



UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA

**Department of General Psychology
Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization**

**Bachelor's Degree Course in
Techniques and Methods in Psychological Science**

Final dissertation

**USING WORDS TO CHANGE SOCIETY:
HOW GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE CAN PROMOTE
THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

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Academic Year 2023/24

*“You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.”
(Maya Angelou, Still I Rise)*

Abstract	7
Introduction	9
CHAPTER 1: LANGUAGE AND SEXISM	11
1.1 Language, gender and stereotypes	11
1.2 An analysis of different language systems: grammatical gender, natural gender and genderless languages	15
1.3 Main forms of linguistic sexism: gender asymmetries (lexical gender, masculine generics and role nouns)	18
CHAPTER 2: GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE	23
2.1 The importance of gender-fair language.....	23
2.2 Gender-fair language strategies: neutralization	26
2.3 Gender-fair language strategies: feminization.....	27
CHAPTER 3: TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURE	29
3.1 Promoting gender-fair language: norms and regulations worldwide.....	29
3.2 A focus on the implementation of gender-fair language in Italy.....	30
3.3 Strategies and interventions to promote gender-fair language	32
Conclusion	34
References	35

Abstract

Language is a powerful tool through which we make sense of the world. It is connected to our cognition: through language we create mental representations of the world around us. The words we use shape our beliefs and consequently impact on our behaviors. Language also influences the definition of our identity and of social categories, so it can contribute to build and reinforce stereotypes. Considering its potential power on the way we think, language can also be a fundamental tool to promote a more equitable society. In the last few decades much research has been done on the link between language and sexism, analyzing the effects on our cognition and proposing alternative linguistic forms to promote a more gender-fair and inclusive language. The first part of this dissertation will describe the link between language and mental representation illustrating the main theories and models that analyze the relationship between language and sexism. Then we will analyze the case of masculine generics and occupational titles, the two main forms of grammatical gender asymmetries in language, applied to English and Italian; this comparison will allow us to consider the differences between grammatical gender languages and natural gender languages. In the next section we will describe some examples of gender-fair language and their application in different contexts, analyzing the results of experiments which test their effectiveness as possible alternative inclusive linguistic forms. We will conclude considering the actual situation of use of gender-fair language and illustrating strategies to promote it, at an individual and a societal level.

Introduction

The power of language of shaping reality is often undervalued. People talk spontaneously using words without actually considering their impact on themselves, first of all, and on the world around them. Every word carries many meanings and acts on our cognition even without our consciousness. Becoming aware of this mechanism and decide to use it in a more responsible way should be of primary importance for everyone of us. It should be an act of love towards ourselves and of social responsibility towards other people.

Nowadays more and more attention is drawn to language and its use; human rights movements are advocating a more inclusive use of language to give voice and visibility to all minorities that have been (and still are) discriminated, in order to represent society as it really is: wonderfully multi-faceted and characterized by enriching valuable differences.

Society is changing but reflecting these changes into language use is a slow process. Recently the debate about gender-fair language has started again to spread in Italy and it is now a heated topic into society, but the reality is that the discussion and the research on more inclusive linguistic forms have been going on for decades. The effect of sexist language on the condition of women in society has been one of the main battles for feminist movements in the past and it is still a very controversial topic.

This thesis will delve into this question exploring how language and gender interact and how this interaction can be used as a tool to promote the empowerment of women.

The first chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between language and cognition, how this mechanism influences the creation and reinforcement of stereotypes and how it reflects onto behavior in society. There will be a comparison of languages from a gendered point of view, analyzing the differences between grammatical gender, natural gender and genderless languages. The discussion will be concluded by examining the main forms of linguistic sexism: masculine generics and occupational titles.

The second chapter focuses on gender-fair language and its main linguistic strategies to reduce asymmetries in language; empirical research will be discussed to observe the

effectiveness of these linguistic forms from a social, behavioral and cognitive point of view.

The third chapter will analyze the current situation in gender-fair language use, how it is implemented from a normative and bureaucratic point of view and it will report previous research on examples of possible interventions to promote its use at an individual and at a societal level.

CHAPTER 1: LANGUAGE AND SEXISM

1.1 Language, gender and stereotypes

There is no thinking without words. Language is inherently interconnected with our cognition; through words we define ourselves and the world around us. The words we have at disposal guide our perception of reality as much as it could be argued that what cannot be defined does not exist.

Language is fundamental to our perception of reality because it shapes our thoughts, beliefs and consequently our behavior. This view is expressed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Linguistic Relativity), which states that people experience the world through language and that linguistic categories influence their view about themselves and reality. There are two versions of the hypothesis: the strong version, which is not supported by modern linguists, argues that language determines thought, and cognitive processes are shaped by the language people have access to; the weak version suggests that language does not determine human behavior but rather influences the person's perceptions, it reflects and perpetuates societal structures and it contributes to the construction of reality based on how users interpret it.

Our perception of reality, then, is the result of the interconnection between language and culture; the language we use responds to cultural and societal needs and consequently has a fundamental role in shaping our beliefs and behaviors as social human beings.

Through language we define our and other people's place in the world; following our cognitive need for categorization, we sort people into social categories according to some characteristics: a fundamental one is gender, which importance is highlighted by the fact that all languages present linguistic forms to represent it.

