



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

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

Tesina di Laurea

*Do men, women and people with other gender
identities use language differently?
A sociolinguistic perspective on gendered language*

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Anno Accademico 2023 / 2024

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Introduction

Language is a powerful tool used to define the world around us, our relationships with others and our identities. This dissertation aims to explore how language is used to make sense of reality, focusing on the relationship between language and gender through sociolinguistics theories. In fact, as feminist stances have gained popularity, especially in western societies, the concept of gender and gender differences between women and men started to become more salient. This dissertation examines the pioneering studies on gender and language that aim to explore the enduring debate about women's and women's language use and the linguistic experiences of non-binary and transgender individuals, trying to shed light on how language can both shape and be influenced by gender ideologies which are strictly related to historical and cultural factors.

In Chapter 1, I will consider the evolution of the sociolinguistics studies, starting from William Labov's critics of early linguistic structuralist theories in which he underlines the importance of social factors in relation to language use. From the early 1900s, sociolinguists started to focus their studies on the relationship between language and gender, thanks to the rise of the feminist movement, as women started to gain more visibility in language studies. The main issue addressed in Chapter 1 is the definition of 'women's language', described by the liberal feminist sociolinguistics is Robin Lakoff, in her pivotal work *Language and Woman's Places* (1975). I will explore the relevant linguistic features that define 'women's language', in particular the use of color nouns, meaningless particles and adjectives, tag-questions and hedging, intonation and hypercorrect grammar. Moreover, I will address the main critics to this early study on language and gender. Lastly, I will focus on the use of language to describe women experiences and identities. Chapter 2 provides an overview on the different approaches that developed over the years in the field of language and gender studies. I will focus on the deficiency approach, the dominance approach, the difference approach, and the dynamic approach. Through the analysis of different frameworks, I seek to better understand how the relationship of language and gender was conceptualized not only by sociolinguists but also by society, trying to redefine gender norms and ideologies that are still part of folklinguistic today. Furthermore, in Chapter 3 I will analyze the relationship between language and gender identity through queer theory lens by adopting a dynamic view of gender in discourse practices. Chapter 3 focuses on the exploration of the use of

language by non-binary and transgender identities in order to construct and redefine their gender identity, despite the challenges imposed by gendered language and society's binary gender norms and ideologies. The chapter provides a discussion on the importance of inclusive language and the pivotal influence of gendered language in reinforcing binary gender ideologies.

Chapter One

Gender, Feminism, and Lakoff's "women's language"

This chapter defines the basis of sociolinguistic studies, through a historical overview of the evolution of the field. Starting from the correlation between social factor and language explored by Labov, I aim to define the importance of gender and gender roles in shaping and influencing men's and women's use of language to better understand whether do man and women speak differently and why. The discussion on gender in this chapter focuses largely on Lakoff's analysis of the complex relationship between women, language and power that resulted in the construction of the concept of 'women's language', characterized by particular linguistic features, which shaped and influenced future discourses and folk linguistic beliefs on differential speech behavior of men and women.

1.1 Definition and history of sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a "developing branch of linguistics and sociology" which aims to explore the "individual and social variation of language" to better understand the "roles performed by a given speaker within one community" (Halima, 2013:11). Sociolinguistics has been defined as the study of language in relation to social factors, including differences in regional, class, and occupational, gender differences and bilingualism (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). Accordingly, sociolinguists are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts. Several scholars are "concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning" (Holmes & Janet, 2013:1).

The basis of sociolinguistics took a long period to develop various theories and concepts defined over the years. It began as a response to structuralist theories, which imply that "languages are studied in isolation which means that the interactions and the relationship among speakers, as well as the social context where language take place, are not taken into account by the linguists" (Ismatullaeva et al., 2022). For example, the sociolinguist William Labov argued that natural languages constitute a social entity and it is impossible to construct grammars of natural languages without paying attention to the speakers and/or society where a given language exists (1977 in Ismatullaeva et al., 2022). Labov explored the linguistic variations within New York City and investigated how these "variations are correlated with social factors such as social class, age, and ethnicity"

(Labov, 1996:5). His ground-breaking study is considered a foundational reference in sociolinguistics because it empirically demonstrated that linguistic variations are not accidental but closely related to social variables (Labov, 1996). It is recognized as one of the earliest analyses of social variation in language, emphasizing that “languages possess a whole range of resources for producing a given linguistic expression” (Labov, 1996:38). In simpler terms, Labovian scholars study language from a ‘social perspective’ and state that “a language is a shared property of a community” (Ismatullaeva et al., 2022:622). In simpler terms, sociolinguistics is the study of how language interacts with society, examining the ways in which language varies and changes in different social contexts. Sociolinguists aim to “describe sociolinguistic variations and, if possible, explain why it happens” (Holmes, 2013:11).

