universality of man, as the norm and as the only subject of discourse that can encompass various other subjectivities (Sabatini 1987).

In addition to the grammatically and semantically unfair uses, there is the question of the binary structure that characterizes most languages. These languages, like Italian, have exclusively masculine and feminine grammatical genders. In these cases, to refer to human referents, the language structure necessitates the choice of masculine or feminine grammatical gender even for non-binary people, i.e., people who do not exclusively identify with feminine and masculine genders. Consequently, a discrepancy arises between the feminine or masculine grammatical gender used and the non-binary gender of the

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[2] For further information about "gender" in linguistics, see Corbett (1991).

[3] See the classification by Stahlberg et. al (2007) in grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages, and genderless languages.

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individual (Rosola 2024). To address this discrepancy, many linguistic communities have sought resources in their language to transcend gender binarism.[4]

The existence of linguistic asymmetries is contingent upon the structural characteristics of the language in question. Consequently, each language has developed strategies to circumvent inequitable linguistic practices and to transcend the gender binary. Moreover, there has been a push for attention to language at the institutional level. A multitude of national and international institutions have striven to implement non-sexist language usage (for a comprehensive overview, see European Parliament 2018).

In this article, I consider the case of the Italian language, which poses numerous challenges related both to gender-unfair uses and the binary structure of the language. Firstly, I provide an overview of gender-unfair usages, exploring two questions. The first concerns the unequal use of language identified by Sabatini (1987), which grammatically penalizes women in the discourse and poses significant challenges in ensuring the equal visibility of genders. The second issue pertains to the structural binarism inherent in language, which poses substantial challenges in representing individuals who do not conform to gender binary categories (§1). Secondly, I explore inclusive linguistic strategies, which consist of giving visibility to genders or obscuring them, identified to date in the Italian language to avoid unfair uses of language and to overcome gender binarism (§2). Subsequently, I present several compelling arguments in favor of the use of visibility strategies (§3). I conclude by arguing that strategies giving visibility to identities are most effective in avoiding traditional discriminatory uses of language and in countering gender stereotypes.

1.   Androcentric Usages in the Italian Language

According to Sabatini (1987: 20), the Italian language is characterized by an androcentric usage, wherein the male is the central reference point within the linguistic domain. "Man" counts as "human in general", thereby rendering women invisible or even penalizing them. In addition to the examples already presented in the introduction, Sabatini identifies a series of other grammatically unfair practices. One example of language androcentric usage can be observed in the common use of the word "uomo" (man) with a generic value. The term "uomo" (man) is typically used to refer to both the male of the species and the species itself. This is evident in expressions such as "I diritti dell'uomo" (the rights of man), which signifies the rights of humanity. By employing the term 'uomo' (man) to represent the human species, the centrality and universality of man are emphasized, while simultaneously marginalizing and partialising women (Sabatini 1987).

Another grammatically unfair usage is the employment of the masculine form of professional terms when referring to women, such as "Ministro" (Minister [M]) for a female Minister. The masculine declension of the terms of professions is used for female referents especially when the professions are prestigious. This practice is not justified by grammatical reasons, as the correct declination for female referents is the feminine form.[5] This use originates from the historical division of roles between women and men, and the

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[4] As regards pronouns, for example, various solutions have been identified to overcome the gender binary, which depend on the linguistic resources that each language possesses. The English community uses the "singular they"; the Swedish community has introduced the pronoun "hen" into the official norm. For further information on the topic of non-binary pronouns, see Maturi 2020.

[5] As Sabatini points out, the female declension of the terms of prestigious roles exists. For instance, the female declension of "senatore" (senator [M]) is "senatrice" (senator [F]), and it is a perfectly regular form (Sabatini 1987: 25-26).

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exclusion of some careers for women. Although today women are increasingly taking on roles of responsibility and prestige previously reserved only for men, there is a reluctance to reflect this change through language (Sabatini 1987). The consequences of this practice are manifold. First and foremost, the utilization of the masculine form to refer to female individuals in positions of prestige can engender ambiguity within the discourse and serve to reinforce gender bias. This results in a gender-differentiated interpretation of words. Indeed, in numerous instances, the same word is perceived to possess greater prestige when inflected in the masculine form, whereas in the feminine it is associated with a subordinate position (Giusti 2022).[6] Secondly, this practice evokes the authority and respectability that are traditionally ascribed to men in patriarchal societies. Consequently, for her role level to be recognized, the woman must adapt to the male standard, which sometimes leads higher-ranking women to prefer the male title. This practice hinders the dissemination of the female form of prestigious professions (Sabatini 1987).