“Apparently sex is so fundamental to social organization and social structure that linguistic means to refer to this category are indispensable for speech communities” (Stahlberg et al. 2007, p. 163).

Having such an important role in language systems does not automatically mean that genders are equally represented in language. On the contrary, there are important gender

asymmetries that have been proven to create and reinforce gender stereotypes and contribute to gender inequalities. Feminist critiques argue that language is androcentric, reinforces the view that the norm is male and thus contributes to the invisibility of women (Stahlberg et al. 2007).

Over the last few decades research has investigated the relationship between language and sexism and the effects of this relationship on the formation of stereotypes and gender biases.

Gygax et al. (2021) investigated the cognitive mechanisms of gender biases that are activated with the use of masculine generics (the use of masculine forms to refer to gender-mixed groups or to people whose gender is unknown) in grammatical gender languages like French and German. The goal of the research was to explore the semantic ambiguity of masculine generics to provide evidence of their interpretation as specifically male or as representing both genders; the authors analyzed processes of inference and meaning activation, to identify the cognitive mechanisms at the heart of gender biases. Findings showed that masculine forms were interpreted as specifically male, demonstrating a bias in interpretation; there was an exception when contextual cues were given to suggest a mixed group: in that case participants were more likely to interpret the masculine forms as gender-inclusive. However, in neutral contexts the male-oriented interpretation was prevalent, thus confirming the male bias.

The same bias is also prevalent in the interpretation of occupational titles; when exposed to role nouns stereotypically associated to a specific gender, automatic stereotyping is activated, often without the awareness of the person.

This aspect has been thoroughly investigated to understand the mechanism by which exposure to stereotypical information influences our cognition in terms of categorization and judgment.

In daily life, individuals are constantly exposed to stereotyped information that shapes their thoughts, opinions, and behaviors, often without awareness of its influence. Banaji et al. (1993) investigated the way in which implicit stereotyping acts on social judgment, analyzing how this mechanism can influence a person's judgement of social target groups. The authors conducted three experiments to demonstrate that exposure to gender-

stereotyped information influences judgments about individuals without the subjects' awareness. Results confirmed the unconscious nature of stereotyping in social judgments, where people utilize stereotypical knowledge incidentally encountered in forming judgments about others based on their social category.

In a subsequent study Banaji and Hardin (1996) further investigated the way in which gender stereotyping works automatically even when the subject has been made aware of its influence. They applied it to language, using the semantic priming procedure to test whether the exposure to a prime related to gender (words with an express reference to gender, e.g. mother, and words stereotypically associated with a specific gender, e.g. doctor) influenced the choice of the referring pronoun (he/she). Results showed that responses were faster when the gender of the pronoun matched the implied gender of the prime word, suggesting that gender stereotypes can operate automatically, affecting judgments in ways that are difficult to control even when the individual is aware of the stereotype.

The priming effect of gender in language has been demonstrated also through the analysis of reading times, which were demonstrated to be longer when there was a gender mismatch between the pronoun and the gender stereotype of the antecedent, showing the automatic access to gender stereotype knowledge during language comprehension (Kennison & Trofe, 2003). This effect has been analyzed in two experiments conducted by Irmen (2007), which used eye-tracking to examine the impact of grammatical and conceptual gender cues on the processing of generic role names in German. The experiments demonstrated that a gender mismatch between the conceptual gender of a role name and the anaphor significantly slowed reading immediately before and after the anaphoric noun. Results reveal three clear tendencies: the influence of the conceptual gender of role names, the effect of grammatical gender, and a general male bias in understanding role names.

Cacciari and Padovani (2007) investigated the priming effect applied to Italian role nouns. They used a gender decision task in which a prime word (role nouns without any gender-related grammatical markers, stereotypically associated with either a female, male or no stereotype; e.g. "insegnante") was followed by a target pronoun (he/she). Whilst in the first experiment no influence of stereotypes emerged on gender decision responses, in the

second experiment, in which the authors manipulated and prolonged the intervals of presentation times, results showed a stereotypical gender priming effect with a facilitation effect in the gender-congruent condition and an inhibition effect in the gender-incongruent one. Findings showed also an unexpected result, that went beyond Banaji's research; there was no effect of gender incongruity stereotype when the pronoun was feminine and the prime masculine (e.g. prime "Engineer", pronoun "SHE"), but an inhibitory effect emerged when the prime was stereotypically associated with females and the pronoun was masculine (e.g. "teacher", "he"); this effect might be explained by the fact that in the Italian language masculine is the generic gender, used to refer to both females and males; moreover societal roles are changing and more and more women are entering traditionally masculine professions, but not the contrary, as men still rarely enter typically feminine professions. These findings confirm the priming effect; as soon as a noun is read, a stereotypical gender association is activated together with its lexical and semantic meaning.

But what are the consequences of these automatic processes in daily life?

Considering the occupational field, gender stereotypes influence women's career perception and choices; such effect has been demonstrated to start at a very young age, when exposure to forms of gender-exclusive language negatively affects children's interests in future professions, narrowing their inclinations towards stereotypically gender-congruent jobs. Importantly the use of inclusive language such as pair forms (e.g. "females and males engineers") have been shown to facilitate mental accessibility to female job-holders, thus having a positive influence on early vocational interests of children and adolescents (Vervecken et al. 2013; Vervecken et al. 2015).

