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Translating Identities: a Comparative Study of Gender-Inclusive Language Strategies in English and Italian

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INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential means of human communication, as it enables individuals to express their needs and ideas, as well as to form bonds between each other in society. However, at times language can become a tool for the maintenance and propagation of dangerous stereotypes and assumptions, with practical implications and possibly harmful effects on people's lives (Sczesny et al. 2015: 943). For instance, traditional linguistic practices that accept the use of the masculine gender for generic reference may contribute to the reinforcement of an androcentric world view according to which men are representative of humankind, thus fuelling discrimination against women and minorities in both linguistic and practical terms (Tavits and Pérez 2019: 16781).

In this respect, the possible interdependence between language and thought, and, consequently, between language and the way humans conceive and organise reality, has interested scholars and intellectuals for a long time. Among the hypotheses and theories that have been formulated around this topic, Linguistic Relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, states that people's thoughts are to some extent affected by the language they speak (Lucy 1997: 291). Although this hypothesis has sparked considerable controversy due to its most radical interpretation bordering on linguistic determinism (Hussein 2012: 642), such a claim seems to be supported by numerous studies, thus stressing the need for further research on the matter.

Therefore, since awareness of the issue of discriminatory use of language and its possible effects arose internationally in the second half of the 20th century, much effort has been put into the reformation of languages in a more inclusive perspective, encompassing multiple aspects of identity, including gender, which is the one lying at the core of this paper. This process has resulted in the development of linguistic strategies aimed at recognising the feminine gender and non-binary gender identities that have recently emerged and are increasingly being acknowledged by society. The strategies designed for this purpose belong to a type of language known as "gender-inclusive language", which has been taken as a basis for the drafting of guidelines for a respectful use of language by numerous authoritative institutions. More specifically, this

kind of language works in two directions, either by giving visibility to the feminine gender or by removing gender references altogether (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 195) in order to move beyond the traditional conception of gender as being binary.

Nevertheless, the process of adoption and development of gender-inclusive language is complicated not only by some degree of persistence of sexist and discriminatory ideologies, but also by the grammatical features of some languages, which can act as an obstacle to the achievement of an equal treatment of genders in language. In addition, in a world that is constantly interconnected thanks to globalisation and where even countries on opposite ends of the planet can communicate instantly and continuously through technology and trade, it is vital that gender-inclusive language is readily translated from one language into another to preserve its goal, namely the promotion of gender equality, across linguistic borders. However, as different languages may exhibit different characteristics, finding the ideal solution for the translation of gender-inclusive language requires great effort and entails numerous obstacles that need to be overcome.

Therefore, the aim of the present dissertation is to examine the question of gender-inclusive language use and translation on the basis of current research on the matter. The first chapter will explain what gender-inclusive language is by defining the concept of gender in both sociological and linguistic terms across languages. After addressing the issue of linguistic sexism and the main approaches thus far designed to deal with it, the significance that gender-inclusive language holds in relation to issues of social equality will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will illustrate the past and current debate on linguistic sexism and gender-inclusive language in the Italian public discourse with respect to the most popular gender-inclusive language strategies that have been developed in this context and the reception they have been met with.

On the other hand, the second chapter will focus primarily on the translation of gender-inclusive language, situating this practice in the context of feminist linguistic activism and exploring modern gender-sensitive approaches to it. It will also address the issue of gender bias in Machine Translation (MT), taking into account current technological advancements and the difficulties that commonly arise in this practice. The final section

of the chapter will be dedicated to the exploration of possible methods designed to mitigate gender bias in this context.

Lastly, in chapter three I will conduct a comparative study of the gender-inclusive language strategies adopted in three administrative documents, namely the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 of the University of Padova, the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna and the International Quidditch Association (IQA) Rulebook 2020, in order to provide and assess examples of real-life gender-inclusive language use and translation in English and Italian. More specifically, after illustrating the stance of Italian public administration with respect to the use of gender in administrative language, I will analyse a sample of extracts taken from these texts on the basis of the current theoretical background on the matter. This analysis will offer an insight into the difficulties that arise when translating gender-inclusive language strategies, thus emphasising the importance of further research in order to increase their effectiveness across languages.

CHAPTER 1

Gender-inclusive language

Identity lies at the core of every individual. Thus, the desire for others to recognise and accept one's identity is far from trivial. However, as social and cultural norms evolve with time, in certain circumstances the conventional means that make identities be seen may prove to be inadequate. This issue also affects language, though its natural capacity for mutability makes it adaptable to the needs of those who use it. As a matter of fact, a new way of conceiving language, known as inclusive language, has begun to work its way across society in the name of a more equal representation of both newly recognised and long existing identities suffering from discrimination in multiple fields of existence alongside the linguistic one. Its effectiveness and viability, though, is still under scrutiny.

1.1 What is inclusive and gender-inclusive language?

In the second half of the 20th century, a new sensibility towards gender issues emerged, resulting in the development of new fields of study, such as Gender and Women's Studies, which are interested in questions related to identity and the relationships between individuals in society. Their analyses encompass the representation of identities through language, as this means of communication can be extremely influential in perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypes and discrimination against certain social categories (Sczesny et al. 2015: 943). Inclusive language has been identified as a possible tool to counter such a threat, and therefore has been adopted by an increasing number of organisations (e.g. the EU, universities) as a criterion for the creation of official guidelines to regulate their means of expression (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 160).

Inclusive language is defined as “language that avoids the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people”¹. According to Catarinella et al. (2022: 1980) “a text is inclusive when it does not reinforce stereotypes and does not discriminate against persons according to age, abilities [...], ethnicities, social status, sexual orientation or physical features”. This kind of language involves the

¹ From Collins Dictionary (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/inclusive-language>).

use of linguistic strategies that replace or correct derogatory and exclusive expressions, both consciously and unconsciously employed, in order to increase the visibility and equality of certain people in speaking and writing. Among the groups that may benefit from inclusive language, we find black people, queer people, and women. More specifically, when inclusive strategies are used to overcome gender asymmetries in language, we talk about gender-inclusive or gender-fair language (Rosola et al. 2023: 1).

In order to better understand the role of gender and its implications for social representations in language, it is important to first specify what this word signifies. Unlike sex, which refers to the biological aspects on the basis of which a person is classified as male or female² (Luck 2020: 5), gender refers to the behaviours and characteristics that a society considers acceptable for each sex³ (Kenda 2022: 206). Therefore, the latter has more of a sociocultural connotation rather than a biological one. This implies that someone's gender identity, which is the way a person perceives their gender, may not coincide with their biological sex. This further complicates the matter by adding transgender identities to the discourse (Kenda 2022: 206).

Gender, however, is not only a social category, but it also denotes a grammatical one. Hord (2016: 2) defines grammatical gender as

a noun class system by which nouns are divided into two or more categories [...] Nouns that do not reflect semantic, or 'human', gender (e.g. *tree*, *car*) are sorted into the categories without any correlation with sex distinction. Semantic or embodied gender, however, is almost always aligned with 'masculine' and 'feminine' grammatical categories.

Horvath et al. (2016: 133) explain that languages can be divided into three classes depending on how they express grammatical gender. The first one is that of genderless languages, in which nouns and pronouns are generally unmarked for gender, except in

² This binary distinction, however, fails to include intersexuality, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "the state or condition of having or combining characteristics of both sexes [...]" (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/intersexuality_n?tab=meaning_and_use#114685).

³ The binary distinction between male and female sex influences the way some people think about gender. However, this interpretation ignores the existence of non-binary people, whose genders "do not conform to socially accepted definitions of *man* and *woman* [...] can mix characteristics of any number of genders, or can express gender fluidity." (Hord 2016: 3). This becomes particularly relevant when talking about gender-inclusive language.

the case of certain lexical elements that include a specific semantic gender reference (e.g. *woman* implies that the referent is female; similarly, *brother* implies that the referent is male). An example of a language that belongs to this category is Finnish. The second category is that of natural gender languages, which mark gender in pronouns, but not in nouns. English is one of them; as a matter of fact, English nouns do not express grammatical gender (e.g. *doctor* may refer to a female doctor as well as a male doctor), whereas there are three third singular person pronouns (i.e. *he*, *she*, *it*), each referring to a precise gender (i.e. male, female and neuter respectively) (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 156). Finally, the third category is that of grammatical gender languages, in which both nouns and pronouns, together with other parts of speech (e.g. adjectives, articles), are gendered, and therefore should follow grammatical agreement between each other (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 195).

Romance languages, for example Italian, belong to this category (e.g. *Lei è una brava dottoressa.* is a sentence which includes a personal pronoun, *lei*, an indefinite article, *una*, an adjective, *brava*, and a noun, *dottoressa*; all of them are marked for gender, and they refer to a female subject). Such languages distinguish between two or three grammatical gender categories, which usually correspond to masculine, feminine and, if present, neuter grammatical gender (Horvath et al. 2016: 133). This distinction is extremely significant for the issue of gender-inclusive language, since the grammatical gender system of a language greatly impacts the viability of the strategies that are proposed to avoid masculine generic reference and gender-exclusive language⁴. As a matter of fact, natural gender languages are usually more “compatible” with gender-inclusive language strategies than grammatical gender languages⁵ (Hord 2016: 1).

⁴ However, the grammatical gender system of a language is not the only reason behind the adoption of gender-inclusive language. According to Sczesny et al. (2015: 952), another non-linguistic factor that influences people’s tendency to use gender-inclusive language is their intentions and attitudes towards the issue, as sexist ideological beliefs may lead to deliberately choose not to employ this kind of language. In this respect, different cultures may allow the affirmation of gender-inclusive language to different degrees in different countries (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 208).

⁵ However, Stahlberg et al. (2007 in Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 271) affirm that “[a]ll languages [...] could in principle be used in a symmetrical and gender-fair way”.

1.2 The issue of masculine generics

Now that we have established what social and grammatical gender are, and the different possible ways in which the latter can be represented in language, we can focus on the relationship between these two concepts⁶. In the case of English, the fact that most personal nouns are unmarked for gender may lead to semantic bias (Pennisi 2022: 167), which depends largely on associative relations (e.g. believing that *doctor* automatically refers to a male referent, or that *nurse* automatically refers to a female one, when these words can actually be used in association with both semantic genders) (Ullman 2022: 129). As regards Italian, there is a distinction to be drawn: nouns referring to inanimate objects do not embody a semantic gender, regardless of their grammatical gender⁷ (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 157), whereas the grammatical gender of nouns associated with human referents reflects their biological sex (Kenda 2022: 209).

In this respect, Liu et al. (2018: 103) highlight that “when speakers of a language are forced to always indicate whether the subject of their statement is male or female (e.g. Arabic), this clearly and constantly demarcates a difference”. This difference, however, is ignored when speakers employ masculine forms to refer to both male and female subjects (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 193). This is the case of the overextended masculine, used when the referent is a group including people of both genders (Rosola et al. 2023: 1). For example, in Italian *uomini*, which means *men*, is often used with the meaning of *human beings*. A similar effect is produced through the use of the generic masculine whenever the referent’s gender is unknown or unspecified (Hamilton 1988: 785). For instance, in English, in the sentence *A good doctor should feel empathy for his patients.*, the masculine third person pronoun *his* is used, although it refers to the noun *doctor*, which in this case is indefinite for gender, as it does not refer to any specific individual. Although in theory these forms have always been considered “neutral” thus far, numerous studies have found that in practice the use of the overextended and generic

⁶ This relationship is relevant to the issue of the present dissertation, as “[d]ifferences in grammatical gender systems have a clear impact on the mechanics of how people use gender neutral languages” (Hord 2016: 3).

⁷ Nonetheless, people’s perception of these objects can be influenced by grammatical gender. As a matter of fact, Boroditsky et al. (2003 in Horvath et al. 2016: 133) state that speakers and listeners seem to associate grammatically masculine (vs. feminine) nouns with characteristics that are generally attributed to males (vs. females), even when such nouns refer to inanimate (and therefore semantically genderless) objects.

masculine is actually ambiguous (Hamilton 1988: 785), with even deleterious effects on female visibility and gender equality in language (Sczesny et al. 2015: 944)⁸. As a matter of fact, Schneider (2004 in Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 270) recognised that “asymmetries in lexical gender, male false generics, and the systematic way language becomes gendered” can have a huge impact on social stereotypes based on gender differences and on the condition of men and women in society, as well as in people’s perception. In this respect, Adamo (2019: 148) argues that while masculine generics do exist, their use reinforces the view that maleness is the norm, constraining femaleness to being perceived as an exception.

This is what has prompted scholars and activists, especially those belonging to the feminist movement, to advocate for gender-inclusive language, in order to oppose androcentrism in language as well as linguistic sexism (Kenda, 2022: 210), which is “the linguistic manifestation of the mentality, social behaviours, cultural judgements, and prejudices tinged with, or vitiated by, sexism” (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 156)⁹. Mucchi-Faina (2005) distinguishes two main approaches which proposals that counter linguistic sexism can reflect. The first one is inclusion (also called neutralisation), which is achieved by “reducing or abolishing terms that connote, or seem to connote, one sex to the exclusion of the other” (e.g. using *flight attendant*, which does not refer to a specific gender, instead of *steward*, which is exclusively masculine, or *stewardess*, which is exclusively feminine) (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 195) and using gender-indefinite nouns instead. An example of a strategy that is included in this approach is the use of epicenes, i.e. “forms with invariant grammatical gender which refer to female as well as male persons” (Sczesny et al. 2016: 123). The opposite strategy is that of visibility (also called feminisation), which makes explicit reference to women in order to highlight their presence (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 195). A strategy belonging to this category is splitting, when “masculine generics are replaced by feminine-masculine word pairs” (Sczesny et al. 2016: 123) (e.g. *steward/stewardess*). Obviously, these two strategies can

⁸ This aspect will be discussed in more detail in Section 1.3.

⁹ The fight against generic masculine is significant not only for promoting equality between men and women, but also for the recognition and acceptance of non-binary identities and all those who are not represented in the traditional Western binary dichotomy (Hord 2016: 1). This dissertation mainly focuses on the issue of sexist language, but it is important to remember that gender-inclusive language has a wider spectrum in this sense.

also be used in combination within the same context; however, the adequacy and effectiveness of each strategy is influenced by the grammatical gender system of a language¹⁰ (Sczesny et al 2016: 123).

1.3 Why is gender-inclusive language relevant?

The studies that investigate the impact of gender-fair linguistic forms on the condition and perception of women in society are extensive and varied. Many scholars agree that “the masculine generic makes women invisible” (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 193), and that “the usage of the generic masculine [...] and the overextended masculine [...] predominantly evoke masculine mental representations, thereby limiting the visibility of female and non-binary individuals” (Rosola et al. 2023: 1). Nonetheless, the debate on inclusive and gender-inclusive language remains heated, even more so since the advent of social media, which allow every user to express their opinion on the matter (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 163).

Among the arguments against linguistic change in favour of gender equality and the visibility of women in language, Sulis and Gheno (2022: 164) observe the presence of the idea that one should not abandon linguistic forms that have always been used in the past. Not only does this strong attachment to traditions ignore the need for a more inclusive and gender-neutral language, which has been recognised by feminists as well as members of the transgender community (Hord 2016: 1), but it also conflicts with the fundamental principle that language is changing constantly (Sabatini 1987: 97)¹¹. In this regard, the UNESCO’s gender-equality guidelines affirm that “[i]f words and expressions that imply that women are inferior to men are constantly used, that assumption of inferiority tends to become part of our mindset”, supporting “the need to adjust our language when our ideas evolve” (Sczesny et al. 2016: 125).

Another objection that opponents of gender-inclusive language often voice is that language is insignificant and unrelated to the condition of women in society, and

¹⁰ As I have already discussed in Section 1.1.

¹¹ According to Martyna (1980 in Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 270) linguistic change is not only possible, but even desirable and necessary in order to avoid harmful dynamics in society.

therefore people should worry about more pressing matters instead¹². This argument calls into question a long-running debate about the power of language to affect thought, which reached one of its peaks in terms of controversy with the formulation of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis¹³, better known as Linguistic Relativity (Hussein 2012: 642). This theory essentially suggests that the language one speaks may in fact influence their thought and world view (Lucy 1997: 291). The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, however, has been subject to different interpretations, some of which potentially jeopardise its appeal and viability (Luck 2020: 20). It is the case of its most radical version, which pertains to what is known as “linguistic determinism”, according to which language determines thought. If this was the case, it would mean that “speakers of different languages think and perceive reality in different ways and that each language has its own world view” (Hussein 2012: 642).

One of the implications that make this hypothesis questionable is the fact that it seems to suggest that the world cannot be perceived objectively, thus calling into question the effectiveness of science and the possibility for humans to really know the reality they live in (Hussein 2020: 642). On the other hand, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has also been interpreted in a more moderate version, which posits that “language affects perceptions of reality and, ultimately, the way in which people see themselves and the world” (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 190); in crude terms, language in some ways influences thought (Tohidian 2009 in Luck 2020: 21). This interpretation is more widely accepted (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 190) and supported by numerous studies and empirical research; for instance, Lucy and Shweder (1979 in Horvath et al. 2016: 133) found that people’s perception of colours is influenced by the way in which their language categorises them, suggesting a relationship between language and cognition.

Regardless of the specific debate on the validity of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, “[t]he fact that language plays a role in shaping our thoughts, in modifying our perception and

¹² This argument is observed by Mucchi-Faina (2005: 194), Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012: 270), Sabatini (1987: 99), Sulis and Gheno (2022: 165) and by Tavits and Pérez (2019: 16781).

