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The debate on language and gender in Italy, from the visibility of women to inclusive language (1980s–2020s).

Gigliola Sulis in conversation with Vera Gheno

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Abstract
This conversation focuses on issues of language and gender and on the debates they generated in Italy over the past forty years: from linguistic sexism, to the role and visibility of women, to the representation of non-binary identities. After introducing the differences in expressing gender in Italian and in other European languages, it discusses the proposals on these matters made since the 1980s, the reactions to them, and their long-term legacy, mainly in relation to the use of female agentives. The interactions between readers and experts are discussed as a case study of the popularisation of the debate, and the key role of the digital sphere is also highlighted. Finally, recent suggestions to move beyond the over-extended masculine to address mixed-gender groups and non-binary people are presented (from the asterisk to the schwa), in parallel with similar attempts made in other languages.

Sommario
Questa conversazione è centrata su questioni di lingua e genere e sui dibattiti che esse hanno generato in Italia negli ultimi quarant'anni: dal sessismo linguistico al ruolo e alla visibilità delle donne, fino alla rappresentazione delle identità non binarie. Dopo un'introduzione sulle differenze nell'esprimere il genere in italiano e in altre lingue europee, vengono discusse le proposte avanzate in materia a partire dagli anni ottanta, le reazioni che hanno incontrato, e il loro lascito di lungo periodo, soprattutto nell'uso degli agentivi femminili. Le interazioni tra lettori ed esperti sono analizzate come caso di studio sulla popolarizzazione del dibattito, per il quale viene anche messo in luce il ruolo centrale della sfera digitale. Nell'ultima parte sono presentati i pareri più recenti per un superamento del maschile sovraesteso in riferimento a gruppi di genere misto e persone non binarie (dall'asterisco allo schwa), in parallelo con tentativi simili fatti in altre lingue.

Keywords

Italian language; gender studies; feminine agentives; inclusivity; non-binary language; schwa.

Parole chiave

Lingua italiana; studi di genere; agentivi femminili; inclusività; linguaggio non binario; schwa.

Introduction

Since the publication of Alma Sabatini's *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1986), the discussion of linguistic gender issues has attracted ever-increasing interest from Italian speakers, both within and beyond academia. Periodically, fierce arguments erupt in political discourse and in the press, thus showing how linguistic sexism hits a nerve in contemporary society. In recent years, the debate has taken yet another turn, expanding onto social media and becoming more widespread and more heated. In this new, interconnected system of communication, not only have the opinions of the so-called naïve linguists risen to unprecedented prominence, but the reciprocal influences between academics and non-academics have also intensified – a process that puts pressure on scholars to take a position on emerging social issues. The pervasiveness of current debates on language and gender, and the tensions they never fail to generate, can be read as the rebalancing of gender dynamics imposing itself in all its manifestations to become a defining socio-political issue: from sexism, to the role and visibility of women, and to non-binary identities. As Antonio Gramsci writes in his *Quaderni del carcere*:

[o]gni volta che affiora, in un modo o nell'altro, la quistione della lingua, significa che si sta imponendo una serie di altri problemi: la formazione e l'allargamento della classe dirigente, la necessità di stabilire rapporti più intimi e sicuri tra i gruppi dirigenti e la massa popolare-nazionale, cioè di riorganizzare l'egemonia culturale.[1]

['Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series

[1] Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), III: *Quaderni 12 (XXIX) – 29 (XXI)*, p. 2346, Q29, par. 3.

of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to recognise the cultural hegemony'].[2]

Issues of language and gender, the debates surrounding them, and the increasingly relevant role of online platforms in their definition, are at the centre of this conversation with Vera Gheno, a sociolinguist who combines scientific research in digital communication, gender, and inclusivity, with an active presence on social media, in podcasts and blogs, on radio and television, as well as in theatres and at cultural festivals. Among her publications are *Tienilo acceso: Posta, commenta, condividi senza spegnere il cervello*, co-authored with Bruno Mastroianni (Milan: Longanesi, 2018), *Femminili singolari: Il femminile è nelle parole* (Florence: effequ, 2019*), Potere alle parole: Come usarle meglio* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), *Trovare le parole: Abbecedario per una comunicazione consapevole*, with Federico Faloppa (Turin: Gruppo Abele, 2021), and *Le ragioni del dubbio: L'arte di usare le parole* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021). In her career, Gheno has collaborated with the Accademia della Crusca (2002–2019) and with the publisher Zanichelli (2018–2020). She is also a literary translator from Hungarian into Italian. This multifaceted intellectual profile and the engagement beyond academia enable her to maintain a constant dialogue with the voices and points of view of different communities and constituencies, thus situating her in a privileged position to reflect on the linguistic changes that are unfolding, in the 2010s and 2020s, at a very fast pace.

The conversation starts with a discussion of the systemic differences in expressing gender in European languages, including Italian. It continues with the issue of under-representation of women in society and in language, in light of Sabatini's

[2] *The Antonio Gramsci Reader. Selected Writings. 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 357.

Raccomandazioni, before discussing the ways in which the debate surrounding these guidelines progressed in the following decades. The questions by readers on the topic and the answers provided by experts on the Accademia della Crusca's website since the early 2000s are discussed as a case study of the popularisation of the debate and of the new connections between scholars and non-specialists. The key role of the digital sphere in scientific research is also considered, since institutional and personal blogs, social media, podcasts, and online versions of newspapers and magazines are being used not only as platforms for the dissemination of ideas but as the intellectual environments where scholars initially outline them, receive feedback, and engage in discussions with peers and with non-experts. These means of communication respond to different rules, allow for different degrees of approximation, and speak to different audiences, but nevertheless they tend to conflate and to work in osmotic relation to one another; as a result, digital media and platforms are becoming increasingly important points of reference for researchers.[3] The last part of the interview focuses on suggestions that have been made in recent years to move beyond the use of the overextended masculine in addressing mixed-gender groups, and on the issue of linguistic representation of non-binary people. In particular, it examines one proposal that has inflamed Italian public debate since 2020, i.e., the introduction of the schwa as a sound in the Italian phonetic system and of its corresponding phonetic symbol – /ə/, 'la e rovesciata' – as a new letter, that could be used to avoid the masculine/feminine opposition.

Some examples of ongoing discussions in other languages are also given. They

[3] On the new, interconnected landscape of communication that has been made possible by the development of digital platforms, and on its implications for researchers, see Mark Carrigan, 'Social Media and the Future of The University', in *Social Media for Academics*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2020), pp. 223-44; Katy Jordan and Martin Weller, 'Academics and Social Networking Sites: Benefits, Problems and Tensions in Professional Engagement with Online Networking', *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 1.1 (2018), 1-9 <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.448>.

show that attempts at overcoming linguistic sexism on the one hand and rethinking the gender binary on the other are widespread, and invite further research from a comparative perspective. At present, the development of a transnational approach to issues of language inclusivity is slowed down by the fact that each debate tends to unfold in relative isolation within national boundaries, and that the critical bibliography on such matters is available mainly in the language that is the object of discussion. In this light, our conversation aims to enrich the field beyond the Italian national level. First, it was conducted in English with the aim of complementing and updating the scholarship available in this language, which has focused mainly on feminine *nomina agentis*;[4] translations of Italian quotations are also provided.[5] Second, it was structured in such a way as to offer an introductory overview of gender issues in Italian and an historical outline of the debates for the benefit of those who are not familiar with them, before focusing on recent developments.[6] Finally, the endnotes provide an extensive set of bibliographical references in both languages, which ground the discussion in the existing literature and constitute a starting point for further reading and research.

[4] See, most recently, Federica Formato, *Gender, Discourse and Ideology in Italian* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Paolo Nitti, 'Feminine-Specific Job Titles: A Research on Sexism in the Italian Language', *Modern Italy*, 26.1 (2021), 1–12 <https://doi.10.1017/mit.2020.31>.

[5] Unless otherwise stated, quotations are translated by Andrew Campbell, whom we thank also for his support in the linguistic revision of the text.

[6] The cases discussed in the following pages do not include debates on linguistic sexism after summer 2021, when this conversation took place. The fast-paced and lively unfolding of the discussion challenges academic attempts at monitoring and contextualising it, while at the same time it bears witness to the significance of the issues at stake. For a thorough set of contributions on this subject at the time of going to print, see *Lingua, grammatica e società: senza, con e oltre lo schwa*, themed issue of *Lingua Italiana*, Treccani Magazine, 21 March 2022 <https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/Schwa/mainSpeciale.html>, with essays by Fabrizio Acanfora, Claudia Bianchi, Cristiana De Santis, Andrea Moro, and Vera Gheno, 'Schwa: storia, motivi e obiettivi di una proposta'. For all references to online sources, the date of last access is 15 September 2021.

Sulis: Before we consider the specificity of the Italian debate on language and gender, it could be useful to set the context, by situating the issue of a non-sexist use of language within ongoing discussions at international level and offering an overview of the differences among languages in expressing gender.

Gheno: Let me start with some preliminary definitions. If 'sexism' is defined as the 'prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex',[7] 'linguistic sexism' can be considered as the linguistic manifestation of the mentality, social behaviours, cultural judgments, and prejudices tinged with (or vitiated by) sexism.[8] Languages cannot be considered intrinsically sexist, although they tend to reflect the androcentric cultures that they stemmed from.[9] What can be sexist is the use we make of a language: sexism does not lie in linguistic structures and mechanisms, but in our choices as speakers. Italian, as other languages, contains all the linguistic tools necessary for a non-sexist use, at least while sticking to the binary view of gender; and where there are no such solutions, it is possible that over time they will be implemented. After all, the languages we speak vary according to our needs as speakers.[10]

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[7] 'Sexism' (s.v.), *OED*. Cfr. also Stefania Cavagnoli and Giorgia Dragotto, *Sessismo* (Milan: Mondadori Education, 2021).

[8] Cfr. Cecilia Robustelli, *Lingua italiana e questioni di genere: Riflessi linguistici di un mutamento socioculturale* (Rome: Aracne, 2018), p. 16, Giulio Lepschy, 'Language and Sexism', in *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall (London-Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 117–138 (p. 117), Angela Goddard and Lindsey Meân Patterson, *Language and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*, 3rd edn (Longan: Harlow, 2004); Paul Baker, *Sexed Texts: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (London: Equinox, 2008).

[9] Alma Sabatini, *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana.* con la collaborazione di Marcella Mariani e la partecipazione alla ricerca di Edda Billi e Alda Santangelo (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1993), p. 20 <https://web.uniroma1.it/fac_smfn/sites/default/files/IlSessismoNellaLinguaItaliana.pdf>.

[10] Vera Gheno, 'Verso l'inclusività linguistica e oltre', *Aula di Lettere*, Zanichelli, 18 February 2021 <https://aulalettere.scuola.zanichelli.it/materie-lettere/italiano-lettere/verso-linclusivita-linguistica-e-oltre>.

The issue of a non-sexist use of language is now discussed in many contexts, both nationally and internationally.[11] In 2018, for example, the High-Level Group on Gender Language and Diversity at the European Parliament published a report that illustrated the current situation and how more balanced solutions were sought in the languages of the European Community.[12] In this document, three major linguistic groups are identified. The first is the group of genderless languages, such as the Finno-Ugric ones (e.g. Hungarian, Finnish, Estonian). In these languages, both nouns and pronouns are completely genderless; gender difference in relation to animals and humans can be expressed lexically (Finnish *poika* 'boy', *tyttö* 'girl') or with a suffix (in Hungarian, *doctor* is the gender neutral form, and *doktornő* 'female doctor' is the feminine, with the *-nő* suffix that means 'woman'). Another group includes natural gender languages (e.g., English, Swedish, Danish), where nouns are genderless but pronouns are gendered. For example, English has three forms for the third person singular of the personal pronouns, *he,* masculine, *she*, feminine, and *it*, a neutral pronoun usually used for inanimate objects or abstract concepts. The third group includes grammatical gender languages, such as Slavic and Romance languages, in which both nouns and pronouns are gendered; some languages, like German, also have the neutral gender, but Italian, French, and Spanish, among others, do not.

At present, in languages that have grammatically neutral nouns, the suggestion for a less biased use of the language is to avoid feminine forms that are perceived as unnecessary and marked (e.g., in English, *actor* instead of the opposition *actor/actress*),

[11] For an overview, cfr. Eva-Maria Thüne, 'L'acqua in movimento: Questioni di genere grammaticale e lessico femminile', in *Donna & linguaggio*, ed. Gianna Marcato (Padua: CLEUP, 1995), pp. 111–28.

