



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di studi linguistici e letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

*Language, gender and sexism: an overview
of English and Italian languages*

Relatore
Prof. Davide Bertocci

Laureanda
Alice Arcangeli
n°matr. 1198218 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2020/2021

Contents

Introduction	3
1. Linguistic sexism	5
1.1. Language is not a neutral instrument	5
1.1.1. Language, thought and society	5
1.1.2. Defining linguistic sexism and gender issue	8
1.2. Feminist linguistic activism	10
1.2.1. Historical background: US origins	11
1.2.2. Historical background: the Italian case	15
2. Gender and sexism in the English language	19
2.1. Defining English gender	19
2.2. Inequality at the lexical level	21
2.2.1. English personal pronouns: generic he and singular they	22
2.2.2. Gender marking in job titles	26
2.2.3. Semantic derogation	27
2.2.4. Titles: Miss, Mrs and Ms	28
3. Gender and sexism in the Italian language	30
3.1. The grammatical gender in Italian	30
3.2. Delineation of sexist forms	33
3.2.1. The unmarked masculine	34
3.2.2. The concord	35

3.2.3. The agentive nouns	37
3.2.4. Titles and surnames	41
3.3. The proposals of Robustelli	41
3.4. A look at the issue of Schwa	42
Conclusion	45
Riassunto	47
References	51
Webography	55

Introduction

«Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about. Language is not simply a reporting device for experience but a defining framework for it. »

Benjamin Lee Whorf

Speech and language are flexible and in everlasting motion, under the influence of the passing of time, they follow the transformations of social reality and can in turn condition and accelerate them. They represent both a communication and knowledge device. Language is one of the innate abilities of human beings and displays what is realized in the interaction between individuals. Language is also gendered, so it models the understanding of equality, as it affects our views on women, on their role in society, on what is perceived as “normal” and acceptable. Thus, more or less consciously, the way in which we use it may reinforce preconceptions, inequalities and gender stereotypes, or, on the contrary, it may promote equality between women and men in everyday life. The relationship between language and gender is very topical today in the field of gender stereotypes that permeate our society. In light of the above, the present work is intended as a reflection on the different mechanisms governing the English and the Italian languages and on the ways in which they can be considered discriminatory.

The work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will try to demonstrate the relationship between language, thought and society and how the gender linguistic debate has repercussions in the way people construct reality and their identity. There will also be historical notes about the birth of feminist linguistics that gave rise to the debate on *linguistic sexism*, focusing first on the American reality and then on the Italian one. The second chapter will focus on English grammar and morphology, introducing the concept of gender system in the English language, which differs from the others Indo-European languages since it is a semantic one, so the distinction that speakers make between masculine and feminine in their linguistic practices, represents

the distinction between male and female that they make in their culture. Then will be analysed some evidences of linguistic sexism present in the English language, in particular on the traditional use of *he* as a sex-neutral pronoun (due to the absence of a third-person singular gender-neutral animate pronoun in the English pronoun paradigm) and on the introduction of the use of singular *they*, considered as a non-discriminatory choice. Will also be examined the gender-marking in job titles, specifically when they are gender-specific but they are still used to denote both women and men and cases where the marked terms imply some difference in status. Finally will be investigated the concept of semantic derogation, referring to the numerous male-specific and female-specific nouns associated with different social connotations; and also titles preceding the names of women. In the third chapter, on the other hand, will be spoken about grammatical gender and about gender assignment rules in Italian. Then will be analysed some linguistic phenomena present in Italian language from a sexist perspective, such as the use of the unmarked masculine, which is the generic use of the masculine to refer to both men and women; the phenomenon of the concord, which became problematic when it is masculine despite the woman is feminine, making the woman invisible; the agentive nouns and the widespread tendency to use male nouns to define the profession of some women; and finally the discrepancies generated by the use of titles and surnames. Then, will be described the proposals of Cecilia Robustelli for a non-sexist use of the Italian language. While the last part of the chapter will be dedicated to the issue of Schwa, a recent proposal of solution to the use of the masculine universal, and to the problems it entails. The aim is to demonstrate how some of the language practices considered discriminatory are still common in both English and Italian languages, which being profoundly different and following different grammatical rules, however generate and lead to the spread of gender stereotypes. An equally important objective is to demonstrate how through a greater awareness of the linguistic mechanisms of gender it is possible to use the language accurately and equally.

1. Linguistic sexism

With the expression *linguistic sexism* we mean any kind of language which excludes one or the other gender. Therefore, lie in the definition itself the implications that language has in society and in the construction of gender identity. The aim of the first part of chapter is to make clear the link between language, thought and society, through the theories of de Saussure, the theory of linguistic relativism of Sapir-Whorf and some sociolinguistic researches; in order to address the notions of *linguistic sexism* and *gender*. Then, in the second part of the chapter, will open the analysis of the birth of the first reflections on the question in America and the echo that has had in Italy.

1.1. Language is not a neutral instrument

Language is the reflection of human thoughts and perception of the world, it is not a neutral instrument, because it has the capacity to convey these visions, literally giving voice to our mind, our culture, our way of living. Words are the mirror of reality and have the power to shape it. This initial assumption is fundamental in order to understand how linguistic practices are involved on a social and cultural level.

1.1.1. Language, thought and society

For the purpose of comprehending how language, thought and society are deeply connected, we will refer to the theory elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure, considered the first modern linguist. Linguistics is the scientific study of human language. As a scientific discipline, it aims to explain the linguistic behaviours of human beings and to examine their mechanisms on the basis of general rules. De Saussure, in his posthumous work *Cours de linguistique générale*¹ (1916), claimed that language has both a social and an individual dimension, the first cannot exist without the second (de Saussure,

¹ Course in general linguistics

1970:18). In the attempt to define the actual object of linguistics, he comes to distinguish between *langue* and *parole*, which represent the two different levels of language. The *langue* is the linguistic competence, the whole of the abstract rules which govern the individual elements and it lies in the community in which a certain language is shared. Whereas the *parole* is the concrete and individual linguistic act of every single speaker, so, it is the act by which the *langue* is performed; it puts into action the relations between elements, transforming them into words and instances pronounced and listened. Therefore, language conceived as a system is social, people use grammatical rules and linguistic structures (*langue*), on the other hand, the way they use it in order to create linguistic acts (*parole*) depends on the single individual and consequently, on the influence society exerts on the latter. Language will not exist without a community of speakers, but the use speakers make of this instrument is completely personal, as it is an act of their own creativity, in most cases filtered by the social context. Therefore, all the linguistic choices that are made to describe both women and men are the result of our thought, and our lingual definitions of women are not merely a whole of grammatical rules, but instead, they are indirectly the product of the compelling influence of our society.

This analysis of language linked to society falls within the field of sociolinguistics, a branch of linguistics defined as «the study of language in relation to social factors, including differences of regional, class, and occupational dialect, gender differences, and bilingualism»². Particular attention will be paid to the case of gender differences. Especially noteworthy is the study *Culture and language: what drives effects of grammatical gender?*, published in 2015, that examines whether the grammatical gender of nouns has an effect on how people represent the entity denoted by the respective noun. During the experiment, participants, divided in two groups of people who speak different languages, were asked to attribute a male or female voice to a range of nouns belonging to different semantic categories. The findings reveal that grammatical gender system does have an impact on this assignment but, at the same

² <https://www.lexico.com/definition/sociolinguistics>

time, cultural factors have a much stronger role on gender/sex association: what is important are the stereotypes that a specific cultural group has established for the referents of nouns. Particularly relevant is the fact that «this cultural effect can completely reverse any possible effect of grammatical categorization», indeed stereotypes associated with a biological sex may diverge from the grammatical gender, so the associations are filtered by what people have learned about these entities.

Language is a dynamic construct. If social changes produce respective changes in language, in the same way language and literature have the power to shape our mind and attitudes. This last statement falls within *linguistic relativism*, part of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggesting that the language we speak affects the way we think: it presupposes that grammatical categories, which are automatic and obligatory, lead speakers to unconscious interpretation of experience (Alvanoudi, 2014:8). Language's structure influences thoughts and habits of the speaker, which are usually unconscious. Habits can be changed, but this requires great willpower (Mooney et al., 2011:29). A considerable evidence is represented by the study of the researcher Jonathan Winawer (2007) on the case of the colour blue in English and Russian languages: while English has one basic term for “blue”, Russian has an obligatory distinction between “siniy” for darker blue and “goluboy” for lighter ones. The difference is not that English speakers cannot distinguish two different kinds of blue, but that Russian speakers habitually use this distinction even during a perceptual task not requiring language. In this regard, it is possible to notice that language does not determine in irreversible way our thinking, indeed we can learn to recognise new categories and notions, but we unconsciously form «*habits of thinking*» based on our language, the same we instinctively use when we speak (Mooney et al., 2011:31). This mediation of language in the interpretation of experience is supported by empirical psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic studies, reporting a correspondence between grammatical gender and the representation of referent's sex. For instance, the study of Doleschal and Schmid (2001) show a correlation between the generic use of the

masculine gender and speaker's tendency to interpret referent as male (Alvanoudi, 2014:6).

Language can be considered one of the scopes in which gender stereotypes and prejudices which permeate our society originated. But if that's true, following the idea of linguistic relativity, this system of word and communication, also constitutes a powerful instrument in support for innovation, capable of eradicating old standards and creating a culture and a reality which gives value to both men and women in the same way.

1.1.2. Defining linguistic sexism and gender issue

The relationship between language, sex and gender represents an important research topic examined since the 1970's in the field of sociolinguistic feminist studies, originally in the United States and then in Europe. In order to better understand the notions of *linguistic sexism* and *gender*, it is advisable to remind that with the term "sex" we refer to biological differences between women and men, and that with the word "sexism" we mean everything that falls within «prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex»³. Whereas "linguistic sexism", as explained by Robustelli (2012), is an expression born in the United States during the 60's and 70's, referring to different use of the language on the basis of sexual affiliation⁴. The growing feminization of world and professions that has characterized all the 20th century, has led to linguistic studies of feminist setting, with the aim to analyse the new feminine condition and the topic of woman's representation. What these studies disclosed is the deep discrimination to which women were subjected in their depiction through language, and more generally, in society. Thus, the language resulted inadequate to represent female "gender".

³ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/sexism>

⁴ https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/femminile/Robustelli.html

The notion of gender is complex and permeates any aspect of our lives, since gender differences are at the basis of society. It is a polysemic concept that involves various disciplinary fields. *Grammatical gender* is a device of noun categorization: it constitutes a noun class system of two or three distinctions which controls grammatical agreement between the noun and other components in the noun phrase or the predicate. A specific gender is attributed to a noun according to semantic, morphological and phonological rules. The categorization of nouns in different languages has always a semantic basis, which relates with humanness, sex, animacy and sometimes shape and size. For instance, in some Dravonian languages nouns denoting male humans belong to one class while nouns denoting female humans and other entities belong to another class (Corbett, 1991). The grammaticization of sex, which is just one of the various semantic distinctions, constitutes an important and special feature of Indo-European languages with grammatical gender (Alvanoudi, 2014:31). Thus, gender is doubtless «the first example of masculine/feminine linguistic dichotomy» (Cameron, 1985:89). Below are reported the origins and the definition of gender according to the Oxford dictionary:

«The word gender has been used since the 14th century as a grammatical term, referring to classes of nouns designated as masculine, feminine, or neuter in some languages. The sense denoting biological sex has also been used since the 14th century, but this did not become common until the mid-20th century [...]».

It follows that the original meaning of the term is due to linguistic topic and only in the following centuries will be attributed to social and biological issues. Its application in grammar derives from the linguistic scholarship of ancient Greek – it is usually credited to Protagoras (V century B.C.). Many Indo-European languages are grammatical gender languages, so classes of nouns and pronouns do not depend on the meanings of elements that compose them but, on their form and on their behaviour when it comes to the agreement of adjective, articles and pronouns (the technical term for this is “concord”). So, linguistic gender divides nouns in *masculine*, *feminine* and *neuter*, that do not concern the actual meaning of a word, but are references to formal

properties, and any language has its own classification. Latin and Greek had three genders, language such as Italian has two genders, while in English, on the other hand, gender is determined not by form but by meanings: a word that refers to an inanimate object will always be neuter, while a word referring to an entity with a biological sex will be masculine or feminine (Cameron, 1985:90). Thus, to some extent, grammatical gender shows a relation to meaning and in particular to the semantic distinction of sex. The word “gender” is also used to describe the social categories of women and men: *lexical gender* indeed indicates the lexical marking of nouns as female or male (Alvanoudi, 2014:2).

«Either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones [...]»⁵.

So, while the word “sex” indicates male and female biological differences, the word “gender”, in its lexical connotation, is referred to the division carried out by society. The distinction between men and women on the social level does not depend on the sexual differences, but on the way in which society interprets them. The male social predominance would have resulted in an androcentric system: in its cultural aspect, grammatical gender assigns sex to referents and supports a social hierarchy according to which men represents the norm and women the subordinate “other” (Alvanoudi, 2014:40). The process of enhancement of feminine requires to overpass a model that had spread in the early 20th century (moment in which women had reached an institutional or professional role comparable to the male one), the one of *sexual equality*, which provided for the homologation of female to male. The purpose is to reach an equality that recognizes the differences, discouraging the interpretation of masculine as universal and giving value to feminine specificity (Robustelli, 2018:17). The gender issue is at the base of the different feminist reflections which culminated in the *second-wave feminism*.

⁵ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/gender>

1.2. Feminist linguistic activism

Firstly, it is necessary to specify what is meant for *feminism*, generically intended. According to Cameron, it represents a movement for the full humanity of women, indeed in her work *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985) she claimed that the objective of this movement is the «creation of a world in which one gender does not set the standard of human value». The transformation of the role of women that took place during the twentieth century has required to face issues of gender inequality legal and administrative. From feminism movement then developed a branch of linguistics called *feminist linguistics*. The inadequate linguistic representation of women is the cornerstone of the awareness on the existence of linguistic sexism and of the born of feminist linguistic activism. Feminist linguistics proposes as a purpose the analysis of gender and linguistic discrimination, with the aim to open a debate that has implications at a social and ideological level, and not merely at the academic one.

« [...] I believe that feminists must have faith in the capacity of language to empower as well as oppress; linguistic resources may very often have been denied us and used against us, but there is nothing immutable about this or any other form of sexism. To place women ‘outside language’ in our theories is to deny ourselves something of crucial importance: the power to shape new meanings for a different and better world. »

(Deborah Cameron, 1985)

1.2.1. Historical background: US origins

The linguistic activism was born in the context of the second-wave feminism in 1960s and 70s in the United States, when linguists began to consider the relationship between language, communicative practice and gender. Indeed, with the expression *linguistic sexism*, reference is made to the scope of the studies on the manifestation of sexual difference in language⁶. The first studies concerned the different use men and

⁶ https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/femminile/Robustelli.html

women make of the language, on the basis of their social positions. One of the first feminist interested in this field was Robin Lakoff, who in her essay *Language and Woman's Place* (1973) stated that the different way of speaking is a direct reflection of male predominant position over women. Indeed, they would use a *powerless language*, which is a sign of insecurity and minor social importance (Robustelli, 2018:18). These early analyses on linguistic behaviour are followed by investigations of the ways in which language is used to refer to both sexes. They began to wonder whether gender-building mechanisms were predetermined in the linguistic system or if, on the contrary, they were the product of speaker's individual choices.

As a consequence of the new female consciousness, the fact that women's portrayal in language use was biased and discriminatory started to be exposed. The existence of linguistic sexism in the English language has been disclosed in the first place by Spender (1980) and Lakoff (1975), whose works are still considered fundamental in the field of gender studies. The first pointed to the role of language in constructing a man-made worldview; while the second identified the negative representation of female sex in the lexicon, stating that language contributes to legitimizing power at a social level (Alvanoudi, 2014:4). Most feminist language activists consider linguistic change as a measure for raising awareness of gender bias and achieve a more balanced representation of sexes in language, indeed many of them subscribe to a view of language that takes its origins from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which language shapes and reflects social reality (and vice versa). Some similarity across speech communities as well as across languages were disclosed by their analyses into the representation of women and men, in particular the "asymmetrical treatment" of masculine and feminine concept is one of the most representative features, shared by many languages. This characteristic consists in considering the male as the prototype for human representation and consequently it reduces the female to the status of "subsumed". Generic references in many languages occurs through the use of forms with the representation of the maleness, gaining as a result a language with an invisible female: women are made visible, or "marked", by means of a morphological process

and their linguistic construction is a derivative of male. At the same time the lexical structure of many languages is affected by this asymmetry, are common indeed the absence of words to denote women in a variety of occupations and professions and also the absence of words to denote men adopting roles generally considered as female-dominant. This semantic asymmetry in the representation of women and men in language is a direct expression of their perception in society: what feminist activists wanted to point out is that woman is seen as a sexual being dependent on man, while in contrast man is a human being whose existence does not need reference to anyone but himself (Pauwels, 2003:553). But even the opposite case, characterized by an excess of visibility was considered problematic, because the accentuation of physic peculiarities to the detriment of the intellectual one and the use of linguistic stereotypes contribute in the creation of a negative image of women (e.g., “A woman’s advice is never to seek”) (Robustelli, 2018:20).

Moreover, feminist activities bared men's status as language regulators, so as to the gendered nature of many linguistic rules and norms: men are always been norm-makers and male's authority in the writing of normative grammars and language institutions, as has been demonstrated by many scholars, contributed to control women's language behaviours over the past centuries. For instance, in Ann Bodine's *Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar* (1975) is presented the use of sex-indefinite *He* as generic pronoun as an outcome of male regulation. Similarly, Dennis Barons *Grammar and gender* (1986) traced the history of sexual bias in English grammar and exposed male-centric practices. So, the first threat to male dominance in language regulation were women's formulation of proposals and guidelines for non-sexist language use, in an attempt to become norm-markers themselves, and consequently their spread across a speech community (Pauwels, 2003:551). Their researches gave rise to proposals for language reform, also known as feminism language planning, an active effort to change how language represents and reproduces gender. It is not just focused on women representation, but rather on a desire for language to support and reflect equality between women and men.

Activists' opinions on strategies for achieving linguistic change are various and are shaped by many factors, first among everything the nature and type of language, in particular language that have grammatical gender and language that do not. Their motivation for change may lie in the desire to expose patriarchal bias in language or it may be driven by the belief that a change in the language system is a direct reflection of social change. One strategy favoured by reformers wishing to expose the sexist nature of the current language system is *linguistic disruption*: in order to make people aware of the multiple forms of discrimination the female is subjected in language, a disruption is achieved breaking morphological rules or grammatical convention (as in the case of "herstory" instead of "history" or the generic use of the pronoun *she*). But more prominent are feminist activists who believe that linguistic equality of the sexes is achievable with linguistic amendments to existing forms, specifically, through the strategies of *gender-neutralization* and *gender-specification*. The first aims to minimize the linguistic expression on gender (an example in English is the elimination of female occupation nouns with suffixes such as -ess, -ette, -trix), whereas the second aims to explicit the gender-marking in human referent (an example in English is the use of *he or she* to replace the generic use of *he*). Both gender-neutralization and gender-specification's strategies are applied mainly at word level, it is believed indeed that changes at this level may lead to elimination of sexism at discourse level. There are different factors that play a role in the choice of the principal strategies: social factors deal with the fact that the strategy should achieve linguistic equality by both effecting and reflecting social change (occupational nomenclature), at the same time linguistic factors focus on the typological and structural feature of a language and also on the issue of linguistic prescriptivism. Activists in general may differ in the priority they assign to concepts of social effectiveness and of linguistic viability. In the case of English language there has not been any debate on the selection, because gender-neutralization is the favoured strategy, but there have been discussions about the selection of alternative forms within this own strategy: for example, the possibility for

generic *He* to be replaced by pronouns such as singular *They*, generic *She*, *It*, *One* or by a new pronoun (Pauwels, 2003:556).

Furthermore, feminist linguistic activism brought to light the problem of gender bias in language and created actual guidelines for non-sexist language use. Their early targets were agencies such as publishers of educational material, the print media and legislative writing, because of their key role in shaping women and men representation and their power of dissemination through a community. To claim changes, they also used the introduction of legislative measures, such as *Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Acts* that points out the need to amend professional and occupational nomenclature (Pauwels, 2003:561). It has been followed by various non-sexist language policies and guidelines that today are employed in many public and private agencies both in English-language and European countries.

So, to summarize, the awareness on linguistic sexism was born in the wake of second-wave feminism, when linguists started to deal with the language in a gender perspective; analyzing in the one hand the pragmatic-discursive differences in the use of the language between man and woman, on the other bringing to light real sexist forms in the linguistic use. Moreover, recently there has been a turn in language and gender research: gender is no longer treated as a given attribute preexisting with respect to language and society, but the practices that repeatedly produce and preserve gender as a fluid category started to be considered (Alvanoudi, 2014:5). As pointed out by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), it is not possible to separate gender from the other aspects of social identity, such as age, class or ethnicity. Linguists have shifted their point of interest from question of representation to construction at the level of interaction and from language system to language use.