The use of pair forms has been demonstrated to have a substantial impact on mental representations, to promote the visibility of women and reduce the effect of occupational stereotyping, altering the perceived distribution of women and men across professional fields (Horvath et al. 2016). As explained by social role theory (Koenig & Eagly, 2014), stereotypes arise from the observation of social groups' typical roles and the behaviors associated with these roles. According to this theory, people develop stereotypes by observing the behaviors of group members in their social roles, which are categorized into occupational, family, friendship, leisure, and other roles. Applied to the professional context, occupational stereotyping refers to considering professions as traditionally

masculine or feminine by observing the distribution of men and women in those professions. Using gender-fair linguistic forms in jobs advertisements and interviews reduces the influence of occupational stereotyping, thus promoting a more balanced perception of careers distribution (Horvath et al. 2016).

The negative influence of gender-exclusive language on career choices of women is not related only to occupational stereotyping and to stereotypical characterization of professions. It can also function as a situational cue that creates group-based ostracism towards women in job context. Stout and Dasgupta (2011) conducted mock job interviews to explore the mechanism of social identity threat by using masculine forms (e.g. the use of “he” to generically refer to both women and men) as contextual cues of group-based ostracism; the hypothesis was that these linguistic forms may provoke the feeling of being ignored and excluded from the situation and activate negative ingroup-stereotypes in women; both these conditions could end in the desire by the person to withdraw from the uncomfortable situation and in a general loss of sense of belonging and motivation towards the job. Results confirmed the hypothesis, highlighting the importance of using inclusive language to foster a sense of belonging and motivation among all members of an organization.

In conclusion, the use of sexist language has serious implications on individuals’ perceptions and daily life and on society as a whole. But the impact of sexism on language depends not only on its interpretation on a cognitive level and on societal inputs, but it is also reinforced by the way in which language itself is structured, as it will be discussed in the following paragraph.

1.2 An analysis of different language systems: grammatical gender, natural gender and genderless languages

Sex and gender are fundamental categories in our societal organization and such importance is reflected in language (Stahlberg et al. 2007). Languages can be classified into three groups depending on how gender is rooted into their grammatical structure; some of them have it as a fundamental grammatical feature (for example Italian or German), while in other languages it does not have relevance (e.g. Finnish).

Grammatical gender languages are those in which gender is heavily embedded into the grammatical structure. Also known as *gendered languages*, they feature nouns that are always classified into specific genders (feminine, masculine, neuter). Additionally, dependent grammatical forms, such as adjectives and pronouns, align with the gender of the nouns they refer to.

All personal nouns have an assigned gender, which can have a lexical meaning related to sex in the case of nouns as, for example, “mother”, “father”, “queen” or “king”; in the case of the other personal nouns, their grammatical gender reflects the gender of the person the noun refers to (e.g. “friend”).

Examples of such languages include Slavic languages like Russian, Romance languages like Spanish, French and Italian, and Germanic languages like German.

Italian is a grammatical gender language, as it follows the rules listed above. In Italian there is no neuter gender, so inanimate objects are assigned either a feminine or masculine gender. Such a strong gendered grammatical structure automatically creates some forms of linguistic asymmetries, for example in the case of the use of masculine as generic (e.g. generic “he” or in plural forms), and it can be problematic when considering the introduction of more gender-inclusive linguistic forms.

English is part of the family of *natural gender languages*, which distinguish gender using pronouns (he or she), whilst nouns generally have no grammatical markers of gender. For example, in the sentence “The student got a bad grade”, the personal noun “student” can refer to both masculine or feminine gender and its gender can be clarified only if personal pronouns (he/she) are present in other sentences (“The student got a bad grade; he/she was very sad”). Comparing English to Italian, the former have fewer linguistic markers of gender in discourse and consequently it could support a more gender-sensitive use of language.

There is another category of languages, namely *genderless languages*, such as Finnish and Chinese. They are characterized by a complete absence of grammatical reference to gender in nouns. Even if this type of languages is the less gender-marked, gender biases may still be implicitly conveyed through titles and role nouns, whose use and interpretation are shaped by wider cultural and societal influences.

Research aimed at exploring how language systems intersect with cultural and societal values. Starting from the idea that language can shape our cognition and influence our perception of the world, thus influencing the formation of social stereotypes and biases, some studies were conducted to investigate the relationship between language systems and gender equality in different countries.

In a study conducted in 2012 Prewitt-Freilino et al. examined the differences in levels of gender equality in countries of grammatical gender, natural gender and genderless languages. They used the 2009 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index and sub-indices to analyze the differences between women and men in economic, educational, political and health dimensions in several different countries, which were divided into the three linguistic categories based on their primary language. Results showed that countries using grammatical gender languages had lower levels of gender equality, compared to the other categories. Findings do not explain if languages have a causal role in the process of creating gender differences, but they suggest that probably what makes the difference is the possibility of language to allow the creation of gender symmetrical forms, as highlighted by the fact that countries that speak natural gender languages had higher levels of gender equality compared to the grammatical gender ones.