[12] High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity, *Gender-Neutral Language in the European Parliament*, European Parliament (2018) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf>.

and, when available, semantically neutral nouns are preferred (*spokesperson* instead of *spokesman*/*spokeswoman*). Still, the issue of pronouns remains. In English, for example, the so-called singular *they* has been proposed and is in part implemented to refer to people of an undetermined gender (as well as genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, or non-binary people: more on that later).[13] A move towards neutralisation is impossible in languages with grammatical gender and genderised nouns; in these languages we notice, in the opposite direction, the attempt to make the feminine gender more visible, for example by increasing the use of feminine forms whenever possible (e.g. in German, when Angela Merkel was elected as German Federal Chancellor, she became a *Bundeskanzlerin*, not a *Bundeskanzler*). The trend is towards the avoidance of the overextended masculine, i.e., the use of the masculine form to address a mixed multitude or to refer to a person of unspecified gender, 'che sarebbe un maschile non marcato, secondo alcuni linguisti, un maschile maschilista secondo altri'[14] [that would be an unmarked masculine, according to some linguists, or a chauvinist masculine form according to others]. The overextended masculine is often described improperly in Italian as a 'neutral', although, as Cecilia Robustelli points out, this is a 'definizione davvero infelice'[15] [a really unfortunate definition] that perpetuates the false myth of the existence of a neutral form in this language.

[13] Evan D. Bradley, 'The Influence of Linguistic and Social Attitudes on Grammaticality Judgments of Singular "They"', *Language Sciences*, 78 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2020.101272>; Dennis Baron, 'A Brief History of Singular "They"', *OED* blog, 4 September 2018 <https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>.

[14] Anna Laura Lepschy, Giulio Lepschy, and Helena Sanson, 'Lingua italiana e femminile', *Quaderns d'Italià*, 6 (2001), 9–18 (p. 12).

[15] Cecilia Robustelli, *Linee Guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (Rome: Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2018) <https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/0/Linee_Guida_+per_l_uso_del_genere_nel_linguaggio_amministrativo_del_MIUR_2018.pdf/3c8dfbef-4dfd-475a-8a29-5adc0d7376d8?version=1.0>.

Sulis: In Italian, the attribution of a feminine or masculine grammatical gender to inanimate objects and abstract nouns can be arbitrary, given the absence of a semantical gender to refer to, while the formation of feminine forms for persons and animals is not always intuitive, since it can result from structural elements but also from the sedimentation of historical usages. In *Femminili singolari* you present a taxonomy of the options available in Italian for the formation of the feminine in nouns.[16]

Gheno: Italian is a language with two grammatical genders, having lost the neutral, which existed in Latin for inanimate objects and abstract concepts; in these cases, the grammatical gender has no direct relation with the semantics of what it describes (e.g. the masculine *il sasso* and *il mare*, *vs* the feminine *la luna* and *la sedia*).[17] For animals and human beings, the grammatical gender of the word is generally associated with the semantic gender of what it defines, so we have *gatto*/*gatta, professore*/*professoressa*; usually the choice of the gender is determined by a quick assessment of the apparent gender of the animal or person defined.

Italian nouns can be divided into four categories that follow different behaviours in the formation of the feminine:[18]

1. *nomi di genere fisso* [nouns with fixed gender]: *padre*/*madre*, *fratello*/*sorella*, *marito*/*moglie, bue*/*vacca*. In this category, the masculine and feminine are formed from different roots, and the analysis of the words is not enough to understand that

[16] Vera Gheno, *Femminili singolari* (Florence: effequ, 2019), pp. 52–54.
[17] This falls outside the scope of the conversation, but it is worth pointing out that some linguists suggest that grammatical gender affects the way people think about an object. See Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips, 'Sex, Syntax, and Semantics', in *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*, ed. by Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 61–79.
[18] See 'femminile' (s.v.), in the online version of *Lo Zingarelli 2022: Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, ed. by Mario Cannella, Beata Lazzarini, and Andrea Zaninello (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2021) <https://dizionaripiu.zanichelli.it/cultura-e-attualita/le-parole-del-giorno/parola-del-giorno/femminile/>.

the terms are related.

2. *nomi di genere promiscuo* [nouns with mixed gender]: *la tigre*, *il serpente*, *la guardia*, *il pedone*, *il genio*, *la spia*. These words, normally for etymological and historical reasons, exist only in one grammatical gender, which is used to indicate any semantic gender: there is no **il guardio*, just as there is no **la genia*, except for semi-serious purposes. With animal nouns, the opposite gender is indicated by adding *maschio*, *femmina* or *il maschio di*/*la femmina di*: *la tigre maschio*, *la femmina del serpente.*
3. *nomi in -a di genere comune* [nouns with common gender]: *il*/*la terapista*, *lo*/*la astronauta*, *il*/*la docente*, *il*/*la preside*. These nouns are epicene (vocabularies mark them as *sostantivo maschile e femminile*) and therefore the gender is understood based on the agreement with other members of the sentence. Many of these nouns end in *-a* for etymological reasons, but this ending is not a marker of the feminine.
4. *nomi di genere mobile* [nouns with mobile gender]: *il maestro*/*la maestra*, *il revisore*/*la revisora*, *il gestore*/*la gestrice*, *l'infermiere*/*l'infermiera*. Such nouns form the feminine according to morphological rules of Italian, which vary. In some cases, there can be more than one possible feminine (*difensora*/*difenditrice*), and therefore the most common form must be checked in dictionaries.

There are also many irregular feminines, which are mostly historical forms: *dio*/*dea*, *doge*/*dogaressa*, *abate*/*badessa*, *re*/*regina*, *eroe*/*eroina*. These last forms remind us that feminine *nomina agentis* are not a novelty: they were already used in classical Latin (*arbitra*, *ministra*, *gubernatrix*)[19], and examples can be found in the history of the Italian language. In fourteenth-century Sardinia, for example, Eleonora d'Arborea was a

[19] On the issue, see Vera Gheno, 'La questione dei nomi delle professioni al femminile una volta per tutte', *Valigia Blu*, 10 December 2020 <https://www.valigiablu.it/professioni-nomi-femminili/>.

juighissa/judighissa/judichissa/judikissa,[20] the feminine of *judiche* or *judike*, the ruler of a *giudicato*, a state jurisdiction in the island; the title was translated into Italian as *giudicessa/giudichessa*, the feminine of *giudice*, from the sixteenth century onwards. The seventeenth century celebrated Plautilla Bricci as the first *architettrice*, the feminine form of *architettore*, which is the historical version of *architetto*; Bricci returned to prominence in 2019 thanks to the biographical novel by Melania Mazzucco, significantly entitled *L'architettrice*.[21]

Sulis: The issue of feminine agentives and the discussion of the linguistic visibility of women in their professions feature prominently in Alma Sabatini's *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1986), which is regarded as the turning point for the debate on language and gender in Italy. In what context was this document produced, and what makes it a landmark in the study of language and gender, even today?

Gheno: On 12 July 1984, the Commissione Nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna was founded under the Ufficio del Consiglio dei Ministri. The creation of this official commission was the Italian response to a wave of interest in Europe towards gender issues.[22] The commission supported the publication of several reports and papers, one of them being Sabatini's *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1986),[23] which, as you say, still serves as a guideline and a point of

[20] Maria Teresa Guerra Medici, 'Eleonora d'Arborea e la Carta de Logu', *Genesis: Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storiche*, 1.2 (2002), 173–81.
[21] Melania Mazzucco, *L'architettrice* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019).
[22] Lepschy, 'Language and Sexism', p. 119.
[23] Alma Sabatini, *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana*: *per la scuola e per l'editoria scolastica* (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1986); then Ead., *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, con la collaborazione di Marcella Mariani e la partecipazione alla ricerca di Edda Billi, Alda Santangelo (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri, 1987), an extract of which ('Raccomandazioni') is available on the website

reference. Before that essay, writing in and on Italian regarding linguistic gender issues was scarce, as noted also by Lepschy.[24] One early and notable exception were, in the 1930s, Bruno Migliorini's observations on the growing presence of women in public life and the consequent use of feminine forms such as *autrice*, *direttrice*, *dottoressa*, *professoressa*, *patronessa*, and *senatrice*; he added that *atleta* seemed more common than *atletessa*, that *presidentessa* implied rather the wife of the president and that *deputata* was more used than *deputatessa*.[25] His observations are a significant anticipation of what Sabatini would write fifty years later.

Sabatini's essay explores the situation of the 1980s, highlighting how speakers were reluctant to accept linguistic changes. After an introduction explaining the importance of nominating women explicitly so that they gain (social) visibility, it discusses the structural imbalances in Italian language in relation to gender. It starts with the question of how to refer to women in roles traditionally taken by men, and it points out that it is correct to refer to them with a feminine noun as it was already done for professional roles that had a significant female presence. Therefore, it supports the use of forms such as *ministra* or *ingegnera*, rarely used at the time, together with the more common *maestra* and *infermiera*. Other examples of an unbalanced use of Italian provided by Sabatini are: the use of the article only in front of feminine surnames (*la Thatcher* but not **il Brandt*); the use of the first name only for female public figures (*Maggie* (*Thatcher*), to which nowadays *Kamala* (*Harris*) could be added); the use of the

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of the Ministero per la Pubblica Amministrazione <https://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/sites/funzionepubblica.gov.it/files/documenti/Normativa%20e%20Documentazione/Dossier%20Pari%20opportunit%C3%A0/linguaggio_non_sessista.pdf>; see above (endnote 7) for the data of the third edition (1993), that is used in this pages.

[24] Lepschy, 'Language and Sexism', pp. 134–35. Cfr. also Tatjana von Bonkewitz, 'Lingua, genere e sesso: sessismo nella grammaticografia e in libri scolastici della lingua italiana', in *Donna & linguaggio*, ed. by Marcato, pp. 99–110.

[25] Bruno Migliorini, 'La lingua contemporanea e le condizioni del suo svolgimento', in *Lingua contemporanea* (Florence: Sansoni, 1938), pp. 7–55; now in *La lingua italiana del Novecento*, ed. by Massimo Luca Fanfani (Florence: Le Lettere, 1990), pp. 5–29 (p. 12, n. 12).

overextended masculine when referring to a group of mixed gender (*cari tutti*, *benvenuti*); and the overextended use of nouns like *uomo* or *fratellanza* that hide the presence of women. In the second part of the essay, Sabatini provides numerous proposals for a non-sexist use of Italian. These include avoiding the article in front of female surnames, using the feminine for every type of job and professional position (*la cancelliera*) and discarding hybrid solutions such as **la cancelliere Merkel* or **il cancelliere donna Merkel* – mixed types that Giovanni Nencioni has defined as a *hircocoervus*.[26] Sabatini also suggests the use of feminine forms with a zero suffix, wherever possible, and the avoidance of the *-essa* suffix, which she considers unnecessary and reductive (e.g. *avvocata* not **avvocatessa*, *sindaca* not **sindachessa*),[27] the only exceptions being forms already consolidated in usage, such as *dottoressa* and *professoressa*. When referring to a mixed group of people, Sabatini proposes to choose either feminine or masculine depending on the majority (*buonasera a tutte* or *buonasera a tutti*), or, as an alternative, to use the masculine and feminine forms together (*buonasera a tutte e tutti*). She also suggests favouring semantically neutral formulations where possible, such as *essere umano*, *persona*, or *individuo* instead of *uomo.*[28] As this summary indicates, in the late 1980s the debate on gender and language in Italy was strongly focused on structural imbalances and the lack of feminine agentives, as a sign of the invisibility of women in traditionally masculine professions.

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[26] Giovanni Nencioni, 'Il ministro, la ministra, o la ministro della Pubblica istruzione, con l'apposizione di un antroponimo femminile? Ecco le diverse proposte per la titolarità del Ministero della Pubblica istruzione quando ne sia investita una donna', *La Crusca per Voi*, 20 (April 2000), also online <http://nencioni.sns.it/fileadmin/template/allegati/QuesitiRisposte/2000_20/2000_20_Risposta_7.pdf>.

[27] Sabatini, *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, pp. 26–27. Cfr. also Anna Laura Lepschy, Giulio Lepschy, and Helena Sanson, 'A proposito di -essa', in *L'Accademia della Crusca per Giovanni Nencioni* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2002), pp. 397–409; Manlio Cortelazzo, 'Perché non si vuole la presidentessa?', in *Donna & linguaggio*, ed. by Marcato, pp. 49–52.

[28] Robustelli, *Lingua italiana e questioni di genere*, pp. 30–43.