1.2.2. Historical background: the Italian case

Exposition and analysis of sexism in language through feminist linguistics movement continued throughout the 80's and 90's in many countries, including Italy. Here the notions of linguistic sexism and gender have been introduced, on the heels of US studies, by the work *L'infinito singolare. Considerazioni sulle differenze sessuali nel linguaggio* (Violi, 1986). According to her analysis, grammatical gender, which represents both a linguistic and a semantic category, symbolizes the sexual difference. But this difference is not based on equality: female grammatical gender exists as a negation of the male one. Moreover, male gender is also used to indicate a neuter and universal subject. Women are confined in the status of “object” and are unable to reach the position of “subject”, except through the male form; and the difference between sexes in the way of speaking depends on this fact: the inadequacy of language towards women is thus demonstrated. Other examples of how the Italian language discriminates against women are represented by concepts of grammatical dissymmetry, which manifests itself when a term has only the masculine form; and that of semantic dissymmetry, that is when a pair of terms is apparently equivalent but the female form has a negative connotation compared to the male one (e.g., “cortigiano”/“cortigiana”) (Robustelli, 2018:25). The so called “neutral masculine” was used indifferently to indicate both women and men, for instance in the case of prestigious professional positions, for a woman to be called “chirurgo”, “direttore”, “architetto”, was a prove of the long-awaited equality; while on the contrary, positions considered less prestigious could be declined to female (e.g., “maestra”, “impiegata”, “operaia”). Violi’s work opened the debate on the relationship between language and gender bias, but the need for a linguistic change that could express equality between men and women is due, in the case of Italy, to the State. Indeed, it was the Italian State that supported the pioneering work of the feminist linguist Alma Sabatini *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1986). The latter then merged into the revolutionary volume *Il sessismo nella lingua Italiana* (1987), published by the Presidency of the Councils of Ministers. It brings out reflections on linguistic sexism with the aim to

suggest indications of alternative proposals. Thus, the debate widens to the sociolinguistic field and, thanks to the press, begins to involve the general public. The purpose of the work was political and it related to the need to re-establish equality between sexes. But at the time the cultural climate of the country was not ready for Sabatini's proposals: the cultural and scientific assumption at the basis of the research are not accepted, it was considered a mere empirical operation, so the contents of the volume were not considered relevant at the scientific level (Robustelli, 2018:33). And this proves that the State did not really want an authoritarian intervention on the use of Italian language, and that in the end linguistics choices depend on who uses them⁷. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that Sabatini's work has been fundamental to make people aware of the problems in society and of the nature of language. It draws attention on the relationship between semantic value and extralinguistic context and on the power of language as a political instrument in the process of achieving gender equality. In his article *Sexism and the Italian language* (Lepschy, 1987), firstly published in England, Lepschy introduces reflections that link Sabatini's questions to general linguistic problems, such as the notion of markedness, the category of the grammatical gender, the relationship between language and society and the hypothesis that language influences thought (Sapir-Whorf). A few years later, Sabatini's work was mentioned by Gianna Marcato in the *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik* (1988), to promote its dissemination in the academic field. Then, in 1995, the same Marcato organised the first international conference of studies focused on topic of linguistics and feminist epistemological approaches. The use of male agentive referring to women and the need to substitute them with the female form, had become the tangible evidence of sexist language (Robustelli, 2018:45-46). Subsequently many initiatives had been undertaken by the institutions in order to promote a non-discriminatory use of language, such as *Guida alla redazione degli atti amministrativi. Regole e suggerimenti* (2001), *La neutralità di genere nel linguaggio usato al Parlamento europeo* (2008), *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo* (2012), to name a few. Many changes have been observed as the years go by, thanks to the awareness put into practice

⁷ https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/femminile/Robustelli.html

for a conscious use of language toward the elimination of gender discrimination. The Italian language absorbed the sociocultural development in the representation of women, it changed and is changing. Moreover, it is important to underline that the mission of visibility of woman toward language today has enlarged its aims (in addition to the avoidance of stereotypes and dissymmetry), such as the individuation of the presence of male and female in practices and documents (Robustelli, 2018:122).

«Vi sono stati cambiamenti di tipo ideologico per parole riferite a classi e razze discriminate. [...] Molti di questi cambiamenti non si possono definire ‘spontanei’, ma sono chiaramente frutto di una precisa azione socio-politica. Essi dimostrano l’importanza che la parola/segno ha rispetto alla realtà sociale e il fatto che siano stati assimilati significa che il problema è veramente diventato ‘senso comune’ o che, per lo meno, la gente ormai si vergogna al solo pensiero di poter essere tacciata come ‘classista’ o ‘razzista’. Quando ci si vergognerà altrettanto di essere considerati ‘sessisti’ molti cambiamenti qui auspicati diverranno realtà ‘normale’.»

(Alma Sabatini, 1987)

2. Gender and sexism in the English language

This second chapter focuses on the English language and specifically on examples of discriminations arising from linguistic practices. The first paragraph serves as an overview of the notion of English gender, which, not being a grammatical gender, differs from that present in other Indo-European languages (including Italian). While the second paragraph, following several points, offers concrete evidences of linguistic inequality present at the lexical level of the English language.

2.1. Defining English gender

Grammatical gender categories function to classify the noun in a language into formal classes, which serves as the basis for agreement with other elements in the sentence (Curzan, 2003:12). In languages where they play a more important role in the syntax than they do in English, the agreement patterns typically hold between a head noun and various dependents within the noun phrase. The names of gender categories are based on semantic characteristics of the noun classes. The classes of nouns denoting males and females are called respectively *masculine* and *feminine* gender classes. The distinction between sex (extralinguistic) and gender (grammatical), sees the first used to refer to biological attributes and the second to the social construction of sex, and this usage has been incorporated into linguistics (Huddleston et al., 2002:484). Furthermore, it must be pointed out that although noun gender systems often have a significant correlation with the categories of male and female, they do not inevitably do so. The word “gender” derives basically from Latin *genus* (“kind”), and the criteria of distinction between various kinds of nouns is not necessarily the sex of their referents; indeed, some languages distinguish for example between human and non-human or animate and inanimate. In the English language, gender differences appear also in the contrast between the relative pronoun *who* and *which*, where the difference is not based on sex, apart from that between the personal pronouns *he*, *she* and *it* (Huddleston et al.,

2002:485). Among Indo-Germanic languages, as well as in the family of Indo-European languages generally speaking, the English gender system appear as unusual: though historically Old English (750-1100 or 1150 AD) had a grammatical gender system comparable to the one of Modern German, in Modern English the grammatical agreement has been lost, and the current system is, unlike its Indo-European ancestor, based on semantic criteria (Curzan, 2003:12). English differs from Indo-European languages, such as French, Italian or German, for two fundamental aspects: firstly, as stated above, between the head noun and dependents there is no gender agreement: gender in English is not an inflectional category. So, gender classes can be distinguished only on the basis of relations with pronouns, as in the following examples:

- I. The *King* declared *himself* satisfied. [masculine]
- II. The *Queen* declared *herself* satisfied. [feminine]
- III. The *machine* had switched *itself* off. [neuter]

In the second place, the choice of pronoun is established by denotation or reference, and not by merely syntactic properties of the antecedent (Huddleston et al., 2002:485). Therefore, English has a pronominal gender system: the personal pronouns *he*, *she* and *it* represent a triple-gender system and the relative pronouns *who* and *which* discern only between the animate and the inanimate (Curzan, 2003:20). In feminist theory, the social construction of gender reflects a combination of features related to reality and of society attitudes toward those features. The categories of feminine and masculine are not fixed, but they fluctuate through time, contexts and speakers. They are categories conceived by the members of a given society, which establishes what those ideas represent. Given that English gender system is a semantic one, the distinction between masculine and feminine English speakers make in their language is a direct reflection of the way in which they distinguish between male and female and between feminine and masculine in their culture (Curzan, 2003:26).

2.2. Inequality at the lexical level

The two main patterns observed with respect to linguistic sexism in the English language, which will be analysed in the following paragraphs, are the generic use of the masculine and the semantic derogation, which consists in the negative connotation feminine nouns tend to carry (Alvanoudi, 2014:40).

In order to better understand some mechanisms of English grammar, first of all, it is important to introduce the general concepts of *marked* and *unmarked* terms, their difference and their formation. In linguistics *markedness* is the state in which one term is highlighted as nontypical or divergent in comparison to a regular or more common form. Basically, it has two acceptations: the first is purely quantitative, so it is unmarked the category that is more frequent or productive in general; the second is more technical and qualitative, that is, the unmarked element is the one that has more traits, or may appear only under certain conditions. In other words, markedness involves the characterization of a "normal" linguistic unit against one or more of its possible "irregular" forms. Marking may be purely semantic, or may be realized as extra morphology. This can be seen in the "honest"/"dishonest" pair, where the first word is unmarked and the second is marked by the addition of *dis-*. Generally, the unmarked form is the dominant one, often used as a generic term⁸. Gender is morphologically marked in noun denoting female, human or animal, much more than in those one denoting males; based on that, gender-marking is perceived as one of the main examples of sexist bias in language (Huddleston et al., 2002:1680): words referred to men are typically unmarked and considered as neutral, on the contrary those referred to women are marked for sex (e.g., actor/actress, waiter/waitress). This marking became problematic because of the asymmetry, that is the case in which terms that should indicate an equivalent position for women and men are not used in the same way. As in the case of "master" and "mistress", indeed the first means a position of authority, while the second has a connotation of loose sexuality (Mooney et al., 2011:110).

⁸ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100134870>

2.2.1. English personal pronouns: generic *he* and singular *they*

Is defined “singular *they*” the use in English of the pronoun *they* (or its inflected or derivative forms, *them*, *their*, *theirs*, and *themselves*), as an epicene, which is a gender-neutral singular pronoun. According to the Oxford English Dictionary «singular *they* has become the pronoun of choice to replace *he* and *she* in cases where the gender of the antecedent – the word the pronoun refers to – is unknown, irrelevant, or nonbinary, or where gender needs to be concealed»⁹.