An analysis of levels of gender equality in different countries was also conducted by Hodel et al. (2017), but with a different focus, not considering the different categories of language systems, but the use of gender-fair language in jobs advertisements. The authors examined the relationship between the language used and linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic factors, exploring how language might facilitate the spread of gender stereotypes. They analyzed data from two countries characterized by egalitarian cultural values and high levels of gender equality (Switzerland and Austria) and two countries with hierarchical cultural values and low levels of gender equality (Poland and Czech Republic). Results showed that countries with high levels of gender equality showed a greater use of gender-fair language in advertisements, whilst a prevalent use of gender-specific job titles was found in job advertisements in countries with low levels of gender equality. This analysis underscores the complex interplay between language use, cultural values, and socioeconomic factors in shaping gender equality in different countries. The

findings advocate for the adoption of gender-fair language as a means to foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

Considering the relationship between the different types of languages and expressed sexism at the individual level, the topic was explored in a study by Wassermann and Weseley (2009), where they investigated whether reading a text in a grammatical gender language (French or Spanish) compared to a natural gender language (English) influenced sexist attitudes. The research was grounded in the theory of linguistic determinism, particularly linguistic relativity, which suggests that language influences thought and perception. Results supported the hypothesis that reading a text in a grammatical gender language led to the expression of more sexist attitudes compared to English, suggesting that gender distinctions may be reinforced by grammatical gender.

Overall the different language systems affect the level of sexism expressed by its speakers even though such an expression unveils in interaction with societal norms and stereotypes.

1.3 Main forms of linguistic sexism: gender asymmetries (lexical gender, masculine generics and role nouns)

Sexism in language can manifest in several ways when genders are not treated symmetrically. There are many forms of gender asymmetries, which can be based on differences in lexical meaning (e.g. address forms) or in grammatical structures, as in the case of the two most debated linguistic forms: masculine generics and role nouns.

Considering lexical meaning, there are many cases in which a noun has a different meaning depending on whether it is the masculine or the feminine form; for example in Italian there are a few nouns that, when used in the feminine form, acquire a different meaning than the original one and gain also a secondary negative connotation, e.g. “un uomo di strada” (“a man of the road”) usually refers to a strong man, whilst “una donna di strada” (“a woman of the road”) refers to a prostitute (Gheno, 2021, p.53). Another example is the use of address forms, such as Mr, Mrs, and Miss; the existence of two different expressions for women (that underline whether they are married or not), and not

for men, highlights the fact that the difference between an unmarried and a married person is relevant only for women.

In addition, there are two other forms of gender asymmetries that are at the center of the debate about gender-inclusive language: masculine generics and role nouns.

Masculine generics are linguistic forms used to refer specifically to males and generically to people whose sex is unknown or to mixed groups composed both by males and females. In natural gender languages masculine generics are expressed by pronouns (as the generic “he”, which is used to refer to a generic person in sentences like “To apply for graduation the student must send this form containing *his* personal information”), or by lexically male expressions like “mankind”, “brotherhood”, “forefathers”. In grammatical gender languages as Italian, masculine generics are even more pervasive because they extend also to personal nouns in plural forms; talking about groups of people whose gender is unknown or made both by males and females, grammatical rules dictate to use plural masculine forms of personal nouns (“Gli studenti aspettavano di iniziare la verifica”; “the students were waiting to start the test”).

Masculine generics is considered a very problematic linguistic form because it is not a lexical gap (differently from job titles and role nouns), rather it is established by grammatical rules and it is then a systematic gender asymmetry in language. This linguistic form reflects an androcentric view of the world in which the norm is male. It is not purely a matter of grammatical functioning of language, but considering how language is related to cognition and shapes beliefs and values, the use of masculine generics is considered to foster women invisibility and enhance gender biases.

Research has shown that, when presented with masculine generics, people interpret there as referring to male individuals. This biased association happens at an early perceptual stage of language processing, before higher-order linguistic integration, suggesting deep-rooted perceptual biases (Glim et al. 2023). The masculine form used as a generic presents a semantic ambiguity about being referred to only males or to mixed groups; this ambiguity is usually resolved towards an only-masculine interpretation, except if there are contextual cues that suggest the presence of women (Gygax et al. 2021).

Another form of gender asymmetry in language concerns role nouns, which are those nouns that designate functions or roles (e.g. job titles), but do not have gender as inherent characteristic of the noun itself; examples of role nouns are “surgeon”, “teacher”, “driver”, that can refer to either females or males, differently from nouns such as king, queen, mother, father, which have gender as part of their core meaning.

Role nouns are considered an important example of gender asymmetry for many reasons. First, there is a lexical gap; in grammatical gender languages like Italian, where masculine and feminine nouns are different, masculine versions of role nouns have traditionally been used to refer also to women. Right now, there is an ongoing debate in Italy about how to construct feminine versions of traditionally male-stereotyped role nouns and it is a heated argument. Grammatical rules allow the creation of feminine versions, but there is strong resistance from people, which are not used to them and protest with the motivation that language has always been the way it is and that masculine versions can be used also for female individuals. Resistance against gender-fair language is usually justified by several different motivations and it depends on implicit as well as explicit mental processes, as it will be discussed in chapter 2.