¹³ This hypothesis is named after Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, two anthropologists and linguists whose contributions added to the discussion. The genesis of linguistic relativity, however, can be traced back to the ideas of the German philosophers J.G. Herder (1744-1803) and W.V. Humboldt (1767-1835) during the Enlightenment period (Hussein 2012: 642).

in creating reality is irrefutable” (Hussein 2020: 645). This is extremely significant for the issue of gender-inclusive language, as it follows that people’s language use should be taken into consideration as a possible factor which may contribute to the condition of women in society and reinforce social discrimination (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 278). For instance, among the social aspects that have been investigated in this respect, job advertisements have been subject to scrutiny in multiple studies, showing that most women tend not to apply for occupations which are advertised using masculine generics, whereas the same position is seen as more appealing when unbiased forms are used (Sczesny et al. 2016: 124). According to Luck (2020: 23), “[w]omen seem to be able to picture themselves in the roles relative to whether or not they are linguistically represented”.

In addition, Horvath and Sczesny (2013 in Harris et al. 2017: 2) conducted a study on German-speaking business students, who were asked to assess standardised female applicants as if they were employers. This simulated hiring experiment showed that when the job description used paired forms (thus including an explicit female reference alongside the masculine one) rather than exclusively male ones, students tended to view female applicants as more suitable for high-power positions. An unprecedented though daring contribution to this debate is the study conducted by Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell and Laakso (2012) in order to verify whether there is a possible correlation between how grammatical gender is expressed in a language and the condition of women from the point of view of gender equality in the countries where that language is spoken. Results seem to suggest that “countries that speak gendered languages evidence less gender equality than countries that speak natural gender or genderless languages” (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 278); however, this contentious claim has yet to be investigated thoroughly, let alone confirmed. On a similar note, Tavits and Pérez (2019: 16782 and 16786) argue that “speakers of gendered tongues express more conservative attitudes toward gender relations” and that “mere changes in words can, in fact, help societies” contribute to the fight against patriarchy¹⁴. It follows that gender-inclusive language contributes to the cause of gender equality by enhancing the visibility of

¹⁴ In this regard, however, Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012: 280) emphasise that linguistic change such as gender-inclusive language strategies should proceed in parallel with social and political actions for gender equality to truly be achieved.

women (as well as nonmales in general) in language (Tavits and Pérez 2019: 16786). In this regard, Liu et al. (2018: 104) state that “changes toward more gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language use among speakers of official languages” may be a good “channel for promoting gender equality”, confirming the great significance of language for this issue.

1.4 Opinions on gender-inclusive language in the Italian public discourse

The first signs of interest in the representation of gender and minorities in language date back to the 1970s, around a decade after the advent of the civil rights movement in the United States (Luck 2020: 14), and mostly derive from the activity of the feminist movement (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 191). As a matter of fact, this issue was first brought forward as a demand for equality in language as well as in society (Luck 2020: 14), and only afterwards did scientific research start to investigate it for purely linguistic purposes (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 191). In the British and American context¹⁵ this issue was tackled in an empirical and practical way, which later served as a basis for the formulation of guidelines for a non-sexist use of language (Lepschy 1989: 63). In general, references about this topic in and on English are more extensive than those in and on Italian (Lepschy 1989: 73), although the discussion of gender-fair strategies has increasingly been attracting academic and public interest (Rosola et al. 2023: 2).

More specifically, in the case of Italy the contributions of the feminist language movements of the 1970s set the scene for an intense debate on linguistic sexism in the Italian language, which reached a milestone with the publication of Alma Sabatini’s *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana*¹⁶ in 1987, supported by the Commissione Nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna, which was created by the Ufficio del Consiglio dei Ministri¹⁷ in 1984 (Sulis and Gheno 2022:

¹⁵ Among the main scholars who discussed this topic within the early feminist critique of language we find Professor Robin Lakoff (especially with *Language and Woman’s Place* in 1973) and writer and activist Dale Spender (especially with *Man Made Language* in 1980) (Luck 2020: 15).

¹⁶ The title of this document literally means “Recommendations for a non-sexist use of the Italian language”.

¹⁷ This bears witness to the involvement of the government since the appearance of the issue in the Italian public discourse (Lepschy 1989: 63), which is still present today, for better or worse. For instance, in July 2024 an Italian right-wing senator proposed a bill to ban the use of certain feminine agentives, such as *sindaca* (instead of *sindaco*) and *avvocata* (instead of *avvocato*), by fining those who use such words over €1000. This bill, which as we are going to see is clearly against Sabatini’s recommendations, was soon

158). Sabatini (1987: 97) herself states that the aim of this document is “suggerire alternative compatibili con il sistema della lingua per evitare alcune forme sessiste della lingua italiana” [to suggest alternatives that are compatible with the linguistic system in order to avoid some sexist forms in the Italian language] and “stabilire un vero rapporto tra valori simbolici nella lingua e valori concreti nella vita” [to establish a genuine relationship between symbolic values in the language and practical values in life].

The suggestions included in Sabatini’s work primarily concern the invisibility of women in language through grammatical and semantic asymmetries (Rosola et al. 2013: 2), with a focus on the sphere of job titles and professional roles traditionally taken by men (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 158). For instance, Sabatini suggests avoiding the use of the words *uomo* (man) and *uomini* (men) to refer to humans in general; instead, she proposes to replace them with expressions such as *essere/i umano/i* (human being/s) or *persona/e* (person/people). She also accepts the use of the paired forms *donna e uomo* (woman and man) and *donne e uomini* (women and men), but she adds that the combinations should appear in reverse too, as “se si continua ad anteporre il maschile al femminile, si persiste nel considerare il maschio più importante” [if we continue to mention the masculine form before the feminine one, we continue to imply that males are more important] (Sabatini 1987: 103).

Another of Sabatini’s suggestions is that titles in the masculine forms should be avoided to refer to women when regular feminine forms exist for the same role, for example in the case of *la senatrice* (female senator) *Maria Rossi* instead of *il senatore Maria Rossi* (Sabatini 1987: 110). Despite Sabatini’s work having a significant, albeit gradual, influence on the debate about the representation of gender in Italian, especially from the point of view of the formulation and adoption of linguistic guidelines, her recommendations initially received a sceptic reception, sometimes bordering on or even resulting in mockery (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 159). However, scepticism and suspicion seem to be a common fate for every attempt at changing traditional linguistic practices through political intervention, as even now they are seen by many as impositions and limitations regardless of their aim (Lepschy 1989: 66). Lepschy (1989: 66) claims that

withdrawn (source: <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/2024/07/21/vietare-femminile-atti-pubblici-proposta-legge-lega>).

widespread distrust of linguistic policies in Italy is a legacy of the fascist regime, when linguistic prescriptivism reached some extreme positions in terms of restrictions to freedom of speech. In the years following Sabatini's *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* the debate has continued to be heated, with numerous interventions from linguists, journalists and scholars, especially those affiliated with the Accademia della Crusca, which can be considered "the highest institution for the study of the Italian language", despite its non-normative role (Sulis and Gheno 2022). The way women are represented in the Italian language, then, is still the subject of scrutiny.

Another noteworthy stage of the development of gender-inclusive language in Italy is the discussion of the masculine-feminine binary, especially in relation to non-binary people¹⁸, who Sulis and Gheno (2022: 166) define as "people who do not recognise themselves in either the masculine or the feminine gender". This issue started to be systematically discussed in the 2010s, and since then numerous creative proposals have been suggested and examined, primarily involving the search for an indistinct plural ending (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 166-167). Among these¹⁹, one option that particularly sparked debate is the use of the schwa (Catarinella et al. 2022: 1980), which is a letter of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) representing the mid-central vowel (D'Achille 2021), instead of the regular -a/-e and -o/-i endings for singular/plural feminine and masculine referents respectively (e.g. *amicə* for "friend"). Generally speaking, this proposal has been received with mixed reactions (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 169). Both the public and part of the scientific community have expressed scepticism about it (Kenda 2022: 216), which can be explained by legitimate concerns about its effective feasibility due to a series of limitations. For instance, a possible challenge related to the grammatical characteristics of language is the fact that "the adoption of the schwa, as with any other inclusive solution, requires a modification of the morphology of the Italian language", which is a very complex and lengthy process (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 168). In addition, there are some practical issues that need to be addressed. According to D'Achille (2021) the symbol representing the schwa (i.e. ə)

¹⁸ However, as Sulis and Gheno (2022: 166) note, alternatives to binary forms are relevant when non-binary individuals are not involved too, as they can be problematic when referring to groups composed of both men and women or to a referent whose gender is not specified. It is the case of the overextended and generic masculine, which we have discussed in Section 1.2.

¹⁹ See Sulis and Gheno 2022: 167 for a list of the other proposals that have been suggested thus far.

could be illegible for people with dyslexia, thus accidentally excluding certain categories of people while trying to achieve inclusivity for others (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 167).

Therefore, numerous scholars (e.g. Arcangeli 2022 in Catarinella et al. 2022, D’Achille 2021) agree that this proposal is not ideal as a neutral form in Italian (Catarinella et al. 2022: 1992). However, the use of the schwa has been observed in popular forms of communication such as social media and comics, which Sulis and Gheno (2022: 170) consider “a sign of both its acceptance and the interest it raises across wide sectors of society”. In addition, the proponents of the schwa are aware of, and careful to emphasise the experimental nature of this proposal (Kenda 2022: 215), which should serve to attract the interest of people in order to raise awareness about the topic of gender-inclusive language, as well as to encourage new proposals and experimentation (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 172-173). In this respect, De Benedetti 2022 (in Catarinella et al. 2022: 1981) argues that by “removing from Italian any obstacles that limit the full expression of oneself and [...] promoting solutions that allow all speakers to feel represented” the right to linguistic self-determination will be granted to all. Consequently, the question of finding gender-inclusive solutions that overcome the linguistic binary in light of the new needs of society remains unresolved.

All things considered, the path to a global acceptance of inclusive language is still long and steep, as it is hindered not only by linguistic barriers, sometimes differing in their nature across languages, but also by people’s prejudice against what is unknown and their resistance to change, which often trace their origins to ingrained traditional views and deep-rooted cultural ideologies. Nevertheless, while this issue continues to be studied and people become more and more familiar with it, the possibility of promoting equality through language is increasingly being acknowledged by institutional authorities and ordinary language users alike. In this respect, since identity is a universal concept and therefore needs to be rendered into different languages when communication between cultures takes place, investigating how inclusive language can be exported beyond linguistic borders has triggered an impulse to rethink the practice of translation, favouring the expression and recognition of identities all over the world.

CHAPTER 2

Translating gender-inclusive language

Now that I have discussed how language can play a crucial role in relation to social matters, the importance of translation in this respect becomes apparent, as the question of identity holds a transnational significance, thus transcending linguistic borders. As a matter of fact, translation is vital not only to ensure that identities are recognised and respected globally, but also to export strategies and ideas that operate in favour of gender equality in order to address this issue through a collective effort. In this respect, when gender-inclusive language is employed in the source language (SL), the need to find viable strategies to render it in the target language (TL) emerges. However, as with language in general, translation is subject to a number of limitations and obstacles, which further complicate the activities of human and machine translation alike, and which studies in the field are trying to find possible solutions to.

2.1 Translation as linguistic activism

Translation is a historic, long-established field of human culture, which has gained even more value since the advent and development of globalisation. As a matter of fact, this process has significantly increased the opportunities for contact between different regions of the world, thus stressing the need for clear and effective communication between different countries and communities in order to facilitate mutual understanding and international cooperation. However, as time passes novel approaches to this activity have emerged, following advancement in theory as well as change in cultural norms.

With respect to the matter of the present dissertation, numerous studies in the fields of feminist linguistics and feminist translation studies focus on the power of language and translation to shape gender roles (Castro 2013a: 5), especially through the representation of genders in different languages (Castro 2013b: 36). For instance, Pauwels (2003: 550) claims that the popular portrayal of women and men in written texts across languages encourages readers to perceive the former as frivolous and gossipy, and the latter as authoritative. The role of feminist activism in linguistics and translation, then, is that of challenging such stereotyped representations by exposing

their biased and discriminatory nature (Pauwels 2003: 551), promoting instead “the emancipatory aim of redressing gender social inequalities through changes in language/s” (Castro 2013b: 36).

The genesis of feminist translation is rooted in the activity of Canadian feminist writers¹ in the 1980s and 1990s (von Flotow 1991: 72), which constituted the first opportunity for contact between feminist politics and translation theory² (von Flotow 2019: 181). Their aim was that of opposing through deconstruction the language conventionally employed in the fields of writing and translation³, which they found imbued with misogynistic views, and creating a new language suitable to give voice to women’s experiences (von Flotow 1991: 72). It is possible to distinguish two main approaches within the Canadian feminist translation school: the first one entailed the desire to change the patriarchal stances of those texts which hid and silenced feminine references, whilst the second one proposed to modify source texts actively and explicitly so that target texts could convey something more, something new and original (von Flotow 2019 in Adamo 2019: 156).

Naturally, whenever feminism is involved, now as then, it sparks a certain amount of controversy because of its inherent disruptive mission (von Flotow 2019: 181). As a matter of fact, this approach to translation, straying away from the traditional notion of this activity as a sort of handicrafts which could prove translators’ skills in shifting faithfully across languages with the least possible interference (Castro 2013a: 5), was soon met with a sceptic reception due to people’s perception of its nature as deviant (Adamo 2019: 156). Apart from this kind of hesitancy, since the 1990s constructive criticism has originated with respect to new theoretical developments in fields such as sociology, for instance the one concerning intersectionality (von Flotow 2019: 183). This notion, which was first introduced by activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, proposes that “factors such as race, class, disability, age and ethnicity” need to be taken

¹ Some of the most influential names in this context are those of Barbara Godard and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (Adamo 2019: 156).

² It is important to underline that these experiences and ideas did not remain confined to the academic context from which they originated but managed to spread through the Canadian culture and beyond (Adamo 2019: 156).

³ The languages they primarily worked with were English and French, as the main geographical background to their action was the predominantly francophone region of Quebec (von Flotow 1991: 72).

into consideration alongside gender in analysing social dynamics and advocating for social justice, as the coexistence of multiple factors may be associated with different and intersecting levels of oppression⁴ (von Flotow 2019: 184). As a consequence, feminist activists need to be careful not to limit their activity by subscribing to a monolithic view of women and should instead recognise “the diversity of women’s lived experiences and other forms of oppression than sexism” (von Flotow 2019: 184).

From the perspective of feminist translation studies, translation is not just a process of linguistic transposition (Adamo 2019: 152), and therefore it should not stop at trying to achieve a faithful and grammatically correct or aesthetically pleasing version of the source text from an exclusively linguistic point of view, as traditional assumptions have long sustained (Castro 2013a: 5). Instead, translation is viewed as an act of ideological⁵ transfer (Nissen 2002: 25) and “a tool for political action and social activism” (Castro 2013b: 38) which operates on texts without ignoring the social circumstances which birthed them and the values they reflect, thus emphasising the ethics of translation (Castro 2013a: 7). Consequently, neutrality is impossible for translators, as declared in the first International Forum on translation and activism⁶ at the University of Granada in 2007 (Adamo 2019: 154).

Those who subscribe to this interpretation of translation, then, question the conventional view of translators as invisible and objective, considering them active mediating agents instead⁷, whose choices in translation depend on ideology rather than linguistics (Castro 2013b: 39). In this perspective, Castro (2013a: 9) states that translators have a double (con)textual and ethical responsibility towards both the source and target context. On

⁴ For example, if we analyse the condition of women and men in society, a man will normally be more privileged than a woman. However, if we add another factor such as race to the equation, a white woman will normally be more privileged than a black woman, as they will both be subject to sexism, but the latter will be subject to racism as well. Intersectionality, then, offers a more nuanced perspective of social dynamics, in the light of which considering the mentioned factors separately from all the others proves to be an oversimplification.

⁵ Nissen (2002: 25) uses the word “ideology” to refer to “the standard set of values, ideas and beliefs that govern a community”.

⁶ Information about this forum can be found at the following link: https://www.intralinea.org/news/item/Translation_and_Activism.

⁷ This approach to the role of the translator calls into question another traditional concept of translation, which sees this practice as feminine because of its reproductive activity, as opposed to writing, which is seen as a masculine practice due to its productive purpose (Castro 2013a: 10).

the one hand, they have a responsibility towards the former to “convey the content of a previous text in the most thorough and convenient possible way”; on the other hand, their responsibility towards the latter is that of “paying attention to the cultural and linguistic changes in vogue in the target society so as to be able to produce an ‘updated’ translation in accordance with them – without preventing the target audience from getting to know how the source text was addressing its source audience” (Castro 2013b: 40).

This concept is quite relevant in respect to inclusive language, as Castro (2013a: 9) herself hypothesises that, as inclusive language becomes steadily more present in texts in English and Galician (the two languages she focuses on), translations that include it may contribute to its affirmation; however, this suggestion is hindered by the tendency of mainstream translations to surpass source texts in the presence of conservative views (Castro 2013a: 9). Therefore, a non-traditional approach as that of the Canadian feminist translation school may prove beneficial to the cause by “making changes to some of these traditional views” on the basis of translators’ interference and “transformance” (von Flotow 1991: 82), which Adamo (2019: 156) defines as “trasformazione performativa del testo di partenza capace di trasgredire le norme che regolano l’occultamento della soggettività femminile nel linguaggio e nella scrittura” [performative transformation of the source text which can transgress the norms prescribing the concealment of female subjectivity in language and writing].