The standard British English pronouns have been approximately fixed over the last 200 years. The pronoun paradigm consists in a set of fixed words, so it is an example of closed-class, whose features are person, number, and case marking. The pronouns are marked for person since there is a distinction between the first-person forms used for the speaker/ writer (referred to as *I*, *me*, *my*, *mine*, and *myself*) and the forms used for the second person, which constitute their addressees (referred to as *you*, *your*, *yours*, *yourself*, and *yourselves*). In the end, the third-person pronouns refer to participants external to interaction (*he*, *him*, *his*, *himself*, *she*, *her*, *hers*, *herself*, *they*, *them*, *their*, *theirs*, *themselves*, *themselves*, *it*, *its*, and *itself*). *He* and *him* are sometimes said to contrast in case, the first belonging to the nominative case and the second belonging to the accusative case. This kind of inflection has only a marginal role in English and indicates a pronoun’s relationship to the verb in a clause. The personal pronouns are also marked for number and have singular and plural forms. The only forms obligatorily marked for gender are the third-person singular (animate) forms. Consequently, the use of any singular animate antecedent categorized with a third-person pronoun imposes a choice between *he* and *she*, whether or not the biological sex of the referent is known. The rest of the paradigm is uniform, as the forced choice of gender is not an issue for first- or second-person forms, thus this choice of grammatical gender and its relation to biological sex are anomalous to the rest of the English language. The absence of a

⁹ <https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>

third-person singular gender-neutral animate pronoun points out that proper pronoun selection would only be possible for definite singular referents whose gender performance was already known to a speaker or writer. The doubt remains when one had to refer to an individual of unknown sex or gender (Paterson, 2014:9-10). Traditionally, *he* has been considered as the “correct” choice to represent a sex-neutral pronoun. But, since its primary meaning contains the component “male”, it is an unsatisfactory pronoun to be used in a secondary sense that covers both males and females. This use of male terms to subsume females is a form of linguistic inequality. A significant example may be the case where the antecedent has to do with some kind of employment (Huddleston et al., 2002:492):

- I. *A Member of Parliament* should always live in *his* constituency.
- II. *The successful candidate* will be required to take up *his* duties.

English personal pronoun paradigm is an example of closed-class, therefore, contrary to an open-class (such as noun and verbs), it is used mainly to create grammatical and semantic relations and is resistant to changes. However social, ideological and cultural phenomena affect both open- and closed- classes in the long term. As a consequence of the social significance of personal reference, personal pronouns are particularly susceptible to modification in response to these changes. The development of new pronouns would represent a fundamental change within the system. What is needed is an epicene pronoun. An alternative form to *he* or *she* is *they*, even though it is a plural pronoun, as in the examples below:

- I. «And every one to rest *themselves* betake» William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).
- II. «Had the Doctor been contented to take my dining tables as anybody in *their* senses would have done ...» Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814).

The word “they” as a singular pronoun to refer to a person of unspecified gender has been used since at least the 14th century¹⁰. Moreover, it is even older than singular *you* (only in the 1600s it started to replace “thou” and “thee”)¹¹: there are relations between the development of singular *they* and the development of the singular *you* from the plural *you*, yet no one complains that singular *you* is ungrammatical. Although there is historical precedent, writers like Shakespeare and Austen and many others who used a singular *they*, most language experts throughout the 20th century banned this usage. As a result of the rules of traditional eighteenth-century prescriptive grammar, its use has been criticised and considered grammatically incorrect, so, in order to achieve noun-pronoun agreement, generic *he* was prescribed as the only acceptable form to use as the English gender-neutral pronoun, indeed the masculine form was dominant. But, as suggested by Bodine in *Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar* (1975), *they* fails to agree with a singular sex-indefinite antecedent by the feature of number, similarly *he* fails to agree by the feature of gender. Nonetheless, the two are not socially analogous, since number lacks social significance. The other non-sexist option would have been the usage of “he or she”, but the grammarians considered this solution as “pedantic” and “unnecessary”. Although prescriptive commentators claimed a choice based on the pursuit of logic and accuracy, according to Bodine their choice was dictated by an androcentric worldview (Cameron, 1998:127-128). Subsequently, a change in perspectives, which coincides with the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s–1970s, will lead to the rejection of generic *he* on account of the fact that it is considered an example of sexist language. The movement against sex-indefinite *he* is actually a counter-reaction to an attempt by prescriptive grammarians to alter the language. Thus, became common the use of singular *they*. Effective evidence of this change comes from the work of Pauwels (2001), that suggests a deep decline in the use of generic *he* in Australia on national radio station, from the pre-feminist reform period to the 1990s. Therefore, before the non-sexist language reforms, approximately 95 per cent of all generic pronouns were generic *he*; while in the post-reform period singular

¹⁰ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/they>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/books/review/whats-your-pronoun-dennis-baron.html>

they become the most frequently used generic pronoun recording a 75 per cent usage rate (Pauwels, 2003:563). The data collected by Paterson in *British Pronoun Use, Prescription and Processing* (2014) shows that the rejection of generic *he*, which was demanded by Bodine and others opposed to the notion of a generic masculine, has occurred; and that singular *they* is the epicene pronoun of British English and is being used to fill the theorised gap in the paradigm (space for a gender-neutral, third-person, animate, singular pronoun) (Paterson, 2014:169). Currently *Merriam-Webster dictionary* indicates six different meaning of the pronoun *they*:

(1) those ones: those people, animals or things (e.g., “*They* dance well”); (2) used to refer to people in a general way or to a group of people who are not specified (e.g., “You know what *they* say”); (3) used with a singular indefinite pronoun antecedent (e.g., “No one has to go if *they* don't want to”); (4) used with a singular antecedent to refer to an unknown or unspecified person (e.g., “An employee with a grievance can file a complaint if *they* need to”); (5) used to refer to a single person whose gender is intentionally not revealed (e.g., “The student, whose name has not been released, will be disciplined according to district policies, Murphy said. *They* also face charges from outside law enforcement, she said”); (6) used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary (e.g., “*They* were in their late 20s, working as an event planner, applying to graduate school”)¹².

Personal references are one of the most socially significant aspects of language, thus personal pronouns are symbolic representation of the linguistic behaviour of the members of a speech community. As shown by the history of English, personal pronouns can change: singular *thee/thou* for singular addressee reference has been abandoned in favour of plural *you*. If gender-neutral reference to specific individuals does become widespread, the hope, as stated by Sally McConnell-Ginet (2014) is that it will come through widening uses of *they* to include usages such as those mentioned above.

¹² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they>

2.2.2. Gender marking in job titles

A typical example of marked term is the one present in job titles, an area where the case for avoiding discriminatory terms is particularly compelling. It is important to underline that whereas the above case consisted of a syntactic phenomenon, namely based on syntactic rules, this one is part of a different field of grammar, the derivational morphology. Therefore, being a case of derivation, the speakers perceive a strong lexical component and can more spontaneously modify parts of the word. Gender-specific job titles consist of occupational terms that also imply the gender of the person performing those jobs; as in the case of “actress”, obtained through the marker *-ess*, which suggests that the person to whom the title refers is a woman. While, on the other hand, a gender-neutral job title is one that does not imply any gender, such as “lawyer”. Particularly relevant are the cases in which a title is gender-specific, but they are used to denote both women and men, as with “chairman”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “man” (and the suffix *-man*) had the meanings "person" and "adult male" in Old English but, even when used as a gender-neutral term to include women, it was understood to still mainly refer to males. The gender-neutral use of *man* and *-man* declined around the 20th century¹³. Many job titles that included this suffix, for example “policeman” or “businessman” have established a feminine counterpart (“policewoman” and “businesswoman”). On the contrary other occupational terms, such as “doorman”, “fireman” or “milkman”, have not undergone the same process, as a consequence of the fact that in the past those jobs were normally performed exclusively by males. Their linguistic form reflects a discrimination, whose acknowledgment had led to a reduction in their use (Huddleston et al., 2002:1682). For example, in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles published in 1977, they were substituted with gender-neutral terms (e.g., “firefighter” instead of “fireman”). For what concern those terms such as “chairman” or “spokesman”, their definition in dictionaries makes no reference to gender, indeed the first is defined as “A person chosen to preside over a

¹³ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113198>

meeting”¹⁴ and the second as “A person who makes statements on behalf of a group or individual”¹⁵. These definitions are the reflection of their usage; indeed, they are applied to women as well as to men. Thus, in the absence of further information, it is likely that, consciously or unconsciously, the holder of the title will be interpreted as male. The above terms, in particular “chairman”, have been one of the main focuses in the campaign against linguistic discrimination. Consequently, nowadays manuals of usage recommend against *-men* forms (other than in specific reference to male) and these terms are commonly avoided by many organizations and individuals; while compounds in *-person* have been coined as gender-neutral alternatives (Huddleston et al., 2002:1682). For what concern feminine terms such as “stewardess”, “usherette” or “aviatrix”, they are marked with respect to the masculine (“steward”, “usher”, aviator”) both in formally (through the addition of the suffixes *-ess*, *-ette*, *-trix*) and in the sense that only the masculine form can be used generically. Moreover, the marked terms insinuate some difference in status and may also suggest lower standards or achievement. For example, in the case of “actor”/“actress” pair the gender-differentiation is motivated by the fact that women and men normally play different roles; while terms such as “authoress” or “poetess” have long been recognised as derogatory forms and are rarely used (Huddleston et al., 2002:1681). Particularly relevant is the corpus research on sexist job titles presented in 2015 by BYU English professor Delys Snyder, entitled *A Corpus Study of the Changes in the Use of Sexist Job Titles over the Last Fifty Years*¹⁶; the purpose of the work was to demonstrate how job titles with gendered elements influence us, for example the fact that people assume maleness when they read occupational titles with *-man*, raising question whether or not a woman should do that particular work, proves that job titles affect the way jobs are perceived.

¹⁴ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/chairman>

¹⁵ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/spokesman>

¹⁶ <https://humanities.byu.edu/sexist-job-titles-and-the-influence-of-language-on-gender-stereotypes/>

2.2.3. Semantic derogation

Semantic derogation refers to the process by which a term comes to have negative meaning over time (Mooney et al., 2011:115). In English numerous male-specific and female-specific nouns are associated with different social connotation in the mind of the speakers, as demonstrated by the following pairs of words:

- I. *Bachelor / Spinster*
- II. *Wizard / Witch*
- III. *Governor / Governess*
- IV. *Master / Mistress*

Specifically, taking as example the first case: the word “spinster” in 1362 indicated a person who spun yarn, and as it was typically a work done by women, the term was mostly used to refer to them (Mooney et al., 2011:115). Although both “bachelor” and “spinster” mean “unmarried adult”, considering how these words are used, it becomes clear that while the first reflects a positive view of single men, the second evokes an image of an old and lonely woman. So, this lexical asymmetry suggests that being unmarried is a positive characteristic for a man, but negative for a woman. Furthermore, the semantic derogation of women also involves their representation as a sexual object. For example, the term “slut” has been subjected to derogation: in 1402, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it meant «A woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance; a foul slattern», and only later it become correlate to the loss of sexual morality. It is also worth noting that there is no word that refers to a man in exactly the same way, for example the word “stud” stands for a sexually promiscuous male, but nevertheless it is not negatively considered as “slut” (Mooney et al., 2011:115). Moreover, as shown by Stanley (1977) in English there are 220 words that denote a woman as sexually available, but only 22 that refer to men in the same way.

