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Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialisation

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Can gender-fair language strategies modulate male bias? A case for the novel schwa-ending strategy in Italian

Supervisor
Professor Eduardo Navarrete Sanchez

Co-supervisor
PhD Marta De Pedis

Candidate: Sara Colombo
Student ID number: 1222830

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

In this thesis we aim to investigate the so-called "male bias" in Italian. We refer to male bias as an unconscious and automatic phenomenon well-known in gender studies, that takes part in creating sexist language. It consists in the speaker's linguistic assumption of the male gender of the person that is being talked about, even when no clue has been given about its gender, i.e. when there is no masculine/feminine inflection to the words (e.g., the applicant; *giornalista* [the journalist], in Italian, which has the same form when referring to males and females). Experts believe that such male bias stems from the so-called "androcentrism", which is the tendency to identify the human male as the prototypical representative of human beings, and to treat masculinity and maleness as the norm.

While conducting research on the topic of male bias in language, it was found that not much literature had been produced in the context of the Italian language that investigates possible strategies that are applicable to its grammar. After introducing the literature that proves the presence of sexist language in Italian, we touch on some of the studies exploring gender-fair strategies in other languages. The goal of this work is to verify whether the use of some language-fair strategies elicits male bias, and if these strategies can mitigate it as compared to a baseline condition. To this end, we took advantage of the study conducted by Lindqvist (2019) that we introduce in a further section and decided to replicate with an adaptation to the Italian Language.

It is especially important to talk about gender and gender-fair strategies at this time in history when such issues are starting to be acknowledged and it's becoming more and more clear how cultures are shifting towards a more comprehensive approach to diversity. The relevance that inclusivity is gaining is reflected in the willingness to create new grammatical tools that would allow people to communicate adequately. The importance of assessing the efficiency of gender-fair strategies in language is a first step towards opening a conversation around the possibilities that arise when languages are freed from past cultural constructs.

1 . 1 A sexist use of the Italian language

Italian is a gender-specific language, therefore it usually grammatically indicates the gender of the subject discussed. However, cultural constructs together with deep-rooted gender stereotypes have contributed to changing the understanding of grammatical rules, for instance masculine job titles are also used to define female professionals, this phenomenon is referred as masculine generic (*maschile sovraesteso*).

This phenomenon is central to the discussion when talking about gender-fair language. A moderate version of the *Sapir-Whorf* hypothesis suggests that language affects perceptions of reality and, ultimately, the way in which people see themselves and the world. These findings have arisen strong interest in feminist domains concerning the use and the effects of sexist language (Parks and Roberton, 1998). Moreover, researchers have discovered that the grammatical gender of a term defining an inanimate object can influence people's perceptions of its masculine or feminine characteristics which cannot merely be due to the properties of the object itself as the researchers used terms that were grammatically masculine in one language and feminine in another (Boroditsky et al. 2003; Konishi 1993). Furthermore, in an early study, Bem and Bem (1973) found that job advertisements reflecting occupational sexrole stereotypes discouraged opposite-sex applicants, whereas those using sex-inclusive terms favoured opposite-sex applications. Thereby the use of the masculine generic diminishes women's interest to apply for non-traditional jobs.

Not many studies have been conducted in regards to the Italian language in order to identify possible solutions to gender inequality. A pioneer on the matter was Alma Sabatini, who has shed light on the use of sexist language in Italian national newspapers (Sabatini, 1987), posing particular attention to the predominance of the masculine gender in the Italian generic third person pronouns (a form also known as "neutral masculine"), that deleted the presence of feminine subjects from speeches. She draws attention to the lack of use of institutional words with a feminine inflection (*ministra* [female minister], *sindaca* [female mayor], *assessora* [female councillor], etc.) In her work she also gives clear indications on how to make better use of the

language by offering a comprehensive list of how to use grammatical gender, in the attempt to recreate symmetry in the treatment of women and men when they appear together in texts.

A 2016 study investigates the use of the terms *Ministro* and *Ministra* (e.i. Minister with a masculine and a feminine inflection) with respect to women's roles in some major Italian newspapers. Findings show that the singular masculine form is widely used to define positions occupied by women (e.g. *Ministro* Annamaria Cancellieri), as well as the plural masculine form and just for the small minority of cases the singular feminine form, providing evidence that sexist language is still strongly present in the Italian media (Formato, 2016).