Sulis: In 1987, *The Italianist* hosted one of the first academic reflections on Sabatini's proposals, 'Sexism and the Italian Language' by Giulio Lepschy.[29] What kind of reception did the *Raccomandazioni* have in Italy, among scholars, politicians, intellectuals? And what is their legacy?

Gheno: Sabatini's proposals were received mainly with scepticism, to the point that a writer and intellectual like Pietro Citati defined them as 'uno dei grandissimi capolavori comici della letteratura italiana' [one of the greatest comic masterpieces of Italian literature]'.[30] At the time, proposals for changes towards usages more respectful of gender diversity were seen by many as an imposition, an attack against freedom of speech, and a waste of time[31] – a line of thought that has not yet disappeared in the current decade. Since Sabatini's seminal work, things have changed very slowly. Tina Anselmi, a prominent political figure who in the 1970s had been the first woman minister in an Italian government, noted the difficulties of the process when introducing a new, expanded edition of the *Raccomandazioni*, in 1993:

L'idea di trasformare completamente la lingua italiana in una lingua 'non sessista' non è stata realizzata, né d'altronde era immaginabile che lo fosse. Lo studio ha avuto comunque l'innegabile merito di avere sollevato il problema e di averlo reso presente soprattutto a chi con il linguaggio

[29] Giulio Lepschy, 'Sexism and the Italian Language', *The Italianist*, 7 (1987), 158–69.
[30] Pietro Citati, 'La lingua perduta delle donne', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 1987, p. 3, also quoted in Fabiana Fusco, '"L'abitudine fa la sindaca e l'avvocata". Il genere femminile nella lingua italiana, anche a partire da Alma Sabatini', in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana. Trent'anni dopo Alma Sabatini*, ed. by Anna Lisa Somma and Gabriele Maestri (Pavia: Blōnk, 2020), pp. 37–58 (p. 41).
[31] For an account of the reactions, both from professional and amateur linguists, see Elizabeth Burr, 'Dilettanti e linguisti di fronte al "genere"', in *Italiano. Strana lingua?*, ed. by Gianna Marcato (Padua: Unipress, 2003), pp. 105–11.

lavora.[32]

[The idea of completely transforming the Italian language into a 'non-sexist' language has not been realised, but then again, such an outcome was never conceivable. This work, however, has had the undeniable merit of outlining the problem and highlighting it, especially to those who work with languages.]

Nonetheless, the following year, the publisher Zanichelli announced the inclusion of more than 800 feminine *nomina agentis* in the 1995 edition of their *Zingarelli* dictionary, next to or under the masculine form,[33] thus indicating that Sabatini's work was starting to make a mark. Nowadays, some of her recommendations have been implemented: more feminine *nomina agentis* than before are established in use (*deputata*, *senatrice*), while others are used but still encounter some resistance (*sindaca*, *ministra*, *avvocata*, *ingegnera*); however, the overextended masculine is still very common (*buonasera a tutti*) or, in the best-case scenario, the double form is used (*buonasera a tutte e tutti*).

Sulis: It is not unusual that requests for modification of linguistic habits are met in the first instance with scepticism or distrust. In the case of Italian, resistance to linguistic change and the perception of it being imposed from above are also linked to the memory of the linguistic policies deployed by the dictatorship during the Mussolini era.[34] For the feminine agentives, it is significant that non-specialist speakers sought advice from the highest institution for the study of the Italian language, the Accademia della Crusca, in

[32] Tina Anselmi, 'Premessa', in Sabatini, *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, p. 3. For the linguistic debate in the 1990s, cfr. *Donna & linguaggio*, ed. by Marcato, and Lepschy, Lepschy, and Sanson, 'Lingua italiana e femminile'.

[33] [Anon.], 'Vocabolario: lo ''Zingarelli'' si tinge di rosa. 800 professioni declinate al femminile', AdnKronos, 13 July 1994 <http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/1994/07/13/Altro/VOCABOLARIO-LO-ZINGARELLI-SI-TINGE-DI-ROSA_121900.php>.

[34] Lepschy, 'Language and sexism', p. 123.

the face of the uncertainty created by the proposals for change and given the differences in attitudes even among scholars and intellectuals (unlike the Real Academia Española or the Académie Française, which have responsibility for overseeing the language development and defining the standard, the Italian Accademia does not play a normative role, but it aims instead at supporting the study of the language and developing awareness of its history and evolution to the present). The Crusca has published letters from readers and replies from experts on issues of language and gender on several occasions since the 1990s, mostly answering doubts on feminine *nomina agentis*. An overview of this dialogue bears witness both to the increasing interest from speakers and to the evolution of scholarly responses.

Gheno: The interaction between speakers and linguists can be traced in the pages of *Lingua italiana* (*Consulenza linguistica/Risposte ai quesiti, Tema del mese*), written by Accademici della Crusca or other designated experts in response to questions posed by the public. Since 1990, the *Risposte* were published twice a year in the biannual magazine *La Crusca per voi*, and since 2002 they have become weekly and made available online. Some of the answers originally published on paper were then republished online, including a 1996 article by Luca Serianni highlighting that only some newspapers were using the feminine *nomina agentis*, those with more sensitivity for issues of political correctness, while in everyday language they were less common, and subject to irony.[35]

[35] Luca Serianni, 'Risposta al quesito del professor Gianni Malesci di Firenze sul femminile professionale', *La Crusca per Voi*, 13 (1996), pp. 10–11, then 'Nomi professionali femminili', *Consulenza linguistica/Risposte ai quesiti*, Accademia della Crusca <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/nomi-professionali-femminili/22> (for a counter-argument, see Gheno, *Femminili singolari*¸ pp. 131–33). In addition to the articles quoted in the other footnotes, the analytical index of *La Crusca per voi* (<https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/crusca-per-voi-indice-analitico?l=F>) lists the following answers on the matter of feminine agentives: Luca Serianni, 'Risposta al quesito del signor Stefano Baldi di Torino sui nomi professionali femminili', 8 (April 1994), pp. 10–11; Serianni, 'Risposta al quesito del signor Mario Guarnieri di Rovito (Cosenza) sulla mancanza di

Meanwhile, though, guidelines for a use of language respectful of gender differences started to be included in manuals for institutional writing, within and outside public organisations.[36]

The issue of feminine agentives came to the fore again in 2008, when linguist Nicoletta Maraschio was elected the first female president of the Accademia della Crusca since its foundation in 1583, and questions on how best to address her were raised: *il presidente*, *la presidentessa* or *la presidente*? The answer is found in a *Consulenza* by Angela Frati, published in November 2009, where Maraschio is quoted, right after her election, expressing her preference for *la presidente*, following the diffusion of analogous forms such as *la preside* or *la cantante*.[37] Maraschio's statement seems to follow Sabatini's recommendation to reject the use of *presidentessa*, which traditionally would refer to the wife of a president, as already noted by Migliorini. Under the direction of Maraschio, the Accademia della Crusca advocated for the normalisation of the feminine *nomina agentis*, working closely with a linguist specialised in language and gender, Cecilia Robustelli,[38] and then with Laura Boldrini, who was President of the *Camera dei*

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corrispondente femminile di alcuni nomi (es. *cliente*)', pp. 10–11; Giovanni Nencioni, 'Risposta al quesito del signor Giuseppe Mannetta di Gesualdo (Avellino) sull'uso del maschile per riferirsi a donne che hanno incarichi pubblici', 9 (October 1994), p. 12; Nencioni, 'Risposta ai quesiti del dottor Antonio Nittolo di Roseto degli Abruzzi (Teramo) sulla neoformazione *ririempibile*, sull'accettabilità di *consigliera*, sull'uso delle maiuscole e sulla scrittura delle sigle', 13 (October 1996), pp. 14-15; Raffaella Setti, 'Risposta al quesito del professor Enrico Spitaleri di Colle Umberto (Treviso) sull'uso dell'articolo davanti ai nomi propri femminili', 23 (October 2001), pp. 8–9; Manuela Manfredini, 'Risposta al quesito di Nicola Bonelli sull'espressione "figlio maggiore" sia per maschile che per femminile', 46.1 (2013), p. 8; Anna M. Thornton, 'Risposta al quesito di Barbara Cavenago sulla correttezza di *le membre*', 49.2 (2014), p. 14.

[36] See, for example, Michele A. Cortelazzo and Federica Pellegrino, 'Lessico e sessismo', in *Guida alla scrittura istituzionale* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2003), pp. 136–39.

[37] Angela Frati, 'La presidente dell'Accademia della Crusca: Ancora sul femminile professionale', *Consulenza linguistica*, Accademia della Crusca, 20 November 2009 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/la-presidente-dellaccademia-della-crusca-ancora-sul-femminile-professionale/250>.

[38] Among her works, in addition to those mentioned elsewhere, see: Cecilia Robustelli, *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo* (Florence: Comune di Firenze, 2012) <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/sites/www.accademiadellacrusca.it/files/page/2013/03/08/2012_linee_guida_per_luso_del_genere_nel_linguaggio_amministrativo.pdf>; *Donne, grammatica e*

Deputati of the Italian Parliament from 2013 to 2018. One of the culminating points of this collaboration was the seminar for journalists organised by Boldrini's presidential office, *Genere femminile e media: L'informazione sulle donne può cambiare*, held on 8 March 2016 in Rome, at Montecitorio, attended by Maraschio and Robustelli amongst others (as I will explain later, Boldrini's commitment in this area made her the target of significant verbal abuse). Robustelli is the author of 'Infermiera sì, ingegnera no?', one of the contributions on *nomina agentis* most commented on by readers in the Crusca's website, in which she states that

> [u]n uso più consapevole della lingua contribuisce a una più adeguata rappresentazione pubblica del ruolo della donna nella società […]. E il linguaggio è uno strumento indispensabile per attuare questo processo: quindi, perché tanta resistenza a usarlo in modo più rispettoso e funzionale a valorizzare la soggettività femminile?[39]
>
> [a more gender aware use of language leads to a more accurate public representation of the role of women in society [...]. And language is an indispensable tool for carrying out this process: why, therefore, is there such resistance to using it in a more respectful manner, in a way that is functional to make female subjectivity stand out?]

In the same article, the scholar also highlights how the difficulties and the uneasiness in the use of feminine agentives are reported when they refer to leading positions or prestigious jobs in which women were not present until recent times, linking the reluctance in their use with the issue of power, and the fear of men of losing it.

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media: Suggerimenti per l'uso dell'italiano (Rome: Giulia Giornaliste, 2014) <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/sites/www.accademiadellacrusca.it/files/page/2014/12/19/donne_grammatica_media.pdf>; *Sindaco e sindaca: Le questioni di genere* (Rome: Accademia della Crusca / La Repubblica, 2017).

[39] Cecilia Robustelli, 'Infermiera sì, ingegnera no?', *Tema del mese*, Accademia della Crusca, 8 March 2013 <accademiadellacrusca.it/it/contenuti/infermiera-si-ingegnera-no/7368>.

In March 2014, Patrizia Bellucci writes in support of the use of feminine agentives also in the legal sector, an area in which both men and women continue to show a particular reluctance; the author notes that the issue is not resolved, and that the discussion is still very heated, for reasons that are not strictly linguistic but pertain to sociocultural issues.[40] She also quotes a point made by another linguist specialising in gender issues, Stefania Cavagnoli, who remarks how the growing presence of women in leading positions has resulted in their growing presence in the media, leading in turn to the oscillation between the use of masculine or feminine forms to refer to them in their professional roles.[41]

The issue of the feminine *nomina agentis* returns in 2017, when the Accademia publishes the monograph *"Quasi una rivoluzione": I femminili di professioni e cariche in Italia e all'estero,* edited by Yorick Gomez Gane. The book situates the Italian debate in a broader context, taking into account solutions proposed in Spanish, French, German, and English.[42] In one of his contributions to the monograph, Claudio Marazzini, who was appointed as the director of the Crusca in 2014, recognises on the one hand the ongoing change in language and society with respect to the role of women, and on the other the right of sectors of society (and linguists) to resist that change. He writes:

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[40] Patrizia Bellucci, 'Il femminile di *questore* e di *prefetto*', *Consulenza linguistica*, Accademia della Crusca, 17 March 2014 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/il-femminile-di-questore-e-di-prefetto/865>. See also Vera Gheno, 'Nomi professionali femminili: Singolarità o normalità?', *Lavoro Diritti Europa*, 2 (2020) <https://www.lavorodirittieuropa.it/images/vera_gheno_Nomi_professionali_femminili_2.pdf>.

[41] Stefania Cavagnoli, *Linguaggio giuridico e lingua di genere: Una simbiosi possibile* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2013), p. 51.