With time the methods belonging to feminist activist translation have been adopted in different contexts and cultures, coming to encompass new interpretations of the original approach⁸ (Adamo 2019: 157). As regards the Italian context, for example, Adamo (2019: 148) observes that most of the major publishing houses in Italy are usually not perceptive enough of the effect that translation strategies can have on society and on citizens’ common sense; thus, those choices subscribing to feminist translation theory that do not follow their editorial policies are often rejected. Furthermore, she suggests that sometimes Italian publishers agree to publish feminist translations just to exploit

⁸ As a matter of fact, Adamo (2019: 157) underlines that from her perspective feminist translation should not be considered a fixed monolithic concept. This mirrors the multifaceted nature of feminism itself, despite people often being unaware of the numerous nuances of this movement.

market dynamics and trends⁹ instead of actually promoting discourse on the issue of gender equality (Adamo 2019: 149). This situation would explain the numerous examples¹⁰ of feminist texts written by feminist writers that, when translated into Italian, seem to contradict the ideas and proposals they express (Adamo 2019: 149). However, it is undeniable that in the 2010s interest in translation studies and practices rooted in feminist activism grew, leading to the translation of key texts of feminist writing¹¹ and materials which serve as vital contribution to the cause (Adamo 2019: 157). As a result, translation can still be an opportunity to test and propose experimental strategies which may aid in encouraging reflection and discussion through defamiliarization (Adamo 2019: 148).

2.2 Strategies for the translation of gender-inclusive language

Feminist translation operates through various methods and strategies, also on the basis of the different ways in which languages express gender and other inherent grammatical characteristics (Paolucci et al. 2023: 15). However, all of these strategies share a specific political purpose (Castro 2013b: 36), namely resistance to oppression and to prescriptive patriarchal language, which has “to be undone in order for women’s words to develop, find a space and be heard” (von Flotow 1991: 73). Serving as the shared foundation of some of these practices, it is important to stress that, in the wake of the new feminist perception of translators as active agents in their activity, “the feminist translator, following the lead of the feminist writers she translates, has given herself permission to make her work visible, discuss the creative process she is engaged in, collude with and challenge the writers she translates.” (von Flotow 1991: 74).

⁹ This view is inspired by Nancy Fraser’s (2013) hypothesis, which is more general and not specific to Italy (Adamo 2019: 149).

¹⁰ Alongside Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), translated into Italian through the use of the generic masculine *Dovremmo essere tutti femministi* (2015), Adamo (2019: 149) mentions Rebecca Solnit’s *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014), whose Italian translation *Gli uomini mi spiegano le cose* (2017) displays professional titles only in the masculine plural form, although they refer to both women and men. Personally, I have noticed a similar issue in the Italian translation of Caroline Criado Perez’s *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019) (e.g. the generic masculine *bambini* for *children* at page 42), although the Italian translator is otherwise careful in the use of inclusive language, even employing the asterisk as a neutral ending in the title of the second chapter.

¹¹ Among these, works by feminist theorists Angela Davis, Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser are included (Adamo 2019: 158).

Among the strategies that have been developed “to promote feminism through and in translation” (von Flotow 2019: 181), von Flotow (2019: 181) draws a distinction between macro-strategies and micro-strategies. The first category includes, for example, prefacing and footnoting¹², through which translators “reflect on their work in a preface” and “stress their active presence in the text in footnotes” (von Flotow 1991: 76), thus “deliberately womanhandling¹³ the text and actively participating in the creation of meaning” (Godard 1988 in von Flotow 1991: 76). Thanks to this strategy, translators have the opportunity to express their views, which favours a dialogue with readers; in addition, it is possible to provide the latter with a clear explanation of the writer’s and translator’s intentions and methods (von Flotow 2019: 181). For instance, if a translator decided to render the English professional title *lawyers* in Italian with *avvocati e avvocate*¹⁴ and wanted to highlight or explain this choice, they could do so by clarifying the reason behind it in the preface or in a footnote. Von Flotow (1991: 76) identifies a didactic purpose lying at the root of this strategy, as the translator can “communicate [the source text’s] multiple meanings otherwise ‘lost in translation’.”

As regards micro-strategies, von Flotow (2019: 182) states that their essence is “making the feminine visible in language”; this can be achieved in different ways, such as through the intentional exclusive use of feminine forms (thus basically reversing masculine generic reference) or through the creation of original masculine and feminine paired forms. Such choices should serve to make the reader aware of “the grammatical imbalance of conventional language use” by standing out because of their rarity and uniqueness (von Flotow 2019: 183).

Adopting a more historical perspective, we can also take into consideration some strategies adopted by Canadian feminist translators of the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to prefacing and footnoting, other methods are supplementing and hijacking (von

¹² Nonetheless, Castro (2013b: 42) underlines that this strategy is possible only in literary translation, whilst it usually cannot be deployed in audio-visual translation.

¹³ The word “womanhandling” is a feminist neologism derived from the verb “manhandling”. This is an example of a strategy typical of the Canadian feminist translation school, which is that of creating neologism and puns “to parody and attack conventional language” (von Flotow 1991: 73).

¹⁴ Not only does this expression include both feminine and masculine forms in pair, but the feminine professional title *avvocata*, despite being accepted in modern Italian as well as suggested in Alma Sabatini’s *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1987), is still perceived by many as grammatically incorrect or unusual.

Flotow 1991: 74). The latter is considered “the most controversial strategy of all feminist translation strategies” (Chen and Chen 2017: 181), as it requires translators to appropriate the text so that it reflects their political intentions, to the point where their presence and interference are perceived as excessive¹⁵ (von Flotow 1991: 79). In respect of feminist translation, this may be achieved by deliberately feminising the text beyond the author’s original intentions, in order to “[make] the feminine seen and heard in [the] translation” (von Flotow 1991: 79).

Finally, supplementing is a method of translation which does not belong exclusively to feminist translation; as a matter of fact, German philosopher and translator Walter Benjamin (1921 in von Flotow 1991: 74) used it in relation to translation in general, stating that “the source text is supplemented by its translation, matured, developed and given an afterlife” (von Flotow 1991: 75). Supplementation is a form of interference which aims to regain what is lost in the process of translation due to the linguistic differences between source and target language in another part of the text (von Flotow 1991: 75). In the context of feminist translation, this strategy allows translators to preserve critiques of linguistic sexism across linguistic borders applying them to different languages despite their possible occurrence in different forms (von Flotow 1991: 75). In the entirety of the process, it is important to underline that “the feminist translator is conscious of her political role as mediator” (von Flotow 1991: 75).

Thus far I have listed translation strategies endowed with an established historical background and supported by credited evidence of use in the feminist context. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, gender-inclusive language may operate not only by making the feminine visible through feminisation, but also by removing all references to gender through neutralisation. In this respect, though, we are faced with a considerable lack of studies concerning strategies that can be employed when translators do not want to make a specific reference to gender in the target text¹⁶ (Paolucci et al.

¹⁵ As a matter of fact, von Flotow (1991: 78) named this strategy in respect of an article that Canadian journalist and translator David Homel published in 1990. Criticising Susanne de Lobtinière-Harwood’s English translation of Lise Gauvin’s *Lettres d’une autre*, he wrote that “[t]he translator [...] is so intrusive at times that she all but *hijacks* [emphasis mine] the author’s work.”

¹⁶ To be precise, such studies exist mainly in the field of media translation, such as in the case of subtitled and dubbed series or news articles (Paolucci et al. 2023: 14).

2023: 14). Such strategies may be desired when translating from a natural gender language (e.g. English) to a grammatical gender language (e.g. Italian). As I have argued in the first chapter of the present dissertation, this may prove to be more inclusive to non-binary identities while also reducing bias that favours men in language (Tavits and Pérez 2019: 16781).

In order to start filling this gap, Paolucci, Lardelli and Gromann (2023) conducted a study to determine what the best translation strategy is when translating from English to German among four given options. First, they drew a distinction between translation strategies employed to overcome differences in linguistic structures and strategies that can be useful in the presence of differences in gender-specific connotations (Paolucci et al. 2023: 15). When source and target language make use of different linguistic structures, translators need to choose their strategies carefully, since some translation choices may sound unnatural in the target text (Di Sabato and Perri 2020 in Paolucci et al. 2023: 15). For example, when translating a source text which completely lacks gender markers from a natural gender language to a grammatical gender language, translators cannot avoid assigning a gender to the characters, and they will often do so according to stereotypical associations (Nissen 2002: 31; Di Sabato and Perri 2020 in Paolucci et al. 2023: 15).

On the other hand, when what differs between source and target language are language- or culture-specific gender connotations, “the divergent ways in which speakers may perceive the world” are involved (Nissen 2002: 28). Thus, translators need to make sure that the message expressed in the source text is not lost or changed because of the strategies they choose to adopt (Di Sabato and Perri 2020 in Paolucci et al. 2023); otherwise, “if a specific gender in one language connotes certain properties, while the translated word in the target language belongs to another gender that conveys quite different connotations”, an ideological clash may arise, jeopardising the possibility for readers to grasp the meaning of the text (Nissen 2002: 28). The critical issue in choosing the right strategy lies in the fact that “one word of one specific gender reflects one reality in one language, while the corresponding word that possesses the opposite gender may reflect another reality” (Nissen 2002: 28). To mitigate this problem, Nissen

(2002: 28) identifies three possible solutions: the first one is using a synonym belonging to the same gender class as the word used in the source text, the second one consists in using a word belonging to the same gender class and coming from a third language which the target audience is familiar with (e.g. some Latin words are well-known in several languages), and finally the third strategy is using a footnote to alert readers to the change in gender.

With respect to Paolucci, Lardelli and Gromann's (2023) study, the approaches they identified to translate from a neutral gender language into a grammatical gender language¹⁷ are varied. The first one is gender-neutral rewording, which consists in phrasing sentences in order to avoid the need to specify the characters' gender, for example through the use of passive constructions and participial forms (Paolucci et al. 2023: 15). Then, another strategy is that of using gender-inclusive characters, which are "typographic characters [...] used to separate male forms from female endings and include all genders", and gender-neutral characters or endings, typically employed in order to "question the gender binary" (Paolucci et al. 2023: 15). Finally, other approaches are based on neosystems¹⁸, according to which new genders or new pronouns are introduced in the language (Paolucci et al. 2023: 15). These strategies were assessed by professional translators so that they could select the most viable alternative on the basis of their expertise. Results show a clear preference for gender-inclusive characters due to their greater readability and comprehensibility; these choices are allegedly favoured by respondents' degree of familiarity with them as well (Paolucci et al. 2023: 20-21).

2.3 Gender bias in Machine Translation

Since the world has started to become inextricably interconnected thanks to globalisation, people's need for quick and easily available translations has been rising inexorably. As a result, many extensively employ automated translation tools such as

¹⁷ Although their work concerns German as a target text, some of the strategies that are mentioned in the study may also apply to Italian. For example, it is common to see the use of slash marks as gender-inclusive characters in Italian (e.g. *maestro/a*). In addition, as I have discussed in Section 1.4, there have been multiple proposals for gender-neutral endings in the Italian language (e.g. asterisk), which can also be found in published texts.

¹⁸ This strategy will be further discussed in Section 2.4.

online translators, especially those that make use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, such technologies are not exempt from problems, thus possibly posing a real threat to society, particularly from the perspective of social justice and equality (Piergentili et al. 2024: 1). Therefore, Natural Language Processing¹⁹ (NLP) technologies, which include systems and applications that use natural language for purposes ranging from voice recognition to text generation (Ullmann 2022: 125), have started to come under careful scrutiny, also due to their widespread adoption (Savoldi et al. 2021: 845). As a matter of fact, AI has been subject to criticism since its first appearance in the 1950s; as of recently, though, concerns over its ethical implications are increasingly being voiced, calling into question the benefits of its use in comparison with the risks it entails (Blodgett et al. 2020 in Piergentili et al. 2023: 71).

As regards language and translation, numerous studies in the field of NLP demonstrate that Machine Translation (MT) tends to suffer from and reinforce gender bias (Piergentili et al. 2024: 1), which Vanmassenhove (2024: 3) defines as

an (explicit or implicit) skew across or within language(s) towards gender(s), leading to systematic associations with gender(s) and thus creating representational (and in some cases allocational) harms that perpetuate unfair, inaccurate and potentially discriminatory stereotypes.

In this respect, representational harms refer to “detraction from the representation of social groups and their identity, which, in turn, affects attitudes and beliefs”; this may happen through under-representation and stereotyping (Crawford 2017 in Savoldi et al. 2021: 846). On the other hand, allocational harms emerge when “a systems allocates or withholds opportunities or resources to certain groups”; this may occur as a direct consequence of representational harms, since those who are discriminated by MT services will be forced to consume more resources to correct faulty translations provided by them (Crawford 2017 in Savoldi et al. 2021: 846).

¹⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines NLP as “[a] form of computational linguistics in which natural-language texts are processed by computer (for automatic machine translation, literary text analysis, etc.)” (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/natural-language-processing_n?tab=meaning_and_use).

In crude terms, bias in technology causes computer systems to “systematically and unfairly discriminate against certain individuals or groups of individuals in favour of others” as a reflection of structural imbalances in society (Friedman and Nissenbaum 1996 in Ullmann 2022: 128). Among these groups we find both women and non-binary individuals (Piergentili et al. 2024: 1), although most studies investigating gender bias in MT usually assume a binary perspective (Piergentili et al. 2023: 73), and therefore further research including all possible gender identities is needed (Savoldi et al. 2021: 850). Thus, unsupervised MT systems usually make extensive use of stereotypical gender associations and masculine forms rooted in androcentric normativity in their outputs²⁰ (Piergentili et al. 2023: 71), blatantly contravening linguistic guidelines on gender-inclusive language due to their inability to comply with them (Vanmassenhove 2024: 2).

For example, using an online translator such as Google Translate to render the English sentence *The doctor asked the nurse to assist the patient.* into Italian, the MT system will automatically assign male gender to the word *doctor* (as well as to *patient*), while the word *nurse* will be translated as if the referent was a woman, regardless of the lack of cues regarding the referents’ genders in the original sentence²¹. Thus, the translation provided by Google Translate will be as follows: *Il medico ha chiesto all’infermiera di assistere il paziente.* The same outcome will be observed when deploying ChatGPT²² (currently based on the GPT-4o model), a Large Language Model (LLM) designed primarily for language generation tasks (Vanmassenhove 2024: 7) which has recently become very popular among internet users. Both automated systems, then, tend to reproduce and reinforce gender stereotypes and expectations according to which professions that are perceived as more authoritative and prestigious by society (e.g. doctor, engineer) are reserved exclusively for men, whilst women remain confined to those roles they historically and stereotypically held in the past (e.g. nurse, kindergarten teacher) (Savoldi et al. 2021: 845).

²⁰ The first chapter of the present dissertation should suffice to understand the social implications of linguistic sexism, and therefore of such a tendency of MT technologies.

²¹ However, in the case of some other languages (e.g. Hungarian) Google took measures to change their online translation system, which now provides two outputs, one showing masculine reference and the other showing feminine reference (Ullmann 2022: 131).

²² GPT stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer.

According to Friedman and Nissenbaum (1996 in Savoldi et al. 2021: 849), gender bias in translation technologies comes into existence due to three categories of bias. The first one is that of pre-existing bias, which is related to the negative influence possibly exerted by the historical and socio-cultural context on the data²³ used to train AI systems (Savoldi et al. 2021: 849). As a matter of fact, Ullmann (2022: 126) states that the internet, which is where such data is largely drawn from, “still greatly lacks diversity and remains a place where mostly privileged and heteronormative communities and individuals are represented”, not to mention that numerous websites serving as sources of data (e.g. Reddit, Wikipedia) are notoriously problematic²⁴ as well as male-dominated. Addressing this issue, the European Commission’s *Ethic Guidelines for Trustworthy AI* state that “[t]he quality of the datasets used is paramount to the performance of AI systems. When data is gathered, it may contain socially constructed biases, inaccuracies, errors and mistakes. This needs to be addressed prior to training with any given data set” (Ullman 2022: 128).

Another category of bias that contributes to gender bias in MT is technical bias, which depends on technical constraints and decisions concerning “data creation, model design, and training and testing procedures” (Savoldi et al. 2021: 849). For instance, Savoldi et al. (2021: 849) state that “[i]f present in training and testing samples, asymmetries in the semantics of language use and gender distribution are respectively learned by MT systems”, stressing the importance of gathering and selecting data diligently. Thus, research on gender bias should take into consideration the way that such systems are designed as well (Ullmann 2022: 128). In addition, Vanmassenhove (2024: 6) emphasises the role of statistical and algorithmic bias, which can exacerbate other kinds of bias in MT. As a matter of fact, “[a] statistically biased MT system may exhibit preferences for frequently occurring words or sub-words, potentially overlooking less common but equally valid synonyms or morphological variants” (Vanmassenhove 2024: 6); in relation to pre-existing bias, larger amounts of masculine references in training

²³ In the context of MT, “training data often consist of both original and translated parallel texts” (Vanmassenhove et al. 2018: 3004).

²⁴ For instance, there have been several articles about the presence of offensive content and misinformation on Reddit (Ullman 2022: 126).

data may result in a tendency of MT systems to employ masculine forms in their outputs.

Finally, gender bias may derive also from emergent bias, which concerns how MT systems are employed by their users (Savoldi et al. 2021: 849). More specifically, this category of bias emerges when these systems are used in different contexts compared to the ones they were originally intended for (Bender and Friedman 2018 in Ullmann 2022: 129), and therefore they are applied to different demographic groups (Savoldi et al. 2021: 850). According to Savoldi et al. (2021: 850), “MT systems that are not intentionally envisioned for a diverse range of users will not generalize for the feminine segment of the population”, leading to user/system mismatch in the form of misgendering or loss of original linguistic style²⁵.