The effects of social factors, such as ethnicity, age, geographical region and socioeconomic status on language are some of the main subjects studied. It is only recently that sociolinguists have focused their attention on gender. In fact, as the discipline established itself, as I addressed above, it began to distance itself from “mainstream linguistics” and concentrate on “non-standard varieties” (Holmes, 2013:4). Various minority groups became subjects of study, above all “working-class groups, ethnic minority groups, adolescents” (Holmes, 2013:4). However, women were not perceived as a minority group, as until relatively recently “men were automatically seen as the heart of society” (Holmes, 2013:4). In fact, it was only from the early 1900s that discussion about language and gender started to theorize that the “linguistic deviant” is the “woman herself”, as her speaking patterns are seen as “peculiarly divergent from more normative” (male) ways of speaking (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:353). Moreover, the emerging of the feminist movement encouraged many scholars to consider the relationship between language and gender as a “symbolic resource to create and manage personal, social, and cultural meaning and identities” (Kendall & Tannen, 2001:1). Many researchers started to focus on “documenting gender-related patterns of language use” and considering “social and political aspects of gender relations” (Kendall & Tannen, 2001:1). I will focus on the impact of gender and gender identity on language use, as it plays an important role in our society.

1.2 Definition of gender

The concept of gender refers to the “socially constructed roles, norms, behaviors that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on the sex they were assigned at birth” (World Health Organization, 2021). It is crucial to differentiate between the concepts of gender and sex. Sex is “typically assigned at birth and refers to the biological characteristics that define people as female, male or intersex” (World Health Organization, 2021). Since the 1990s, one significant theoretical work to influence the field of language and gender is that of Butler (1990) and her notion of gender as performative (Ehrlich, 2014). In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on gender studies related to language use and queer theory, that I will address in greater depth in Chapter 3.

1.3 Feminism and sociolinguistics

The relationship between sociolinguistics and feminism explores how language affects and perpetuates the dynamics of gender power in society. The discipline analyzes how linguistic practices influence and are influenced by social structures, highlighting the role of language in the construction of gender identities and inequalities. The first serious discussions and studies on the impact of gendered language emerged during the 1970s when sociolinguistic researches were carried out at scientific levels. The primary figure associated with liberal feminist sociolinguistics is Robin Lakoff, whose pivotal work *Language and Woman's Places* (1975) continues to resonate with today's readers. Lakoff describes it as “an attempt to provide diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of men and women” (1975: 4). In fact, her work has become widely recognized for analyzing “linguistic gendered differences” and for asserting the impact of “gendered language” in the shaping of “unequal roles of men and women in society” (Svendsen, 2019:1). During the 1990s, the second wave feminism was replaced by third wave feminism, which “turned away from ideas of patriarchy and oppression and condemned talk of ‘women’ and ‘men’ as ‘essentialist’” (Holmes, 2013:8). Today, some scholars have returned to analyze concerns raised by second wave feminism by “challenging sexism and misogyny in all forms” (Holmes, 2013:8). A remarkable shift in feminist thinking has been aroused by black women in the USA “who have challenge the dominance of white women in the

feminist movement” and have strongly argued that “women may be oppressed because of their race, class and sexuality as well as because of their gender” (Holmes, 2013:8).

1.4 Lakoff’s theory on ‘women’s language’

Lakoff’s work drew a “connection between the gender differences she believed existed and the social place of women in middle-class white American society at the time she was writing” (Ehrlich, 2014:92). Lakoff would suggest that women's distinctive ways of talking “both reflected and perpetuated” their subordinate social status as she states that “the social discrepancy in the positions of men and women in our society is reflected in linguistic disparities” (Lakoff, 1975:43). Therefore, she introduces the concept of ‘women’s language’ which she describes as meaning both “language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone” (Lakoff, 1975: 7). This approach to language displays the language spoken by women as lacking in comparison to that used by men. Cameron (2006) states that it is clear that the most relevant aspect of ‘women’s language’ is associated with weakness and subordination. This concept is referred to as the deficiency approach, which I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 2. Lakoff identifies relevant linguistic features that “compromise” this style of language as it “dominates the language of most women” (1975:53) as they are associated with the communicative functions of weakening or mitigating the force of an utterance (Cameron, 2006). In the next sections I will analyze these features and investigate in more depth the linguistic practices and ideologies that were associated with woman speech at the time.