2.2.4. Titles: Miss, Mrs and Ms

Titles preceding the names of women have traditionally varied according to their marital status, specifically *Mrs* is used in the case of a married woman, otherwise is used *Miss*. In both cases a woman is defined in terms of her relationship with others, in particular men. On the other hand, the equivalent title of the latter (*Mr*) is always the same, regardless of whether they are married or not. Both female terms originated from the word “mistress”, which is the feminine form for “mister”. As in the case of its male counterpart, “mistress” was used to refer to both married and unmarried women; but it has fallen into disuse today and is generally interpreted to indicate a woman who is having an affair with a married man¹⁷ (indeed, the opposition between “mister” and “mistress” falls within the cases subjected to semantic derogation). Feminists initially proposed the use of the title *Ms*, without any reference to marriage as the female counterpart of *Mr*. But then, it has taken on a range of other meaning and is mostly used to indicate a woman that is divorced, a feminist, a lesbian or unmarried (Mooney, 2011:111). As a consequence, information about women will be revealed independently on the title she chooses to adopt. This forced choice to which men are not subjected, reflects a fundamental asymmetry and reveals the importance society pours out on the marital status of a woman. However it is important to underline that it is a case in which the problem is not connected to value judgments, or to a lack of expression of female status, but concerns an asymmetry entirely administrative and in terms of rights.

¹⁷ <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/when-to-use-miss-mrs-or-ms-3514830>

3. Gender and sexism in the Italian language

This chapter is intended as an analysis of the Italian language, with the aim of examining the question of linguistic sexism by scrutinizing some phenomena of the language that may be discriminatory. In the first paragraph is described the notion of grammatical gender, following its historical origins, the birth of the feminine gender in Indo-European and the criteria of gender assignment in Italian. In the second paragraph will be defined different areas, seats of the main phenomena of linguistic sexism. Then, in the third paragraph will be proposed solutions that allow to avoid a non-symmetrical use of the language, coming from the studies of Cecilia Robustelli, linguist who has been dealing with gender language for a long time. Finally, will be outlined an overview of the recent issue of Schwa.

3.1. The grammatical gender in Italian

In many languages grammatical gender is a category typical of the name. In this sense, it is partially different from other categories such as the number or the case, also typical of the name, for its inherent character, rather than inflective. Basically, examining the number and gender in Italian, the difference appears clear: while number can assume two values, singular and plural, gender is not variable. Thus, we have for example “libro” (singular) and “libri” (plural); but the same name “libro” will always be only masculine. In Italian all masculine names as such, constitute a class, opposed to that of feminine names. So, it is said that the gender function is to classify names. In other aspects, gender behaves in a manner similar to number. It becomes evident if we consider the phenomenon of agreement, whose technical term is concord, with the article, the adjective, the pronoun and also partially with certain verbal forms. All this kind of words agree with the name both by number and by gender. Thus, gender also has a second function, different from the one described above: it creates phenomena of concord (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:15).

The Italian language, along with other Romance languages, comes from Latin but it is related with various other languages, spread in Europe and Asia, called Indo-European languages. Ancient languages attest the existence of a three-gender system: masculine, feminine and neuter. Nevertheless, it is important to underline how the categorization of nouns in the Indo-European languages was based first on the animated-inanimate semantic opposition and only later on the masculine-feminine dichotomy. Inanimate nouns were represented by the neuter grammatical gender, while animated nouns by the two subcategories male and female. According to Luraghi (2006), feminine gender arose only at a later time, and it result clear if we consider its own formation: from the morphological point of view, indeed, female names are mostly characterised by the presence of a suffix, on the other hand male and neuter names are not. Originally, the system of gender in Indo-European was based, as mentioned above, on the animated-inanimate dichotomy. The animated gender also included "semi-animated" entities, such as natural forces: they were comparable to animated beings for their ability to move. In denoting some of these referents have developed so-called "lexical doubles": the same referent (e.g., water; fire) can have the form neuter or masculine/feminine depending on the nuance of meaning that you want to express. The use of the neuter emphasizes its static nature, while the use of the masculine or feminine emphasizes its ability to move, shared with animated beings. Luraghi (2006) argues that the classification by animation is then followed by a classification based on the sex of the referents: the animated nouns were thus characterized by the male gender, those semi-animated (such as natural phenomena) from the female gender and the inanimate ones from the neutral/irrelevant gender. It is important to note that at the time of the establishment of the tripartite male-female-neuter some inanimate nouns were already part of the two other classes (male or female) as semi-animated. So right from the start there is a great arbitrariness in the gender assignment, reinforced then by the birth of the adjectives of first class: the morphological aspect becomes therefore fundamental for the assignment of gender (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:103-105). According to Luraghi, the reason why the animated gender has become the gender of male human referents, while that of the semi-animated has gone to delineate female human referents,

probably derives from the concept of "individuation". The male referents were more identified because they were given greater freedom to act, while the female referents were in an intermediate position between the animate and inanimate referents, as the abstract referents were in an intermediate position between the animate and the inanimate concrete (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:105-106). To summarize, the reconstructed gender system for Indo-European consists of three phases: the first sees an opposition between animated and inanimate gender; the second sees the introduction of a new gender, which will become feminine but which originally did not denote nouns with female animated referents; the third sees the birth of the tripartite system typical of the classical languages and of some modern languages (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:90).

Italian is a Romance language that, like the other languages belonging to this linguistic family, has lost the neuter gender of Latin. Therefore, inanimate nouns are classified either as masculine or as feminine, this assignment of gender is then semantically arbitrary and has mostly phonological motivations. Indeed, there is no semantic reason for which "penna" is female and "tavolo" male. Different is the situation for nouns that have female human referents, which take female grammatical gender (e.g., nonna, madre), or for those with male referents that take male gender (e.g., nonno, padre). In these cases, the grammatical and the referential gender (sex of the referent) coincide (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:19). There are very few exceptions to this rule, defined as "irrelevant" by Robustelli at the system level; an example are the terms "guardia" or "sentinella", which are feminine, even if they have mostly male referents (Robustelli, 2012). Therefore, in Italian there is not a single criterion for the assignment of gender, usually the semantic criterion for human referents and for some animals is exploited, while for inanimate referents and for most animals the gender is semantically arbitrary and may have a morphological/phonological motivation.

In Italian there are no real productive morphological rules in the assignment of gender, however the gender (male or female) is visible from the morphological point of view. It is reported morphologically by inflectional suffixes (the endings), derivative

suffixes (such as *-tore/-trice*) and satellite elements that agree with the name (Robustelli, 2012). According to Marcato and Thüne (2002), the inflectional morphology of Italian and the phenomenon of concord make it possible to distinguish the masculine from the feminine. In some cases we speak of "motion", with this term we refer to the processes of word formation for animated referents: from the noun that refers to a particular sex the corresponding noun but of the opposite sex is formed (most female names are derived from male ones)¹⁸. As for the inflectional morphology of nouns with human referents, the linguists Marcato and Thüne (2002) divide the nouns into three subtypes. The first subtype consists of a closed class of nouns whose referential (semantic) gender is expressed by lexical roots associated with the corresponding grammatical gender; it includes many nouns of kinship and adjective nouns: “nuora-*e*”; “madre-*i*” (female) and “genero-*i*”; “padre-*i*” (male). The second type is identified by those “mobile gender nouns” characterized by the fact that the lexical root is the same for both the female and the male form and the gender is reported on semantic criteria through the suffixes: *-a* (feminine), *-o* (masculine) for the singular form and *-e* and *-i* respectively for the plural form. They belong to this subclass nouns such as “ragazz-*a/-e*”, “ragazz-*o/-i*”; “impiegat-*a/-e*”, “impiegat-*o/-i*”. Male nouns also come out in the singular in *-e* such as “signor-*e/-i*”. Finally, the third group includes all those names whose nominal root does not allow the use of the above suffixes to signal the genus. In this case it is the satellite elements (adjectives, determinants) that signal the referential gender of the noun. An example is the noun “nipote-*i*” where the sex of the referent can be reported, for example, by the article: “la nipote” (female gender) or “il nipote” (male gender). Again, many agentive nouns can be found in this class (Marcato; Thüne, 2002: 190-191).

3.2. Delineation of sexist forms

Four main macro-areas will be analysed in the following paragraphs: the use of generic masculine, the concord, the issue of the agentive nouns and finally the titles.

¹⁸ <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mozione>

3.2.1. The unmarked masculine

One of the phenomena found in the Italian language is the so-called use of *unmarked masculine* (or *inclusive masculine/generic masculine/neutral masculine*). This term refers to a widespread belief that masculine can be used to refer, in a generic way, to male or female referents (Cardinaletti; Giusti, 1991:178). This use neutralizes the female referents because it coincides with the referential masculine and therefore the interpretation will be ambiguous:

- I. *I professori si stanno battendo per un aumento di stipendio.*
- II. *Il presidente della commissione deve essere un professore.*
- III. *Domani sciopereranno i professori, non i bidelli¹⁹.*

The interpretation of the above examples underlines how the unmarked masculine always implies male referents but not necessarily it entails female referents.

Sabatini identifies, among the forms of unmarked masculine, also the use of some masculine nouns with a generic value such as "uomo" or "uomini". For example, the phrase: "I diritti dell'uomo", should be transformed, in her opinion, into: "I diritti umani"/"I diritti della persona"/"I diritti degli esseri umani". This suggestion might seem "excessive", however, as Cardinaletti and Giusti (1991) point out, the noun "uomo" can not always be read in the sense of "human being" or "person", because it would give rise to agrammatical phrases such as: "*Maria è un uomo molto bello" (Cardinaletti; Giusti, 1991:179). Nonetheless, Lepschy (1989) does not fully agree, indeed he argues that the human being is naturally led to distinguish the opposites in marked-unmarked; for this reason, he believes that the markedness, even at the level of gender, can not and should not be eliminated. However, the proposals of Alma Sabatini, the arguments of Cardinaletti and Giusti and the most recent *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (2018) of Robustelli, should not be

¹⁹ Examples taken from Cardinaletti; Giusti (1991:178-179)

read as prescriptive rules aimed at changing the language in its entirety, but as suggestions for a use of the language that does not make the referents ambiguous, this especially in administrative texts, public notices and legal texts where often the woman is made invisible.