All things considered, because of gender bias MT currently may not seem an ideal and promising context for the promotion of gender-inclusive language. However, increasing studies in this field have been investigating possible ways of mitigating such bias (Ullmann 2022: 135) in order to achieve unbiased translations that respect users’ gender identity and operate in a manner which is both effective and ethically respectable.

2.4 Possible solutions to gender bias in Machine Translation

Although according to Ullmann (2022: 135) “[r]emoving all biases is practically impossible²⁶”, mitigating and reducing gender bias in MT systems has been proved to be feasible through a fairly varied range of strategies, which in some cases can also improve translation quality. In this regard, since gender bias is an interdisciplinary issue (Savoldi et al. 2021: 857), several studies (e.g. Savoldi et al. 2021: 857; Ullmann 2022: 132; Vanmassenhove 2024: 2) stress the value of a multidisciplinary approach, synchronising efforts from fields such as linguistics and sociolinguistics, computer science and engineering.

²⁵ As a matter of fact, Coates (2015 in Vanmassenhove et al. 2018: 3003) argues that “the language used by males and females differ in terms of style and syntax”. In this regard, Vanmassenhove, Hardmeier and Way (2018: 3003) stress the importance of “getting the gender right” as a “matter of basic politeness” as well.

²⁶ Actually, she also questions whether such an outcome should be desirable at all, as it would not represent the current state of affairs in the world accurately (Ullman 2022: 135).

Basta, Costa-jussà and Fonollosa (2020: 99) observed that gender bias in MT has a connection with the way MT systems operate. As a matter of fact, such systems usually work on a limited, sentence-by-sentence basis²⁷, thus ignoring contextual information (Basta et al. 2020: 99) that may occur in other parts of the source text (Savoldi et al. 2021: 853) and hint at the correct gender to assign to the referent(s) appearing in a particular sentence. Therefore, their study aimed to verify whether the use of current Neural Machine Translation (NMT) contextual methodologies combined with gender-balanced data sets can effectively mitigate gender bias while also improving translation quality (Basta et al. 2020: 99). This approach falls within those methods which are aimed at “mitigating gender bias through architectural changes of general-purpose MT models or via dedicated training procedures” (Savoldi et al. 2021: 854).

The first strategy which Basta et al. (2020: 100) tested consists in concatenating two sentences, so that the context provided by the previous sentence is added to the overall contextual information which a MT system works with when translating the following one. The second strategy is speaker identification, which entails the addition of gender tags before each sentence, providing information on the gender of the speaker (Basta et al. 2020: 100). Their work aimed to achieve translations between English (a natural gender language) and Spanish (a grammatical gender language) on the basis of two gender-balanced test datasets, namely Europarl²⁸, which is a parallel corpus containing excerpts from the proceedings of the European Parliament from 1996 to 2011 in 21 European languages, and GeBioCorpus²⁹, which includes 1000 sentences from male and female biographies each, all sourced from Wikipedia (Basta et al. 2020: 100).

Results show that adding the context from a previous sentence is more effective in improving translation quality when working with Europarl, since sentences belonging to the documents contained in GeBioCorpus are not always contiguous; on the other hand,

²⁷ i.e. “translating each sentence in isolation” (Piergentili et al. 2023: 78).

²⁸ This corpus was collected by Philipp Koehn specifically for Statistical Machine Translation purposes (<https://www.statmt.org/europarl/>). The description of the corpus can be found in Koehn, Philipp. 2005. Europarl: A Parallel Corpus for Statistical Machine Translation. *Proceedings of Machine Translation Summit X: Papers*. 79–86.

²⁹ The tool employed for the creation of this corpus, called GeBioToolkit, was introduced by Costa-jussà, Lin and España-Bonet in 2019 (see Costa-jussà, Marta R., Lin, Pau Li & España-Bonet, Cristina. 2020. GeBioToolkit: Automatic Extraction of Gender-Balanced Multilingual Corpus of Wikipedia Biographies. *Proceedings of the Twelfth Language Resources and Evaluation Conference*. 4081-4088).

speaker identification seems to work better with GeBioCorpus, when the gender tag is assigned on the basis of the biography of the main character (Basta et al. 2020: 100). As regards gender bias, Basta et al. (2020: 100) found that both methods (i.e. adding the previous context and speaker identification) effectively contribute to the disambiguation of the gender of referents in translation. More specifically, adding context produced “a slight improvement in gender translations requiring anaphoric coreference to be solved in English-Spanish” (Savoldi et al. 2021: 855). In this regard, Vanmassenhove et al. (2018: 3007) claim that “informing the NMT system by providing tags indicating the gender of the speaker can indeed lead to significant [although not always consistent] improvements over state-of-the-art baseline systems”.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations related to speaker identification through gender tagging which needs to be addressed in the general context of MT. As a matter of fact, in order to make use of gender tags one has to receive accurate information about the speaker’s gender. However, this kind of metadata may not always be available, and if hypothetically MT systems were to be programmed to automatically insert gender tags themselves, for instance by deducing the speakers’ gender from their first names, they could easily be misled, thus wrongly assuming the speaker’s gender identity and adding another element of bias in the translation (Savoldi et al. 2021: 854).

Ullmann’s (2022: 137) study investigates multiple methods, differing in the stage of the translation process in which they are employed; more specifically, some of these strategies are adopted before training the MT system, whilst others need the training process to be over before operating. While pre-training strategies³⁰ do not seem to produce considerable improvement neither in accuracy nor in translation quality, fine-tuning the MT system after the training process on the basis of a small but gender-balanced dataset was indeed effective in reducing gender bias in the output (Ullmann 2022: 137-138). According to Savoldi et al. (2021: 856) the advantage of fine-tuning is that “the effort required is limited as the goal is to alleviate stereotypes by focusing on a

³⁰ These include downsampling, which consists in “[removing] data until the ratio of gendered terms is balanced for both languages”, upsampling, which is essentially the opposite operation, and counterfactual augmentation, through which sentences including the under-represented gendered terms which mirror those already present in the dataset are specifically created and added to it (Ullmann 2022: 137).

pre-defined occupational lexicon”, in contrast with counterfactual augmentation (see Note 29), which “requires one to create identical pairs of sentences differing only in terms of gender references”.

As regards studies which specifically try to mitigate gender bias with approaches inclusive of non-binary identities as well, Piergentili et al. (2023: 72) observe that this aim can be achieved using either innovative linguistic devices, whose aim is “to enrich the language with extra resources, which act as gender-neutral alternatives to gendered linguistic elements”³¹ (Piergentili et al. 2024: 2), or gender-neutral language, which instead of highlighting non-binary identities seeks to disregard all gender references (Piergentili et al. 2024: 2). Between these two strategies, the former is trickier, since broad and systematic consensus about the acceptance of neopronouns and neomorphemes has yet to emerge and, when allowed, their use is typically restricted to informal contexts (Piergentili et al. 2023: 72). In addition, they currently exist only in certain languages³², including Swedish (e.g. the gender-neutral neopronoun *hen*³³ instead of *hon/han*, respectively feminine and masculine), English (e.g. the neopronoun *ze/zir* instead of *she/her* and *he/him/his*), Spanish, French and German, where they are employed mostly by members of the LGBTQIA+ community on the basis of “individuals’ identity and preferences in gender expression” (Piergentili et al. 2024: 1-2). On the other hand, the second approach “solely relies on established gender-neutral devices of the standard language”, therefore it can be adopted in formal contexts as well (Piergentili et al. 2023: 72).

The main issue when dealing with gender-neutral resources in translation is that they usually do not have directly corresponding forms in other languages; for example, in Italian there is no broadly accepted device to render the English gender-neutral pronoun *they*, which is now widely employed in contexts when the referent’s gender is unknown

³¹ Savoldi et al. (2021: 858) talk about Direct Non-binary Language (DNL), which “[aims] at increasing the visibility of non-binary individuals [...]”, as opposed to indirect non-binary language (Attig and López 2020 in Piergentili et al. 2024: 2).

³² In the case of Italian, the schwa and those similar suggestions discussed in Section 1.4 are considered neomorphemes (Piergentili et al. 2024: 3).

³³ See Gustafsson Sendén, Marie, Bäck, Emma A. & Lindqvist, Anna. 2015. Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: the influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6. 1-12.

or unspecified (Piergentili et al. 2023: 73). In addition, although there are some gender-neutralisation strategies (e.g. epicene formulations) that can prove to be effective alternatives (Piergentili et al. 2024: 2), the translation of gender-neutral language in MT is a challenging task, especially due to the absence of gender-neutral data to train MT systems (Vanmassenhove 2024: 5) and to the scarcity of studies that go beyond the outdated binary perspective (Piergentili et al. 2023: 73).

In respect of gender-neutralisation strategies, Piergentili et al. (2023: 75) focused their study on Gender-Neutral Translation (GNT), i.e. “the task of automatically translating from one language into another without marking the gender of human referents in the target”, in order to achieve MT non-discriminatory outputs. For this purpose, they based their approach for a gender-neutral English-Italian translation on the directions provided in institutional guidelines on gender-inclusive language³⁴ (Piergentili et al. 2023: 74-75). First, they concur with Basta et al. (2020) that both programming MT systems to translate beyond the sentence level through the addition of contextual information and providing speaker’s metadata in the form of gender tags may contribute to mitigating gender bias; nonetheless, they also add that “it remains occasionally dubious whether context provides a useful linguistically-motivated knowledge”, expressing the need for further research (Piergentili et al. 2023: 78).

Furthermore, by treating gender inclusivity as a constraint such as those adopted in automatic language generation (Garbacea and Mei 2022 in Piergentili et al. 2023: 77), Piergentili et al. (2023: 78) suggest “appending the constraint in the form of a target word or lemma to the source output so as to encourage the model to copy it in the output” as a possible strategy. However, there are some limitations to this method, since it cannot be adopted beyond the word-level, when neutralisation strategies should be realised throughout a whole sentence; in addition, the shortage of corresponding terminology regarding gender inclusivity across languages prevents MT systems from mapping source words to target words (Piergentili et al. 2023: 78).

³⁴ However, they noticed significant differences in the conceptualisation of discrimination and, consequently, in the methods proposed in order to deal with it between the two languages; the main discrepancy lies in the fact that English strategies are inclusive of non-binary identities, while Italian ones are generally based on a binary perspective (Piergentili et al. 2023: 74).

Finally, as regards the use of innovative linguistic resources, the inability of LLMs to correctly recognise and translate neopronouns and neomorphemes when no prompts are provided has been widely attested in research (e.g. Vanmassenhove 2024 on using ChatGPT for English-Italian translation); this is related to multiple reasons, for instance the possible lack of certain characters in training datasets (Piergentili et al. 2024: 3). In addition, Lauscher et al. (2023 in Piergentili et al. 2024: 3) found that “commercial systems fail to deal with English neopronouns, resulting in either misgendering or low-quality outputs.”

By creating a benchmark specifically intended for the evaluation of the use of neomorpheme paradigms in MT from English into Italian called NEO-GATE, Piergentili et al. (2024: 5-6) assessed the way four LLMs (including GPT-4) handle translation when they are asked to make use of two Italian neomorphemes, the asterisk and the schwa, in their output; in their study, different formulations for the prompted task were tested, “ranging from a simple pairing of source sentences directly with gender-inclusive translations, to a ternary opposition of masculine, feminine, and gender-inclusive translations” (Piergentili et al. 2024: 6). Although “models’ understanding of the task is significantly influenced by prompt complexity, the number of demonstrations, and the specific characters employed as neomorphemes”, results hint that some LLMs can potentially produce gender-inclusive translations through the use of neomorphemes; however, further research is needed in order to improve translation accuracy when adopting this approach (Piergentili et al. 2024: 10).

All things considered, although the approaches discussed have proved to be somewhat effective for the purpose at hand, according to Savoldi et al. (2021: 856) “there is no conclusive state-of-the-art method for mitigating bias”, as, being gender bias a multifaceted issue, “[...] interventions in MT tend to respond to specific aspects of the problem with modular solutions, but if and how they can be integrated within the same MT system remains unexplored”. Therefore, the path to the complete removal of gender-bias in Machine Translation is still long and tortuous, showing the need for constant critical analysis of AI systems (Ullmann 2022: 139) as well as for continuous

and up-to-date research which merges expertise from different fields and disciplines (Vanmassenhove 2024: 19).

In light of this account, both human and machine translation present numerous challenges and limitations when approaching a complex matter such as gender-inclusive language. However, the need for gender-inclusive translation remains, and both popular and institutional efforts to produce texts using gender-inclusive language are proof of some degree of willingness to address it in order to give people's gender identity and representation proper consideration across languages while advocating for gender equality.

CHAPTER 3

Gender-inclusive language in translation: from theory to practice

Discussing the question of gender-inclusive language, I have thus far stressed the importance it holds and the difficulties that can be encountered when handling it in both monolingual and bilingual contexts. This has allowed me to build a sufficient theoretical framework that should prove helpful to conduct a comparative study of gender-inclusive language strategies in English and Italian in three existing documents, thus showing real-life examples of gender-inclusive language use and translation produced by authoritative entities, which I will analyse on the basis of current research on this matter.

3.1 Gender-inclusive language in Italian administrative language

Since my analysis will consider two documents pertaining to the register of administrative language, it is worth examining the current state of play in the Italian public administration as regards its stance on the use of gender-inclusive language in official documents briefly. Despite some persistent resistance to such language in public discourse (see Section 1.4), the commitment of the Italian public administration to the promotion of gender equality through language is easily verifiable on paper by considering the multiple regulations that have been enforced since the 1970s, when discussion around the issue of gender equality arose. In the guidelines she was commissioned to devise by the University of L'Aquila, Thornton (2020: 11) starts her account of such rules from Law No. 903 of 9 December 1977, which prescribes that both men and women are treated equally in employment. More specifically, article 1 proscribes discrimination on the grounds of sex during recruitment, including when it is practiced indirectly through job advertisements; this scenario involves, for instance, the case of calls for applications that exclusively make use of masculine forms to refer to both men and women (Thornton 2020: 11).

Since awareness of gender discrimination in language emerged, numerous Italian administrations have adopted their own guidelines for non-discriminatory use of language in administrative documents (Thornton 2020: 12). Two texts that have played a pivotal role in this process are *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua*

italiana (1987) by Alma Sabatini (whose importance for the adoption of gender-inclusive language in Italy I have already stressed in Section 1.4) and *Manuale di stile. Strumenti per semplificare il linguaggio delle amministrazioni pubbliche. Proposta e materiali di studio*¹ (1997) edited by Alfredo Fioritto and published by the Dipartimento per la Funzione Pubblica of the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri² (Thornton 2020: 12). As a matter of fact, both these documents laid the groundwork and actually began “un’operazione di revisione (ma al tempo fu definita *semplificazione*) del linguaggio amministrativo destinata a incidere profondamente sulla comunicazione istituzionale” [a process of revision (though at the time it was defined *simplification*) of administrative language which was destined to affect institutional communication deeply] (Robustelli 2012: 9).

When examining recent guidelines³ and manuals on the use of gender in administrative language, it is evident that the pillar of most interventions is the rejection of masculine generics, especially when a text makes specific reference to women holding professional titles and roles stereotypically associated with men (e.g. *direttrice*, *assessora*, *ministra*). In this respect, one of the approaches that Robustelli (2012: 21) outlines in her *Linee guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo* (2012) is that of visibility. According to this strategy, feminine and masculine forms should be selected on the basis of the referent’s gender, thus ensuring that female referents are always assigned professional titles in the feminine form; when the referent is an undefined individual (e.g. in the case of forms to be filled out) or a group of people of both genders (e.g. in the case of rulebooks), paired masculine and feminine forms should be used (Thornton 2020: 31-34). In this regard, Thornton (2020: 31-34) recommends the use of full forms (e.g. *gli studenti e le studentesse*) instead of

¹ This text expands on *Codice di stile delle comunicazioni scritte ad uso delle amministrazioni pubbliche* (1993), which contains a chapter on a non-sexist and non-discriminatory use of the Italian language that urges the need for change as regards the standard androcentric procedures used in institutional and administrative language (Robustelli 2023: 47).

² These texts are also mentioned in the Italian Directive of 23 May 2007, which, mirroring Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Community on equal opportunities and treatment between men and women in employment, requires that all administrative documents in Italy are written using a non-discriminatory language (Thornton 2020: 11).

³ See, for instance, *Linee guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo* (2012) by Cecilia Robustelli and *Linee Guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (2018).

contracted forms (e.g. *gli/le studenti/studentesse*), which present some disadvantages⁴ in comparison.

On the other hand, another approach suggested by Robustelli (2012: 21) to avoid using masculine generics is called “*oscuramento*”⁵ (literally “obscuring”). According to *Linee Guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR*, this involves the use of “alcuni espedienti grammaticali e sintattici che permettono di fare riferimento a una o più persone senza dare indicazioni sul fatto che si tratti di uomini o donne [...]” [certain grammatical and syntactic devices that allow for reference to one or more people without specifying whether they are men or women [...]]. Among the strategies that belong to this approach we find the use of periphrases, collective nouns, relative and indefinite pronouns, and passive and impersonal forms (Robustelli 2012: 21-22), which do not give any information on the referent’s gender.

The choice between adopting the approach of visibility and that of obscuring depends on multiple factors, such as “l’intenzione comunicativa, il tipo di testo, la sua struttura, la sua lunghezza, l’importanza che assume l’esplicitazione del genere, la ricorrenza dei termini (cioè quante volte compaiono nello stesso testo) e molti altri” [the communicative intention, the type of text, its structure, its length, the importance of specifying gender, the recurrence of the terms (meaning how often they appear in the same text) and many others] (Robustelli 2012: 22). As a matter of fact, when addressing the adoption of gender-inclusive language strategies within public administration, it is crucial to take into account the specific characteristics of administrative language, which often complicate the matter even further. For instance, according to *Direttiva sulla semplificazione del linguaggio dei testi amministrativi* of 8 May 2002, there are some requirements that administrative language needs to satisfy in order for communication with the public to be successful, namely clarity, simplicity and brevity; at the same time, another requirement of administrative language is that it must ensure that information is complete and correct (Robustelli 2012: 9).