It seems even more relevant to talk about sexist language in an era of automation of language with the ever expanding usage of machine learning powered translators, so the importance of addressing the systematic and engrained presence of male bias is even more pressing. A 2020 paper published on this topic, provides evidence that Machine Translation systems like DeepL and Google Translate exhibit a statistical bias towards male defaults, as well as a tendency to reproduce gender stereotypes when translating from English, a gender neutral language, to Italian, a gender language (Luccioli, 2020). These results provide significant insights about the role played by language in the social construction of reality, but also underline the broader issue of women underrepresentation perpetuating stereotypes and prejudice against women.

2. Gender-fair language: attitudes and tested strategies

1.2.1 Are gendered languages more likely to show the presence of a male bias?

Since these conversations around sexist language became more and more pervasive, studies have been conducted on gender-fair strategies in different languages and people's attitudes towards them. Since grammar can vary widely between different languages, each country had to face its own challenges to approach the issue. A study that investigates 111 countries reports findings reveals that countries where gendered languages are spoken experience less gender

equality compared to countries with other grammatical gender systems (Prewitt-Freilino, 2012). Furthermore, countries where natural gendered languages are spoken demonstrate greater gender equality. When analysed together, these findings suggest a relationship between the gendering of language at a macro level in terms of gender differences in economic participation, even when other factors that could influence variations in gender equality are present, supporting the idea that sexism is more strongly embedded where gendered languages are spoken.

1.2.2 Attitudes towards gender-fair strategies in language

Deep-rooted biases in gendered languages are evident and are important factors to consider when designing strategies towards a gender-fair use of language. When talking about gender-specific languages there are complications that come with the nature of their grammar.

We can consider a study conducted on Spanish language (Bengoechea, 2014), a gender-specific language like Italian and French, that investigates student's attitudes towards the most controversial verbal forms advocated in Spanish non-sexist linguistic policies: 1) the use of @ (as in *alumn@s* [students]); 2) the use of dual gender (as in *alumnos y alumnas* [male students and female students]); 3) the use of feminine terms for some women's professional titles and occupations (i.e. *ingeniera* [female engineer]); 4) the use of non-sexed collective nouns (as in *profeso-rado* [teaching staff]).

These are some of the considered strategies that are discussed also in other countries sharing a similar grammar. The study concluded that the @ symbol and collective nouns are widely accepted among the participants, whereas the one which appears to provoke the greatest hesitation is the use of the feminine for some names of professions. It has also been noted that in general, the number of female students in favour of the use of those strategies exceeded the number of male students.

In November 2017 University of Padua published the administrative and institutional guidelines to better address gender differences. The objectives of are the one related to fighting discrimination in every aspect of everyday communication and

promote a language able to convey values such equity, opennes and inclusion as a reflection of the institute ethics. Driving these proposals is the belief that language can produce and carry gender prejudice and stereotypes, but it can also be the tool to undermine them, promoting equality and gender symmetry. This step is necessary to meet the needs for gender parity of a changing society, who needs acknowledgment and support from the language it uses.

The uncertainty created by a lack of direction around a fair use of language perpetuates the use of masculine generics to address women. For these reasons University of Padua in its guidelines suggest the following strategies when referring to two or more people:

- Linguistic choices that give visibility to both gender (i.e.*il\la candidato\a*, *il candidato o la candidata* [the applicant in its masculine and feminine declination])
- Linguistic choices that don't allow to specify the gender (*la persona* [the person], *l'individuo* [the individual])

On October 22th 2022 Giorgia Meloni started serving as Prime Minister of Italy. She was the first woman to break that glass ceiling, created by the deep rooted cultural androcentrism that characterises many countries, including Italy. Meloni has soon after declared that she would rather be addressed as *il presidente*, masculine inflection of the president.

This same year Maria Sole Ferrieri Caputi broke the same glass ceiling in the referee profession as the first female referee in football premier league. While she declared she would not specifically prefer to be addressed with masculine or feminine inflection some of the major national newspapers refer to her as *arbitro*, the masculine inflection.