Gender asymmetries in role nouns are created also by the fact that feminine versions of job titles are often more complex than male ones and they are derived from them adding suffixes to the end of the word (e.g. in Italian: “dottore”, “dottor-essa”); this linguistic form has been criticized because it causes an effect of markedness of female references (Stahlberg et al. 2007), underlining excessively and unnecessarily the fact that female versions are derived and that the male one is the standard.

Another example of markedness of female reference is the use of compounding to build feminine versions of traditionally male jobs, such as female-surgeon or “signora president” (“Mrs. President”); this technique highlights the need to specify which gender usually pursues the specific job.

The importance given to the existence of specific feminine job titles is related to the male bias observed also in the case of masculine generics: a masculine word will necessarily activate a masculine mental representation of the profession. In the case of role nouns the question is even more complicated because not only the grammatical gender of the noun elicits a masculine representation, but there are also strong male biases associated to

certain jobs, which, as demonstrated in several studies, are stereotypically associated with men. An example is shown in the famous riddle of the surgeon:

*“A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies on the spot.
The son is rushed to the ER. The attending surgeon looks at the boy and
says, ‘I can not operate on this boy. He’s my son!’ How can this be?”*

Most people cannot provide the correct answer of the surgeon being the mother of the child; a study conducted by Morehouse et al. (2022) investigated the robustness of this stereotype, observing its tenacity and strength that hindered the ability of participants of drawing reasonable inferences.

As previously discussed in paragraph 1.1., this well-rooted occupational stereotype originates from the fact that the view individuals have of social groups and associated stereotypes stems from their personal experiences and observations of the varied distribution of women and men within those groups, as explained by social role theory (Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

The robustness of these stereotypes is demonstrated by research conducted on priming effect, which showed the automatic association between gender-stereotypical professions and the gender traditionally associated with them (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Cacciari & Padovani, 2007; Irmen, 2007), as previously discussed.

Gender stereotyping associated to role nouns is strongly present also in leadership titles, which are traditionally associated with men. Archer and Kam (2022) analyzed the impact of masculine leadership titles (e.g. “chairman”) on the perception of leadership, showing that even when the gender of the leader was not specified, participants assumed the title referred to a man; findings, then, demonstrated that leadership is perceived as a masculine dimension and that language reinforces the stereotypes, thus constituting an obstacle to female leadership.

Gender asymmetries, then, implicitly transmit a “male-only” view of the world, reinforcing existing stereotypes and contributing to the maintenance of a gender-unbalanced society. Considering the impact of language on thought and consequently on behavior, it is important, then, to make it a positive means through which improve gender equality.

CHAPTER 2: GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE

2.1 The importance of gender-fair language

Nowadays the importance of using a language that is inclusive and gender-fair is widely recognized both by academic and political spheres.

According to United Nations [UN] (n.d.), “Using gender-inclusive language means speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes. Given the key role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, using gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias.”

As analyzed before, use of sexist language can reinforce stereotypes and have an impact on women in a variety of aspects, from a general invisibility to career choices and job opportunities.

Gender-fair language can be a powerful tool to contrast these effects and slowly change our perception of reality. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the importance of using inclusive language to promote a more balanced representation of women and men in society and to reduce gender discriminations; empirical research about the positive effects of gender-fair linguistic forms will be discussed in the following chapter.

Even if gradually the sensibility of people is changing and more and more individuals feel the need to improve language in a more inclusive way, there is still some resistance towards the use of gender-fair language.

Parks and Robertson (1998) conducted a study to investigate the ongoing resistance to nonsexist language among undergraduates to understand the complexity of changing language norms. They used Blauger's classification of arguments against changing sexist language (1980) as a starting point; this classification highlights the different nature of the various reasons of resistance against gender-inclusive language: for example, considering it a trivial concern that distracts from more serious problems, justifying its non-use as motivated by word etymology, asking for respect of freedom of speech and considering change as too difficult and impractical. Results showed that Blauger's

classification was still applicable even if it needs the revision of some categories (e.g. addition of new categories such as “Tradition” and “Sexism is acceptable”); the majority of students supported inclusive language but mixed responses revealed the true complexity of sexist language: even if there was a general support of gender equality, students were resistant to change certain aspects of terminology (e.g. terms about social relationships, “Mrs” and “Miss”), demonstrating a tension between the desire to maintain traditional values and the understanding of the need to change language.

Some arguments identified by Blauberg in 1980 are still applicable today. One of the most widespread motivations is that changing language is a trivial concern and that there are more important forms of sexism. The importance of language in shaping our beliefs and behaviors is still undervalued even if there is large evidence of its effect; moreover, this idea seems to suggest that people have to choose which battle to focus on, without considering that all aspects are equally important and that real change can stem only from a synergic work on all dimensions of sexism.

Another argument that is usually at the center of the discussion is the linguistic aspect of how language works; especially in Italian, where gender is strictly defined by grammatical rules, many people believe that gender-fair language goes against these linguistic rules and that language should be as it has always been. This idea clearly demonstrates our resistance to change because supporters of this view remain strongly anchored to this belief even in front of demonstration of the fact that grammatical rules in Italian allow certain inclusive forms and, most of all, that language is a fluid changing entity that reflects society, it has changed in the past and it will continue to change in the future. Related to the linguistic aspect, another argument is that the use of gender-fair language negatively impacts the comprehensibility of texts, but research shows that there is no impairment effect and that comprehensibility depends on the general phrasing of texts (Friedrich & Heise, 2019).