⁴ For example, contracted forms cannot be read aloud easily as they do not coincide perfectly with what a person would normally say when talking.

⁵ Mucchi-Faina (2005: 195) calls it “neutralisation” (see Section 1.2), while Comandini (2021 in Pepponi 2023: 83) refers to it as “strategie in italiano standard”, meaning “strategies in standard Italian”.

In this respect, some may argue that using gender-inclusive language in administrative texts through visibility jeopardises simplicity and brevity, or that adopting the strategy of obscuring undermines clarity and completeness of information (Iannizzotto and di Valvasone 2023: 73). For example, Thornton (2020: 32) claims that paired masculine and feminine professional titles may be perceived by many as forms that make a text more complicated and cumbersome, although Gygax and Gesto (2007 in Thornton 2020: 33-34) found that people need more time to read such forms only in their first occurrence. Furthermore, despite recognising that this strategy may indeed lengthen and make texts that are already long and convoluted even heavier, Iannizzotto and di Valvasone (2023: 72) argue that, by assigning grammatical gender to nouns on the basis of their referents' gender, a text would actually meet the requirement of completeness and correctness of information.

All things considered, it is important to underline that, due to the complications related to the specificity of administrative language, finding a universal approach to the use of gender-inclusive language in public administration proves to be quite impracticable. As a matter of fact, the best way of avoiding the use of the masculine generics in administrative documents seems to be that of seeking an appropriate solution case-by-case (Sabatini 1987 in Robustelli 2012: 14-15); this emphasises the need for public administrations to acquire the competences that are necessary to handle such a complex question (Robustelli 2012: 1). In any case, although guidelines of this sort are usually treated as mere suggestions, and thus deciding whether to adopt gender-inclusive language or not within this context often becomes an individual and non-binding choice⁶ (Thornton 2020: 12), the Italian public administration is required by numerous regulations to employ a language which is inclusive of both masculine and feminine genders, so that men and women receive equal treatment in official documents.

3.2 Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 of the University of Padova

The first document that I will consider in my analysis is the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) of the University of Padova for the years 2022-2024. Iannizzotto and di

⁶ On the other hand, in Section 1.4 of the present dissertation we saw what people's feelings towards changes in languages tend to be when they perceive the threat of linguistic prescriptivism, therefore the decision of adopting such an approach is understandable.

Valvasone (2023: 74) define the GEP (in Italian, “Piano di uguaglianza di genere”) as “un documento strategico [...] che ha l’obiettivo di inquadrare le azioni e i programmi da attuare per promuovere l’uguaglianza di genere e favorire ambienti di lavoro equi e inclusivi” [a strategic document [...] with the aim of framing the actions and plans that are to be carried out in order to promote gender equality and favour equal and inclusive work environments]. Italian universities are required to prepare GEPs and make them available according to the Directives for the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri No. 2 of 2019 and the Communication COM No. 152 of 5 March 2020 of the European Commission as an essential prerequisite for participation in Horizon Europe calls for research and innovation (Iannizzotto and di Valvasone 2023: 74) and the consequent allocation of funds. Usually the measures that Italian universities take to promote gender equality in the university system as a whole include the adoption of gender-fair language for both internal and external communication, as well as of guidelines for the visibility of gender in language, as provided by the *Vademecum per l’elaborazione del Gender Equality Plan negli Atenei Italiani* (2021) edited by the Gruppo di Lavoro GEP della Commissione CRUI⁷ sulle Tematiche di genere (Robustelli 2023: 48). It comes as no surprise, then, that GEPs naturally contain gender-inclusive language, thus serving as a perfect source of examples of how such language can be used in official documents.

Before beginning my analysis, a clarification is due as regards the source language (SL) and target language (TL) of the document which I will take into consideration in this comparative study. Obviously, as the University of Padova is an Italian university, its documents are originally written in Italian, which is thus the SL; however, the university being an international environment open to intercultural exchanges and contacts, most documents are then translated into English as well, which therefore becomes the TL. Of course, since languages have their own specific characteristics (see Section 1.1), some of the excerpts that may cause trouble with respect to gender expression in one language

⁷ This acronym stands for “Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane” (Conference of Italian University Rectors), which is an association of public and private universities in Italy (<https://www.cruai.it/>). For the topic of the present dissertation, it is interesting to notice that the word *rettori* appearing in this name is an example of overextended masculine, whereas the paired form *rettori e rettrici* would be more inclusive; however, this is the original name of the association, which was founded in 1963, thus changing it would probably hinder its recognisability. Nonetheless, Pepponi (2023: 85) chooses to expand the acronym CRUI to “Conferenza dei Rettori e delle Rettrici delle Università Italiane” anyway.

may not do so in another. For example, as Italian is a grammatical gender language, most animate nouns express gender, in contrast to what happens in English, which is a natural gender language; consequently, in Italian one often needs to use two different nouns when referring to categories of people of both male and female gender (e.g. *studenti e studentesse*) when in English most nouns are naturally inclusive of both genders (e.g. *students*). Therefore, in the present section the Italian version will be the starting point of most of my analysis, although I will always provide the English translation of the excerpts taken into consideration in brackets, and I will also include possible extracts that are troublesome in English but not in Italian.

Perusing the Italian version of the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 of the University of Padova, three main strategies can be observed. The first one is the use of paired feminine and masculine forms to refer to undefined individuals (whose gender is thus unknown) and to groups or categories of people including both the masculine and feminine gender⁸; examples of this strategy can be observed throughout the document. For instance, on page 9 we find the paired genitives “delle ragazze e dei ragazzi”, which were translated into English as “of both girls and boys”, and the expression “la formazione di [...], *educatori ed educatrici* [emphasis mine]”, translated into English as “training [...] and *educators* [emphasis mine]”. In addition, on page 13 there are both the extended form “dottorande e dottorandi” (“graduate students”), and the contracted forms “Dottorande/i” (“PHD students”) and “Assegniste/i”⁹ (“Grant holders”). Thanks to this strategy, it is possible to pursue the goals identified by Thornton (2020: 19) in order to grant equal treatment of men and women in language, namely: women’s visibility, which is achieved by using words that express both the referents’ professional title and their gender; symmetry, which is accomplished through the use of both masculine and feminine terms that symmetrically refer to the same role; and equal

⁸ It is possible to see that the order in which the masculine and feminine forms appear in the pairs alternates, thus the feminine form sometimes comes first, while at other times it comes second. This follows Sabatini’s (1987: 103) suggestion that the masculine form should not always appear in the first position of the pair, as “se si continua ad anteporre il maschile al femminile, si persiste nel considerare il maschio più importante” [if we continue to mention the masculine form before the feminine one, we continue to imply that males are more important]. In this respect, other guidelines may suggest always putting the feminine form first in order to increase women’s visibility in the text (Thornton 2020: 34).

⁹ Although these last two pairs seem to contradict Thornton’s (2020: 32) recommendation for the use of extended forms over contracted ones in administrative language (see Section 3.1), it is important to underline that in this case they appear in a table, therefore using a briefer formulation is more convenient in order to save space.

opportunity for inclusion for both genders, which entails the rejection of exclusively masculine (or feminine) forms to refer to groups comprised of people of both genders.

If someone were to skim the document quickly, they would notice that for some titles there are no paired masculine and feminine forms, but only one single noun is used; it is the case of “*insegnanti*” (“teachers”) on page 9 and “*titolari di assegni di ricerca*” (“grant holders”) on page 18. This, however, does not contradict the strategy of visibility, as the masculine and feminine forms of this sort of words coincide, thus the referent’s gender can be deduced only from other parts of speech that refer to them (e.g. articles, as in *gli insegnanti*, which is masculine plural, instead of *le insegnanti*, which is feminine plural). When such parts of speech are not present, however, these nouns may be used to refer to both genders at the same time. Gheno (2020: 3) calls this category of nouns “common-gender nouns”, in contrast with mobile-gender or changing-gender nouns¹⁰, in which case the feminine form is derived from the masculine by changing its ending or adding a suffix¹¹ (e.g. *maestro/maestra*; *professore/professoressa*).

Another strategy appearing in the document is the use of the feminine form for professional titles that refer to women as specific individuals. As a matter of fact, page 8 contains a list of the components of the Gender Equality Plan Work Group, which include women as well as men; I shall consider some of the examples in order. The first two names of the list are collectively referred to with the title “*Presidenti*” in Italian, which is a word that belongs to the category of common-gender nouns¹², as it derives from a Latin present participial. As a matter of fact, the word *presidente* can be referred

¹⁰ For the sake of completeness, the other two categories of feminine and masculine paired words in the Italian language identified by Gheno (2020: 3) are that of independent or fixed-gender nouns, whose feminine and masculine forms differ completely (e.g. *fratello/sorella*), and that of ambiguous-gender or gender-neutral nouns, which usually refer to animals and do not differ for gender (e.g. *la tigre*, despite being grammatically feminine, can refer to both a male and female tiger), thus, if one wants to specify the sex of the referent, the word *maschio* (“male”) or *femmina* (“female”) needs to be added explicitly.

¹¹ There are multiple endings and suffixes that can be used to create feminine forms from masculine ones. For instance, the masculine ending *-o* in *avvocato* (i.e. “male lawyer”) becomes *-a* in *avvocata* (i.e. “female lawyer”), while the masculine ending *-tore* in *rettore* (i.e. “male rector”) becomes *-trice* in *rettrice* (i.e. “female rector”). In this respect, current guidelines are usually based on Alma Sabatini’s *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (Robustelli 2012: 19).

¹² The same goes for *dirigente* and *responsabile*, for instance, in the following excerpts “*Dirigente Area Comunicazione e marketing*” (“Head of the Communications and Marketing Area”) and “*Responsabile Settore Finanziamenti individuali, Ufficio Ricerca internazionale*” (“Individual Grant Unit Manager of the International Research Office”).

both to a man (e.g. *il presidente*, meaning “the chairman”) or a woman (e.g. *la presidente*, meaning “the chairwoman”), although someone may argue that for the latter the correct feminine form is *presidentessa*; this is a misconception, as the word *presidentessa* does exist, but it used to denote a president’s wife (Gheno 2020: 13). In addition, the suffix *-essa* originally had a derogatory connotation, which disappeared in the case of titles that are now common in the Italian language, such as *professoressa* (“female professor”) and *studentessa* (“female student”); furthermore, the use of such form would not respect Thornton’s (2020: 23) goal of symmetry. As regards the English version, the translation is appreciable, as instead of “chairmen”, which would be an instance of overextended masculine, the gender-neutral title “chairpersons” was preferred.

Other titles in the feminine form that appear in this list are: *delegata*, for example in “Delegata alle Politiche per le pari opportunità” (“Delegate for Equal Opportunities Policies”), “Delegata CUG” (“Delegate for the Guarantee Committee”) and “Delegata Consulta dei direttori di dipartimento”¹³ (“Delegate for the Board of Department Directors”); “Consigliera di fiducia”, which is translated into English as “Trusted Advisor”; *direttrice* in “Direttrice Ufficio Ricerca internazionale” (“Manager of the International Research Office”) and “Direttrice Ufficio Public engagement” (“Manager of the Public Engagement Office”). Finally, I would like to make a quick reference to the title “Difensora civica”: in Italian, when the masculine form of a professional title ends in *-sore*, Sabatini (1987: 115-116) proposes that the feminine form be derived by changing the suffix in *-sora* (e.g. *assessore* becomes *assessora* for “councillor”). However, in the case of nouns deriving from verbs that already exist in the Italian language, Thornton (2020: 29) accepts feminine forms obtained through the addition of the suffix *-trice* to the stem of the verb as well; therefore, the feminine form corresponding to the masculine *difensore* could be both *difensora* and *difenditrice* (from the verb *difendere*, which means “to defend” in English). The English translation, though, is relatively more problematic, since the word of Swedish origin “ombudsman”

¹³ However, this name contains what seems to be an overextended masculine, as *direttori* is exclusively masculine, whereas the group possibly includes both men and women. In addition, due to the presence of the feminine form *direttrice* to refer to women in the same page, to a keen eye the text may appear to lack consistency from this point of view.

is masculine, as the ending suffix “-man” (which is found in other titles of the sort, such as “chairman”) denotes. Therefore, when referring to a woman, the correct form would be “ombudswoman”, although some style guides may suggest the use of the gender-neutral forms “ombudsperson” and “ombud” (similar to “chairperson” and “chair”) instead (López-Medel 2023: 12).

With respect to the present strategy, there is a feature which deserves some consideration. As a matter of fact, despite the naturalness¹⁴ and grammatical correctness¹⁵ of professional titles in the feminine form in Italian, some of them, especially those that do not have a long history behind them, may be perceived with unfamiliarity by some speakers, and therefore they may be treated sceptically as if they were neologisms, or wrongly judged as incorrect and awkward (Gheno 2020: 5). In fact, the reason why these feminine forms seem to be unheard of is that they usually refer to professions that could not be practiced by women until recently (Gheno 2020: 5). Therefore, as in the past women could not work as lawyers or ministers, for example, there was no need for a word to refer to *avvocate* (i.e. “female lawyers”) or *ministre* (i.e. “female ministers”). On the other hand, since those roles that had always been traditionally held by men started to be accessible to women as well, the language changed, as it naturally does, in order to meet this new need.

Nonetheless, until the end of the 1980s “l’idea di parità sembrava implicare un adeguamento della donna al modello maschile o, più tecnicamente, una sua ‘omologazione’ al paradigma socioculturale maschile” [the idea of equality seemed to imply that women should adjust to the male model or, more technically, ‘assimilate’ to the male sociocultural paradigm] (Robustelli 2012: 3). This interpretation of gender equality with respect to professional titles and roles is evidenced by the fact that even now some women holding such titles may ask others to refer to them in the masculine form. Such a choice usually depends on the perceived inferiority of professional titles in the feminine form compared to the masculine one, as if an *avvocata* were less worthy

¹⁴ The Italian language provides the mechanisms required for the creation of feminine words from masculine ones on its own (Gheno 2020: 3).

¹⁵ Since Italian is a grammatical gender language, the grammatical gender of words that refer to animate referents is determined on the basis of their biological gender; therefore, words that are used to refer to a woman should be used in the feminine gender (Robustelli 2012: 17).

than an *avvocato*, or on the belief that using the feminine form is irrelevant, as women have more serious problems to worry about¹⁶ (Gheno 2020: 9). In this respect, Gheno (2020: 9) explains that:

[...] è la donna stessa a sentirsi squalificata dall'uso del femminile, come se al titolo professionale maschile venisse dato un valore maggiore. Il che, però, ci racconta molto dell'autopercezione della donna in questi ambiti professionali: sentendosi “meno” del maschio, ecco che preferisce essere nominata come il maschio. Il tutto nasce dall'idea che sia più paritario essere nominate al maschile: “il genere non conta”.

[...] it is women themselves who feel discredited by the use of the feminine, as if the masculine professional title was considered more prestigious. This, however, is very indicative of the self-perception of women in these professional fields: since they feel ‘less’ than males, they prefer to be referred to as such. Everything comes from the idea that it is more equal to be addressed in the masculine: ‘gender does not matter’.

However, the same issue does not arise with professional titles that have always been accessible and traditionally associated to women; for instance, nobody ever protests when the titles *infermiera* or *maestra* are used to refer to a “female nurse” and a “female teacher” respectively (Filì 2023: 24). This shows that the still relatively wide-spread preference for the use of masculine professional titles regardless of the referent’s gender does not have linguistic roots, since the Italian grammar contemplates, regulates and even demands the existence of feminine professional titles when referring to female referents, but rather sociocultural ones (Gheno 2020: 10). In this respect, Gheno (2020: 9) states that “se a noi donne davvero non importasse niente della questione di genere, ci definiremmo serenamente al femminile in qualsiasi campo, senza alcuna remora” [if women really did not care about gender issues, we would easily define ourselves using feminine forms in any fields, with no hesitation].

Finally, the GEP uses another strategy, which in contrast with the previous ones aims to remove any reference to gender all together. As a matter of fact, numerous neutral

¹⁶ This reminds us of one of the arguments that are commonly presented against the use of gender-inclusive language (see Section 1.3).

formulations and periphrases can be found throughout the text, for instance “oltre il 95% delle *immatricolazioni* [emphasis mine]” (“more than 95% of *enrolments* [emphasis mine]”) on page 9, which makes use of an inanimate noun instead of making reference to *le immatricolate e gli immatricolati* (“enrolled students”); the same effect is achieved on pages 10 and 11 with the expressions “Distribuzione delle *immatricolazioni* [emphasis mine] per genere [...]” and “Distribuzione delle *iscrizioni* [emphasis mine] per genere [...]” (which in English are both translated as “*Enrolment* [emphasis mine] distribution by gender [...]).