Some characteristics of the unmarked masculine are inextricably linked to the phenomenon of the concord which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

3.2.2. The concord

In Italian, from a morphosyntactic point of view, gender is reported through the phenomenon of concord. An element called *controller* determines the form of the elements associated with it called *target* elements: articles, adjectives, nouns, pronouns, participles (these elements can be part of the same syntagma or not) (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:21). Thus, while nouns have a gender value inherent in the lexicon, articles and adjectives have neither gender nor inherent number and these values are determined on the basis of the head of the nominal syntagma to which they refer. Italian is pervasive in the concord system, affecting determiners and name modifiers, unlike the English language, in which the agreement by gender occurs only with pronouns and possessive third-person singular. Therefore, in Italian we have:

I. *Ieri i miei amici sono usciti di casa alle nove e sono tornati stanchi verso sera.*

Where the name “amici”, which is masculine, causes concord in gender (as well as in number) with the article “i”, the possessive “miei”, the verbal forms “usciti” and “tornati” and the predicative adjective “stanchi”. While in its English translation, this sentence does not present any phenomenon of concord, since in the plural the gender is not specified even for the anaphoric pronoun:

II. *My friends left home at 9 a.m. and come back tired in the evening*²⁰.

In Italian, the terms referring to a human being of female sex are of female grammatical gender and those referring to a male human being are of male gender. The article "agrees" on gender (and number) with the name to which it refers. So, as it is said "la maestr-a" and not "la maestr-o", then it will say "la ministr-a" and not "la ministr-o". The assignment and the gender agreement in Italian do not happen according to random mechanisms or the free choice of the speaker, but connect to rules (semantic and formal) of general scope that are acquired from early childhood (Robustelli, 2018). As described above, the gender value can be assigned to the controller name on the basis of characteristics of the referent to which the name refers, or on the basis of morphological or phonetic characteristics of the name itself. The concord of gender, namely, the attribution of a gender value to target elements, may be based on the gender class to which the controller name belongs or on the characteristics of the referent to which the controller refers. Corbett (1991) names the first mode of concord *syntactic concord* and the second *semantic concord* (Luraghi; Olita, 2006:125).

In some cases, the concord makes the interpretation of the sentence ambiguous, from a gender perspective, or contributes to creating sexist forms. The most common situation in cases of agreement between controller nouns and target elements is that in which the controller noun (with animated referents and indicating positions, roles, etc) is masculine despite the referent is feminine and consequently the concord with the target elements is masculine. As in the example below:

I. *Paola Galvani è il nuovo sindaco di Rottofreno*²¹.

It should firstly be noted that the example is characterized by a syntactic concord, to use the denomination of Corbett, it is used the male noun "sindaco" with male concord of

²⁰ Examples taken from Luraghi;Olita (2006:21)

²¹ <https://www.ilpiacenza.it/politica/a-rottofreno-il-nuovo-sindaco-e-paola-galvani.html>

the target element, despite the referent being a woman. Then the male grammatical gender is assigned to a controller whose gender of the referent is not explained or is not known, the natural interpretation is that the referent is male, even if in reality we are referring to a woman. In these cases, the woman is made invisible, "obscured", for an improper use of an agentive noun used in the masculine and relative masculine concord. The agentive nouns will be defined and discussed more thoroughly in the next paragraph.

3.2.3. The agentive nouns

The *agentive nouns* are the kind of nouns that are used to classify people who participate in certain functions, positions, professions, roles, etc. This kind of noun is one of the main problems in the field of linguistic sexism because there is still a tendency to use male nouns to define the profession of some women, especially with regard to the most prestigious professions. As Cardinaletti and Giusti (1991) argue, this probably belongs to a cultural heritage for which women had no access to such positions. Today, however, things have changed and many women hold professions once the preserve of men. Therefore, the creation of a "feminine" term that did not exist before is due on the one hand to the extra-linguistic changes and on the other to the fact that this term respects the rules of word formation of the Italian language. Many (including many women) prefer to use the masculine form in designating female positions, this is due to different reasons: the prestige associated with it, the apparent neutrality of the masculine noun (which has already been discussed in the previous paragraph) and the apparent "ugliness" of the feminine noun, indeed we often hear that "it sounds bad". As regard this last question, the hesitation in the use of the feminine with respect to the male form can be explained by the fact that every neologism (including the feminine agentive nouns) before becoming "spontaneous" must acclimatize in the lexicon and this takes time (Robustelli, 2012).

There are three different procedures for the formation of adjective nouns: derivation, composition and modification by the addition of “*donna*”. Agentive nouns can be derived from verbs, nouns, or adjectives. When the origin of the noun is a verb, the base from which the derivation takes place can be the gerund (e.g., *diplomanda/o*), the present participle (e.g., *la presidente/ il presidente*) or the past participle (e.g., *delegata/o*) (Marcato; Thüne, 2002:192).

Derived agentive with the gender suffixes *a-* and *o-*:

- I. *La giornalista / il giornalista*
- II. *La pizzaiola / il pizzaiolo*
- III. *L'ortolana / l'ortolano*
- IV. *La panchinara / il panchinaro*
- V. *La postina / il postino*

Derived agentive with the gender suffixes *a-* and *e-*:

- I. *La consigliera / il consigliere*
- II. *La pastora / il pastore*
- III. *L'assessora / l'assessore*

Note how all the agentive suffixes allow a regular formation of the masculine-feminine through the endings *a/o-* and *a/e-*. There are nouns in which gender distinction occurs only through article *il* or *la*; they are characterized by *-e* or *-a* endings for both genders and use the following agentive suffixes: *-iatra*, *-ista*, *-ante* (e.g., *psichiatra*, *farmacista*, *insegnante*). Also, within the derivation process there are two other suffixes: *-tore/-trice*, that create nouns such as “*at-tore*”/“*at-trice*” or “*ambascia-tore*”/“*ambascia-trice*”. Finally, *-essa* is the only female suffix not to have a male equivalent; we find it in pair attested as “*professor-e*”/“*professor-essa*” or “*dottor-e*”/“*dottor-essa*” (Marcato; Thüne, 2002:193). In *Raccomandazioni Sabatini*

suggested to avoid the suffix *-trice* and to use the suffix *-ora* instead of *-essa* for nouns as “dottore”/“dottor-ora”. The reason lies in the fact that they have also taken on negative connotations over time. But, as claimed by linguists such as Robustelli, Cardinaletti and Giusti, these suffixes now have assumed a neutral connotation and are preferable to the suffix *-ora*: and terms such as “campionessa” or “dottoressa”, are all productive forms and attested in the use. Another process of formation of agentive nouns is the composition, are an example terms such as “il/la capogruppo” or “il/la portavoce”; Marcato and Thüne (2002) include in this category also those agentive compounds characterized by the male noun and by a female specification of the type “il medico donna” or “il magistrato donna”. Nouns of this kind are to be avoided, especially because, as described above, they can form the feminine regularly: “la dottoressa”), “la magistrata” (Marcato; Thüne, 2002:193-194).

Finally, are relevant the dates reported by the study *Asimmetrie semantiche di genere: un'analisi sull'italiano del corpus itWaCI* by Nardone (2016), the research aims to analyze if and to what extent some of the feminine nouns designating roles and professions are still characterized by a pejorative semantic asymmetry with respect to the male corresponding. The analysis was carried out on itWaC, one of the largest corpora available for the Italian language and focused primarily on the number of frequencies and the locations of the nouns analyzed. The results show that the nouns “segretaria”, “direttrice”, “collaboratrice”, “dottoressa” and “professoressa”, which have come into use by now, are often characterized by a semantic asymmetry with respect to the male ones. Considering for example the nouns “segretaria” and “segretario” and their context of use it is evident that “segretario” is never associated with the subordinate role of person "who in an office, in a company, in a firm performs positions of trust of various kinds on behalf of a superior" but always at the "title of persons who hold high office and perform important functions of public life" (Nardone, 2016:11). As regards instead the nouns “professore” and “professoressa”, it can be noticed a kind of binary opposition between the university world associated with the first and the school world associated with the second. Indeed, while “professoressa” in the corpus is

associated with “italiano”, “storia”, “matematica”, “lettere”, “scuola”, “inglese”, “scienze”, “medie”, and only once with “university”; the term “professore” is placed with “universitario”, “posto”, “ruolo”, “associato”, “ordinario”, “università”, “contratto”, “emerito”, “straordinario”, “ricercatore”, “diritto”, “storia”, “filosofia”, “settore”, “incaricato”, “reclutamento”, “facoltà”. While this semantic asymmetry confirms a social and economic asymmetry unfortunately present in our society, on the other hand probably reinforces it, because if it is true that the number of women working in the academic world decreases as you go up to top positions, the preponderant use of the “generic” masculine causes them to become invisible. With respect to the terms “architetta”, “procuratrice”, “chirurga”, “avvocata” e “avvocatessa” which appear in the corpus in a ratio of 1 to 97, 1 to 339, 1 to 150, 1 to 130 and 1 to 73 with the corresponding male, it can be noted that most of the references are to foreign women who have achieved international fame and success, and only in reference to the word “sindaca” we find the presence of two Italian women. Hence the establishment of a "vicious circle", whereby women who hold prestigious roles prefer to be designated with male nouns because the female correlations are still steeped in lexical meanings that refer to subordination rather than prestige and authoritativeness and, in so doing, help the female forms to remain characterized by semantic asymmetries. (Nardone, 2016:13-14).

In the light of the above, there appears to be no linguistic motivation to the diffusion of male forms in delineating female figures: from the analysis proposed for the agentive nouns it has been seen how they all present the morphological possibility of a female form or how this is signalled by trait of concord. Furthermore, Sgroi (2008) examined the problem of grammatical gender not, as tradition, in the field of inflectional morphology, which considers the feminine as an inflected form of the masculine without a dignity of lemma, nor in the perspective of semantic-referential analysis, but morphosyntax and lexical morphology. The derivation in parallel to which Sgroi ascribes nouns with endings or suffixes according to gender, testifies that the feminine lexeme is a real lexeme, “new” compared to the masculine one, with different

referential and sexual meaning, and that dictionaries should lemmatize and not reduce to simple inflectional form of the masculine (Robustelli, 2018:53-54).