1.4.1 Colors, meaningless particles and adjectives

Lakoff (1975:8) suggests that women make “far more precise discriminations in naming colors than men”, they use words such as *beige*, *ecru* or *aquamarine*. The author finds in women’s language a vast range of adjectives, described as “irrelevant to the real world” (Robin Lakoff, 1975:49). Words including *adorable*, *charming*, *sweet*, *divine*, *cute* indicate how the speaker feels in relation to his addressee (Robin Lakoff, 1975). The author suggests that the use of these forms of speech underline women’s lower status in society, as men tend to use neutral adjectives such as *great*, *terrific*, *cool*, *neat*.

1.4.2 Tag-questions and hedging

Tag questions are defined as “grammatical structures in which a declarative is followed by an attached interrogative clause or ‘tag’” (Cameron, 2006:81). These features imply a seek for approval or confirmation and Lakoff (1975: 15) argues that these short clauses are used “when the speaker is stating a claim, but lack full confidence in the truth of that claim”. In fact, the author claims that the phrase *It's a nice day isn't it* (+TAG) is less assertive than *It's a nice day* (-TAG) (Deborah Cameron, 2006). Lakoff identifies tag-use as “legitimate” in contexts where the speaker is uncertain about something which the addressee is likely to know better (1975:16). She also identifies tag-use in small talk as legitimate, as asking something you already know can be legitimized if it serves to maintain the conversation, as in ‘Sure is hot in here, isn't it?’ (Lakoff, 1975:16). Moreover, women's speech seems in general to contain more hedging: for example, are found instances of "well," "y'know," "kinda," and others that tend to convey uncertainty about what the speaker is saying (Robin Lakoff, 1975).

1.4.3 Intonation

According to Lakoff (1975), intonation patterns found in woman's language reflect the aim to leave a decision open, not imposing an opinion, views or claims on somebody. The author equates rising intonation in declarative sentences with showing tentativeness, uncertainty or indecision rather than a sign of affiliation and connection. Consequently, this uncertainty sustains and reinforces the social stereotypes of women as weak (Cameron, 2006). For instance, asked the question: “When will dinner be ready?” instead of saying "Around six o'clock" with a falling intonation that indicates that the speaker is providing a definitive statement, it might be said with a rising intonation, similar to "Around six o'clock?", which reflects the speaker desire to reduce the force of the utterance, leaving at the addressee the power of making the final decision (Deborah Cameron, 2006).

1.4.4 Hypercorrect grammar

Since it was considered desirable in middle-class society to speak ‘properly,’ hypercorrectness in grammar is related to the social expectation that “women are supposed to speak more politely than man” (Robin Lakoff, 1975:55). Lakoff (1975) points

out that at young age boys, tend to drop the /g/ sound while girls will pronounce the word with the standard form. To give an example, boys say “singin’”, “goin’” while girls use the correct forms. Moreover, while girls tend to consistently use standard verb form, boys are comfortable using contractions, such as ‘ain’t.’

1.4.5 Rules of Politeness

Finally, Lakoff (1975) notes that women’s speech is more polite than men’s. Linguistic politeness is often achieved by selecting linguistic forms “which are perceived as expressing an appropriate degree of social distance of which acknowledge relevant status or power differences”(Holmes, 2013:274). Strategies such as politeness show attentiveness to the needs of others (Baxter, 2010) and according to Lakoff (1975:64) such strategies are used in society “in order to reduce friction in personal interaction”. Brown and Levinson (1978) define politeness as the use of linguistic strategies to manage what they define as face. “Respecting face is defined as showing consideration for people’s feelings” by respecting two needs: on one hand, “the need not to be imposed on” called negative face; on the other hand, “the need to be liked and admired” called positive face (in Coates, 2016:105). For instance, we try to satisfy “the negative face wants of others” by paring requests with apologies for the impositions in order to put the addressee in the position “to say no without appearing rude, that is, without losing face”; the positive face, instead, is satisfied when we greet others and “express admiration and approval” (Coates, 2016:105). Moreover, Lakoff (1975) suggests three universal rules of politeness: formality, deference and camaraderie. Formality serves firstly as a tool to “create distance between speaker and addressee” and secondly to “erase emotive content to an utterance” distancing the speaker from what they are saying (Lakoff, 1975:65). For example, implementing the use of the so-called Academic Passive, since the active voice is a sign of involvement. Moreover, hypercorrect form of grammar and the use of titles (Mr., Dr., Sir) play an important role in the construction of linguistic politeness. The author identifies the second rule of politeness with deference, which highlights “the superiority of the addressee over the speaker” (Lakoff, 1975:66).