In addition, some collective nouns which do not hint at the components’ gender are used, for example “corpo docente” (in English “teaching staff” on page 12) on page 13 and “personale docente e di ricerca” (“teaching and research staff”) on page 14; these formulations eliminate the need for gendered professional titles to refer to animate referents such as *professoressa e professori* (“professors”) and *ricercatrici e ricercatori* (“researchers”), which would have lengthened the text despite being grammatically correct and inclusive of both men and women. Similarly, on page 20 in the Italian version of the document the collective noun “per la cittadinanza” appears, whilst the English version uses the expression “for the city’s residents”, whose literal translation in Italian would be problematic, as both the masculine and feminine form of the plural definite article (respectively *i* and *le*) would have to be accompanied by the common-gender plural noun *residenti*. Moreover, on the same page a relative clause can be spotted: “chi entra a far parte della comunità universitaria” is a gender-neutral way of referring to what the English version calls “newcomers to the university community”, which in Italian would otherwise be gendered (literally *nuove arrivate e nuovi arrivati*, or *nuove e nuovi arrivati*¹⁷). All of these instances follow Robustelli’s (2012: 21-22) suggestions regarding the strategy that she calls *oscuramento*.

¹⁷ Although excluding the feminine animate noun *arrivate*, this last expression follows the suggestions of the *Linee Guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (pages 19 and 20), according to which, when masculine and feminine forms are used in pair in order to express both genders symmetrically, “[l]’eventuale accordo di aggettivi, participi e pronomi è di norma al maschile plurale, secondo la norma grammaticale [...] che permette di evitare il loro raddoppiamento attraverso una sorta di ‘economia linguistica’ molto funzionale alla redazione di testi snelli e meno complicati per chi legge.” [when necessary, the agreement of adjectives, participles and pronouns is usually in the masculine plural, according to the grammatical rule [...] which makes it possible to avoid doubling them through a sort of ‘linguistic economy’ which is really functional to draft texts that are concise and less convoluted for the reader]. In such cases, it is recommended to put the feminine form first, so that the following parts of

Finally, I would like to highlight a particular extract on page 34, which does not refer to women, but instead correctly refers to “transgender and gender non-conforming¹⁸ people” (which is the expression used in the English version of the document) as “persone transgender e gender non-conforming” in Italian. As a matter of fact, it is still possible to hear people who are uneducated on the matter (both unintentionally and, sadly, deliberately) use expressions which may actually be offensive to transgender people, such as *i/le trans* (which limits their identity to the fact of being transgender instead of recognising them as people too) and *transessuali* (which is considered inappropriate by some as it refers to someone’s sexual identity instead of their gender identity). The fact that the present document does not show expressions of the sort hints at the university’s concern for an appropriate representation of transgender and gender non-conforming students in language¹⁹.

From the previous excerpts, then, the GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Padova seems to follow most recommendations for the use of gender-inclusive language in administrative texts. This is most evident in the Italian version, where both masculine and feminine genders are expressed, in pairs or in reference to male and female referents respectively; otherwise, gender is concealed through the use of neutral formulations. Now I would like to focus on some extracts that personally stood out to me while I was reading this document, as they cast some doubt on the rationale for their presence and on their correctness in a gender-inclusive sense. I hope that by pointing these excerpts out I do not give any impression of wanting to question the expertise of those who prepared the document, as my intention is actually to ponder over the

speech in the plural masculine, when present, are closer to the masculine form (e.g. “nuove e nuovi assunti” on page 20, which in English is translated as “new recruits”) (Thornton 2020: 34).

¹⁸ From the definition that the Oxford English Dictionary associates to this adjective (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/gender-nonconforming_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#1370225410100) we understand that a gender-nonconforming person is “a person who expresses gender or gender identity in ways that do not correspond to traditional or stereotypical expectations of binary masculine or feminine behaviour, dress, etc.”

¹⁹ In this respect, Iannizzotto and di Valvasone (2023: 78) state that “[f]are attenzione al linguaggio quando si parla di questioni di genere, di uguaglianza, di diversità e di inclusività [...] significa anche – e, forse, primariamente – stare attenti alla terminologia corretta per indicare certe realtà, e dunque sostanzialmente conoscere almeno le basi, per esempio, della cultura e quindi anche del linguaggio LGBTQ+” [to be careful to language when talking about gender issues, equality, diversity and inclusivity [...] also – and perhaps primarily – means being careful to the terminology that appropriately indicates certain entities, and therefore it fundamentally means knowing at least the basis of, for example, the LGBTQ+ culture and, thus, of its language].

difficulties of using gender-inclusive language in contexts such as that of public administration, where specific standards need to be met, and the strategies that competent individuals choose to adopt to promote gender-equality through language.

First, on page 7 we find the following extract: “Per ciascuna delle cinque macroaree di intervento sono stati definiti più obiettivi, declinati in azioni, con l’indicazione del presidio politico e gestionale, *dei destinatari* [emphasis mine] e degli indicatori e target atti a misurarne l’impatto.” The phrase “dei destinatari” in Italian, which in English was translated as “the addressees”, is strictly masculine, thus it seems to me that this is an instance of generic masculine. If one wanted to be inclusive of female addressees as well, the paired forms *dei destinatari e delle destinatarie* (or alternatively the contracted forms *dei/delle destinatari/e*) should be used, although I can see why such a briefer formulation was preferred. In addition, on page 20 there are multiple instances of overextended masculine reference: in the second and third items of the fifth row (which is titled “Target”) of the table referring to “Azione 1” (“Step 1”) the masculine forms “nuovi assunti” (“new recruits”) and “fruitori” (“users”) appear. Such forms could be problematic, but their use is probably justified by the need for brief formulations that arises due to the context where they are found.²⁰

Moreover, the third row of the table (namely “Destinatari”, meaning “Recipients”, which is an example of generic masculine and may be explained by the same need for conciseness) already suggests that the document acknowledges the inclusion of both men and women through the use of the expression “nuove e nuovi assunti e matricole di tutti i livelli” (in English “New recruits and freshmen at all levels”), thus someone may find repeating such paired forms unnecessary. Furthermore, at the same page the phrase “dove possibile conteggiarli” (“count them, where possible”) is combined with the plural noun “partecipanti” (“participants”). Although this noun is a common-gender noun, and thus a single form is suitable to refer to both genders, the object pronoun *-li* in the verb *conteggiarli* refers to multiple masculine referents, while the feminine version

²⁰ However, on page 33 the paired forms “fruitrici e fruitori” (in English “users”) and the neutral formulation including a relative clause “matricole che fruiscono il corso” (in English “freshmen attending the course”) are used in the same context, thus this choice seems inconsistent, and this explanation may not be accurate.

would be *-le*. Since readers may perceive the paired forms *conteggiarli e conteggiarle* as cumbersome (although one could use the contracted forms *conteggiarli/e* instead), it might be more convenient to use a neutral formulation which somewhat mirrors the English translation, such as *quando è possibile conoscerlo*, which refers to the number of participants rather than to any animate (and therefore gendered) referents. A similar issue can be found on page 29, where the common-gender noun “partecipanti” is preceded by the masculine plural article “dei”²¹, and on page 30, where the common-gender noun “dipendenti” is followed by the past participle “iscritti”, which is masculine only (in English the whole expression is translated as “Employees enrolled per year”). These last instances, however, can be explained by considering the recommendations included in the *Linee Guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (see Note 17).

All things considered, the original Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 of the University of Padova appears to be highly attentive to a gender-inclusive representation of identities in language. This aim is mainly achieved through the use of paired feminine and masculine forms to refer to categories of people of both genders, professional titles in the feminine form to refer to the women who hold them, and neutral formulations that do not specify the referents’ gender. The reference to transgender and gender non-conforming people on page 34 is laudable, especially because it implies that the university takes such identities into account when organising its efforts for the promotion of a more inclusive environment from the perspective of gender. Unfortunately, most strategies adopted in the text are not inclusive of non-binary people (who are often considered part of the transgender community due to a deviation of their gender identity and expression from the gender they are assigned at birth) as they pertain to the visibility approach, which is based on expressing the referents’ gender explicitly, but as of now there are no suitable strategies that allow for reference to all possible genders in a completely inclusive manner, especially in the register of administrative language.

²¹ This instance is even more problematic, though, as the recipients who the step proposed makes reference to are “studentesse e ricercatrici di Ateneo” (“Female university students and researchers”), and thus women. As a matter of fact, this step involves “training actions for female students and researchers on sustainability-related topics”.

3.3 Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna

The next document that I will analyse is the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna²², whose aim is to monitor gender inequalities within the university's community and provide "a systemic view of a wide range of measures and initiatives [...]", in order to "turn [the] University into an inclusive place and spread a culture of gender equality beyond [its] walls, thus contributing to foster positive change in society"²³. Due to its objectives, this text offers numerous examples of gender-inclusive language use, similarly to the GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Padova. On the other hand, one main difference between the previous document and the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna lies in the length of the texts, as the former is considerably briefer. Therefore, I would like to point out beforehand that in the present section I will not mention every single occurrence of gender-inclusive language use, but rather I will consider only some examples in order to illustrate the type of strategies which can be observed in the document, so as to prevent my study from becoming monotonous and redundant.

At first glance, it is possible to see that the strategies appearing in the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna are mostly the same as those adopted in the GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Padova, starting from the ones pertaining to its approach to visibility. As a matter of fact, there are innumerable paired feminine and masculine forms, both full and contracted, throughout the text. For example, in the foreword on page 6 there are already four almost consecutive paired forms, namely "molte/i" ("many people"), "tutte/i le/gli altre/i rappresentanti" ("all the other members"), "tutte e tutti" ("all") and "studentesse e studenti" ("students"). By considering other extracts in the following pages, such as "Ordinari/e" ("Full Professors"), "gli/le Associati/e" ("Associate Professors") and "i/le docenti" on page 7, it is possible to notice that the order in which the masculine and feminine forms appear within the pairs changes, just as it did in the GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Padova (see Note 8). Paired forms are used both for professional titles, as in "la figura

²² Since the document was produced within an Italian university, Italian serves as the SL while English serves as the TL, as was the case for the first text that I have analysed in this chapter.

²³ These excerpts are taken from page 9 of the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna, which serves as an introduction.

del/della Consigliere/a di Fiducia” (“the position of Confidential Counsellor”) on page 15, and for categories of undefined individuals including both genders, as in “è garantito²⁴ il diritto *delle/i lavoratrici/lavoratori e delle/gli studentesse/studenti* [emphasis mine] a un ambiente di lavoro sicuro” (“[...] guarantees *workers and students* [emphasis mine] a safe and peaceful working environment”) on the same page. Interestingly enough, it seems that the University of Bologna uses contracted forms such as *i/le docenti* and *gli/le studenti/esse* more frequently and freely compared to the University of Padova, which mainly reserves them for tables and other contexts that require briefer formulations instead.

Another strategy that the two documents thus far analysed have in common is the use of professional titles in the feminine form when referring to women; this is observable, for instance, on page 6 with “Presidente” (not *presidentessa*; see Section 3.2), which is translated into English through the neutral formulation “Chair” (unlike “chairman” or “chairwoman”), and “Delegata al Bilancio” (“Delegate for Budget”). The feminine title *delegata* is used again on page 11 in the titles “Delegata all’Equità, Inclusione e Diversità” and “Delegata al Bilancio e alla programmazione”; strangely enough, these extracts are left untranslated in the English version²⁵, together with other professional titles referring to male referents (such as “Magnifico Rettore” and “Protettore al Personale”) and common-gender nouns (such as “Presidente del CUG” and “Componente del CUG”).

Finally, the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna adopts another strategy that I have already examined in the previous section, which is that of using neutral formulations in order not to specify the referent’s gender. As a matter of fact, reading the document one cannot miss the numerous excerpts where the singular term *persona* (meaning “person” in English), which becomes *persone* in the plural (which in English is “people”), is used²⁶. This is the case of the excerpts “la dignità di tale persona” (“the dignity of a person”) and “il pieno sviluppo della persona umana”

²⁴ It is possible to observe that, unlike in the English translation, this expression constitutes a passive form, which is one of the devices included by Robustelli (2012: 21) in the obscuring approach.

²⁵ On the other hand, the titles written in other rows of the table (e.g. “Assegnista di ricerca”, which was translated as “Research fellow”) are translated.

²⁶ This is a strategy that Sabatini (1987: 103) herself recommends as well.

(“the full development of the human person”) on page 14. Moreover, it is possible to notice that the noun *personale* is often followed by a relative clause, as for the expressions “tutte le persone che subiscono forme di discriminazione e violenza” (“all of those who are experiencing discrimination and violence”) on page 6, “of the people we educate” on page 7 of the English version, which was translated into Italian as “di coloro che formiamo”, and “persone che lavorano presso l’Università di Bologna” (“people working at the University of Bologna”) on page 20. This combination works perfectly to refer to human referents without specifying their gender.

The number of relative clauses in the text is notable as well. As a matter of fact, on page 9 the name “Comitato Unico di Garanzia per le pari opportunità, la valorizzazione del benessere di chi lavora e contro le discriminazioni nel lavoro” (in English “Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities, Employee Wellbeing and Non-Discrimination at Work”) contains the relative clause “chi lavora”, which replaces alternative expressions that would be inevitably gendered in Italian, such as the paired forms *lavoratori e lavoratrici*. Similarly, on page 23 the relative clause “chi studia e lavora in Ateneo” (“students and staff”) appears instead of gendered forms such as *studentesse e studenti e lavoratori e lavoratrici*, which would be quite cumbersome. Moreover, on page 14 we find the excerpt “gli uomini e le donne che esercitano un’attività autonoma” (“men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity”), which combines two strategies: on the one hand, it includes the paired forms *uomini e donne* in order to give visibility to both male and female referents, while on the other hand the relative clause “che esercitano un’attività autonoma” eliminates the need for gendered nouns such as *lavoratrici e lavoratori autonomi*. A similar combination of (in this case contracted) paired forms and a relative clause can be observed on page 9, where the expression “tutti/e coloro che leggeranno” (“all of those who will read it”) is used instead of referring directly to readers through gendered forms such as *tutti i futuri lettori e lettrici*.

In addition, among the devices for gender-neutral language use which can be observed in the text, we find collective nouns as well. The most frequent one is “personale” (“staff”), such as in “personale tecnico-amministrativo e docente” (“professional and teaching staff”) on page 6 and “personale dell’Ateneo” (“University staff”) on page 19.

Other examples of gender-neutral collective nouns include “comunità studentesca” (“student community” on page 6) and “componente docente” (“teachers”) on page 7.

However, what particularly stood out to me while perusing the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna was the frequent occurrence of periphrases which effectively allow for a neutral formulation of sentences that would otherwise specify the referent’s gender. Instances of this strategy can be found on page 16, where the noun “benessere” is followed by the adjective “lavorativo” (in English the whole phrase is translated as “employee wellbeing”) instead of being combined with a genitive case, as in *benessere dei lavoratori e delle lavoratrici*, but also on page 17 of the Italian version, where, in order not to repeat the professional title “La/Il Consigliera/e di Fiducia” (“The Confidential Counsellor”) appearing towards the top of the page, the periphrasis “questa figura” (which could be translated as “this role”²⁷) is used. Furthermore, on page 38, unlike the English version, which uses the expression “the place where the student obtained their secondary school diploma”, in the Italian text the periphrasis “area territoriale di conseguimento” is preferred. Similarly, on page 40, instead of using an expression which refers to “Incoming international students” as the English version does, the Italian version refers to “la mobilità internazionale in ingresso”, which is an inanimate referent.

Thus far I have examined the excerpts that I find to be good examples of successful gender-inclusive language use and translation in the present document. On the other hand, as I did for the previous section, now I would like to mention some extracts which left me doubtful about their inclusivity, starting from the numerous occurrences of what seem to be masculine generics. First, on page 7 we find the masculine title “Professori Emeriti” (“Emeritus Professors”), which constitutes an instance of overextended masculine. In order to include those women that achieve this position too, the form “Professore e Professori Emeriti”, where the paired forms for “professors” are followed only by the masculine adjective *emeriti* as provided by current guidelines (see Note 17), should be preferred, especially since this formulation does appear in the University’s

²⁷ In the English version the title is simply repeated.

website²⁸, and therefore it would seem that the University of Bologna acknowledges and accepts it. Furthermore, on the same page it is possible to observe another example of masculine generics, which is included in the excerpt “congedi e assenze dovute a malattie dei figli” (“sick child leave”). As a matter of fact, *figli* (which literally means “sons”) is masculine, and therefore excludes daughters. This may be problematic, especially because further on in the text the paired forms “figlie e figli” (“children”, on page 99) and “figli e figlie” (“babies”, on page 111) are used flawlessly; thus, the lack of the feminine form *figlie* in the first extract goes unexplained and may be perceived as inconsistent.

Later in the document, it is possible to observe that the name “Consiglio degli Studenti” (“Student Council”) is present on page 15. As was the case for the CRUI (see Note 7), this name contains a masculine genitive, namely “degli Studenti”, and therefore female students seem to be excluded from a linguistic point of view. In this regard, there are two possible ways to refer to a female student in Italian: on the one hand, *studentessa* is currently a well-established noun which speakers use commonly and naturally (Thornton 2020: 28). On the other hand, Sabatini (1987: 112) accepts the use of *studente* as an epicene noun that can refer to women as well, since it comes from a Latin present participle (see Section 3.2 when examining the title *presidente*). Thus, from this perspective, *studenti* could be used as an inclusive noun for both male and female students. However, the contracted preposition *degli* remains masculine, although it may be argued that, according to *Linee Guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR* (2018), the parts of speech referring to paired forms are usually in the masculine plural form anyway (meaning that, if we used the paired form *studenti e studentesse*, the masculine contracted preposition would be chosen). All things considered, more inclusive formulations would be *Consiglio degli e delle Studenti* (or alternatively *Consiglio degli/delle Studenti* using contracted forms, although this may not be ideal for the official name of an organisation) or *Consiglio degli Studenti e delle Studentesse*, mirroring Pepponi’s (2023: 85) use of paired forms to expand the acronym CRUI (see Note 7).

²⁸ See <https://www.unibo.it/it/ateneo/chi-siamo/professori-emeriti>.