I shall now proceed to address the question of the binary structure of the Italian language and the implications this has for non-binary individuals. As previously stated in the introduction, the Italian language is characterized by grammatical gender binarism, whereby only masculine and feminine grammatical genders are included. Consequently, the Italian language lacks the linguistic resources to represent non-binary individuals. Nevertheless, there is an increasing recognition in the discourse of the necessity to express the plurality of gender identities, transcending the constraints of binary models (see, for example, Dembroff & Wodak 2018; Lopez 2020).

Lopez (2020) addresses the issue of non-binary identities in the context of translation, emphasizing the pressing need for translators to develop proficiency in using a non-binary language. The argument presented is that, to translate a text from one language to another, it is necessary to pay close attention to the intention of the original text. In the event that an English text employs the neutral pronoun "singular they", the translator is duty-bound to adhere to the original text by translating the pronoun into other languages following non-binary linguistic conventions. In addition to emphasizing the importance of accurate and appropriate translation, Lopez raises another significant issue. The use of inappropriate language for non-binary individuals can have legal implications. To illustrate, as an ever-increasing number of countries acknowledge the entitlement of individuals to present themselves with a neutral gender marker on official documents, the question of translating the gender of a non-binary person' on documents from one country to another arises. It would be incorrect and immoral to translate the gender indicated on the documentation of a non-binary person into masculine or feminine (Lopez 2020). This approach is designed to overcome the limitations of gender binarism from a linguistic perspective. The adoption of non-binary language may entail the exploration of new communication methods, including linguistic strategies that obscure elements of sentences that specify the gender of the reference person or strategies that manifest the gender beyond the traditional binary.

The issues examined in this section give rise to two distinct challenges. On the one hand, there is the issue of androcentric language use, which situates women in a position of subordination and marginality within discourse. Secondly, the binary structure of the Italian language is lacking in the linguistic resources required to equally represent non-binary people. The implementation of gender-fair strategies can prove beneficial in

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[6] For example, the term "ostetrica" (obstetrician [F]) tends to be interpreted as less prestigious compared to the term "ostetrico" (obstetrician [M]). Specifically, the first connotes a female nurse specialized in obstetrics, while the second suggests a male gynecologist doctor (Giusti 2022).

effectively addressing these two forms of inequity. The following section presents an overview of the most prevalent linguistic strategies identified in the Italian language. Some gender-fair strategies are inclusive of non-binary people, whereas others are exclusive to non-binary identities.

2.   Gender-Fair Strategies in the Italian Language

To adopt a respectful view of differences and counter linguistic androcentrism, many inclusive linguistic strategies can be implemented in Italian. They can be classified into two principal categories: visibility strategies and obscuring strategies.[7]

Regarding visibility strategies, the objective is to ensure the visibility of genders. Among these strategies, some make only the female gender visible, while others also make the non-binary gender visible. One strategy for making the female gender visible is the strategy of splitting, which involves repeating the same term in both masculine and feminine forms. To illustrate, instead of the overextended masculine "cari tutti" (dear all, M), the splitting strategy may be employed by stating "care tutte e cari tutti" (dear all [F] and dear all [M]). Another strategy for ensuring the visibility of the female gender is the use of the feminine form for terms referring to women in professional contexts and the correct feminine declension for all elements in the sentence. To illustrate, in place of the use of masculine forms of apical roles for feminine referents, such as "il Ministro Elsa Fornero" ("the Minister [M] Elsa Fornero), the correct feminine declension can be used by stating "la Ministra Elsa Fornero" ("the Minister [F] Elsa Fornero). The splitting strategy make the female gender visible, while excluding non-binary genders. One strategy for making the non-binary gender visible is the use of neo-gender markers to replace grammatical gender markers. In the case of the Italian language, many potential solutions have been put forth (e.g., *, ɜ, -, @, u, x, y, etc.) (Gheno 2022). To illustrate, the neo-gender marker could be employed to make the non-binary gender visible by replacing the overextended masculine "cari tutti" (dear all [M]) or the binary splitting "care tutte e cari tutti" (dear all [F] and dear all [M]). This would result in the use of "care tutte, cari tutti, car* tutt*" (dear all [F], all [M], and all [neo-gender marker]).

Regarding obscuration strategies, the objective is to refrain from disclosing any information about gender. By obscuring all genders, the strategy is gender fair to both women and non-binary people. A strategy that obscures genders consists of the avoidance of the use of gender-marked words, with their replacement by gender-neutral terms. For example, one might employ nouns with fixed gender that do not align with the gender of the referent, such as "persona" (person) and "individuo" (individual). Collective nouns, including "personale docente" (teaching staff) and "comunità studentesca" (student community), could also be utilized. Furthermore, to avoid any personal reference, sentences could be formulated with impersonal forms, such as "si devono inoltrare i documenti" (documents must be sent) instead of "gli studenti devono inoltrare i documenti (students [M] have to send the documents.). Furthermore, passive forms such as "la domanda può essere consegnata" (the application can be forwarded) can be used instead of "lo studente deve fare domanda" (the student [M] must submit the application). Additionally, relative pronouns like "chi ha la responsabilità" (who has the responsibility) can be employed in place of "quelli che hanno la responsabilità" (those [M] who have responsibility). Indefinite pronouns like "ogni studente" (every student) can be used

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[7] While the distinction between visibility and obscuration strategies is a widely discussed concept in academic literature, there are alternative frameworks that offer a different perspective. For an illustrative example of the categorisation of the strategies in strategies of visibility and strategies of obscuration, see Robustelli (2012) or MIUR (2018).