Opposition to inclusive forms is also motivated by considering change as too difficult, impractical or inconvenient, demonstrating once again the resistance to change; addressing this difficulty of accepting change is a fundamental aspect to keep into consideration when implementing interventions to promote gender-fair language use, as it will be discussed in chapter 3.

But how does a person decide to use gender-inclusive language?

Understanding the psychological mechanisms that guide language use is fundamental to promote a change towards a more inclusive language.

The act of using or not gender-fair language is guided both by deliberate and habitual mechanisms: a person must be explicitly favorable to use it and have a positive attitude towards its use, and at the same time this intention must be reinforced by repeated use of gender-inclusive language in order to make its use a habitual process (Sczesny et al. 2015). If the choice of language is guided both by habit and by deliberate decision making, people who have strong sexist beliefs will not be inclined to use gender-fair language and will rely on standard linguistic forms that they used in the past; interventions, then, should focus on two aspects: make gender inclusive linguistic forms more visible in order to make them habitual, and address attitudes and beliefs by making people aware of positive consequences of using gender-fair language (Sczesny et al. 2015).

Koeser and Sczesny (2014) explored the relationship between attitudes and relative use of gender-fair language by investigating whether providing rational arguments could persuade individuals to use and support more inclusive forms of language. Participants were exposed to different types of persuasive texts: strong arguments for gender-fair language, weak arguments for gender-fair language, strong arguments for masculine generics, and control texts with no persuasive content. After reading the texts, participants' language use, attitudes, and cognitive responses were measured. Results showed that participants who read arguments promoting gender-fair language showed an increased use of its forms compared to those who read control texts, demonstrating a behavioral training effect, but there were no significant changes in attitudes after exposure to any of the arguments. The study suggests that in the short term a change in language behavior might be more achievable than modifying pre-existing attitudes. The authors concluded that an attitudinal shift might be attainable after repeated exposure to and use of gender-fair language.

Use of gender-fair language can be difficult at the beginning and requires an explicit effort to choose which linguistic form or strategy to use and how to use it. There are several

gender-fair linguistic forms that have been proven to be effective in reducing male bias and promoting equal representations of women and men in language. Among them, two of the most used and scientifically supported ones are neutralization and feminization.

2.2 Gender-fair language strategies: neutralization

Neutralization is the linguistic strategy that aims at reducing gender references in the discourse. There are many techniques and linguistic forms that can be used: replacement of gender-marked words with gender-indefinite nouns (e.g. epicenes, which refer both to females and males); creation of new words (“firefighter” instead of “fireman”), use of singular *they* (in English), use of new personal pronouns (“ze” in English), modifying words to make them gender-neutral (use of “*” or “@” at the end of grammatically marked nouns in Italian).

These techniques are used to diminish the salience of gender in discourse, allowing for a less gendered interpretation of it.

An interesting example of the effect of neutralization on gender stereotypes is reported in a study conducted by Morehose et al. (2022). They analyzed the effect of incidental exposure to gender-fair linguistic forms in the famous riddle of the surgeon, which was proven to be rooted in a strong and robust stereotype of “surgeon=male”, particularly resistant to change to the point of influencing the ability of people to draw reasonable inferences on the gender of the surgeon. Results showed that using the word “child” instead of “son” prompted higher mother responses, showing the effectiveness of neutralization to weaken the expression of stereotypes.

Not all neutralization techniques are equally effective. Lindqvist et al. (2019) conducted two experiments to compare and test the effectiveness of three gender-fair language strategies: paired forms (he/she), traditional neutral words (e.g. singular “they”, “the applicant”, and newly created gender-neutral pronouns (“ze” in English, “hen” in Swedish). Results showed indicated that paired forms and actively created gender-neutral pronouns effectively eliminated the male bias, whereas traditional neutral words did not, not even the use of singular “they”. This finding can be explained considering that paired forms actively increase the visibility of both genders and new pronouns are not associated

with pre-existing meanings, while traditional neutral words are intended to be neutral but often carry implicit male biases.

2.3 Gender-fair language strategies: feminization

Feminization is a gender-fair language strategy aimed at increasing women's visibility in discourse by an explicit reference to women or by use of both feminine and masculine forms (pair forms).

Pair forms is one of the most used techniques and several studies have demonstrated its effectiveness to reduce male bias and promote women's visibility (Horvath et al. 2016; Lindqvist et al. 2019), as discussed in the previous chapters.

The importance and strength of this effect is especially relevant considering the impact of male biases during childhood on early vocational interests of children regarding future educational and occupational choices, as demonstrated in a study by Vervecken et al. (2013). By the age six, children start using gender as a criterion for evaluating the suitability of occupations. This influences their career interests and choices by a filtering process in which they eliminate interest in occupations that are in conflict with their gender self-concept. The study hypothesized that using gender-fair language (e.g., "female and male engineers") instead of gender-exclusive language (e.g., "engineers" in the masculine form) would increase the visibility of women in traditionally male occupational roles, leading to a more balanced perceptions of occupational success for both genders. Consequently, girls would show increased interest in male-dominated fields when exposed to gender-fair language. Results confirmed the hypothesis, thus supporting that language shapes gender stereotypes and suggests that using gender-fair language can reduce these stereotypes.