A question naturally arises, are feminine forms perceived as less prestigious? While the feminine form is widely accepted for some professional roles traditionally associated with subordinated or caring positions, when talking about more prestigious roles the language deletes women from certain contexts.

A study found that attitudes toward gender-neutral language use were, at least in part, an expression of their general attitudes toward women (Sarrasin, 2015). Moreover, research has shown that if opposition to gender-neutral language exists, it is likely to decrease over time, suggesting that gender-neutral language should be implemented, even in case of opposition based on linguistic considerations.

This point is especially important when talking about attitudes, in light of a recent study showing that, when participants are asked about their recognition of gender exclusive language, they are not critically aware of gendered language (Tolosa, 2021). Such belief or attitude is critical because unawareness of sexist terms in language results in their deliberate use or implementation. But with regards to the willingness of the participants in using gender-fair language, the majority of them shows a positive attitude towards gender-inclusive language.

These discoveries have been brought together here to create a groundwork that can better explain the drivers towards the replication of the study of Lindqvist (2019), It is an attempt to widen the conversation around sexist language and gender-fair strategies applicable to the Italian language, considering what literature shows to be the consequences of unawareness and inaction, namely perpetuation of Inequality. On the other hand acting upon it would possibly mean providing those new tools of communication that could offer a better response to the needs of our changing society.

1.2.3 The original study by Lindqvist et al.

In the original study by Lindqvist et al., different strategies of gender-fair language have been applied to reduce a male bias. In two experiments, they tested how different gender-fair strategies could eliminate male bias.

Experiment 1 – Swedish

A total of 417 college students completed an online survey. The design included four between-subjects conditions. Participants read a description of a candidate

ostensibly written by a professional recruiter, where the candidate was referred to using:

1. the Swedish actively created gender-neutral pronoun hen
2. the paired pronouns he/she (han/hon in Swedish)
3. the gender-neutral noun NN (Latin for "don't know the name")
4. the gender-neutral neutral noun "the applicant" (den sökande in Swedish).

There were included two versions of supposedly grammatically neutral nouns in order to thoroughly test the male bias.

Participants were informed that the study was about evaluating candidates for a certain job position in a recruitment situation. The questionnaires were introduced with a job advertisement for a gender-neutral position as real-estate agent. This profession has an equal balance between women and men. Subsequently, participants read the description of a candidate applying for the position, where the candidate was randomly referred to as one of the four conditions. Both the advertisement and the summary were balanced regarding agentic/communal words to avoid any other biases associated with gender.

The outcome variable in terms of gender-associations of the candidate was measured by asking the participants to select which photo they believed showed the candidate. Four photos were presented in a randomised order, showing two typically feminine White women and two typically masculine White men.

To test the male bias associated with the different conditions they analysed if the distribution of chosen pictures significantly differed from 50/50, which would imply no male bias because the photos then would have been selected at random.

Experiment 2 – English

To further extend the results from the Swedish language in Experiment 1, they also tested whether the two gender-fair language strategies would have the same effect in English.

A total of 411 participants completed an online survey experiment. It was used the same design as in Experiment 1, but this time with the four between-subjects conditions:

1. actively created, gender-neutral pronoun ze
2. the paired pronouns he/she
3. gender-neutral (singular) they
4. gender-neutral "the applicant."

In both experiments, results indicated that paired forms and actively created gender-neutral pronouns eliminated the male bias, whereas traditional neutral words contained a male bias. Thus, gender-fair language strategies should avoid using traditional words. They argue that an actively created gender-neutral pronoun is of highest value because it is more inclusive.

Chapter 2 - Experiment Design

2. 1 Replicating Lindquist et. al

2.1.1 Stimuli

The stimuli replicate the ones used by Lindqvist (2019) in their original study, but it has been adapted to work with the Italian language and the necessary data has been collected through a Qualtrics online survey (see supplemental materials). After accepting the informed consent, participants are presented with a scenario where the Human Resources department of a hotel is hiring waiters/waitresses. This job is described in gender-neutral terms and so perceived without any gender bias, as assessed by Horvath (2016). This experiment had two conditions that employed either masculine generics or the schwa-ending gender-fair strategy (-ə).