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instead of "tutti gli studenti" (all the students [M]). The second person, such as "vi invitiamo a compilare il modulo" (we invite you to fill out the form) can be used instead of "researchers [M] are invited to fill out the form"). Additionally, the imperative forms, such as "compila il modulo" (fill in the form) can be employed instead of "lo studente deve compilare il modulo" (the student [M] must fill out the form). An additional obscuring strategy is the utilization of neo-gender markers (e.g., *, ǝ, -, @, u, x, y, etc.) to replace female and male gender markers. To illustrate, to avoid the overextended masculine "cari tutti" (dear all [M]) or the binary splitting "care tutte e cari tutti" (dear all [F] and dear all [M]), the neo-gender marker can be employed to obscure all genders. This can be achieved by stating "car* tutt*" (dear all [neo-gender marker]).[8]

The decision between visibility or obscuration strategies can be made by considering several factors. For instance, the selection can be made based on the type of text, specifically its structure and length. Alternatively, the decision can be made based on the communicative intention, such as the necessity of making gender explicit (Robustelli, 2012). In the next section, I present some compelling arguments in favor of visibility strategies, irrespective of linguistic context and text type. First, I present the considerations put forth by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE 2019). Secondly, I discuss the insights of the linguist Giuliana Giusti (2022). Moreover, to reinforce this line of reasoning, I examine the findings of experimental studies conducted by Gygax et al. (2008) and Belle et al. (2021). These studies offer valuable evidence for contemplating the interconnection between gender representation and gender stereotypes. Finally, I argue that visibility strategies are preferable to contrasting language androcentrism because they are more effective in counteracting stereotypes.

3.   Arguments on Visibility Strategies

EIGE (2019) argues that, from an inclusive standpoint, strategies that obscure gender information are optimal because they are fair for all individuals, regardless of gender. Nonetheless, the use of gender-obscuring language presents several potential disadvantages. For instance, it often takes the male perspective as its basis and can consequently obscure significant differences in the roles of other individuals. Indeed, it does not overtly challenge the androcentric norm and, therefore, does not contribute to its destabilization. In this sense, it may not contribute to the transformation of the unequal structure of gender relations. Conversely, the promotion of gender visibility in language can facilitate change. Indeed, it challenges the male standard and the biases associated with it regarding gender roles (EIGE 2019).

Similarly, Giuliana Giusti (2022) argues that obscuring gender does not effectively challenge gender stereotypes and the underrepresentation of women in media. It is only beneficial when the presence of women is unchallenged by stereotypes, and it may be a useful approach in administrative contexts. In support of the argument that obscuration strategies are ineffective in counteracting gender stereotypes, she highlights the observation that even in languages such as English, in which the majority of terms do not indicate gender, the names that designate stereotypically male roles tend to be interpreted as masculine. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the case of names associated with prestigious roles. Therefore, obscuring gender would imply that role terms are interpreted with the influence of gender stereotypes. This is corroborated by research examining how gender is interpreted in the absence of explicit gender marking in role

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[8] For a more detailed overview about visibility and obscuration (or neutralization) strategies, see Vázquez et al. (2024).

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names. Gygax et al. (2021) argue that when interpreting texts, readers tend to construct a coherent mental representation with the information conveyed. In the absence of gender information, although this may not be a prerequisite for comprehension, the role nouns such as "surgeon" nevertheless prompt the encoding of gender. To accomplish this, individuals draw upon contextual cues and stored knowledge about the world to ascribe a gender to the referent. This knowledge of the world is stereotyped and influences the gender interpretation of roles (Ibidem).[9]

To date, there have been numerous experimental studies that have investigated how individuals construct a representation of gender in relation to gender stereotypes (for example, see Carreiras, et al. 1996; Garnham, et al. 2002; Oakhill, et al. 2005). In their experimental study, Gygax et al. (2008), investigated the interaction between stereotypes and the interpretation of role names in three languages: English, French, and German. The findings indicate that when participants interpreted role names in English, which did not offer any grammatical information regarding gender, their gender representation was based on the stereotypicality of the roles. In contrast, when grammatical gender was available in French and German role names, the influence of the gender stereotype was minimal, with grammatical gender information prevailing. The research demonstrates that individuals construct gender representations based on grammatical information when it is available, and on stereotypical information when grammatical information is absent. (Gygax et al. 2008).[10]

The impact of stereotypes on the gender interpretation of role names in the English language can be exemplified by the surgeon's riddle (Vázquez et al. 2024):

A father and a son are driving when a truck hits their car. When the ambulance arrived, the father was dead already. 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?