This effect was found to be relevant also regarding adolescents in another study conducted by Vervecken et al. (2015), in which the authors investigated the influence of using pair forms on the gendered perceptions of occupations on ascription of success and warmth and competence to male and female jobholders. This research confirmed previous findings that gender-fair language can reduce gender bias in occupational perceptions also among adolescents. The use of pair forms facilitated a more equal ascription of success

between female and male roles and the attribution of warmth to typically male occupations, demonstrating a reduction of the effect of gender biases.

Given its strong effect on reality perception since childhood, the use of pair forms should be valued as a simple yet powerful tool to promote and build a more balanced representation of society.

Considering the easiness by which these linguistic forms can be implemented in daily as well as in formal discourse, the use of gender-fair language should become a priority for people and organizations' agendas to adopt an inclusive approach and concretely act on gender discriminations.

CHAPTER 3: TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURE

3.1 Promoting gender-fair language: norms and regulations worldwide

Gender equality is one of the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, promoted by UN; goal n.5, in fact, is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”). Target 5.1 refers to “end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere” and has as indicator “whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex” (UN, 2015).

Research has demonstrated the link between language and levels of gender equality in societies (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Hodel et al., 2017), highlighting the importance of considering language when contrasting discriminations at a societal and political level. Language is one of the means through which inequalities are maintained, thus it should be a target of intervention to transform it into a positive useful tool to promote gender equality. But this is not enough: for an actual change towards gender equality, it is necessary to have a multifaceted approach; it is not sufficient to promote the use of non-sexist language at an individual and societal level, but it should be supported also by the implementation of political, social and economic interventions, as it will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

Concerning the linguistic aspect, in the last decades several organizations have created and promoted guidelines to a more gender-fair use of language. In 1999 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] published the “Guidelines for gender-neutral language”, in which they provided examples of alternative words and phrasings and gave definitions on some important concepts related to the advancement of women’s rights (e.g. “gender”, “equality”, “equity”, etc.). This document was a fundamental step to acknowledge the importance of language in gender differences and it served as a starting point to bring the discussion into political spheres and to the development of subsequent documents on the topic.

Especially in the past decade, many efforts have been done towards the development and implementation of numerous guidelines at both international and national levels. Various

international and European organizations, along with professional associations, universities, major news agencies, and publications, have adopted guidelines for non-sexist language use. Additionally, within the European Union, many Member States have also engaged in debates and proposed language policies and guidelines at different levels.

The UN organizations have published several materials on gender-inclusive language, with the aim of giving people and organizations a toolbox of resources to support them in the implementation of more inclusive forms of language. Among these resources, there is the booklet “Gender-inclusive language guidelines: Promoting gender equality through the use of language”, created by UN Women (n.d.), which provides an overview of inclusive linguistic techniques and how to use them.

In 2018, on the 10th anniversary of their first adoption, the European Parliament updated its guidelines that provide practical advice on the use of gender-fair language in the Parliament’s documents and communications in all official languages. These guidelines are especially important considering the Parliament’s specificities of being a multilingual context and a legislator.

In the professional psychological context, the American Psychological Association has always been a promoter of gender-sensitive use of language; in 2023 it updated its “Inclusive Language Guide”, a document containing a comprehensive analysis of relevant terms and their definitions, as well as terms to avoid and suggestions of alternatives, with the aim of raising awareness and promoting a use of language that is culturally sensitive towards historically marginalized groups.

3.2 A focus on the implementation of gender-fair language in Italy

An important work that stimulated the debate on the topic of gender-inclusive language in Italy was the booklet “Il sessismo nella lingua italiana” by Alma Sabatini. Published in 1987, it was promoted by the Presidency of the Ministers’ Council and the National Committee on Equity between Men and Women with the aim of promoting awareness about the relationship between language and women’s representation into society. This work analyzed journals and job advertisements to detect gender asymmetries and formulated some recommendations for a more inclusive use of language. It was a very

important document because it made a systematic analysis of the Italian language and provided practical suggestions and alternatives, becoming a useful tool, especially for professionals who deal with language (e.g. teachers). Moreover, it stirred the debate about the importance of language in gender discriminations, bringing attention to this neglected topic.

For a long time, this work was known only into academic spheres, but recently attention has been drawn again to the topic. Nowadays the debate about changing language towards more inclusive forms is very heated in society: even if during the last decades there were signs of change (implementation of norms and guidelines at a local, regional and national level, as well as in universities and organizations; discussion into academic spheres; changes in language use, e.g. use of feminine role titles, more attention into articles...), the reactions of people to this topic are strongly divided with very contrasting opinions. There is resistance to accept the feminine version of occupational titles, even if women actually work in those fields and thus should have the right denomination. This opposition shows that changes in society are very slow and do not automatically reflect into language. The persistent use of sexist language represents a cultural resistance towards the change of the representation of women and men into social roles (Giuliani, 2024, p.193).