3.2.4. Titles and surnames

As for the titles with which we appeal to women and men, discrepancies emerge: we often find the article in front of surnames of women (e.g., la Fedeli), while we do not find the male article in front of surnames of men (e.g., *il Mattarella); at least in standard Italian, in most dialects and regional Italian instead proper names are normal with articles both with masculine and feminine. This derives from an old grammatical prescription of Italian, but it would be a good idea to avoid its use (Robustelli, 2014:52-53). Should also be eliminated the use of “signorina”, which has no male equivalent, in favour of the use of the only forms “signora” and “signore” that are precisely symmetrical. In addition, the use of the latter should be avoided where it is possible to use the professional title (Robustelli, 2018).

3.3. The proposals of Robustelli

Cecilia Robustelli proposes different strategies to solve the ambiguity or the "sexism" of some of the forms described above. The linguist, in her text *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo* (2012) and *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (2018), focuses on administrative texts and stresses that the choice of one or the other strategy must be based on the type of text in question. In addition to suggesting the use of the agentive noun coherent with the gender of the referent, Robustelli proposes further strategies depending on whether we refer to well-defined people or to more people not defined. The strategies suggested are the following: maintenance of inclusive masculine, visibility of the female gender and obscuring of both genders. The first strategy, that is the maintenance of the masculine inclusive, is adopted especially when you are reviewing texts particularly long: in those cases, using the gender in a symmetrical way for all forms could make the reading of

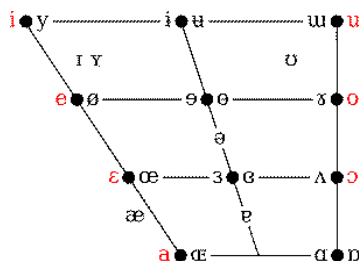
the text more difficult. This can also be useful to solve the question of some inclusive masculine plurals: in some contexts, they are acceptable in expressing both referents. The second strategy, however, is characterized by the symmetrical use of gender as in “ragazz-i svegl-i e ragazz-e svegli-e”. According to Robustelli, it is advisable to use this strategy when the contacts are a small group of well-defined people. This is often necessary in the singular, where a use of the male form alone could suggest that the referent is only male. The last strategy, however, requires that both the male and the female gender be obscured. It is an effective technique when the referents are many and undefined. It can be achieved through various expedients; for example, one can use “neutral” forms as “individuo” or “persona”, which refer indistinctly to men and women or use collective nouns such as “il personale”. Effective is also the use of pronouns such as “chi” and “coloro”, also neutral from the point of view of the referent. Finally, the use of the passive phrase can be a good tip to avoid making the agent explicit and make the phrase symmetrical. Such strategies should not be applied as fixed rules, but rather as guidelines.

3.4. A look at the issue of Schwa

In the ongoing debate that has been going on for some years on how to make Italian a more inclusive language and less linked to the predominance of the male gender, one of the most cited solutions concerns the use of the symbol ə, called *Schwa*, instead of the male ending to define a mixed group of people²². It is a neutral vowel sound, not rounded, without accent or tone, of poor sonority; it is transcribed with the symbol IPA /ə/ (international phonetic alphabet) and in the vowel quadrilateral has a central position.

²² <https://www.micromega.net/vera-gheno-intervista-schwa/>

Scheme of vowels in the IPA²³:



The Schwa is very common in world languages, as allophone (the allophones are the different concrete realizations that a phoneme has in speech) of unstressed vowel phonemes, especially at the end of a word; for example, in English it is the prothetic vowel (position preceding the tonic syllable), visible, for instance, in the “a” of “about”. In Italian it is not present as phoneme (having the Italian standard only distinct and clear vowels); but it appears instead in different dialects of Central and Southern Italy such as those of Naples and Bari²⁴. However, the introduction of a new sound in Italian, seems to be complicated: both for the very rooted habits of the speakers and because Italian is a language full of variants and exceptions; without considering the fact that phonological changes in natural languages do not occur this way. It appears to be more practicable to introduce it in the written language. The linguist Vera Gheno, who has long advocated the need to find alternative solutions to avoid the predominance of male, is one of the main supporters of the use of the Schwa (e.g., the use of “tuttə” instead of “tutti”) inasmuch it represents the middle vowel par excellence²⁵. The use of the Schwa as the final ending in place of the masculine universal is definitely an extremely inclusive vision, because it is a manifest intention of recognition and respect of all people who do not identify their gender as male or female. But the reflection on the use

²³ <https://italianoinclusivo.it/pronuncia/>

²⁴ [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sceva_\(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sceva_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)/)

²⁵ <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/08/28/schwa/>

of this character has lately caused a great stir. In particular, it has been denounced by many as a sound impossible to pronounce, the use of Schwa was considered as a forced imposition and as a pretext to reiterate a way of doing attributable to "politically correct". As a result, Massimo Arcangeli, professor of linguistics and academics, has created an appeal on the web that has collected in a few hours over 12 thousand signatures, also by illustrious Italian academics, writers and political figures, to condemn it as a "disfigurement of the language"²⁶. According to Gheno, the Schwa is first and foremost a political manifesto even before a concrete linguistic proposal. In the sense that those who use it place themselves in a position of openness to the needs whose legitimacy they recognize. that of the Schwa is not an imposition from above, but instead she considers it an experiment²⁷. Cecilia Robustelli, on the other hand, argues that replacing grammatical endings with a symbol would lead to the deletion of gender and number: there would be no grammatical agreement, an indispensable tool to recognize the logical relationships between words within the text. There would be no more textual cohesion²⁸. That its use remains, is limited or snubbed, the facts will say and it will happen naturally, like any other development of language, as it happens with any other novelty. Whether we are in favour of or against the use of this character, we can still find the positive aspect in this debate: it is certainly a tool to bring people to question themselves and reflect on the important issue it represents, to wonder about the way our use of language can be discriminatory.

²⁶<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/02/20/schwa-la-sperimentazione-linguistica-come-fatto-politico-cosi-emergono-altre-soggettivita-reazione-alloppressione-di-genere/6494894/>

²⁷ <https://www.micromega.net/vera-gheno-intervista-schwa/>

²⁸ <https://www.micromega.net/schwa-problemi-limiti-cecilia-robustelli/>

Conclusion

The way in which women are represented through language contributes to shape our vision of the world and of the women themselves. Indeed, it is demonstrated by different theories (de Saussure, sociolinguistic researches and linguistic relativism), that our linguistic use is implicated in the creation of gender stereotypes and in the building of our very identities. The debate on linguistic sexism is not a mere grammatical issue, but it is possible to assert that a poor linguistic representation of the woman does not relate to a grammatical rule of the language, but to a linguistic choice of the speakers, or returning to de Saussure, to a creative act of *parole*. Language creates experience in specific ways, but they can always mutate due to cultural, historical and social factors. Maybe eliminating linguistic sexism is not a tool to directly eliminate social sexism, but it certainly could be a tool to represent women in a positive way. As emerged from the analysis of inflectional morphology and the rules of concord, Italian allows a complete visibility of female nouns with human references and coherent mechanisms of agreement. Therefore, there are no rules of the Italian system that prevent a use of the language symmetrical between man and woman. English is a language with a low gender marking that, unlike Italian, could be considered less relevant for a study on these issues, however even languages of this type are not exempt from issues related to linguistic sexism, thus demonstrating that the theme is not purely linguistic, but has deep social roots (job titles are an example). That of the sexist use of language is a topic even now discussed everyday worldwide and has become a transnational factor of linguistic change, but although the step forwards that have been done, there is still who believe that a linguistic practice cannot create a real discrimination. Old habits are hard to eradicate and changes come with time, what matters is to continue to claim these changes and take an active interest so that they can happen. This work does not want to be a set of prescriptive rules to be applied, but rather a reflection on what a greater linguistic awareness can produce. The aim is to show the linguistic possibilities that English and Italian offer, less ambiguous in outlining and naming the woman. No language is sexist in itself, but it can be sexist in the use speakers make of it. As

Cameron (1985, 90) acknowledges, “in the mouths of sexists, language can always be sexist”.

Riassunto

Il presente elaborato si propone come un'analisi dei differenti meccanismi che regolano la lingua Inglese e la lingua Italiana e in particolare degli aspetti che fanno sì che essi possano essere considerati discriminatori in un'ottica di genere. La riflessione parte dal presupposto che il linguaggio, inteso come abilità innata degli esseri umani, non può essere considerato uno strumento neutro, in quanto il modo in cui gli individui lo utilizzano riflette la loro percezione del mondo, il loro pensiero, la loro cultura. Nel primo capitolo il modo in cui linguaggio, pensiero e società sono connessi verrà analizzato tramite le teorie di de Saussure, alcune ricerche sociolinguistiche e la teoria del relativismo linguistico di Sapir-Whorf. De Saussure, considerato il primo linguista moderno, divide il linguaggio in due livelli fondamentali: la *langue*, ovvero l'insieme delle regole grammaticali condivise dalla società in cui una certa lingua è condivisa, e la *parole*, che costituisce invece l'atto linguistico concreto del parlante, il quale è individuale e frutto di una scelta personale, spesso influenzata dal contesto sociale. I risultati dello studio *Culture and language: what drives effects of grammatical gender?* (2015), i cui partecipanti avevano il compito di attribuire una voce maschile o femminile a una serie di nomi appartenenti a diverse categorie semantiche, rivelano che gli stereotipi associati a un sesso biologico possono divergere dal genere grammaticale, quindi le associazioni sono filtrate da ciò che le persone hanno imparato su queste entità. La teoria del relativismo linguistico evidenzia l'importanza che ha la lingua nell'influenzare il nostro pensiero e presuppone che le categorie grammaticali, che sono automatiche e obbligatorie, conducano i parlanti a inconsce interpretazioni della realtà. Degno di nota a questo riguardo è lo studio di Jonathan Winawer (2007) condotto sul caso del colore blu nella lingua inglese e in quella russa, il quale rivela che inconsciamente formiamo «abitudini di pensiero» basate sul nostro linguaggio, che istintivamente usiamo quando parliamo. Non è possibile parlare di lingua senza considerare l'influenza della dimensione linguistica nella costruzione dell'identità di genere. Le differenze di genere sono alla base della nostra società, la nozione di genere ha infatti diverse accezioni: genere biologico (sesso), genere sociale e genere