[42] *"Quasi una rivoluzione": I femminili di professioni e cariche in Italia e all'estero*, con un saggio di Giuseppe Zarra e interventi di Claudio Marazzini, ed. by Yorick Gomez Gane (Florence: Accademia della Crusca, 2017). The monograph concludes a project proposed by Vittorio Coletti in 2016 for a 'ricerca sui titoli di cariche pubbliche e professioni esercitate da donne nelle principali lingue europee' [a study on titles of public roles and professions carried out by women in main European languages].

la lingua è una democrazia, in cui la maggioranza governa, i grammatici prendono atto delle innovazioni e cercano di farle andare d'accordo con la tradizione, e le minoranze, anche ribelli, hanno pur diritto di esistere, senza dover temere l'eliminazione fisica o la cosiddetta gogna mediatica.[43]

[language is a democracy in which the majority rules, grammarians take note of innovations and try to make them fit with tradition, while the minorities, even the rebels, have the right to exist without fear of physical elimination or of being pilloried by the media.]

In February 2017 there is one last intervention by Robustelli on the Crusca website, this time focusing on a few feminine forms that speakers have found particularly difficult to accept: *medica*, *direttrice*/*direttora*, *poetessa*/*poeta.*[44] *Medica*, until recent times, was considered incorrect as a noun, and only in the 2022 edition of the *Zingarelli* dictionary did it lose the label of *raro*, becoming the standard feminine of *medico*. *Direttrice* has suffered from its association with the school context (e.g. *direttrice del collegio*) and for this reason several newspaper and magazine editors prefer to use the masculine form, *direttore*, or the feminine *direttora*. Beatrice Venezi, a well-known orchestral conductor, raised a heated discussion when she declared, live on national television during the 2021 edition of the Festival della canzone italiana di Sanremo, that she preferred to be called *direttore*, stating: 'Per me quello che conta è il talento e la preparazione con cui si svolge un determinato lavoro. Le professioni hanno un nome preciso e nel mio caso è "direttore d'orchestra"' [For me what counts is the talent and the

[43] Claudio Marazzini, 'Qualche precisazione sul tema del "linguaggio di genere", mentre i lavori sono in corso', in "*Quasi una rivoluzione"*, ed. by Gomez Gane, pp. 121–29 (p. 123). See also Rita Fresu, 'Quasi una rivoluzione: I femminili di professioni e cariche in Italia e all'estero', *Lingua Italiana,* Treccani Magazine, 14 January 2018 <https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/recensioni/recensione_78.html>.

[44] Cecilia Robustelli, 'Donne al lavoro (medico, direttore, poeta): ancora sul femminile dei nomi di professione', *Tema del mese*, Accademia della Crusca, 21 February 2017 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/donne-al-lavoro-medico-direttore-poeta-ancora-sul-femminile-dei-nomi-di-professione/1237>.

preparation with which you carry out a specific job. Professions have a specific noun and in my case it is 'direttore d'orchestra'].[45] *Direttora*, although not incorrect, can create confusion alongside the far most widespread *direttrice*; perhaps it is more effective to change the connotation of *direttrice* by using it also outside of the scholastic world.[46] Finally, *poetessa* remains the standard form to indicate a female poet, but *la poeta* can also be used, since *poeta* can be considered an epicene as *atleta*.

Further on, the website of the Accademia della Crusca contains several answers on specific feminine forms: *soprano*; *mecenate*, *mentore*, *anfitriona*, and *cicerone* in 2018; *cantante/cantantessa* in 2019; *probovira/probavira*; *parroca*; *critica cinematografica*; *falegname/falegnama* in 2020; *direttrice d'orchestra*, *maestra del coro*; *cavaliera* and other honorific titles in 2021.[47] The last contribution available on the

[45] [Anon.], 'Sanremo, Beatrice Venezi: "Direttore, non direttrice". E i social si spaccano sulla scelta', *La Repubblica*, 6 March 2021 <https://www.repubblica.it/dossier/spettacoli/sanremo-2021/2021/03/06/news/sanremo_beatrice_venezi_direttore_non_direttrice_e_i_social_si_spaccano_sulla_scelta-290592565/>.

[46] Cfr. also Marina Sbisà, 'Il genere tra stereotipi e impliciti', in *Non esiste solo il maschile: Teorie e pratiche per un linguaggio non discriminatorio da un punto di vista di genere*, ed. by Sergia Adamo, Giulia Zanfabro, and Elisabetta Tigani Sava (Trieste: EUT, 2019), pp. 17–26 (p. 26).

[47] See *Consulenza linguistica, Risposte ai quesiti*, Accademia della Crusca*:* Paolo D'Achille, '"La Scala non ha più *soprani*..."?', 19 January 2018 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/la-scala-non-ha-più-soprani/1399>; D'Achille, '*Cicerone, Mecenate, Anfitrione e Mentore*. E quando sono donne?', 11 December 2018 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/cicerone-mecenate-anfitrione-e-mentore-e-quando-sono-donne/1565>; D'Achille, 'La *Cantantessa* è una (e gli *Studentessi* sono solo canzonette)', 29 January 2019 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/la-cantantessa-è-una-e-gli-studentessi-sono-solo-canzonette/1585>; Paolo D'Achille and Anna M. Thornton, 'I *probiviri* sono tanti; ma come si fa a indicarne uno? E quando c'è una donna? O più di una?', 16 October 2020 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/i-emprobiviriem-sono-tanti-ma-come-si-fa-a-indicarne-uno-e-quando-c-una-donna-o-pi-di-una/2831>; Paola Manni, '*Parroca*', 23 October 2020 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/emparrocaem/2837>; Anna M. Thornton, '*Critica cinematografica* e *critica d'arte*: sono anche persone, non solo attività', 24 November 2020 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/emcritica-cinematograficaem-e-emcritica-darteem-sono-anche-persone-non-solo-attivit/2853>; Paolo D'Achille and Anna M. Thornton, 'Professioni e mestieri al femminile: Il caso di *falegname* (e anche di *legnaiolo*, *carpentiere* *fabbro*, *muratore*, *controllore*)', 25 September 2020 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/professioni-e-mestieri-al-femminile-il-caso-di-emfalegnameem-e-anche-di-emlegnaioloem-emcarpentieree/2821>; Paolo D'Achille, '*Direttori d'orchestra* e *maestri del coro* anche se donne?', 23 March 2021 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/emdirettori-dorchestraem-e-emmaestri-del-

Crusca website is the February 2021 *Tema del mese* by Vittorio Coletti, one of the most authoritative voices among those who consider it unnecessary to propose solutions to avoid the overextended masculine in order to take into consideration not only female subjects but also non-binary persons. In 'Nomi di mestiere e questioni di genere', he defends the use of the overextended masculine, because the doubling of the existing forms, as proposed by Sabatini, would lead to the loss of the functional advantage of the 'maschile inclusivo', 'che ora è solo una comodissima opzione grammaticale che non esalta e non mortifica nessuno' [which is currently only an extremely convenient grammatical option that does not praise or mortify anyone].[48] The article continues with a polemic directed against

i perbenisti, che oggi iniziano le loro lettere con "Care tutte e cari tutti" (per non dire di coloro che scrivono "car* tutt*", violando l'ortografia tradizionale per non irritare le femministe più radicali e, da qualche tempo, anche quanti non si riconoscono in nessuno dei due sessi).
[the **right-thinking people (sarebbe 'benpensanti') [do-gooders?]** who now begin letters with 'Care tutte e cari tutti' (not to mention the people who write 'car* tutt*', violating traditional orthography so as not to upset the most radical feminists and, for some time now, also those who do not identify with either of the two sexes)].

Sulis: When we trace the trajectory of the proposals for and debates on a non-sexist use of the Italian language, it becomes clear that they develop from the interaction – not always a peaceful one – among social groups, institutions, politicians, scholars. The

coroem-anche-se-donne/2917>; D'Achille, 'Qual è il femminile di *cavaliere*?', 20 April 2021 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/qual-%C3%A8-il-femminile-di-cavaliere/2932>.
[48] Vittorio Coletti, 'Nomi di mestiere e questioni di genere', *Tema del mese*, Accademia della Crusca, 21 February 2021 <http://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/contenuti/nomi-di-mestiere-e-questioni-di-genere/9160>.

feminist movements of the 1970s lay the groundwork for the government's initiative in 1984, when the Commissione Nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna was created. The work of linguists on the Commissione and the resulting *Raccomandazioni* set the stage for progressively more frequent reflections on the visibility of women within the language and in society, as the questions to Accademia della Crusca and the experts' answers show. A subsequent phase in the debate sees an exponential increase in the number of contributors, an increase made possible by the availability of online forms of communication such as blogs and social media. Your research includes both the field of language and gender and digital communication. In addition, you have an active presence on social media, with tens of thousands of followers (more than 45,000 on Facebook, plus 5000 friends, almost 50,000 on Instagram, over 13,000 on Twitter). Your posts on language and gender are read and commented on by hundreds of users and often are the prelude for detailed and passionate exchanges of ideas. Based on your experience, what kind of objections can be registered online on the side of the non-specialist speakers, when they are faced with proposals for a non-sexist use of Italian?

Gheno: Recent years have seen the popularisation of linguistic debates, especially on the gender issue. Furthermore, thanks to the expansion of the use of social networks, the question has emerged from political and linguistic contexts to become a topic that generates heated reactions among people, who seem to be more interested than in the past in metacognitive reflections on the language they and their communities use. My long-term involvement in this debate as a linguist who is active in public engagement activities and present on social platforms since 1995 – and who managed the Twitter account of the Accademia della Crusca from 2012 to 2019 – has allowed me to compile a list of the most

common reasons given by speakers for opposing the use of the feminine form for women in professional roles. Although I have not systematised and analysed them yet from a scientific perspective, I think they offer a realistic picture of the range of opinions expressed.[49] Some speakers remark that 'i femminili suonano male' [feminine agentives sound ugly] due to an alleged cacophony, ignoring that the reason behind our use of words is necessity rather than euphony; as highlighted by Anna M. Thornton, '"[s]uona male" forse non significa che viola una regola della grammatica, ma che suscita "una sottile ironia"' ['sound wrong' perhaps does not mean that they break a rule of grammar, but rather that they generate 'a subtle irony'].[50] Negative comments come from speakers in all social classes and professional sectors, including high institutional figures; one significant example is the take on the matter of feminine agentives of a former President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano:

> Penso che Laura Boldrini non si dorrà se insisto in una licenza che mi sono preso da molto tempo, quello di reagire alla trasformazione di dignitosi vocaboli della lingua italiana nell'orribile appellativo di 'ministra' e nell'abominevole appellativo di 'sindaca' [51]
>
> [I believe that Laura Boldrini will not complain if I continue with the liberty – which I first started taking a long time ago – of reacting to the transformation of perfectly suitable Italian words into the horrible appellative of 'ministra' and the abominable appellative of 'sindaca'].

Some specific feminine agentives are considered ridiculous, as in the case of *ministra*, which would sound similar to *minestra*, or, even worse, of *architetta*, which would sound

[49] For a longer list of objections, see Gheno, *Femminili singolari*, pp. 69–213, and Gheno, 'La questione dei nomi delle professioni al femminile una volta per tutte'.
[50] Anna M. Thornton, 'Designare le donne', in *Mi fai male…*, ed. by Giuliana Giusti and Susanna Regazzoni (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2009), pp. 115–34.
[51] Quoted in Michele A. Cortelazzo, 'Il presidente, la presidente, la capra', *CortMic*, 6 January 2017 <https://cortmic.myblog.it/presidente/>.

too similar to the noun *tetta*; it is worth pointing out that the third person singular of the present tense of the verb *architettare* is also *architetta*, yet it is used without attracting criticism. In every language, words can echo each other and may even evoke obscenities. Yet nobody complains when people shout '*fallo!*' while watching a football match, even if it has the two diverging meanings of 'foul' and 'phallus', nor is it customary to laugh every time somebody uses the word *consesso*, which contains *sesso*. Others contest that in some cases the feminine form proposed already exists with another meaning (e.g. *matematica,* referring both to a female mathematician and to mathematics as a discipline), even if polysemy is standard in any language, and normally context suffices to clarify the sense in which the word is used.[52]

'Le professioni sono neutre' [professions have no gender] is another justification presented by speakers for not using professional feminine nouns. Italian recurs to the overextended masculine when referring generically to a job or a position (*Tra i compiti del ministro rientrano…*), but this does not mean that it is wrong to use the feminine when referring to a woman (*la ministra Stefania Prestigiacomo…*) as is the case for the many jobs and positions where traditionally the presence of a woman is not considered exceptional, such as *sarta*, *cassiera*, *operaia*. With regard to *operaia*, it is worth mentioning the fact that Google Translate suggests as the English translation 'factory girl' instead of 'female worker', thus showing that languages with gender neutral nouns are not exempt from sexist assumptions. Another frequent justification appeals to the strength of traditions: 'Si è sempre usato il maschile, perché cambiare?' [The masculine form has always been used, so why change now?]. This stems from the idea that language would not be subject to change, contradicting everything that is known about the way languages work. Another argument confuses the epicene suffix *-iatra* for a feminine, because of its

[52] This case is illustrated with a focus on the word *critica* in Thornton, 'Designare le donne'.