After reading the description of former employees of the hotel applying for the job, participants are shown four pictures (the same used by Lindqvist, 2019) presented on screen in a randomised order, of two typically feminine white women and two typically masculine white men and they are asked to select the person they would hire for the job.

We considered male bias where a male person was selected in a statistically higher number than 50% of the answers.

Subsequently, participants are asked to answer the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI: Glick & Fiske, 1996, as translated by Rattazzi, 2008. Henceforth, we will refer to the scores from this Inventory as *Sexism*) and the first part of the Inventory of Attitudes towards Sexist/Nonsexist Language in its General version (IASNL-G: Parks & Roberton, 2000, 2001; adapted from its italian translation by Merkel, 2013. Henceforth, we will refer to the scores from this Inventory as *Attitudes*).

Moreover, we have collected data regarding the Sexism, Attitudes, Age, Gender and Level of education of the participants.

Finally, a set of questions investigates the familiarity, acceptability and use of the gender-fair strategy of the schwa (ə), the participants' age, their gender assigned at birth, their gender identity, their first language and level of education.

For reasons of data interpretation, this study grounds itself on gender binarism, leaving the variables of gender-fluidity and non-binarism to further investigations.

2.1.2 Conditions

As mentioned above, the scenarios presented the following conditions, to which participants were randomly assigned to:

- Use of the flexitive morpheme employing the grapheme/phoneme schwa (<ə>) to create a third grammatical gender, free of any gender connotations, ideally useful to refer to either a mixed group of people (males and females), or to non-binary or gender-fluid people (i.e., those who do not identify in male/female gender binarism), such as *ə candidatə* (the applicants). To create the scenario for these condition, we have used the guidelines by the publishing house Effequ (https://www.effequ.it/lo-schwa-secondo-noi/), the first one to use this strategy in their books;
- Masculine generics *i candidati* (the applicants, masculine plural in its form, which can refer to a general gender-mixed audience, the so-called *maschile sovraesteso*).

2.1.3 Hypothesis and Predictions

Lindqvist (2019) suggested the following Hypotheses:
- existing words (nouns or pronouns) used in a new gender-neutral way still might contain a male bias and hence be associated with men and masculinity;
- invented new words which lack traditional, androcentric associations to men and masculinity might hence be free from a male bias (Wayne 2004).

Therefore, our predictions were the following:

- Masculine generics (*maschile sovraesteso*) are predicted to elicit male bias (H 1).
- Schwa-ending forms, which are actively created gender-neutral forms (similar to *ze* as tested by Lindqvist, 2019 in English), will not contain a male bias (H 2)

2.1.4 Participants

Participants were assigned randomly to either condition. Data were collected through an online survey, submitted to 100 randomly selected participants per condition, 50 of which females and 50 males (to ensure enough statistical power), who identify Italian as their first language and claim to be male or female, cisgender and at least 18 year old. As mention in the previous section, this study does not include data collected from non-binary and\or transgender participants for both reason of data interpretation and sample size issues.

Chapter 3 – Data Analysis and Results

3.1 Data analysis

When starting to analyse data we determined data exclusion by:

- Participants being under 18 years old
- Participants being non-binary or "other"
- Participants being non-cisgender
- Participants whose first language is not Italian

For these reasons we had to delete 5 data points as participants' first language was not Italian, 1 data point from a participant who revoked data processing consent. The final analysis was therefore conducted on 194 participants between male and females (see table 1).

| | *Condition* | | |
	MASC	SCHWA	Grand Total
Female	49	48	97
Male	48	49	97
Grand Total	**97**	**97**	**194**

1. Processed data described by condition and gender.

3.2. Results

The final result are described by the table (2) below:

| | *Choice* | | |
Condition	F	M	Grand Total
MASC	68	29	97
SCHWA	79	18	97
Grand Total	**147**	**47**	**194**

2. Choice of male or female candidate based on the condition presented (either masculine generics or schwa-ending form).

Following our predictions (H1 masculine form elicit male bias, H2 Schwa-ending form will not contain a male bias) we can say that:

- In regards to H1, no more than 50% of the participants indicated a male as a possible candidate, therefore male bias is not contained in this form.
- In regards to H2, more than 50% of participants indicated a female as a possible candidate, therefore it appears that this form does not contain male bias.