Another problematic excerpt is found on page 13, where the document mentions the “Convenzione europea per la salvaguardia dei diritti dell’uomo e delle libertà fondamentali”. In her *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana*, Sabatini (1987: 103) clearly criticises the expression *diritti dell’uomo* (which literally means “men’s rights”) and instead recommends replacing it with *diritti umani*, which also mirrors the English translation (“European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”). However, the use of this expression in the Italian version of the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna may be explained by the fact that the document is maintaining the original Italian name of the convention, which took place in the 1950s, when the issue of gender-inclusive language had not arose yet.

On page 14, other examples of masculine generics appear, including “prestatori di assistenza” (“carers”), which excludes the feminine form *prestatrici* deriving from the verb *prestare*²⁹ (which in this case means “to provide”), and “i lavoratori di un determinato sesso” (“workers of a particular sex”), although I suppose that the clarification “di un determinato sesso” after “lavoratori” (which is masculine) implies that women are included as well. Furthermore, on the same page the genitives “dei cittadini” (“of citizens”) and “dei lavoratori” (“of workers”) are exclusively masculine. However, I am not sure whether these extracts are supposed to cite the Italian Constitution, which was adopted in 1948 and therefore cannot be reasonably expected to follow any guidelines on gender-inclusive language.

In addition, an extract which hindered my comprehension of the text at first was the passage “Sugli immatricolati/e 2022/23 ancora nel corso nel 2023/24 – *esclusi gli studenti* [emphasis mine] con diploma di maturità estero – [...]” (“For students enrolled in the 1st year in 2022/23 who were still in the same programme in 2023/24 – excluding students with a foreign secondary school diploma – [...]”) on page 42. As a matter of fact, before reading the English version of the document, it was not clear to me whether the noun “studenti” referred to both male and female students or only to male ones. What contributed to this ambiguity may be the fact that, due to the presence of the

²⁹ See what Thornton (2020: 28-29) says regarding feminine forms which are derived from masculine ones ending in *-tore*.

paired masculine and feminine forms “immatricolati/e”, I was expecting similar forms to follow, such as *studenti e studentesse*, or alternatively the contracted forms *studenti/esse*.

In conclusion, despite the occurrence of some masculine generics, the language of the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna is considerably inclusive from the point of view of gender thanks to the presence of paired masculine and feminine forms, feminine professional titles when the referents who hold them are women, and neutral formulations; as regards this last strategy, the text shows numerous instances of collective nouns and relative clauses, the latter often combined with the noun *persona/e*, which refers to human beings in general, regardless of their gender. From a non-binary perspective, though, the document does not successfully represent non-binary individuals due to the use of visibility strategies, as it was the case for the GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Padova. Nonetheless, considering the means that are currently available in the Italian language, the document is adequate for the purpose and follows most guidelines on the use of gender in administrative language. Similarly to the previous document that I analysed in Section 3.2, the use of gender-inclusive language is most evident in the Italian version, due to those characteristics of the Italian language that are involved in gender expression.

3.4 International Quidditch Association Rulebook 2020

In order to make my study more varied, I will now analyse a document that was produced in a completely different context, namely the International Quidditch Association (IQA) Rulebook 2020. This text contains the regulations that govern quidditch, now officially known as quadball³⁰, a mixed-sex sport that “embraces players of all genders and sexualities [...]” and in which “[a]ll quidditch athletes have the right to define how they identify and it is this stated gender that is recognized on pitch”³¹. Consequently, the language used in the text is intended to be as inclusive as possible from the point of view of gender, in order not only to promote the values of gender equity and inclusivity that the sport advocates, but also so that it is unequivocal that the

³⁰ As a matter of fact, the current name of the organisation is International Quadball Association (see <https://www.iqasport.org/>), despite the title of the rulebook.

³¹ These excerpts are taken from page 7 of the IQA Rulebook 2020.

rules apply to all players, regardless of their gender. Since the sport is played internationally, as highlighted by the existence of an international association that governs it, the rulebooks that are produced within this context are translated from English (which is thus the SL) into multiple languages, including Italian (which is thus one of the TLs). It is important to highlight that, due to its nature and context of production, the present text is subject to fewer constraints compared to the two administrative documents that I have analysed thus far in this chapter, and therefore it is more suitable for experimentations of innovative gender-inclusive language strategies. In this regard, while analysing the present document I will primarily illustrate those strategies that I have not already discussed with respect to the previous texts, so that my study does not become repetitive.

First, I would like to take into consideration the source text (ST) in English, where it is impossible not to notice the frequent use of the personal pronoun “they/them” to address singular undefined referents, a device known as “singular *they*”. An example of this gender-neutral strategy appearing in the IQA Rulebook 2020 is the sentence “If a team staffer substantially illegally enters the pitch or affects play while illegally on the pitch, *they* [emphasis mine] are encroaching on the pitch”³² on page 11. In this excerpt the pronoun “they” refers to the singular generic antecedent “a team staffer”, which does not designate a specific individual, but rather anyone who holds this role in the hypothetical scenario described by the rule. Other instances of singular *they* can be found throughout the text, for example on page 65 in the sentence “A player charging through an illegal pick shall not be penalized provided *they* [emphasis mine] do not increase *their* [emphasis mine] force in response to the pick”, and on page 80 in the sentence “A player with any part of *their* [emphasis mine] body behind or touching *their* [emphasis mine] own keeper zone line is considered to be in the keeper zone”.

The use of singular *they* to pronominalise sex-indefinite referents³³ has existed in the English language for a long time³⁴ (Saguy and Williams 2022: 7) and is commonly

³² The Italian translation of the English excerpts will be discussed further on in the section, after I have finished analysing the ST.

³³ Namely quantificational, non-specific and epicene antecedents (Bjorkman 2017: 1) such as “everyone”, “someone” and “each one” respectively.

found in contemporary English (Balhorn 2004: 80), although in the late 18th century it started to come under criticism, as “this practice creates ambiguity as to whether an intended antecedent is one or many” (Saguy and Williams 2022: 7). As a matter of fact, singular, sex-indefinite antecedents would require grammatical agreement in both number and gender, thus needing a singular, ungendered coreferential pronoun; however, English lacks sex-indefinite pronouns for third person singular (Bodine 1975: 130), as the only ones that can be referred to human beings, namely “he” and “she”, are both marked for sex. On the other hand, “they” is a third-person pronoun which “matches the antecedent for animacy and non-specification of sex”, but its grammatical number is normally plural (Balhorn 2004: 79). Therefore, in searching the most suitable solution for this kind of coreference, a dilemma arises, as

[i]f the definition of ‘they’ as exclusively plural is accepted, then ‘they’ fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of number. Similarly, ‘he’ fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of gender (Bodine 1975: 133).

Nevertheless, the choice of a masculine pronoun for generic reference has much more social significance than that of a (primarily) plural pronoun (Bodine 1975: 133). In this respect, Saguy and Williams (2022: 8) state that “using singular *they* in place of generic *he* advances feminist aims both by addressing male bias in language and also, more fundamentally, by diminishing the salience of gender as a social distinction³⁵” (Saguy and Williams 2022: 8). As a matter of fact, numerous studies show that “[t]he generic *he* that grammarians prescribe is typically perceived as referring to a male, not as being all-inclusive” (Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997: 106), as I have already discussed in the first chapter of the present dissertation.

Apart from this noble aim, by comparing the reading time required to read and understand the pronouns “he”, “she” and “they” in sentences with nonreferential antecedents, Foertsch and Gernsbacher (1997: 110) supported the suitability of singular

³⁴ Newman (1997 in Balhorn 2004: 82) traces the origins of singular *they* back to the late 14th and early 15th century.

³⁵ According to philosopher Marilyn Frye (1983 in Saguy and Williams 2022: 8), diminishing the salience of gender as a social distinction serves feminist purposes as “the forces which make us mark and announce sexes are among the forces which constitute the oppression of women, and they are central and essential to the maintenance of that system.”

they as a pronoun for generic coreference. To be precise, according to the results of their study, “when the antecedent was an indefinite pronoun, readers actually processed singular *they* faster than *he* or *she*” (Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997: 110). A grammatical justification for the use of “they” for generic reference is provided by Balhorn (2004: 83), who explains that an antecedent such as “everyone”, “despite the grammatical singularity evident in the third-person, singular -s verbal inflection, is notionally plural”, as it designates all potential referents for a particular sentence. Consequently, such an antecedent “initiates a generic referent, that although singular syntactically, is plural in meaning and unspecified for sex” (Balhorn 2004: 83).

However, until the emergence of feminist linguistic activism in the 1970s (Balhorn 2004: 80) numerous grammarians have prescribed the adoption of the singular masculine third-person pronoun “he” for such instances (Saguy and Williams 2022: 7), especially in formal professional writing (Bjorkman 2017: 3). As a consequence, some people are still convinced that singular *they* is grammatically incorrect (Saguy and Williams 2022: 9), and sometimes “[e]ven people who generally support gender-inclusive language practices may avoid using singular *they* for fear of being perceived as uneducated” (Saguy and Williams 2022: 26). This has contributed to the perpetuation of an androcentric world view according to which “linguistically, human beings were to be considered male unless proven otherwise” (Bodine 1975: 133). As a matter of fact, the rationale behind support of generic *he* can be encapsulated in the exemplary quotation of a grammarian of the 17th century, who, with respect to agreement between relative pronouns and antecedents, stated that “the Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine” (Poole 1646 in Bodine 1975: 134).

Nonetheless, proscription of singular *they* did not succeed in eradicating this practice (Bjorkman 2017: 3), thus a sentence such as “Someone forgot their umbrella” sounds completely natural to most English speakers (Saguy and Williams 2022: 7). On the other hand, replacing the possessive adjective “their” with the singular masculine form “his” would deceive readers into thinking that the subject is necessarily masculine (Bjorkman 2017: 3). Other possible alternatives that have been proposed as solutions involve using “he or she” and “s/he”, although they are not considered ideal, as the

former is perceived as cumbersome (Saguy and Williams 2022: 7) and the latter is not suitable in oral contexts (Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997: 106); furthermore, such formulations are inclusive of binary genders only.

In this respect, since the 2010s singular *they* has attracted attention for another use, namely that of a non-binary personal pronoun to refer to people who do not identify either as male or female (Saguy and Williams 2022: 9), thus playing a major role in gender-inclusive language as “a show of resistance to biological gender essentialism and as an affirmation that gender is a self-determined identity” (Zimmerman 2019 in Saguy and Williams 2022: 10). However, this practice is sometimes subject to harsh criticism and disregarded, especially by those who hold sexist and transphobic views (Saguy and Williams 2022: 10), although it seems that “internalized cultural assumptions that all humans can be sorted into binary gender categories” are not the only obstacle to its acceptance (Bjorkman 2017: 2). As a matter of fact, most speakers do not accept sentences where “they” is used to pronominalise singular definite antecedents expressed by given names or gender-specific nouns (whose gender is thus known by both speaker and hearer), such as in “Thomas broke their leg” or “I’ll let my sister introduce themselves”; this is usually the case even for those speakers who normally accept sentences where the antecedent is still singular and definite, but expressed by common nouns, such as in “The professor said they cancelled the exam” (Bjorkman 2017: 2). Therefore, “even for innovative *they* users, the current status of *they* in English is apparently insufficient to render [such sentences] automatically acceptable [...]” (Bjorkman 2017: 2), a phenomenon which Bjorkman (2017: 11) associates to a grammatical property of given names in English. In this regard, Foertsch and Gernsbacher (1997: 110) found that, in sentences where antecedents are referential, “singular *they* is no longer as efficient as a gendered pronoun that matches the gender stereotype of the antecedent”, as readers do not process the former as readily, suggesting that “using *they* with referential antecedents seems out of place.”

Nevertheless, singular *they* remains a key device for non-binary reference within the LGBTQIA+ community, also since “speakers in trans communities sometimes use *they/them* as ‘temporary’ pronouns until informed by a person that they identify

otherwise” (Nordmarken 2019 in Saguy and Williams 2022: 11). This usage is in accordance with the gender-inclusive purpose of the adoption of singular *they* as an indefinite pronoun, since it challenges the androcentric world view indirectly conveyed by generic *he*. In this respect, we can deduce that by adopting singular *they* not only does the IQA Rulebook 2020 avoid using a biased language, but it also shows acceptance of both binary and non-binary identities.

Other gender-inclusive language strategies that can be observed in the ST include the repetition of nouns, such as in the sentence “If a struck *beater* [emphasis mine] catches the bludger before it otherwise becomes dead, that *beater* [emphasis mine] is no longer subject to the knockout effect” on page 58. As a matter of fact, the repetition of the word “beater” eliminates the need for assigning a personal pronoun altogether; alternatively, by looking at the rest of the document, we can presume that singular *they* would have been selected to pronominalise the subject of the conditional clause. In addition, in the section of the rulebook reserved to acknowledgements on page 5, the gender-neutral noun “individuals” is used to refer to people of various genders.

I will now proceed with my analysis by considering the Italian version of the IQA Rulebook 2020, where at first glance it is possible to observe some of the gender-inclusive language strategies that appeared in the GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Padova and in the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna. These include, for instance, the adoption of gender-neutral nouns and formulations, as exemplified by the phrases “le persone esperte” on the second page³⁶ and “una persona facente parte del *roster* ufficiale” (where the ST states “one individual on the team’s official roster”) on the ninth page, which as a matter of fact contain the word *persona/e*. Gender-neutral reference is realised also through the use of English words such as in “*community* [emphasis mine] del quidditch italiano” on the fourth page and the maintenance of untranslated terms such as “coach” (instead of “allenatori e allenatrici”) on the eighth page (which corresponds to page 9 of the ST) and “*speaking captain*” on the ninth page (which corresponds to page 11 of the ST).

³⁶ This page is dedicated to the “Prefazione dei traduttori” (literally “Translators’ Preface”), and therefore does not appear in the original version. This applies to the first four pages of the Italian translation as well.

On the other hand, upon closer inspection it is evident that the Italian translation is the result of a composite and studied project, as illustrated by the “Dichiarazione sul linguaggio” (which literally means “Statement on language”) on the fourth page. Here it is stated that the first and concluding sections of the document use the schwa ending, while the rest of the text adopts the masculine gender in the first half, as accepted by traditional grammar, and the feminine gender in the second half for balance. Furthermore, as a form of prefacing, the translators highlight that this does not mean that the regulations contained in this rulebook apply only to one gender rather than another, but rather that this approach is an attempt to bypass the grammatical rules of the Italian language, so that the text is inclusive of all genders.

As regards the use of the schwa as a gender-neutral ending, this strategy is exemplified in the text in the phrase “senza autorizzazione scritta da parte di autori, autrici, *autorə* [emphasis mine]” on the first page, where the schwa is added to a noun in order to include male, female and nonbinary referents, and in the clause “sperando di essere *statə* [emphasis mine] quanto più *chiarə* [emphasis mine] possibile” on the second page, where the schwa is added to make a past participle and an adjective gender-neutral. As I have already discussed in the first section of the present dissertation, this strategy is highly problematic for a variety of reasons, some of which are noticeable by considering some of the instances appearing in the text. For example, on the fifth page the noun “*giocatorə*” is used as a gender-neutral way to refer to a player; however, this is a word whose masculine (i.e. *giocatore*) and feminine form (i.e. *giocatrice*) are not properly symmetrical. Consequently, “arguing that the inclusive forms of ‘direttore’ (male director) or ‘pittore’ (male painter) should be written with the last letter e inverted enshrine in fact the death of the feminine word ‘direttrice’ (female director) and ‘pittrice’ (female painter)”, thus nullifying the efforts made to increase the visibility of female referents against the traditional and biased practice of using masculine generics (Arcangeli 2022 in Catarinella et al. 2022: 1981); the same applies to “*autorə*” and “*editorə*” on the first page.

On the other hand, with respect to the use of the masculine and feminine gender for the first and second half of the document respectively, it can be enlightening to assess its effectiveness by associating this strategy with that of alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns. This strategy involves the production of a text containing only masculine pronouns in some paragraphs or sections and only feminine pronouns in others. Some authors recommend this strategy for gender-inclusive reference in order to avoid the disadvantages of paired pronouns and singular *they*, namely stylistic awkwardness and quantitative imprecision respectively (Madson and Shoda 2006: 276). The rationale behind this proposal lies in the presumption that “if ‘he’ and ‘she’ are used with equal frequency, the text will be nonsexist” (Madson and Hessling 1999: 561), thus removing the gender bias in favour of men which masculine generics convey.

However, current research suggests that alternating pronouns may not be an ideal strategy for the drafting of texts that intend to be unbiased. Such a claim is made on the basis of studies that take into account variables such as “the perceived frequency of masculine and feminine pronouns, perceived gender bias in the text, the perceived effectiveness of pronoun usage in eliminating gender bias, and the overall quality of the passage” (Madson and Hessling 2001: 156-157). As a matter of fact, it seems that readers tend to overestimate the frequency of feminine pronouns in the alternating condition (Madson and Hessling 2001: 568), even when masculine and feminine pronouns actually appear in the same quantity (Madson and Hessling 2001: 561); as a result, they usually find texts that adopt this strategy to be biased in favour of women (Madson and Hessling 2001: 568) and low in overall quality (Madson and Shoda 2006: 282). In other words, “[w]hen feminine pronouns stand alone in an alternating pattern with masculine pronouns, readers rate the text as sexist and poorly written” (Madson and Shoda 2006: 283), thus thwarting the original purpose behind the adoption of this strategy. The tendency of readers to overestimate the frequency of feminine pronouns in the alternating condition may be explained by the fact that they “are not accustomed to encountering feminine terms used in generic contexts”, and therefore “when text alternates between masculine and feminine pronouns, readers may notice the feminine pronouns more than the masculine pronouns” (Madson and Hessling 1999: 562).