-a ending: 'Se devo dire *ministra,* allora dirò anche *pediatro*!' [If I have to say *ministra*, then I will also say *pediatro*!]. The same kind of argument was used in 2016 to attack the Presidente della Camera, Laura Boldrini, after she asked members of parliament several times to refer to her as *signora presidente* instead of *signor presidente*.[53] On that occasion, some newspapers incorrectly attributed to her the request to be called *la presidenta* (vs *la presidente*).[54] *Presidenta,* which is the standard feminine in Spanish, is not used in Italian, where *presidente* is epicene. After the fake news circulated, Boldrini was accused, along with the Accademia della Crusca, of seeking the destruction of the Italian language – an accusation that has never been retracted and that is still used against her after so many years, [55] even if Boldrini stated several times that she was simply following Alma Sabatini's recommendations. Some detractors still derisively call linguistic gender matters *boldrinate*.[56]

A final stance against feminine agentives is presented by those who associate their use with a renewed form of 'Newspeak', the ideologically controlled language that

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[53] See the episodes involving the *deputati* Paolo Grimoldi, *La Repubblica*, 15 April 2015 <https://video.repubblica.it/politica/grazie-signor-presidente-e-boldrini-replica-al-leghista-grazie-deputata/197861/196894>, and Roberto Simonetti, *La Repubblica*, 20 December 2015 <https://video.repubblica.it/politica/boldrini-contro-il-leghista-se-io-sono-il-signor-presidente-lei-e-la-deputata/222757/221995>. Both members of parliament belong to the Lega Nord party, which has long shown hostility towards the feminisation of the Italian language.

[54] Giuseppe De Lorenzo, 'L'inutile battaglia della Boldrini: La Crusca sdogana "presidenta"', *Il Giornale*, 9 March 2016 <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/ora-boldrini-sar-contenta-crusca-ha-deciso-si-pu-dire-presid-1233867.html>. This article has never been rectified and continues to be quoted as a valid source. Two years later, after Boldrini had left the office of Presidente della Camera, and after her successors expressed a preference for the use of masculine titles, the right-wing newspaper *Il Secolo d'Italia* spread again the fake news that Boldrini wanted to be called *presidenta* ('Addio a "presidenta" e "ministra": il Palazzo rinnega e resetta la Boldrini', *Il Secolo d'Italia*, 4 October 2018 <www.secoloditalia.it/2018/10/addio-a-presidenta-e-ministra-il-palazzo-rinnega-e-resetta-la-boldrini/>). See also linguist Michele A. Cortelazzo's blog entry, 'Il curriculum vitae di Giuseppe Conte e il trionfo del grillismo', *CortMic*, 25 May 2018 <https://cortmic.myblog.it/curriculum-conte/>.

[55] Paola Villani, 'Il femminile come "genere del disprezzo". Il caso di *presidenta*: parola d'odio e fake news', *L'Articolo*, Accademia della Crusca, 30 September 2020 <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/contenuti/il-femminile-come-genere-del-disprezzo-il-caso-di-presidenta-parola-d-odio-e-fake-news/8109>.

[56] Cfr. 'boldrinata' (s.v.) in the section *Neologismi* of *Lingua Italiana*, Treccani Magazine <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/boldrinata_%28altro%29/>.

is imposed onto the inhabitants of the totalitarian state of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949): 'State creando una lingua orwelliana!' [You are creating an Orwellian language]. Orwell's dystopian novel is quoted often when linguistic changes are discussed in general debates, although in this case it is difficult to understand how the use of more words could be considered an example of Newspeak, considering that Orwell explained that Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.[57] Another aspect to consider in the opinions expressed by some naïve linguists is the frequent use of forms of othering (for example with the use of the pronoun *voi* to address as a single group all those expressing different points of view):

un insieme di dinamiche, processi, strutture, anche linguistiche, che raggruppano dialetticamente i soggetti in un 'noi' e in un 'loro', in gruppi presentati come omogenei e alternativi gli uni agli altri, non solo per caratteristiche ma anche per interessi.[58]
[a series of dynamics, processes, and structures (including linguistic ones), that gather together dialectically the subjects into 'us' and 'them', in clusters presented as internally homogeneous and diametrically opposing, in terms not only of characteristics but also of interests]

One of the most interesting aspects of these debates is that many of those who manifest opposition to the feminisation of language tend to be also convinced that linguistic changes bear no weight for the improvement of the social status of women. 'I

[57] George Orwell, 'The Principles of Newspeak', in *La neolingua della politica*, ed. by Massimo Birattari (Milan: Garzanti, 2021), pp. 69–107 (p. 74) (edition in English and Italian with parallel text; the essay was originally an appendix to the novel).
[58] Federico Faloppa, *#Odio: Manuale di resistenza alla violenza delle parole* (Turin: UTET, 2020), pp. 169–70.

problemi sono ben altri' [Real problems lie elsewhere], is often repeated: this denial of the relevance of language in social battles is often used to change the axis of a debate and to avoid discussing specific issues.[59] In this context, references to political correctness are frequently made, in the distorted view that sees it as a limitation on free speech:[60] the use of feminine nouns to refer to women is considered a form of political correctness and not a mere *consequentia rerum*, i.e. the consequence of observing a person and identifying them as a female.

Despite difficulties and resistance at various levels, the very fact that these debates are taking place, and involve a high number of social-media users online, prove that an awareness of issues of language and gender is developing, albeit slowly. Another sign of a change in this direction is the renewed attention for removing gender (and other) stereotypes from textbooks[61] and online digital language tools we use in everyday life: for instance, many feminine agentives are marked as errors by some of the most common digital spellcheckers of Italian, where the apparent biases of automatic translators come from the data present in the corpora on which they operate.[62]

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[59] Gheno, *Femminili singolari*, pp. 110–12.

[60] On the matter, see Lepschy, Lepschy, and Sanson, 'Lingua italiana e femminile', pp. 14–17, and Federico Faloppa, 'PC or not PC? Some Reflections upon Political Correctness and its Influence on the Italian Language', in *Cultural Change through Language and Narrative: Italy and the USA*, ed. by Guido Bonsaver, Alessandro Carlucci, and Matthew Reza (Oxford: Legenda, 2018), pp. 174–98.

[61] *Obiettivo 10 in parità*, Zanichelli (2021) <https://www.zanichelli.it/chi-siamo/obiettivo-dieci-in-parita>, with contributions by Luisa Carrada, Vera Gheno, Chiara Xausa, Silvana Badaloni, Annalisa Oboe, Claudia Padovani, Lorenza Perini, Francesca Faenza, and Marzia Camarda. On gender stereotypes, see also Francesca Vecchioni, *Pregiudizi inconsapevoli: Perché i luoghi comuni sono sempre così affollati* (Milan: Mondadori, 2020).

[62] Donata Columbro, 'Google Translate è sessista perché la tecnologia non è neutra', *La Stampa*, 22 April 2021 <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/firme/data-storie/2021/04/22/news/google-translate-e-sessista-perche-la-tecnologia-non-e-neutra-1.40184385/>; Emanuela Griglié and Guido Romeo, *Per soli uomini: Il maschilismo dei dati, dalla ricerca scientifica al design* (Turin: Codice, 2021); Nicolas Kayser-Bril,'Automated Translation is Hopelessly Sexist, but don't Blame the Algorithm or the Training Data', *Algorithm Watch*, 29 March 2021 <https://algorithmwatch.org/en/automated-translation-sexist/>; Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020); Carla Bazzanella and others, 'Categorizzazione del femminile e del maschile nelle nuove tecnologie: Prime ricerche nel

Furthermore, it is to be expected that speakers will oppose resistance to a linguistic change that has been proposed and debated over a relatively short period of time. In general, naïve linguists tend to reason mainly according to their own linguistic experiences, without having a more systemic, broader view of the phenomena that occur in language. Perhaps due to the young age of Italian as a spoken language (it was the television, in the early 1960s, that gave it a final push),[63] there is a certain widespread linguistic misoneism, and many perceive change as something that undermines their certainties. Moreover, if we consider that language is a powerful act of identity, we understand that these changes affect not only words, but the whole clusters of meanings attached to them. Indeed, the sense of identity triggers defensive and even aggressive reactions, which among other things are caused by the way such issues are presented by the press, often in the form of polarised or distorted news. This is, for example, the case of the news item about German dictionary Duden's decision, in 2021, to introduce *c*. 12,000 feminine professional nouns as independent entries in its online version. The title and subtitle of an article on the matter in the newspaper *La Stampa* read:

Il dizionario tedesco si rinnova per adeguarsi alla parità dei sessi. Il principale vocabolario tedesco, Duden ha deciso di eliminare il maschile generico: per molti studiosi l'innovazione

Thesaurus italiano, spagnolo, francese, inglese di Word', *Cuadernos de Filologia italiana*, 7 (2000), 193–245.

[63] Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* [1963] (Laterza: Rome-Bari, 2011); Giovanni Vigo, 'Gli italiani alla conquista dell'alfabeto', in *Fare gli italiani: Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea*, 2 vols, ed. by Simonetta Soldani and Gabriele Turi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), I: *La nascita dello Stato Nazionale*, pp. 37–66; Teresa Poggi Salani, 'Una tardiva unificazione linguistica: I riflessi sull'oggi', in *Fare gli italiani*, ed. by Soldani and Turi, II: *Una società di massa*, pp. 211–47; Fabio Rossi, 'Lingua e media', in *Enciclopedia dell'Italiano* (Rome: Treccani, 2010), also online <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lingua-e-media_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)>. Cfr. also Vera Gheno, *Potere alle parole: Perché usarle meglio* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), pp. 67–94.

mortifica la lingua, per altri è un passo importante. [64]

[The German dictionary is being updated to conform to sex equality. Duden, the main German dictionary, has decided to remove the generic masculine: for many scholars this innovation will mortify the language; for others, it is an important step forward.]

The title seems to suggest that something has been erased, thus raising the concerns of many readers, but adding the feminine certainly cannot be described as an elimination.

As Raffaele Ventura writes, underneath the debate about language and gender lies the issue of abolishing linguistic privileges that in turn reflect real privileges.[65] Tullio De Mauro has already reminded us that our society, our *pólis*, is made possible by the *lógos*, the faculty of language;[66] in such a society, those who are not named cannot gain full visibility. Yet, many speakers do not seem to be aware that being named means having the linguistic privilege of self-representation and presence in their own language, and are reluctant to recognise that such a privilege, at present, is not democratically extended to other social groups.[67]

Sulis: The last, significant shift in public debates on language and gender in Italy is very recent, dateing to the late 2010s. If for decades scholars, politicians, intellectuals, as well as naïve linguists, have discussed mainly structural imbalances and the visibility of

[64] Vittorio Sabadin, 'Il dizionario tedesco si rinnova per adeguarsi alla parità dei sessi', *La Stampa*, 15 February 2021 <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2021/02/15/news/il-dizionario-tedesco-si-rinnova-per-adeguarsi-alla-parita-dei-sessi-1.39905385/>.
[65] Raffaele A. Ventura, 'La cattiva notizia è che la cancel culture esiste eccome', *Wired*, 10 May 2021 <https://www.wired.it/play/cultura/2021/05/10/cancel-culture-esiste-debunker-politicamente-corretto/>.
[66] Tullio De Mauro, '*Dieci tesi* nel loro contesto storico: linguistica, pedagogia e politica tra gli anni Sessanta e Settanta' [2007], in *L'educazione linguistica democratica*, ed. by Silvana Loiero and Maria Antonietta Marchese (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2018), pp. 41–58 (p. 48).
[67] Graziella Priulla, *Parole tossiche: Cronache di ordinario sessismo* (Cagli [PU]: Settenove, 2014); Lorenzo Gasparrini, *Non sono sessista ma… Il sessismo nel linguaggio contemporaneo* (Rome: Tlon, 2019), pp.7–34.

women within the language, the question of how to overcome the masculine-feminine binary has come now to the fore. What solutions have been proposed?