As discussed before, beliefs and cultural values are one of the core dimensions at the basis of language use. Promoting the use of gender-fair language can be encouraged by discussions in the academic spheres and implemented at a structural level by norms and regulations, but its adoption at an individual level is determined by different factors. Nowadays it is evident that there is a change in sensibility about this topic and more and more people feel the need to evolve towards more inclusive forms of language, but there is still a long road to go to make this change a universal cultural value shared by all individuals.

3.3 Strategies and interventions to promote gender-fair language

A concrete and stable change in language cannot be imposed by regulations: it arises from the speakers' collective needs, and it becomes structural when it is socially recognized as important and incorporated into daily linguistic habits.

Use of gender-inclusive language, as well, arises from the individual's belief that it is an important matter that needs attention; consequently, the person will decide to use it deliberately. At the same time, to make this decision permanent and spontaneous, using this kind of language should become a habitual process (Sczesny et al. 2015).

To encourage and support the adoption of gender-fair language several strategies and interventions can be implemented in many different contexts and levels. Norms and guidelines can be useful to provide a normative framework and to serve as practical resource to clarify doubts, and they are a concrete sign of the ongoing change in society, but they are not very effective to promote a change in language use because this change should arise from individuals' needs.

To be effective, interventions should aim at targeting people's deliberate and habitual processes, taking into consideration the importance of changing beliefs and the automatic processes that guide language use.

A behavioral change, rather than an attitudinal one, is more achievable in the short term. The exposition to arguments supporting gender-fair language has been demonstrated to increase the use of inclusive forms (Koeser & Sczesny 2014). This effect can be provoked also by simple and frequent exposition to non-sexist terms in order to make this kind of language more visible and available (Sczesny et al. 2015). It is also important to consider the influence of incidental exposure to information, which is demonstrated to guide stereotyping and influence one's judgement on targets, even without the person's awareness (Banaji et al. 1993). This aspect is of great importance considering the massive exposure to media that people experience in daily life: through social media, TV and newspapers, a person is constantly exposed to various stimuli; this influence can be negative if it reinforces stereotypes, but it could also be used in a proactive way to spread counter-stereotypical information about women. Media can be also very powerful in

promoting inclusive language, including it into their narrative, allowing to reach a wide span of population.

A consistent and durable behavioral change in language use could eventually lead to an attitudinal change, which is more difficult to obtain as it involves changing a person's beliefs. Research has tried to test some strategies to address beliefs in language use. The exposure to arguments supporting gender-fair language was effective in promoting an immediate change in language use, but it did not show a significant effect on attitudes (Koeser & Sczesny 2014). To target beliefs, it might be useful to address people's understanding of the positive consequences of gender-fair language (Sczesny et al. 2015), encouraging individuals to reflect on gender inequalities in society and the need to improve the situation. Considering the motivations that people use to justify a sexist use of language (Parks & Robertson 1998), interventions should encourage discussion about the necessity to accept change as a natural process, both at an individual level and at a societal level, understanding that tradition is not immutable and that inequalities that might be justifiable in the past should now be addressed.

Together with the media, another fundamental actor in the development of language is school. The educational context can be a privileged place to foster inclusive language and address discrimination; research showed that gender stereotypes arise since a very early age in children and affect their self-identity concept in many ways, influencing their thoughts and behaviors. The use of gender-fair language can foster a more balanced representation of reality; studies have demonstrated that the use of more inclusive linguistic forms, especially pair forms, can impact children' and adolescents' perception of careers, reducing the influence of gender stereotypical ads, thus encouraging them to pursue careers based on their actual interests (Vervecken et al. 2013; Vervecken et al. 2015).

In the professional context interventions aim at promoting the use of inclusive language in job advertisements, interviews, as well as in daily management of the workplace. It is important to use language correctly to transmit a balanced representation of women and men in jobs, thus encouraging women to pursue all careers without implicit or explicit external influence; the use of gender-fair language can also be a tool to create safe

workplaces where women can feel a sense of belonging and where they are guaranteed fair treatment, equal pay and access to promotions.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of early feminist movements, which advocated gender equality and a fair use of language, society has changed: women have entered in almost all contexts traditionally assigned to men, they have tried to take their rightful place and make their voice heard, drawing attention to their issues. This gradual empowerment of women is a slow process, it is not concluded, and it faces daily challenges. Even if today there is much more sensibility towards the topic of gender equality and more and more people are sensitive and ready to act in a more inclusive way, there are still profound beliefs and traditional views that impede this development. This is especially evident in language use. Even if research has investigated and demonstrated the connection between language and cognition and the impact of language on social groups and societal organizations, changing language use is a difficult matter. There have been improvements towards a more gender-fair language but this change is still on the way, it still needs to be shared collectively and to become habitual and spontaneous. Research is still on-going and active on this topic, it aims at demonstrating the effectiveness of gender-fair language and at proposing practical strategies and suggestions for its implementation. Considering that we define ourselves using language, it should be of utmost importance to each of us taking the results of research and applying them into daily life, spreading consciousness on the topic and encouraging other people to do so. Change is already on the way and it is our responsibility to get into the flow and contribute to it, to create a more equal society where every women and every girl can live and act on their own free will with full possibility to express their potential.

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