Consequently, it seems that other strategies could be preferred to eliminate gender bias in texts through pronoun use, although some style guides recommend alternating pronouns anyway, as this strategy is less stylistically awkward and repetitive than paired pronouns (Madson and Shoda 2006: 284). In this respect, Madson and Shoda (2006: 284) state that

[i]f the author is trying to persuade a conservative audience, paired pronouns may be his or her best option³⁷. If, on the other hand, the author is at least as interested in changing the world as in persuading the audience, alternating pronouns may be used precisely because they are jarring to the reader. Alternating pronouns might make readers' perceptions of the text somewhat less positive, but they might also motivate readers' [sic] to think differently about sexism in language and in general. The authors need to decide whether they are willing to take this risk.

On the basis of these considerations, it seems that the IQA chose to give priority to the promotion of gender equality in language through alternating pronouns instead of to perceived stylistic quality, disregarding the possible risks that this strategy may entail. In this respect, it would be interesting to investigate whether the fact that readers are explicitly warned of the use of alternating pronouns as a gender-inclusive language strategy at the beginning of the text contributes to reducing the probability of perceived gender bias.

Finally, I would like to mention some problematic excerpts that I have found in the IQA Rulebook 2020, as I did for the other two documents that I analysed in the previous sections. I must admit that the passages that left me doubtful when I read the present document are considerably less numerous, yet it is debatable whether this is a sign of the effectiveness of the strategies adopted. First, there are a couple of instances in which some parts of speech in the masculine gender are associated to words containing the schwa ending; this can be observed in the phrase “*alcun* [emphasis mine] editorə o licenziatarìə” and in the excerpt “Autrici, autori, autorə, membrə dello staff, editorə di questo libro non sono in alcun modo *affiliati* [emphasis mine]”, both on the first page. Although I believe that this case may be considered analogous to those that I have

³⁷ More specifically, this choice may be ideal “when authors want to make their nonsexist intentions clear to the reader” (Madson and Hessling 1999: 572).

already discussed in the previous sections with respect to paired masculine and feminine forms accompanied by adjectives and participles exclusively in the masculine (see Note 17), I wonder whether adding the schwa ending to these parts of speech (thus writing *alcunə* and *affiliatə*) would be more appropriate. In addition, an overextended masculine is used on the second page; as a matter of fact, in the heading “Prefazione dei traduttori” the word *traduttori* is a plural masculine noun, but the translators’ names seem to suggest that they are actually a woman and a man³⁸.

All things considered, the IQA Rulebook 2020 seems to be extremely attentive to the inclusion of people of all genders, even of non-binary identities. This aim is achieved through the adoption of non-conventional strategies, such as the use of the schwa in Italian, and of devices that have received mixed reception, such as singular *they* in English. It is important to emphasise that this approach to the use and translation of gender-inclusive language is enabled by the purpose of the document, as the IQA is not a public administration, and thus it can afford to explore alternative strategies compared to those prescribed by institutional guidelines in its documents. It is also interesting to notice that the translation process of the rulebook involved the combination of different strategies in a systematic manner, as openly declared by the translators themselves.

In conclusion, in the present chapter I have analysed three documents, namely the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 of the University of Padova, the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna, and the International Quidditch Association Rulebook 2020, in order to examine the strategies of gender-inclusive language adopted in each document and how they were rendered in translation. I have thus provided examples of gender-inclusive language use and translation, as evidence of the achievability of gender equality in language despite the difficulties entailed in this practice. As a matter of fact, the presence of some problematic excerpts in the texts supports the claim that using and translating gender-inclusive language is not an easy task, and that further research and experimentation is needed in order to find the most appropriate solutions. Nonetheless, the existence of documents, even administrative and institutional ones, that include gender-inclusive strategies and render them across

³⁸ This hypothesis seems to be supported also by the use of the past participle “cimentatə” for gender-neutral coreference.

languages proves that institutions are willing to put effort into promoting gender equality and into increasing the visibility of all genders (for now mostly the feminine one) in language.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present dissertation was to explore the significance of gender-inclusive language in relation to issues of social equality, as well as to shed light on the complexity that underlies the practices of using and translating this type of language. This work contributes to the reflection on the role of the linguistic representation of genders in promoting gender equality and on the importance of gender-inclusive language for a respectful treatment and acknowledgement of discriminated gender identities in language.

Building on linguistic and sociological studies on the concept of gender, the first chapter illustrated the main approaches to a gender-sensitive use of language for the eradication of sexist linguistic practices such as masculine generics, namely neutralisation (also known as inclusion) and visibility (also known as feminisation) (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 195). Subsequently, the sociological implications of language use were analysed as a response to common arguments against the adoption of gender-inclusive language strategies, usually stemming from linguistic conservatism (Sulis and Gheno 2020: 164). In this respect, various studies that endorse the need for gender-inclusive language due to its instrumentality in reducing discrimination against women and non-male identities were discussed. Among them, the most self-explanatory may be those regarding job applications, which show that women are less likely to apply for jobs whose advertisements use masculine generics compared to instances when actual generic reference is made (Sczesny et al. 2016: 124); on the other hand, the results of Horvath and Sczesny's (2013 in Harris et al. 2017: 2) simulated hiring experiment suggest that employers themselves may judge female applicants more suitable for a position when paired forms appear instead of exclusively masculine generics in its advertisement.

Finally, the chapter examined the response to gender-inclusive language coming from the public discourse in Italy, especially with respect to two of the most popular strategies proposed in Italian, namely the use of professional titles in the feminine form when referring to women according to Alma Sabatini's *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1987) and the schwa as a gender-neutral ending. In

light of this account, it seems that, while the former is now officially accepted and recommended, albeit with hesitation from some ordinary speakers as regards uncommon feminine forms, the latter presents multiple disadvantages that undermine its suitability as an effective gender-inclusive language strategy in official contexts (Catarinella et al. 2022: 1992), although it is increasingly being adopted in informal text types such as comic books (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 170). Furthermore, the schwa still constitutes a first approach to a non-binary expression of gender in Italian, thus paving the way for further experimentation of gender-neutral linguistic strategies in such a grammatical gender language (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 172-173).

The second chapter focused on the translation of gender-inclusive language, situating it in the context of feminist translation and exploring the theoretical background to this practice. By challenging the traditional concept of translation as faithful linguistic transposition (Adamo 2019: 152), feminist translation allows translators to make their presence felt throughout their work (von Flotow 1991: 74) in order to question the patriarchal stance of source texts (von Flotow 2019 in Adamo 2019: 156) as an act of political and social activism (Castro 2013b: 38). The chapter discussed some of the methods of feminist translation, drawing a distinction between macro-strategies such as prefacing and footnoting, where the translator's intervention is most explicit, and micro-strategies, whose aim is to enhance the visibility of the feminine gender through the use of linguistic devices such as "feminine generics" and original paired masculine and feminine forms (von Flotow 2019: 181-182).

On the other hand, translation strategies functioning through the concealment of gender references were analysed as well. In this respect, a study by Paolucci, Lardelli and Gromann (2023: 15) assessed the suitability of a number of approaches for a gender-inclusive translation from a natural gender language (i.e. English) into a grammatical gender one (i.e. German), including gender-neutral rewording, gender-inclusive and gender-neutral characters and neosystems. The findings suggest that gender-inclusive characters are preferable due to their higher readability and comprehensibility, although results may be influenced by readers' greater familiarity with them (Paolucci et al. 2023: 20-21).

Subsequently, the chapter addressed the practice of Machine Translation (MT) with respect to gender bias, investigating the way this issue originates and its effects in terms of discrimination through the reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Piergentili et al. 2023: 71). Furthermore, possible strategies to mitigate this phenomenon were analysed, including the addition of contextual information, speaker identification, fine-tuning of MT systems, innovative linguistic devices and gender-neutral language. Although most of these methods have proved to be successful in fulfilling the intended purpose to some extent, a universal solution capable of solving the issue of gender bias in MT with respect to all of its aspects has yet to be found (Savoldi et al. 2021: 856), and therefore further research on the matter is needed (Vanmassenhove 2024: 19).

Lastly, in the third chapter I built on the information provided in the previous sections and on new insights into specific linguistic aspects of gender-inclusive language use in English and Italian in order to assess the strategies adopted for the drafting and translation of three official documents, namely the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 of the University of Padova, the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 of the University of Bologna and the International Quidditch Association (IQA) Rulebook 2020. Since two of these texts constitute examples of administrative language use in the Italian context, I explored the current stance of Italian public administration on the use of gender in administrative language, showing that, despite the complications related to the specific features of this register, public administrations are increasingly expected to adopt gender-inclusive language and to devise guidelines for its correct use.

As regards the comparative study I conducted on the documents, for each text I analysed both notable and problematic excerpts in the English and Italian versions, commenting on them on the basis of current guidelines on the use of gender in administrative language and of existing studies on the strategies appearing in them, such as paired masculine and feminine forms, singular *they* and alternating pronouns. In the light of this analysis, for the most part the documents that were considered seem to adopt gender-inclusive language correctly and effectively, showing that using this type of language naturally and spontaneously without hindering communication is possible. However, the presence of problematic passages highlights the need for further research

in order to improve current strategies and increase their effectiveness and usability in such contexts; more specifically, limitations emerged primarily with respect to the strategies devised for the representation of non-binary identities due to the shortage of studies on the matter, especially with respect to the Italian language.

All things considered, the present dissertation supports claims that gender-inclusive language significantly contributes to the promotion of gender equality through a respectful representation of gender identities in language. Despite acknowledging the numerous challenges that complicate the path to a completely successful use and translation of gender-inclusive language strategies, stemming both from traditional grammar and from the need for further linguistic experimentation and research on the matter, the comparative study contained in this work demonstrates that gender-inclusive language can be effectively adopted and translated in official documents. Furthermore, the previous chapters show promising signs with respect to the possibility of finding possible solutions to the obstacles arising in the practices of gender-inclusive language use and translation, such as gender bias in Machine Translation.

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SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Il linguaggio è uno strumento essenziale per la comunicazione umana, in quanto permette di esprimere i propri bisogni e le proprie idee, nonché di relazionarsi in una società. Tuttavia, esso può diventare anche un mezzo per la conservazione e la diffusione di pericolosi stereotipi, con effetti potenzialmente deleteri sulla vita delle persone (Sczesny et al. 2015: 943). Ad esempio, l'uso di pratiche linguistiche tradizionali basate sul fatto che il genere maschile possa essere usato con valenza neutra per riferirsi ad individui di ogni sesso contribuisce all'affermazione di una visione androcentrica del mondo secondo cui l'uomo (nel senso di persona di sesso maschile) rappresenta il prototipo dell'essere umano, alimentando così la discriminazione nei confronti delle donne e di tutte le identità di genere che non corrispondono a quella maschile in termini sia linguistici, sia pratici (Tavits and Pérez 2019: 16781).

A tal proposito, il legame tra linguaggio e pensiero, e dunque tra il linguaggio e il modo in cui le persone concepiscono e ordinano la realtà, ha interessato studiosi e intellettuali per molto tempo. Tra le ipotesi e le teorie che sono state formulate su questo argomento, la relatività linguistica, conosciuta anche come ipotesi di Sapir-Whorf, afferma che il linguaggio utilizzato dalle persone può in una certa misura influire sul modo in cui esse pensano (Lucy 1997: 291). Sebbene questa ipotesi sia considerata alquanto controversa, poiché la sua interpretazione più estrema sfocerebbe in quello che viene definito "determinismo linguistico" (Hussein 2012: 642), tale affermazione sembra essere supportata da numerosi studi, e ciò evidenzia quindi la necessità di condurre ulteriori ricerche in merito.

Dunque, da quando la consapevolezza del problema degli usi discriminatori del linguaggio e dei suoi possibili effetti è aumentata a livello internazionale nella seconda metà del XX secolo, l'impegno per una riforma delle lingue in una prospettiva più inclusiva è cresciuto di conseguenza, andando a includere molteplici aspetti dell'identità, tra cui il genere, che è quello attorno a cui questa tesi è stata sviluppata. Tale processo ha portato all'ideazione di strategie linguistiche mirate al riconoscimento del genere femminile e delle identità di genere non binarie che sono recentemente

apparse e stanno venendo sempre più accettate nella società. Le strategie sviluppate per questo proposito appartengono ad un tipo di linguaggio chiamato “linguaggio inclusivo di genere”, che è stato considerato un punto di riferimento per la redazione di linee guida per un uso rispettoso della lingua da numerose autorità istituzionali. Più precisamente, questo tipo di linguaggio funziona in due direzioni, dando maggior visibilità al genere femminile oppure rimuovendo qualsiasi riferimento al genere (Mucchi-Faina 2005: 195) per superare la tradizionale concezione binaria di questa categoria.

Ciò nonostante, il processo di adozione e sviluppo del linguaggio inclusivo di genere è ostacolato non solo da una certa persistenza delle ideologie sessiste e discriminatorie, ma anche dalle caratteristiche grammaticali di alcune lingue, che possono complicare il percorso verso il raggiungimento di un pari trattamento dei generi nel linguaggio. Inoltre, in un mondo perennemente interconnesso grazie alla globalizzazione e dove persino paesi ai capi opposti del pianeta possono comunicare istantaneamente e di continuo attraverso la tecnologia e il commercio, è essenziale che il linguaggio inclusivo di genere venga tradotto prontamente da una lingua all'altra per preservare il suo obiettivo, cioè la promozione dell'uguaglianza di genere, al di là dei confini linguistici. Tuttavia, poiché lingue diverse possono presentare caratteristiche differenti, trovare la soluzione ideale per tradurre il linguaggio inclusivo di genere richiede notevole impegno e prevede il superamento di numerosi ostacoli.

Perciò, questa tesi si propone di esplorare il tema del linguaggio inclusivo di genere come strumento per la promozione dell'uguaglianza di genere e il contrasto alle pratiche linguistiche discriminatorie nei confronti delle donne e di altre identità differenti da quella maschile, ad esempio quelle non binarie. Attraverso l'analisi di alcune strategie per l'uso e la traduzione di un linguaggio rispettoso dal punto di vista del genere, il presente lavoro si unisce al corpus di studi a sostegno dell'efficacia di questo tipo di linguaggio nella lotta alle discriminazioni di genere, auspicando ulteriori ricerche per il superamento degli ostacoli che possono emergere nell'adottarlo e nel tradurlo.

Più precisamente, il primo capitolo spiega che cosa si intende per linguaggio inclusivo di genere, prendendo in considerazione la definizione del concetto di genere da un punto di vista sia socioculturale che linguistico. Analizzati i principali approcci per affrontare il problema del sessismo linguistico, alimentato da pratiche linguistiche androcentriche come il maschile universale, viene poi evidenziata l'importanza del linguaggio inclusivo di genere in relazione alla promozione dell'uguaglianza sociale tra generi, accennando all'ipotesi alquanto discussa della relatività linguistica. Il capitolo illustra infine le posizioni passate e presenti dell'opinione pubblica riguardo alle strategie di linguaggio inclusivo di genere più popolari apparse nella lingua italiana, tra cui l'uso di titoli professionali al femminile per riferirsi a persone di genere femminile e la schwa come terminazione neutra.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra invece sulla traduzione del linguaggio inclusivo di genere, collocando questa pratica nel contesto dell'attivismo linguistico femminista e discutendo gli approcci storici e attuali alla traduzione in una prospettiva di genere. Viene poi preso in esame il problema del bias di genere, osservato frequentemente nel contesto della traduzione automatica, in luce dei progressi tecnologici correnti e delle difficoltà che possono emergere in questa pratica. La parte finale del capitolo è dedicata alla discussione di possibili strategie per mitigare il fenomeno del bias di genere.

Infine, nel terzo e ultimo capitolo viene condotto uno studio comparativo delle strategie di linguaggio inclusivo di genere adottate in tre documenti amministrativi: il Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 dell'Università di Padova, il Gender Equality Annual Report 2024 dell'Università di Bologna e l'International Quidditch Association Rulebook 2020; in questo modo, sono analizzati esempi di uso e traduzione del linguaggio inclusivo di genere in inglese e in italiano. Più precisamente, dopo aver esaminato l'opinione dell'amministrazione pubblica italiana riguardo all'uso del linguaggio inclusivo di genere sulla base delle direttive finora emanate e delle attuali linee guida sviluppate per regolare il linguaggio amministrativo, viene considerato un campione di estratti presi da questi testi, facendo quindi luce sulle difficoltà che emergono quando si traduce il linguaggio inclusivo di genere, segno della necessità di ulteriori studi per migliorare la sua efficacia nella comunicazione tra parlanti di lingue diverse.

Le conclusioni a cui giunge questa tesi confermano ciò che sostengono numerosi studi riguardo all'influenza dell'uso del linguaggio inclusivo di genere sulle condizioni sociali delle donne e delle identità di genere diverse da quella maschile, e sostiene quindi la necessità di approfondimenti su come impiegare e tradurre questo tipo di linguaggio nel modo corretto. Lo studio comparativo condotto all'interno di questo lavoro, seppur evidenziando alcune criticità legate alle caratteristiche grammaticali delle lingue prese in considerazione e al registro linguistico dei testi considerati, dimostra che usare il linguaggio inclusivo di genere in modo naturale e spontaneo all'interno di un documento amministrativo è possibile. Tuttavia, la presenza di estratti problematici rispetto alla rappresentazione di genere nella lingua sottolinea il bisogno di approfondire il tema con ulteriori ricerche, soprattutto in riferimento ad un'interpretazione non binaria del concetto di genere.