In the masculine generic condition 70.1% of participants selected a female as a candidate, against the 81.4% in the schwa-ending condition. From this data emerged as a baseline a trend that favours female candidates, stronger in the schwa-ending condition.

While searching for the reason for this trend we considered data collected about age (table 3), education (table 4) and gender (table 5).

We can notice how the vast majority of participants range between 20 and 40 years old, with mean value at 32 and median at 28.
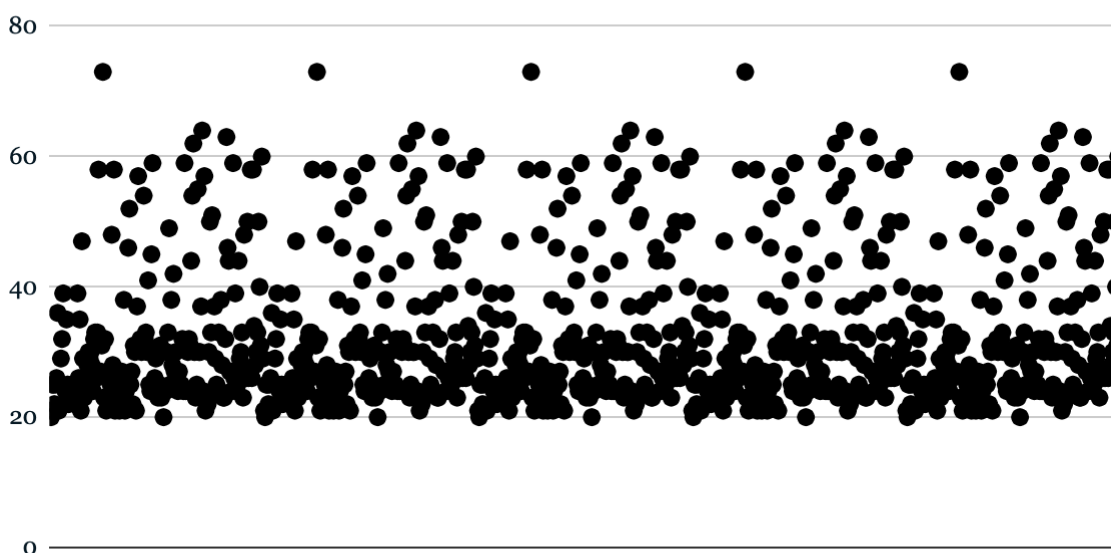
3. Participants age scatterplot.

Around 76% of participants who chose a female candidate had a bachelor or master degree or a Phd, against the 55% of participants who selected a male candidate. This could suggest a relation between level of education and sensibility to male bias.

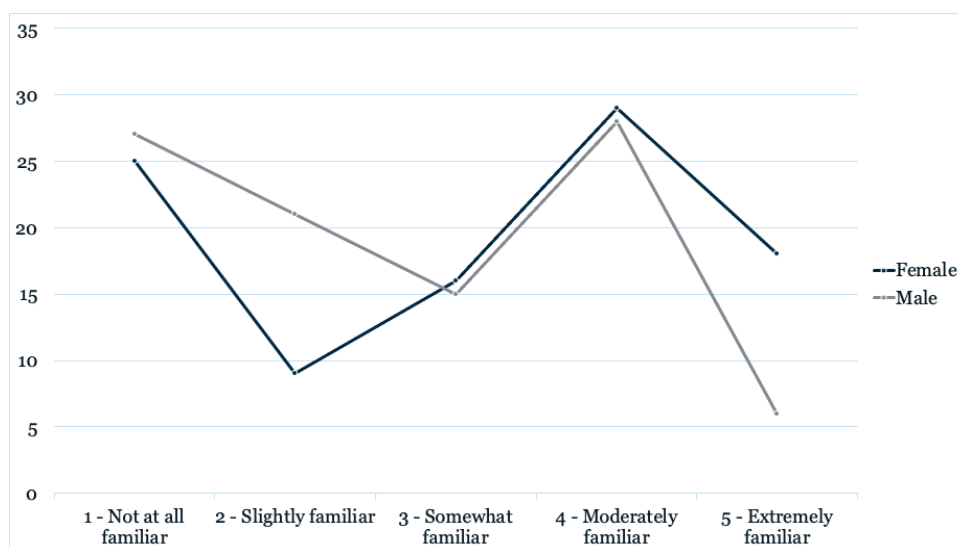| Gender Choice	Education			
	Phd	Bachelor or Master Degree	High School Diploma	Middle School Certificate
F	4.08%	72.11%	22.45%	1.36%
M	6.38%	48.94%	42.55%	2.13%
Grand Total	**4.64%**	**66.49%**	**27.32%**	**1.55%**