The empirical research conducted by Belle et al. (2021) has demonstrated that the majority of participants encountered difficulties in transcending the gender stereotypes associated with the term "surgeon". Indeed, only approximately 30% of participants answered that the surgeon could be a woman and the son's mother. In other words, the term "surgeon" evokes a male bias, making it challenging to envisage alternative possibilities, contrary to the assumption that a doctor is always male (Belle et al. 2021).[11] Vázquez et al. (2014)

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[9] 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).

[10] It is noteworthy that in languages such as German and French that provide gender information, the researchers observed that when the overextended masculine form of role nouns is employed, the grammatical gender information takes precedence over the stereotype. As a result, the use of the overextended masculine is often interpreted as masculine. As the authors highlight, this tendency towards a masculine interpretation of the overextended masculine can have adverse implications for women. This can, for instance, impede the recognition of women in society or lead to tangible disadvantages, as observed in the context of job advertisements (Gygax et al. 2008).

[11] 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

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propose that this observation could be extended to Italian about obscuration strategies. The obscuration of gender-related information in Italian may serve to reinforce the prevailing role-based gender stereotype. Conversely, it can be postulated that the gender stereotype associated with the term "surgeon" would be undermined by the provision of information regarding its gender. In the Italian language, for instance, the feminine form "chirurga" (surgeon, F) can be employed to explicitly denote a female surgeon. Consequently, while grammatical gender languages present a variety of challenges to the inclusion of all gender identities, they also offer opportunities to challenge gender stereotypes (Vázquez et al., 2024).[12]

In conclusion, the arguments put forth by EIGE (2019) and Giusti (2022) lend support to the notion that visibility strategies are more effective in counteracting stereotypes and linguistic androcentrism. Moreover, this assertion is bolstered by the aforementioned experimental studies that examine the relationship between gender representation and gender stereotypes. Based on these studies, it can be assumed that visibility strategies challenge gender stereotypes more effectively, whereas obscuring strategies may serve to reinforce them.

4.   Conclusion

As Wittgenstein argued, the word is not an immutable entity; rather, it can assume different forms and functions based on the context in which it is situated (Wittgenstein 1953). In any context characterized by patriarchal structures, an analysis of the meaning of words and their implications must take into account the social hierarchies and relations of domination that define such a context. To analyze the androcentric uses of the Italian language, Sabatini examines a representative sample of newspapers and magazines. From this sample, the objective was to identify and examine the discriminatory words that were exemplary for their "normality". Consequently, she has analyzed the semantic value of these words within their specific context. The data indicates that gender-discriminatory words are characterized by repetition. Such terms are pervasive and, being not exceptional but rather every day, they evade detection and are more challenging to identify as discriminatory (Sabatini 1987). It will therefore go unnoticed that the word "libera" (free [F]), when used to refer to a woman, does not merely signify a person who is free from constraints or limitations of some kind, but may also be used to describe her sexual behavior. Similarly, it will go unnoticed that we have a male interpretation of the word "uomo" (man) used generically in "uomo di Neanderthal" (man of Neanderthal), and will be surprised to learn that the first Neanderthal exemplar was female.

To avoid ambiguity in discourse and counteract androcentric uses of language, the use of gender-fair language can be employed as a means of achieving this goal. Where the

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schemas in influencing problem-solving processes, despite social changes and experiences that challenge traditional stereotypes (Belle et al. 2021).

[12] This argument is corroborated by the study conducted by Gygax et al. (2021) on the ambiguity associated with the gender interpretation of the masculine form of role nouns. 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 female surgeons. 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. In fact, 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).

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standard is male, the use of a language that makes genders other than male visible will disrupt the standard and stimulate an alternative, and sometimes adequate, representation of what surrounds us. In this article, I have illustrated how this can be achieved in the context of the Italian language. I have provided an overview of some of these gender-unfair uses and the gender-fair linguistic proposals advanced for the Italian language. Among the gender strategies identified, I have presented some arguments for the efficacy of visibility strategies in challenging androcentric standards and counteracting gender stereotypes. When selecting a strategy to utilize, several additional factors may be considered, including the communicative intention, the type of text, and the interlocutor. However, due to space limitations, this article will not examine the other criteria to be considered in the choice. Further investigation into this topic may be beneficial in future research.

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