Gheno: The concern for the best way to address a mixed, non-gender-specific plurality is not new, as it was already raised by Sabatini in the 1980s. Since then, in addition to the solutions proposed by linguists, inventive ways have been created in different contexts to avoid both the overextended masculine and the double form (masculine plus feminine). Recently, non-binary identities, that is, people who do not recognise themselves in either the masculine or the feminine gender, are being considered in the light of individuals' social rights to recognition and visibility.[68] As a result, in contexts particularly attentive to the gender issue, there are attempts at creating and encouraging the use of an indistinct plural ending, both to refer to non-binary people and to go beyond the masculine *vs* feminine binary. Such inclusive forms (a term we will discuss shortly) or gender-neutral endings are extremely varied. They range from the asterisk, probably the most common solution (instead of *cari tutti*, or *cari tutti e (care) tutte*: *car* tutt**), to letters of the alphabet (the vowel *u*, *caru tutu*, or consonants such *x, or y or z*, as in *carx tuttx*, *cary tutty*, *carz tuttz*), to the *at* sign (*car@ tutt@*), the apostrophe (*car' tutt'*), the underscore (*car_ tutt_*), the ampersand (*car& tutt&*), and the schwa (*carə tuttə*). Other experiments combine the feminine and masculine endings: *carei tuttei*, *care.i tutte.i*, *care/i tutte/i*.[69] The common problem with most of these proposals is that they can be used in writing, but less in speech, as some of them create difficulties in pronunciation; from this point of view, the *-u* ending seems to be the best solution, but it engenders confusion, since in

[68] Maya De Leo, *Queer: Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021), pp. 207–17.
[69] A list is available in Vera Gheno, 'Lo schwa tra fantasia e norma', *La Falla del Cassero*, August 2020 <https://lafalla.cassero.it/lo-schwa-tra-fantasia-e-norma/>.

several dialects of Italy this vowel represents the masculine suffix. Contrary to what usually happens, in fact, in these cases the proposed innovation seems to move from writing to speech. This is probably linked to the increase of spaces available for informal writing which has come with digital communication and social media: since they are widely in use, people write much more than before, both in formal contexts and for informal occasions. This has created opportunities for written linguistic experiments that are sometimes translated into speech. One can think for example of *LOL*, the English acronym for *Laugh(ing) Out Loud,* which has recently moved to the spoken jargon of millennials and Generation Z and is also used in Italian.[70]

The proposal that has been at the centre of the most heated discussions over the past few years is the use of the schwa (ə), a sign of the International Phonetic Alphabet that represents the mid-central vowel.[71] The name is German (in Italian it is also called *scevà*), coming from the Hebrew שׁוּא, literally 'emptiness', thus being semantically a good solution to indicate an indefinite gender: *bambinə*, instead of *bambini e bambine*. Although it is not part of the phonemic inventory of standard Italian, it is used in some areal languages of the Italian peninsula, such as Neapolitan and some varieties of Apulian; the symbol also looks more like a letter than, for instance, the asterisk, and as a result it does not stick out on the printed page that much.

As a linguistic experiment, the schwa presents various limits. First, it is a symbol born with another function, and difficult for many to pronounce, while vocal text readers

[70] Vera Gheno, *Social-linguistica: Italiano e italiani dei social network* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2017), p. 44.
[71] Asher Laufer, 'The Origin of the IPA Schwa', in *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*, ed. by Sasha Calhoun and others (Melbourne: 2019), Australasian Speech Science and Technology Association (ASSTA) <https://assta.org/proceedings/ICPhS2019/papers/ICPhS_1957.pdf>.

do not recognise it (yet), as noted by experts of web accessibility.[72] It is also complex to write on many digital devices, as it is not present on standard keyboards, although it has been recently added among the alternatives to the letter *e* on several mobile phones. A much more serious concern is that its use can create problems for people with dyslexia or other reading impairments, as well as the elderly, because the symbol is easily confused with the vowels *e* or *a.* Paradoxically, a symbol implemented for inclusivity could end up resulting in ableism and ageism, and thus excluding parts of the population. While practical problems are mostly solvable with time (keyboards and readers can be reprogrammed), the challenges for those with reading difficulties are significant and must be taken into consideration. From a linguistic perspective, though, the most serious issue is that the adoption of the schwa, as with any other inclusive solution, requires a modification of the morphology of the Italian language, and while updating the lexicon is relatively easy and fast, changing the morphology is a much deeper, complex, and longer process. Therefore, for now, the schwa cannot be seen as the ideal solution to the problem of inclusivity in language. It is an interesting experiment, used as a flagship by those who care about gender and linguistic inclusivity, but it is probably only one phase in the search for a better solution.

Sulis: Initially, the schwa as a non-gender-specific ending seemed to be favoured by minority and militant groups, but now it can be increasingly found also in mainstream communication beyond the LGBTQIA+ communities. Some publishers, intellectuals, and artists are already using it, and it is not surprising that among the first to explore this possibility were some cartoonists, since the language of comics has a tradition of playful

[72] Lucia Iacopini, 'Lo schwa (ə) che rende l'inclusione inaccessibile', *WebAccessibile*, 15 April 2021 <https://www.webaccessibile.org/approfondimenti/lo-schwa-%C7%9D-che-rende-linclusione-inaccessibile/>.

experimentalism with sounds and a widespread use of symbols. To what extent is the use of the schwa accepted, and what reactions do these proposals provoke in the Italian public debate? Let me offer an example: an Active Policy of Linguistic Inclusivity for written communication in Italian was approved as early as 2015–2016 at the University of Edinburgh; still in use, it suggests possible alternatives to the overextended masculine (now including the schwa), and it is presented as 'a non-penalising approach that encourages critical awareness about gender and language'. [73]

I also wonder if we can identify a generation gap in approaching the issue. Older generations seem to lack interest, or are slow to recognise linguistic inclusivity as significant, or approach it with distrust or scepticism, in addition to being generally more resistant to language change. On the other hand, at least in my experience, the issue of the 'speakability' of non-binary or fluid identities and their rights of citizenship within the language seem more relevant for the younger generations, to the point that I started researching the topic after being prompted by students at the University of Leeds.

Gheno: I agree with your suggestion of a possible generational rift, in which younger generations tend to relate more easily to the issue of expressing non-fixed, fluid identities,[74] while older people seem to have difficulties in understanding gender fluidity per se. In addition, the polarisation of the debate, typical of social media and several news outlets, can only harm the general understanding of these issues (as well as any other topic

[73] *Active Policy of Linguistic Inclusivity* (*APLI*), Italian, Department of European Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh <https://www.ed.ac.uk/literatures-languages-cultures/delc/italian/linguistic-inclusivity?fbclid=IwAR3eeHKYFR_ZCtqaESRR7jhEdlAEorZUEoYKs-FqZAg4_WHms9kYGYVU9N0>. The policy was drafted by Davide Messina.

[74] Beatrice Cristalli, 'Parlare della fluidità di genere. Dentro la Generazione Z', *Scritto e Parlato* in *Lingua Italiana,* Treccani Magazine, 7 January 2021 <https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/scritto_e_parlato/Parlare_della_fluidita_di_genere.html>.

of discussion).[75]

With regard to the proposal of the schwa, I state my own positionality within the field, because I speak even more than for other cases as an observer who is also proactively involved in the public debate. I wrote a brief piece suggesting the schwa as a possible alternative to the use of the asterisk in 2019.[76] The idea came to me in answer to a non-binary person who had asked me what could be used in speech instead of the asterisk, since it has no sound. Only later did I discover that the symbol had been used for years in LGBTQIA+ communities (although I am still searching for datable written evidence of this), and that since 2015 Luca Boschetto, who leads the project and website *Italiano Inclusivo: Una lingua che non discrimina per genere*, had suggested the use of the schwa (ə) for the singular and the long schwa (ɜ) for the plural.[77] The idea of using the schwa instead of the overextended masculine attracted the interest of Silvia Costantino and Francesco Quatraro of the publishing house effequ, and they decided to adopt it in *Il contrario della solitudine: Manifesto per un femminismo in comune* (2020), a translation by Eloisa Del Giudice of Marcia Tiburi's *Feminismo em comum: Para todas, todes e todos* (2018). In this pamphlet of intersectional feminism,[78] written in Brazilian Portuguese, the author uses the gender-neutral ending *-es* (*todes*) in addition to the masculine and feminine plural *-os, -as* (*todos*, *todas*). Along with Del Giudice, effequ chose to use *tuttə* together with *tutti, tutte*. A footnote at the first occurrence justifies their

[75] Vera Gheno and Bruno Mastroianni, *Tienilo acceso: Posta, commenta, condividi senza spegnere il cervello* (Milan: Longanesi, 2018), pp. 122–32. Cfr. also Benedetta Baldi, *#Opinione immediata: Opinione pubblica, post-verità e altre menzogne* (Pisa: Pacini, 2018); Bruno Mastroianni, *La disputa felice: Dissentire senza litigare sui social network, sui media e in pubblico* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2017).
[76] Gheno, *Femminili singolari*, pp. 184–85.
[77] On the website, Boschetto define themselves as 'appassionatə di temi relativi all'inclusività di genere e linguistica'[passionatə about themes related to gender and linguistic inclusivity] <https://italianoinclusivo.it/nascita/>.
[78] On intersectionality cfr. Barbara Giovanna Bello, *Intersezionalità: Teorie e pratiche tra diritto e società* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2020).

choice as follows:

Per identificare il genere non binario nel libro si è scelto l'utilizzo dello *schwa*, vocale indistinta che nell'alfabeto fonetico internazionale viene identificata col simbolo *ə*. Il simbolo, scelto in luogo delle altre varianti *, *u*, _, *x*, @, è stato scelto a partire dal dibattito attualmente in corso prendendo spunto dalla proposta di Vera Gheno formulata nel suo libro *Femminili singolari* (effequ, Firenze 2019).[79]

[To identify the non-binary gender in this book, we have chosen to use the schwa, an indeterminate vowel that in the International Phonetic Alphabet is represented by the symbol ə. This symbol, chosen instead of the variants *, u, _, x, and @, has been chosen based on the debate currently taking place, and follows the proposal formulated by Vera Gheno in her book *Femminili singolari*.]

After the experience with Tiburi's translation, Quatraro and Costantino implemented the use of the schwa in their series *Saggi Pop*, and a few years later it can be found in twelve of their non-fiction books. The reception has been mixed, but in the words of Quatraro the sales have not diminished. The rules implemented by effequ are: *lə* as the only singular article, *ə* as the only plural article, *ləi* as the only third person singular pronoun, and *-ə* for non-gender-specific endings of nouns and adjectives.[80] Every book contains a detailed note which explains the sense of this choice and its meaning for the publishing house. It ends with these words:

[79] Marcia Tiburi, *Il contrario della solitudine*, trans. by Eloisa Del Giudice (Florence: effequ, 2020), p. 23.

[80] See Silvia Costantino and Francesco Quatraro, 'In difesa della lingua che cambia', *L'indiscreto*, 23 July 2021 <www.indiscreto.org/in-difesa-della-lingua-che-cambia/>, written in response to Erik Boni, 'Critica del linguaggio inclusivo', *L'indiscreto*, 14 July 2021 <https://www.indiscreto.org/critica-del-linguaggio-inclusivo/>.

Sarà dunque un utilizzo in forma di sottolineatura, per ricordare che la lingua può prestare attenzione, all'interno una moltitudine, ai singoli individui che la compongono. Questo, crediamo, rappresenta uno dei punti di partenza per riflettere e far vivere una lingua, che alla fine dovrà essere sufficientemente ampia ed elastica per descrivere un altrettanto ampio ed elastico stato di cose: prestare attenzione al singolo, per evitare dunque di generalizzare (perché lo sappiamo, così nascono sdruciti stereotipi), e per riuscire a essere inclusivə.[81]

[It will therefore be used to emphasise, to remind readers that language can draw attention, even from within a multitude, to the individual persons that form it. This, we believe, represents one of the points of departure for reflecting on and keeping alive a language, which will ultimately need to be sufficiently broad and flexible to describe an equally broad and flexible state of affairs: paying attention to the individual, in order to avoid generalisations (from which, as we know, ragged stereotypes are born) and to be able to be inclusivə.]