4. Choice of male or female candidate in relation to level of education.

In regards to gender, no significant difference has been found in the choice of a female candidate, whilst 68.09% of male candidates choice has been made by males suggesting a significant disparity compared to the female ones.

Gender	Gender Choice	
	F	M
Female	55.78%	31.91%
Male	44.22%	68.09%

5. Choice of male or female candidate in relation to gender.

One of the variables investigated in this study was the **familiarity** with the schwa-ending strategy. Data shows a higher rate of familiarity between female than male participants (table 6). Furthermore 87.5% of the participants identifying as extremely familiar chose a female candidate, in contrast to just 69% of the ones not at all familiar (table 7).

6. Rate of familiarity in relation to gender.

Gender Choice	Familiarity				
	Extremely familiar	Moderately familiar	Somewhat familiar	Slightly familiar	Not at all familiar
F	87.50%	77.19%	77.42%	73.33%	69.23%
M	12.50%	22.81%	22.58%	26.67%	30.77%

7. Familiarity to the schwa-ending strategy in relation to gender choice.

We also consider **Use** as variable to determine the frequency with which participants made use of the schwa-ending strategy. Majority appears to have never never made use of this strategy, where females are the only ones who, even if in a small minority, make consistent use of it (table 8). Between participants who never used it at all, around 70% chose a female candidate in contrast to 85% that chose a male (table 9).

Gender	Use			
	Yes, often/ always	Yes, sometimes	No, never	Grand Total
Female	8	22	69	97
Male	0	20	75	97
Grand Total	**8**	**42**	**144**	**194**

8. Rate of use in relation to gender.

Gender Choice	Use		
	Yes, often/ always	Yes, sometimes	No, never
F	5.44%	23.81%	70.75%
M	0%	14.89%	85.11%
Grand Total	**4.12%**	**21.65%**	**74.23%**

9. Use of the schwa-ending strategy in relation to gender choice.

Data on acceptability of the schwa-ending strategy shows that in the case of extremely acceptable and moderately acceptable options, more than 80% of the choices was towards a female candidate (table 10). It has been found to have a higher rate of acceptance from females than males (table 11).

| Gender Choice	Acceptability					
	Extremely acceptable	Moderately acceptable	Somewhat acceptable	Slightly acceptable	Not at all acceptable	Grand Total
F	82.86%	82.35%	60.87%	72.92%	65.00%	75.77%
M	17.14%	17.65%	39.13%	27.08%	35.00%	24.23%