linguistico. Fa parte di quest'ultima categoria il genere grammaticale, la cui funzione è quella di classificare i nomi di una determinata lingua in classi formali; la grammatizzazione del sesso, che è solo una delle varie distinzioni semantiche (animatezza, l'umanità, forma, dimensioni), costituisce una caratteristica importante nelle lingue Indoeuropee con genere grammaticale: scegliendo il genere linguistico per nominare i referenti si sta dividendo la società in "maschile" e "femminile", ma anche in costrutti sociali e culturali. La lingua è dunque strettamente collegata alla costruzione dei ruoli sociali e degli stereotipi. Queste riflessioni sono alla base della nascita dell'espressione *linguistic sexism*, che si sviluppa negli anni '60 e '70 negli Stati Uniti, durante la seconda ondata femminista: la linguistica femminista si poneva come obiettivo l'analisi delle discriminazioni linguistiche di genere, portando alla luce vere e proprie forme sessiste nell'uso della lingua e creando vere e proprie linee-guida per un uso non sessista della lingua, le quali ancora oggi vengono utilizzate da diverse istituzioni pubbliche e private. Mentre in Italia le iniziative contro il sessismo linguistico sono state portate avanti dallo Stato, il quale supportò la pubblicazione del lavoro di Alma Sabatini *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua Italiana* (1986). La linguistica femminista ha dunque avuto un ruolo chiave nel rendere le persone consapevoli del ruolo del linguaggio come importante strumento nel raggiungimento della parità di genere. Il secondo capitolo è dedicato ad un'analisi della lingua Inglese e in particolare delle forme linguistiche che possono essere considerate sessiste. Si parte dall'assunto che nella lingua Inglese, a differenza di altre lingue Indoeuropee, il genere non è una categoria grammaticale, quindi le classi dei nomi si distinguono sulla base della loro relazione con i pronomi. L'inglese ha un sistema di genere basato su criteri semantici, dunque la distinzione fra maschile e femminile che i parlanti creano mentre parlano è un diretto riflesso della distinzione che operano nella loro cultura. L'uso del pronome *he* come pronome neutro è considerato uno dei maggiori esempi di sessismo linguistico, in quanto il maschile viene usato in maniera generica; un'alternativa non discriminatoria è rappresentata dall'uso del pronome plurale *they* come pronome neutro singolare associato a un referente animato. Un'altra area di rilevante importanza per la questione è quella dei titoli professionali che

implicano anche il genere della persona che svolge tali lavori, in particolar modo quando tali titoli vengono usati per indicare sia uomini che donne, come nel caso di “chairman”, o i casi in cui la forma maschile viene usata genericamente, come nel caso di “steward”/“stewardess”. Studi sull’argomento dimostrano che tali titoli hanno un effetto sul modo in cui il lavoro in questione viene percepito. Degni di nota sono anche il fenomeno della *semantic derogation*, per la quale uno stesso termine al femminile o al maschile assume una connotazione negativa nella mente del parlante (come nel caso di “master”/“mistress”); o quello dei titoli che precedono i nomi, per i quali le donne devono operare una scelta a seconda del loro stato civile (tra “Miss”, “Mrs” e “Ms”) mentre gli uomini no (“Mr”). Infine, il terzo capitolo si propone come un’analisi della lingua italiana e delle forme discriminatorie che essa può veicolare. L’Italiano, a differenza dell’inglese è una lingua basata sul genere grammaticale, l’assegnazione di genere a sostantivi con referenti umani è infatti resa possibile dalla ricca morfologia flessiva che sfrutta desinenze, suffissi e accordo. Uno dei principali esempi di sessismo linguistico è l’utilizzo del maschile non marcato (o inclusivo), infatti esso è solo apparentemente neutro e dall’analisi appare come i referenti siano ambigui: l’uomo e sempre incluso, ma la donna non è detto che lo sia. Tale utilizzo è strettamente legato al fenomeno dell’accordo, il quale diventa problematico per interpretazione di frasi in cui l’accordo è al maschile nonostante la referente sia femminile, rendendo la donna invisibile. Particolarmente rilevante è inoltre l’ambito dei sostantivi agentivi, ovvero quelli utilizzati per riferirsi alle persone che svolgono una particolare funzione, ruolo o professione, i quali diventano discriminatori dal momento in cui si riscontra ancora una forte tendenza nell’utilizzare la forma maschile per definire la professione di alcune donne, soprattutto le più prestigiose (come nel caso di “magistrato”/“magistrata”). Infine emergono delle discrepanze nell’utilizzo di titoli e cognomi, come ad esempio nel caso dell’articolo posto davanti ai cognomi di donne. Alla fine del capitolo, una panoramica è dedicata alla recente questione dell’utilizzo dello *Schwa* (ə) alla fine delle parole in sostituzione del maschile generico, come proposta per un linguaggio più inclusivo, proposta che appare problematica dal momento in cui non è in questo modo che si modificano le lingue naturali, non esistono inoltre regole di accordo o di uso

dell'articolo. È bene dunque che questo carattere rimanga nel terreno della sperimentazione. Ciò che di positivo è emerso dal dibattito sullo Schwa è la diffusione della riflessione sugli usi sessisti della lingua che esso ha portato. Il dibattito sul sessismo linguistico non è una mera questione grammaticale, ma è possibile affermare che una scarsa rappresentazione linguistica della donna non si riferisce a una regola grammaticale della lingua, ma a una scelta linguistica dei parlanti. Questo lavoro non vuole essere un insieme di regole prescrittive da applicare, ma piuttosto una riflessione sulle possibilità di cui dispongono la lingua Inglese e quella Italiana e su ciò che una maggiore consapevolezza linguistica può produrre.

References

- Alvanoudi Algeliki (2014), *Grammatical Gender in Interaction. Cultural and Cognitive Aspects*. Brill.
- Baron Dennis (1986), *Grammar and Gender*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- Bodine Ann (1975), “Androcentrism and prescriptive grammar: Singular “they”, sex-indefinite ‘he’, and ‘he’ or ‘she’”, *Language in Society* 4(2): 129–46.
- Cameron Deborah (1985), *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. The Macmillan Press Ltd, London.
- Cameron Deborah (1998), *The Feminist Critique of Language*. Routledge, London.
- Cardinaletti Anna; Giusti Giuliana (1991), “Il sessismo nella lingua italiana. Riflessioni sui lavori di Alma Sabatini”, *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*, vol. XXIII, pp. 169-189. Bulzoni Editore, Roma.
- Curzan Anne (2003), *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- De Saussure Ferdinand (1970), *Corso di linguistica generale*. Editori Laterza, Bari.
- Doleschal Ursula; Schmid Sonja (2001), “Doing gender in Russian: Structure and perspective”, in Hellinger M.; Bußmann H. (edited by.), *Gender across languages: The linguistic representation of women and men*, vol. 1, pp.253-282. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Huddleston Rodney; Pullum Geoffrey K.; Bauer Laurie (2002), *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Lakoff Robin (1973), "Language and Woman's Place", *Language in Society*, Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, UK.

Lepschy Giulio (1987), "Sexism and the Italian language", *The Italianist* VII, 1987.

Luraghi Silvia; Olita Anna (2006), *Linguaggio e genere*. Carocci, Roma.

Marcato Gianna (1988), *Lexicon der Romanistischen Linguistic*. De Gruyter.

Marcato Gianna; Thüne Eva-Maria (2002), "Gender and female visibility in Italian", in Hellinger M.; Bußmann H. (edited by), *Gender across languages*, vol.2, pp.187-213. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

McConnell-Ginet Sally (2014), "Gender and its Relation to Sex: The Myth of 'Natural' Gender", *The Expression of Gender*, edited by Greville G. Corbett, 3–38. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Mooney Annabelle et al. (2011), *Language, Society & Power: An Introduction*. Routledge, Oxton.

Nardone Chiara (2016), "Asimmetrie semantiche di genere: un'analisi sull'italiano del corpus itWaC", *Gender/sexuality/italy*, 3, "Themed Section".

Paterson Laura Louise (2014), *British Pronoun Use, Prescription and Processing*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pawels Anne (2003) “Linguistic sexism and feminist linguistic activism”, in Holmes J.; Meyerhoff M., *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford.

Robustelli Cecilia (2012), *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo*, progetto di Accademia della Crusca e Comune di Firenze, Firenze.

Robustelli Cecilia (2014), *Donne grammatica e media. Suggerimenti per l'uso dell'italiano*. Gi. U. Li. A. Giornaliste.

Robustelli Cecilia (2018), *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR*. Ministero per l'Istruzione, l'Università e la Ricerca, Roma.

Robustelli Cecilia (2018), *Lingua italiana e questioni di genere. Riflessi linguistici di un mutamento socioculturale*. Aracne Editrice, Roma.

Sabatini Alma (1986), *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana. Per la scuola e l'editoria scolastica*, Commissione Nazionale per la realizzazione della parità tra uomo e donna, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Roma.

Sabatini Alma (1987), *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*. Commissione Nazionale per la realizzazione della parità tra uomo e donna, Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri, Roma.

Sieghard Beller, Karen Fadnes Brattebø, Kristina Osland Lavik, Rakel Drønen Reigstad, Andrea Bender (2015), “Culture or language: what drives effects of grammatical gender?”, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 26(2): 331–359. De Gruyter Mouton.

SgROI Salvatore (2008), “La mozione: problemi teorici, storici e descrittivi”, *Quaderni di Semantica*, XXIX/I.

Stanley, Julia P. 1977. "Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute.", *Papers in Language Variation*. David L. Shores and Carole P. Hines, 303–321. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.

Violi Patrizia (1986), *L'infinito singolare. Considerazioni sulle differenze sessuali nel linguaggio*. Essedue Edizioni, Verona.

Winawer J., Witthoff N., Frank M. G., Wu L., Wade A. R., Borodintsky L. (2007) "Russian reveal effect of language in color discrimination" PNAS 104 (19):7780-5, May 8.

Webography

<https://humanities.byu.edu/sexist-job-titles-and-the-influence-of-language-on-gender-stereotypes/>

<https://italianoinclusivo.it/pronuncia/>

<https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>

<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/02/20/schwa-la-sperimentazione-linguistica-come-fatto-politico-cosi-emergono-altre-soggettivita-reazione-all'oppressione-di-genero/6494894/>

<https://www.ilpiacenza.it/politica/a-rottofreno-il-nuovo-sindaco-e-paola-galvani.html>

<https://www.ilpost.it/2020/08/28/schwa/>

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/chairman>

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/gender>

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/sexism>

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/sociolinguistics>

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/spokesman>

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/they>

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they>

<https://www.micromega.net/schwa-problemi-limiti-cecilia-robustelli/>

<https://www.micromega.net/vera-gheno-intervista-schwa/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/books/review/whats-your-pronoun-dennis-baron.html>

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113198>

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100134870>

<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/when-to-use-miss-mrs-or-ms-3514830>

https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/femminile/Robustelli.html

<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mozione>

[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sceva_\(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sceva_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)/)