The general public became aware of this solution when it went viral in the press in 2020. It started with a short, sarcastic article written by Mattia Feltri, journalist and director of *HuffPost Italia*, published on the front page of *La Stampa*, where those who use the asterisk and the schwa were contrasted with those who continue to use the overextended masculine. [82] Here, I was indirectly brought into play for a speech I had given in Rome, in which I had briefly discussed the upcoming use of the schwa symbol in effequ's books.[83] The article refers to me as 'un'accademica della Crusca [che] suggerisce l'uso dello schwa' [a female academician of the Crusca [who] suggests using the schwa], and

[81] The note first appears in Lorenzo Fantoni, *Vivere mille vite. Storia familiare dei videogiochi* (Florence: effequ, 2020), p. 6.

[82] Mattia Feltri, 'Allarmi siam fascistə', *La Stampa*, 25 July 2020 <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/firme/buongiorno/2020/07/25/news/allarmi-siam-fasciste-1.39122109/>.

[83] The event, organised by Associazione Tlon, was *Prendiamola con filosofia*, Rome, Parco Appio, 23 July 2020, livestreamed on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2pc9lN0SWw>.

the incorrect affiliation – I never had this role, even if I contributed to the institution's publications and website – created a storm, by giving an alleged official stamp to what was an ongoing linguistic experiment. Feltri's piece gave rise to a number of other contributions in the press and social media, including an official reply by Marazzini on the Accademia della Crusca's Facebook page.[84] Beyond my personal involvement, this case is paradigmatic of the fluid and quick interaction between the press, public debates, scholarly writing, and comments on social media, that is not exempt from mistakes, misunderstandings, and manipulations.

The way the information on language inclusiveness and the schwa has started to circulate in the mainstream press has functioned as a perfect trigger for a polarisation of the debate, and as a catalyst for those who are hostile to change, facilitating a violent opposition to the proposal and suggesting a lack of both expertise and common sense in those who experiment with it. On the other hand, most of those using the schwa are fully conscious of the tentative nature of this choice, as effequ editor Quatraro states in a post published on Facebook in response to Feltri's writing.[85] While effequ continues to use the schwa in non-fiction books, another publisher, Settenove, has released a textbook on relational education using the schwa instead of the overextended masculine.[86] In addition, the symbol is being used in comics: it can be found for example in a poster drawn by Sio (Simone Albrigi) for the 2020 Lucca Comics convention, representing a genderqueer

[84] Claudio Marazzini 'Lettera del nostro presidente Claudio Marazzini a Massimo Giannini, direttore delLa Stampa', post on the Facebook profile of Accademia della Crusca, 30 July 2020. See also Antonio Pavolini's blog post, 'Perché la lettera dell'Accademia della Crusca al direttore de "La Stampa" contiene quasi tutto quello che non va nel dibattito pubblico di questo Paese', *Medium*, 4 August 2020 <https://antoniopavolini.medium.com/perch%C3%A9-la-lettera-dellaccademia-della-crusca-al-direttore-de-la-stampa-contiene-quasi-tutto-faf6435e6ce4>.

[85] Francesco Quatraro, post on his personal Facebook profile, 25 July 2020.

[86] *Scosse in classe. Percorsi trasversali tra il nido e la scuola secondaria per educare alle relazioni*, ed. by Elena Fierli and Sara Marini (Cagli [PU]: Settenove, 2021).

person under a banner saying 'Benvenutə',[87] and in the story *La dittatura immaginaria* by Zerocalcare (Michele Rech), published in the magazine *Internazionale* (2021).[88]

The fact that the schwa has reached popular forms of communication like comics is the sign of both its acceptance and the interest it raises across wide sectors of society, but heated quarrels over language and gender develop when the subject arises in the public sphere, in the words of politicians, linguists, intellectuals, journalists, artists. A recent example is the decision by writer, television and radio personality, and militant communicator Michela Murgia, in June 2021, to use the schwa for mixed pluralities in her articles for newspapers and magazines of the GEDI media group, such as *La Repubblica* and *L'Espresso*.[89] Her choice was followed by a vehement and largely uninformed confrontation between opposing fronts of supporters and denigrators, expressed in articles, comments, and blog entries appearing on different media.[90]

Sulis: You have already mentioned a clarification by the Accademia della Crusca discouraging the use of the schwa, even if it was only in the form of a Facebook post. Are there other scholarly reflections on this matter, or is the topic too new and the debate too polarised and ever-changing to allow for scientific reflections?

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[87] Matteo Chiarini Nespolesi, 'Lucca Changes: Sio e Fumettibrutti mostrano il cambiamento (e l'inclusività) nei loro poster', *DailyNerd*, 15 September 2020 <https://www.dailynerd.it/lucca-changes-sio-e-fumettibrutti-mostrano-il-cambiamento-e-linclusivita-nei-loro-poster/>.

[88] Zerocalcare [Michele Rech], 'La dittatura immaginaria', *Internazionale*, 14 May 2020, pp. 49–75.

[89] The first occurrance is in Michela Murgia, 'Perché non basta essere Giorgia Meloni', *L'Espresso*, 7 June 2021 <https://espresso.repubblica.it/opinioni/2021/06/07/news/perche_non_basta_essere_giorgia_meloni-304566404/>, but see in general her column 'L'antitaliana' in the magazine *L'Espresso*. A few weeks after Murgia, the schwa was used also by blogger and diversity advocate Dario Accolla, see 'Ddl Zan, il Vaticano attacca perché teme di perdere terreno', *il Fatto Quotidiano*, 22 June 2021 <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/06/22/ddl-zan-il-vaticano-attacca-perche-teme-di-perdere-terreno/6238224/>.

[90] Cfr. Roberta Marchetti, 'Michela Murgia sdogana lo schwa, addio desinenza maschile nella lingua italiana?', *Today Donna*, 7 June 2021 <https://www.today.it/donna/schwa-cos-e-michela-murgia.html>.

Gheno: If the public debate on the schwa is very lively, the issue of inclusive language for non-binary people has not attracted much attention from scholars. The time of academic reaction is much slower than the pace of discussions, especially when social media are involved. In addition, it is noticeable that the few cases of scholarly reflection tend to develop at the crossroads between the mainstream press, blogs, online newspapers, and social media. Salvatore Claudio Sgroi, for example, has commented against the proposal in a short contribution to a linguistic blog, *Lo SciacquaLingua*, judging it as 'una proposta poco felice legata a una insufficiente riflessione di teoria linguistica.'[an ill-chosen proposal born of insufficient consideration of linguistic theory.][91] Marco Biffi, on the official Facebook page of the Accademia della Crusca, declares that it is 'una questione puramente linguistica sulla scelta di un morfema grammaticale flessionale, in cui il sessismo, francamente – e deve essere per forza chiaro almeno ai linguisti – non c'entra niente' [a purely linguistic question about the choice of an inflectional morpheme, which frankly – and this must be clear at least to linguists – has nothing to do with sexism]. [92] Personally, when I write on language and gender on my Facebook page, the posts are followed by long and articulated discussions, comprising several hundred comments,[93] and they involve people from different spheres: among

[91] Salvatore Claudio Sgroi, 'La "terza via" dell'anti-sessismo linguistico di Vera Gheno', *Lo SciaquaLingua: Noterelle sulla lingua italiana*, 25 September 2020 <https://faustoraso.blogspot.com/2020/09/sgroi-78-la-terza-via-dellanti-sessismo.html>. The scholar comments on a post on my Facebook account, '[Lo schwpiegone. Post in espansione]', 13 September 2020.

[92] Marco Biffi, 'La discussione di questi giorni sui social dell'Accademia in merito alla lettera del Presidente Claudio Marazzini sulla vicenda "Feltri" merita qualche riflessione e precisazione', post on the Facebook page of the Accademia della Crusca, 1 August 2020.

[93] See for example my Facebook post dated 9 February 2022, 'In questo post, cerco di raccogliere fonti che possano servire per chi vuole saperne di più sulla questione schwa', with more than 1300 likes and 290 comments and shared more than 230 times, while the aforementioned '[Lo schwpiegone. Post in espansione]' has almost 700 likes and 190 comments, and has been shared more than 170 times.

them, there are academics, feminist and LGBTQIA+ militants, people who suffer discrimination due to their intrinsic characteristics, but also non-specialised users. The role of these platforms should not be underestimated, as they function as a necessary bridge between academia and the general public.

Yet, despite the initial reluctance, it seems that the question is beginning to be considered in professional contexts. The newest *Linee guida per l'uso di un linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze di genere* published by the Agenzia delle Entrate at the end of 2020, for example, while addressing the issue of feminine agentives, also contain a foreword by Marazzini in which the existence of a non-binary view of language and the necessity of taking it into consideration are both acknowledged.[94] This necessity is not universally accepted, though, and several feminists have declared they are worried about a new invisibilisation of women through the use of the schwa or any other inclusive form. In this line of thought is Giuliana Giusti, according to whom 'la scevà è una vocale indistinta che verrebbe interpretata come maschile per i termini di prestigio ed eventualmente come maschile, femminile, o genere fluido per i nomi di minor prestigio' [the schwa is an indeterminate vowel that would be interpreted as masculine for prestigious terms and possibly as masculine, feminine, or gender-fluid for less prestigious nouns];[95] her opinion is echoed by other feminist linguists and sociologists. There is no evidence, though, that the schwa is interpreted by its users as masculine, and actually, given its resemblance with the *e* and the *a*, many see it as a feminine form. The problem

[94] Claudio Marazzini, 'Prefazione: Intervenire sulla lingua con garbo e con cautela', in *Linee guida per l'uso di un linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze di genere*, ed. by Gabriella Alemanno and Carlo Palumbo (Rome: Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato Italiano, 2020), pp. 11–14 <https://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/portale/documents/20143/1742359/Linee_guida_linguaggio_genere_2020.pdf/>.

[95] Vera Mantengoli, 'Intervista a Giuliana Giusti', *Resistenza e futuro*, Istituto Veneziano per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea, 25 April 2021, pp. 30–33 <https://www.anpive.org/wordpress/resistenza-e-futuro/25-aprile-2021/>.

posed by Giusti has to be taken in consideration, however. Robustelli, in an interview with the magazine *Micromega*, states:

In italiano (e non solo) le desinenze grammaticali non indicano il genere, inteso ovviamente come genere socioculturale, ma il sesso: la desinenza maschile e quella femminile ci dicono soltanto che il riferimento è a una persona di sesso maschile o femminile, e non danno alcuna indicazione sulla sua identità di genere. La morfologia della lingua italiana (ma non è la sola!) rivela il sesso della persona a cui ci si riferisce, non c'è niente da fare. Comunque su un piano di realtà (quasi) *nihil obstat* a questa funzione: la quasi totalità delle persone è identificabile su base sessuale come maschio o femmina. È vero, le persone intersex (1%) restano fuori, ma eliminare le desinenze grammaticali significa impedire la rappresentazione di metà della popolazione italiana, quella di sesso femminile.[96]

[In Italian (and other languages), grammatical endings do not indicate the gender, obviously understood as the sociocultural gender, but the sex: masculine and feminine endings tell us only that they refer to a person of male or female sex, and do not give any clue as to that person's gender identity. The morphology of the Italian language (but it is not the only one!) reveals the sex of the person to whom it refers: there is no way around it. Anyway, on a plane of reality (almost) nothing precludes this function: nearly all people can be identified sexually as either male or female. It is true that intersex people (1%) remain outside these categories, but getting rid

[96] Cecilia Robustelli, 'Lo schwa? Una toppa peggiore del buco', *MicroMega*, 30 April 2021 <https://www.micromega.net/schwa-problemi-limiti-cecilia-robustelli/>. Robustelli's article closes a series of contributions opened by *MicroMega*'s director Paolo Flores d'Arcais with 'L'articolo che volevo scrivere ma che era già stato scritto', where proposals for language inclusivity are defined as the 'ennesima idiozia reazionaria spacciata per progressista' [another example of reactionary stupidity passed off as a progressive stance] (*MicroMega,* 19 April 2021 <https://www.micromega.net/larticolo-che-volevo-scrivere-ma-che-era-gia-stato-scritto/>); the piece includes an introductory section by Flores d'Arcais, 'La neolingua reazionaria che piace alla non-"sinistra"', and a contribution by columnist and writer Guia Soncini already published in *Linkiesta*, 'Rompere le filə | Ogni mattina uno schwa del villaggio si sveglia per imporci la sua neolingua'), followed by a section by Luciana Piddiu, who defines these solutions as 'artifici linguistici' [linguistic ploys] ('Una comunista e femminista contro la superstizione del gender', 26 April 2021 <https://www.micromega.net/contro-la-superstizione-del-gender/>), and by an interview with me (Cinzia Sciuto, 'Lo schwa è un esperimento. E sperimentare con la lingua non è vietato', 26 April 2021 <https://www.micromega.net/vera-gheno-intervista-schwa/>).

of grammatical endings means preventing the representation of half of the Italian population, namely the female sex.]