10. Acceptability of the schwa-ending strategy in relation to gender choice.
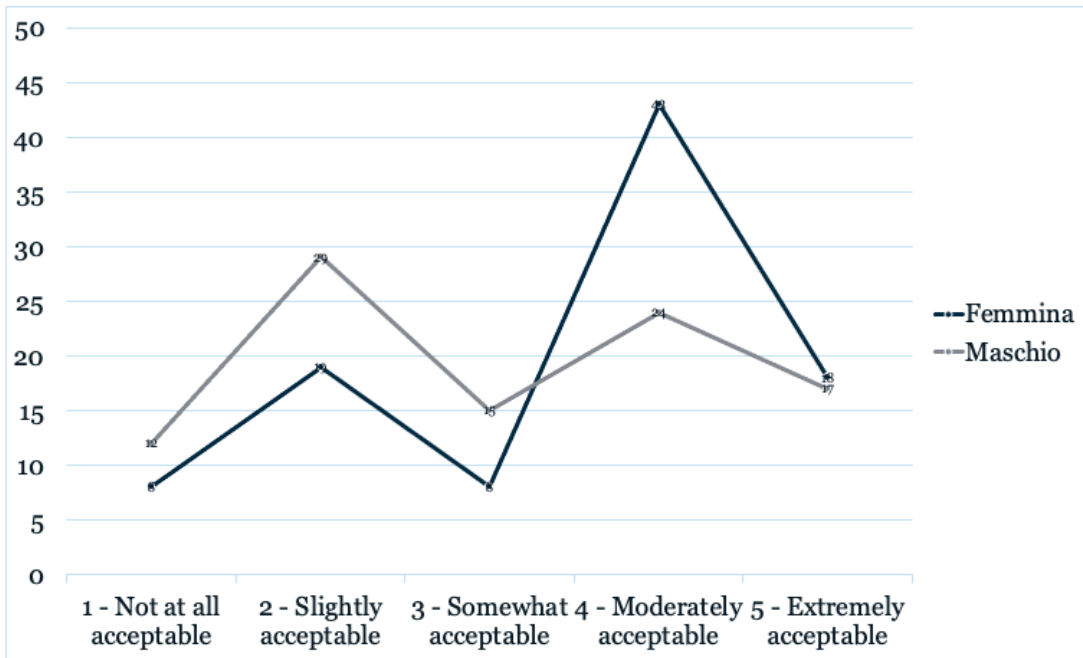
11. Rate of acceptance in relation to gender.

Data from ASI (table 12) shows very low scores reflecting low sexism in the population composing our sample.

ASI Score
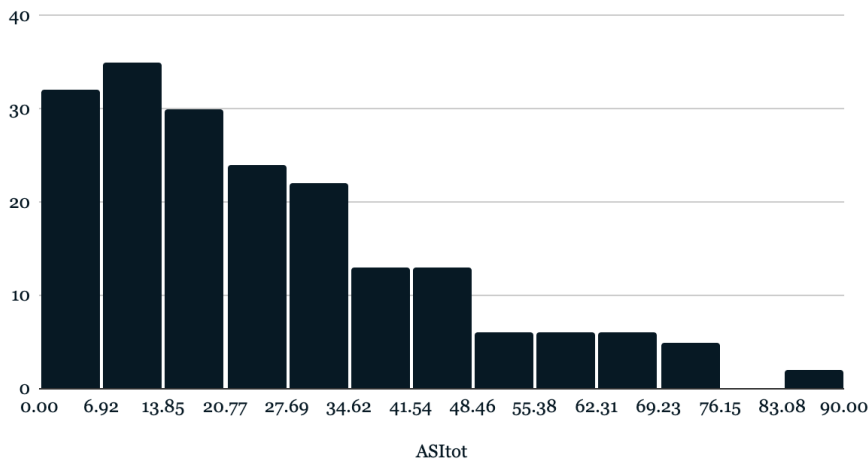
12. ASI scores

In regards to the IASNL, we've adapted the scoring scale values to match our shorter 12 items adaptation, where total scores below 30 reflect a negative attitude towards nonsexsist language; total scores between 30 and 42 reflect a neutral attitude towards nonsexist language; and total scores between 42 and 60 reflect a supportive attitude towards nonsexist language.

The results show how a significant portion of participants scored in the neutral to supportive range, in fact we found the mean to be 40 (table13).

IASNL Score
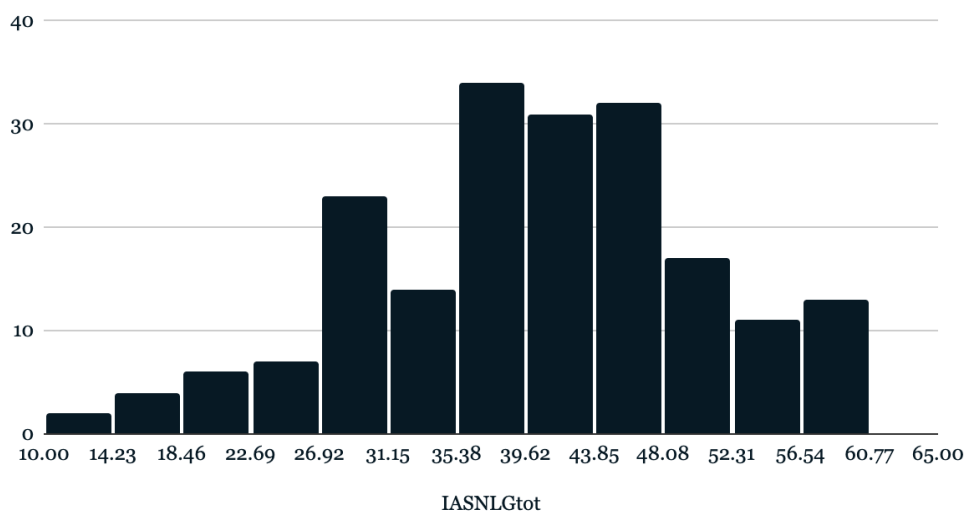
13. IASNL scores

Chapter 4 – Conclusions

Our findings do not show the presence of male bias in language comprehension. The results show a propensity towards the choice of a female candidate. Nevertheless, in the case of the schwa-ending strategy has been detected an even higher tendency in regards to the female candidate suggesting that such strategy could give women more visibility. The reasons for such imbalance could be due to the younger generation composing our sample. Awareness around gender has increased exponentially in the last few years thanks to strong conversation and intervention, especially in the academic environment. This idea is supported by data showing more likelihood in the choice of a female candidate in participants with higher qualifications. In general females participants showed higher levels of Familiarity, Use and Acceptance of the schwa-ending strategy compared to male participants. We also considered the result of ASI and IASNL reflecting a neutral to supportive attitude towards nonsexist language and general low scores in sexism.

Further work could include a deeper statistical inferential analysis and a more diverse sample. This work only scratches the surface of this topic but really hopes to bring a small contribution to the wider discourse.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Experiment: https://psicologiapd.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bwiQKiQFK218KIS

I candidati [the applicants] and other gendered words that could lead to male bias in language comprehension was replaced with the schwa-ending form ə candidatə

Il manager locale di una nota catena di alberghi è alla ricerca di nuovo personale per il ristorante interno. Decide di scrivere una mail al titolare della catena proponendo una scelta tra alcunə candidatə che precedentemente hanno già lavorato in altri ruoli per la stessa azienda. Leggi attentamente la mail e, quando hai finito, clicca su "continua".

Gentile titolare,

Con la presente intendo proporre tre candidatə per la posizione di camererierə, offerta dalla nostra filiale.

ə candidatə hanno 31 anni e posseggono tuttə una laurea triennale. Lavorano presso la mia filiale da più di tre anni.

ə candidatə hanno dato tre principali ragioni per cui hanno deciso di fare domanda per la posizione offerta:

1 - Sviluppo personale nel campo;
2 - Ricevere ulteriori responsabilità e affrontare nuove sfide;
3 - Incontrare nuove persone e ampliare il proprio network professionale.

ə candidatə vivono nei loro appartamenti da solə. Nel tempo libero, ə candidatə si dedicano all'esercizio fisico, ai viaggi e ad uscire con amici e famiglia. ə candidatə hanno inoltre affermato di apprezzare la collaborazione con gli altri e affrontare nuove sfide.

Ex colleghə, della stessa filiale, dopo l'esperienza di lavoro con questə candidatə per oltre tre anni, hanno dato i seguenti riscontri rispetto al loro carattere:

"Sono socievoli, ambiziosə, volenterosə di lavorare e gentili in egual misura".

"Apportano molto all'atmosfera del luogo di lavoro e sono un'ottima risorsa, ma, chi più chi meno, hanno sempre la tendenza ad arrivare in albergo all'ultimo momento".

"Sono motivatə, ambiziosi, eccellentemente preparatə, e vanno d'accordo con tutti".

"Offrono un ottimo servizio all'albergo, sono molto alla mano e vanno d'accordo con tutti i clienti. Tuttə loro conoscono almeno una lingua straniera".

In attesa di gentile riscontro, porgo cordiali saluti,

Manager locale

Chi sceglieresti per la posizione?

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