This perspective seems to assume that whoever uses the schwa aims at eliminating the other morphemes. Yet, the schwa and the other solutions are proposed not in substitution of but as an addition to the existing system, to be used solely to replace the overextended masculine and with the aim of making non-binary people visible in our language and society. Moreover, it should be considered that current languages were born in contexts in which the known genders were male and female, while the reflection on gender as a social construct is relatively recent, dating from the second half of the twentieth century with Simone De Beauvoir and continued by Judith Butler.[97]

Some suggest that the inclusive proposals are impositions coming from intellectual élites, echoing the same accusations that were aimed at Sabatini's work more than thirty years ago. Linguist Giuseppe Antonelli writes, in *La lettura* supplement of *Corriere della sera*:

'La proposta dello schwa o dell'asterisco per rendere l'italiano più inclusivo in relazione al genere è solo l'ultimo esempio; tanti letterati avevano suggerito caratteri particolari per aggiornare la lingua. Tentativi falliti. Perché le riforme non si calano dall'alto'.[98]
[The proposal to use the schwa or the asterisk to make Italian more inclusive in relation to gender is only the latest example; many literati have previously suggested updating the language through the use of particular characters. All have failed. Reforms cannot be

[97] Judith Butler, 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', in *Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century*, themed issue of *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), 35–49.
[98] Giuseppe Antonelli, 'Car* tutt* diteci con quali segni dobbiamo scrivere', *La Lettura* / *Corriere della Sera*, 23 May 2021, pp. 23–24 (p. 24).

imposed from above].

That reforms aiming at linguistic inclusivity would be 'coming from above' is debatable, as the variety of solutions adopted by intersectional feminists, transfeminist, and LGBTQIA+ collectives can be considered the sign of a necessity expressed directly by the communities that currently are unable to fully express themselves. Like Antonelli, Massimo Arcangeli is also extremely critical of the proposal, in particular for the perceived difficulty in using inclusive forms in speech:

E come fare per trasferire quelle forme proprio al parlato? Diamo retta agli **improvvisati sostenitori** dello schwa che pensano, trattandosi di un suono preciso, di poterne estendere a tutta l'Italia gli usi dialettali o di poter prendere esempio dall'inglese, che di suoni vocalici intermedi se ne intende? Siamo di fronte all'ennesima follia di un politicamente corretto.[99]
And how do we transfer these forms into the spoken language? Should we listen to those **who have recently jumped onto the schwa bandwagon/ improvised/sudden supporters/advocates** of the schwa who think that, since it is a precise sound, its dialectal uses can be extended to all of Italy, or that they can use as a model English, with all its medial vowel sounds? This is yet another act of madness in the name of political correctness.

As already mentioned, most of those who are trying to use the schwa are aware of it being an experiment, one that probably will simply open the door to new solutions, serving in the meanwhile as a sort of spotlight on the issue. It is certainly a very difficult but necessary debate, which would benefit from depolarisation.

[99] Massimo Arcangeli, 'Guerra alle desinenze, il linguista Massimo Arcangeli: "La scrittura inclusiva una follia del politicamente corretto"', *Il Messaggero*, 26 May 2021 <https://www.ilmessaggero.it/donna/moltodonna/lingua_desinenze_politicamente_corretto_francia-5982290.html>.

Sulis: Since we opened this conversation by situating the Italian debate on language and gender in the European context, I propose that in conclusion we consider the asterisk, the schwa, and other Italian proposals for a non-binary language as part of a transnational phenomenon. It seems significant to me that, as you mentioned earlier, the schwa was used in an Italian book for the first time in a transnational context, in occasion of the translation of a text of intersectional feminism that already presented its own gender-neutral solutions. What happens in other languages?

Gheno: Linguistic experiments in other languages have been underway for some time, aimed at greater inclusiveness. In English, in addition to the singular *they*, there are experiments with new pronouns, such as *ze/zir*.[100] In Swedish, one can mention the singular pronoun *hen*, which as a proposal dates back to the sixties, but was included in the 'official word list' of the Academy of the Swedish Language in 2015.[101] Furthermore, one can mention the use of @ in Spanish, in forms like *muchach@s*, and the plurals in *e* such as *todes* in Portuguese, as in the case of Tiburi, while in Latin America some prefer to use the *x*, as in *Latinx*.[102] Also resistance to change can be found elsewhere: the Real Academia Española has repeatedly ruled against 'el lenguaje inclusivo' and reaffirmed

[100] Evan D. Bradley and others, 'Singular "They" and Novel Pronouns: Gender-Neutral, Nonbinary, or Both?', *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America*, 4.36 (2019), 1–7 <https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v4i1.4542>.

[101] Giuliana Giuliani, 'Due sessi o nessuno? Proposte per un linguaggio non sessista in Italia e in Svezia', in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, ed. by Somma and Maestri, pp. 186–89; Marie Gustafsson Sendén, Emma A. Bäck, and Anna Lindqvist, 'Introducing a Gender-Neutral Pronoun in a Natural Gender Language: The Influence of Time on Attitudes and Behavior', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015), 1–12 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00893>.

[102] In Slovenia the discussion is also ongoing: see Vesna Mikolič, 'Lo sloveno e la comunicazione attenta al genere', in *Non esiste solo il maschile*, ed. by Adamo, Zanfabro, and Tigani Sava, pp. 73–79.

that the 'masculino grammatical' can and should be used as an unmarked gender.[103] This position is shared by the Académie Française, which recently advised the French Ministry of Education to ban the use of inclusive language in schools, with a ministerial circular letter.[104] In Germany, a petition to ban such experiments was launched by an association of linguists a few years ago.[105] As in Italy, a very common statement in discussions on the matter is that inclusive language comes from the will of an élite, detached from the rest of the society; yet, as journalist and activist Jennifer Guerra wrote in a comment on the position of the Académie Française,

una delle principali argomentazioni contro il linguaggio inclusivo è che le innovazioni linguistiche non si possono imporre con la forza. Ma quando c'è bisogno di fermarlo per decreto, ecco che la legge diventa improvvisamente lo strumento più adatto.[106]
[one of the main arguments against inclusive language is that linguistic innovations cannot be imposed by force. Yet, when there is a need to stop it by decree, then legislation suddenly becomes the most suitable method].

In the meantime, however, people who do not self-identify in either of the two

[103] *Informe de la Real Academia Española sobre el lenguaje inclusivo y cuestiones conexas*, Real Academia Española, 16 January 2020 <https://www.rae.es/sites/default/files/Informe_lenguaje_inclusivo.pdf>, p. 75.
[104] *Règles de féminisation dans les actes administratifs du ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports et les pratiques d'enseignement*, Ministére de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse, 5 May 2021 <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/21/Hebdo18/MENB2114203C.htm>.
[105] Monika Maron and others, 'Schluss mit Gender-Unfug!', Verein Deutsche Sprache, 6 March 2019 <https://vds-ev.de/aktionen/aufrufe/schluss-mit-gender-unfug/>. Cfr. Ian P. Johnson, 'Gender Neutral Wording is Making German Ridiculous, Asserts Association', *DW*, 7 March 2019 <www.dw.com/en/gender-neutral-wording-is-making-german-ridiculous-asserts-association/a-47801450>; Nette Nöstlinger, 'Debate over Gender-Neutral Language Divides Germany', *Politico*, 8 March 2021 <https://www.politico.eu/article/debate-over-gender-inclusive-neutral-language-divides-germany/>.
[106] Jennifer Guerra, 'L'uso del genere neutro non si può imporre dall'alto: Ma a quanto pare si può vietare per legge', *The Vision*, 14 June 2021 <https://thevision.com/attualita/genere-neutro-francia/>.

genders are growing in number and being increasingly granted visibility, to the point that the state of New York included 'gender x' on documents in 2018, and Canada followed suit in 2019.[107] This suggests that the non-binary gender issue is likely to be central in many languages over the next decade. For now, a shared opinion for Italian is that the schwa might become more common in fixed formulas like salutations, or in informal contexts, such as social networks, as hypothesised by some scholars who, in general, do not favour this innovation:

[s]e proprio si vuole usare lo schwa, se ne limiti l'uso alle formule di apertura del discorso, che diventerebbero innocue frasi cristallizzate;[108]

[if we really want to use the schwa, it should be limited to salutations, which would become harmless crystallised expressions]

'l'ipotesi più probabile non è quella di una istituzionalizzazione ortografica dello schwa, quanto piuttosto di una sua diffusione (che potrebbe rimanere ideologicamente marcata) all'interno degli usi frastagliati tipici della rete'.[109]

[the most likely outcome is not the orthographical institutionalisation of the schwa, but rather its circulation (which could remain ideologically marked) within the irregular uses that are typical of the Internet].

On a final, personal note, as an intersectional feminist, I believe that language evolution should go in the direction of giving everyone the opportunity to recognise themselves in

[107] Brooke Sopelsa, 'Gender 'X': New York City to Add Third Gender Option to Birth Certificates', *NBCNews*, 12 September 2018 <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/gender-x-new-york-city-add-third-gender-option-birth-n909021>; 'Canadians Can Now Identify as Gender "X" on their Passports', Government of Canada, 4 June 2019 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/gender-x-documents.html>.

[108] Robustelli, 'Lo schwa? Una toppa peggiore del buco'.

[109] Antonelli, 'Car* tutt* diteci con quali segni dobbiamo scrivere'.

their own language and express themselves fully through it. At present, not all people have the same opportunity to make their voices heard: some are victims of discursive injustice and are not given recognition because they are part of social groups that until recent times have been marginalised.[110] Our societies are becoming infinitely more complex and varied than they once were. As proposed by Fabrizio Acanfora, an academic, writer, and activist for diversity and inclusivity, being autistic himself, we should move beyond the paradigm of inclusivity and think instead in terms of 'coexistence of differences'.[111] Speaking of 'inclusive language', in fact, continues to presuppose a normocentric society, in which 'normal people' include 'divergent ones', and the latter continue to be deprived of agency. In talking of a 'coexistence of differences', on the other hand, we recognise that each person is different from another and interact with them from their respective individual diversity. The need to redefine the same grounds of the debate is expressed with clarity, among others, by Sergia Adamo, who writes:

Nelle discussioni e nelle polemiche sul linguaggio non discriminatorio da un punto di vista di genere si tende, fondamentalmente, a concentrarsi su un'identità culturale già fissata, su una lingua data, su un determinato spazio sociolinguistico. Ma forse alcune domande, e alcune, pur parziali, risposte potrebbero iniziare a essere articolate se ci si spostasse su un terreno di intreccio tra culture, di messa in gioco di spazi porosi, di frontiere dove si ragiona necessariamente da posizioni non statiche.[112]

[In the discussions and controversies about a non-discriminatory use of language from a gender perspective, there is a fundamental tendency to focus on a cultural identity that is already fixed,

[110] Claudia Bianchi, *Hate speech: Il lato oscuro del linguaggio* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2021), pp. 15–20.
[111] Fabrizio Acanfora, *In altre parole: Dizionario minimo di diversità* (Florence: effequ, 2021), pp. 121–26. Acanfora defines himself as 'autistic', according to the 'identity first' approach, while others prefer 'persons with autism', following the 'person first' approach.
[112] Sergia Adamo, 'Tutti femministi: Della traduzione come attivismo linguistico', in *Non esiste solo il maschile*, ed. by Adamo, Zanfabro, and Tigani Sava, pp. 147–62 (p. 147).

on a specific language, on a determined sociolinguistic space. But perhaps certain questions, and certain, albeit partial, answers could begin to be articulated **if the debate were shifted onto ground where cultures intertwine, porous spaces are brought into play, and borders force you to argue from ever-shifting positions // if we shifted the debate onto new ground. On this ground cultures intertwine, borders become porous, and the positions we argue from are no longer static.]**

Going back to the lesson of De Mauro, we need to change our standing point and move from '*come si deve* dire una cosa' [*how we must* say something] to '*come si può* dire una cosa' [*how we can* say something], so that we can finally appreciate 'in quale fantastico infinito universo di modi distinti di comunicare noi siamo proiettati nel momento in cui abbiamo da risolvere il problema di dire una cosa' [in what a fantastic infinite universe of different ways of communicating we find ourselves in the moment in which we face the issue of saying something].[113]

[113] Tullio De Mauro, 'Il plurilinguismo nella società e nella scuola italiana' [1975], in *L'educazione linguistica democratica*, ed. by Loiero and Marchese, pp. 73–85 (p. 85).