The tools used to achieve politeness are hesitancy in speech and action and the use of tag questions and question intonation (Lakoff, 1975). The third rule, camaraderie, is used to make the addressee comfortable by showing interest in them. The use of friendly gestures,

nicknames and first names suggest that the speaker is interested in the addressee. (Lakoff, 1975). Brown (1998), as a result of her studies, claims that “women use extremes of positive and negative politeness” as they show more “sensitivity to the face needs of others” (Coates, 2016:107). In addition, the scholar argues that negative politeness, such as apologies for intruding, use of impersonal structures (e.g. passive forms) and hedges assertions, characterized the language of people which are “in an inferior position in society” (Coates, 2016:107). This deduction is confirmed by O’Barr and Atkins’ (1980) study on courtroom language, where they focus their attention on some particular features largely based on Lakoff’s women’s language or WL (in Coates, 2016:). The study confirmed Brown’s view, as the results show that “some female witnesses use very few WL features, but also some male witnesses used a high proportion of WL features” underlining that the use of WL features defined by the scholars “does not correlate with speaker’s gender” (Coates, 2016:108). For instance, O’Barr and Atkins (1980) state that WL features, found in their study, correlate with two other factors: social status and previous courtroom experience. Drawing from this correlation, the scholars renamed these features typically associated with women’s speech as ‘Powerless language’ arguing that it was associated with language used by women because “in societies like ours, women are usually less powerful than men” (Coates, 2016:109).

1.5 Criticisms of Lakoff work

From the point of view of today’s researchers, Lakoff’s most relevant drawbacks are the lack of empirical basis and the limiting focus on gender issues. Lakoff’s theories about women’s language were rooted in her personal observations and beliefs rather than systematic research, yet her theories motivated researchers to seek empirical evidence (Cameron, 2009). Moreover, during the 1980s, O’Barr & Atkins (1980), while looking for features of ‘women’s language, found them not to be typical of all women, nor to be confined to the speech of women only” (Deborah Cameron, 2006:78). These scholars found a correlation between the features and the general status, such as the social class and occupation of the speaker. Lakoff’s tendency to “automatically identifying the linguistic strategies used by subordinate groups as *ipso facto* markers of subordinate status”(Deborah Cameron, 2006:79) is seen as one of her least constructive legacies. According to Baxter (2010), as stated before, language is “always multi-functional” and sensitive to the context. For instance, it cannot be simplified to “a simple correspondence

between the sex/gender of the speaker and their use of a particular language style” (Baxter, 2009:72). Moreover, discourse theorists criticized on the gender difference perspective for taking into greater consideration the gender factor rather than other features such as age, class or ethnicity in the formation of personal identity. I will focus on the perspective of discourse theories in greater detail in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, Lakoff’s ideas, theorized more than thirty years ago, are still relevant as they have shaped not only future studies but also the “folklinguistic stereotype” regarding the way females typically use language (Judith Baxter, 2009:161).

I am interested in the concept of “women’s language” because is one of the first attempts to identify a correlation between gender and particular linguistic features. To be more precise, in recent years scholars claim that as “language shapes gender salience and ideology through discursive processes,” it is expected that “the gender distinctiveness of a language will influence support among its speakers regarding gender equality” (Liu et al., 2018:87) . Finally, Deborah Cameron (2009:13) states that despite the fact that Lakoff’s claims about the way women use language have now been abandoned, considering that further research did not support them, the more general perception that “there is a connection between language-use, gender, and power, still stands”. In Chapter 2 I will focus on the various approaches to this topic, exploring how the relationship between gender and language has been studied and classified over time.

1.6 How are women talked about?

Balamurali et al. (2023) question whether “linguistic inequality could be used to address social inequality”. Sustaining Lakoff, they claim that “women encounter linguistic inequality in two different contexts: how they are trained to use language and how people generally speak to them.” Firstly, the “scientific” validation of popular stereotypes defining women and men steered to “desire the codification and regulation on women’s speech, and of women as speakers” by developing many rules, codes and guides for directing women’s use of language (Pauwels, 2003:550). These restrains “cemented men’s status as norm-makers, language regulators, and language planners” (Pauwels, 2003:550). Men’s roles as dictionary-makers and normative grammar writers in the “establishment of language academies and other normative institutions”, left no space for women’s role as regulators (Pauwels, 2003:550). However, women started to expose the

“bias portrayals of the sexes in language use” and began to take action to uncover the “gendered nature of many linguistic rules” (Pauwels, 2003:551). A relevant feature across many languages is the “asymmetrical treatment of women and men, of male/masculine and female/feminine concepts and principles” (Pauwels, 2003:553). As Murgia (2021:26) argues, women are still fighting for social recognition underlying the denial of women’s social identity, as she states that being addressed by “first names” powerful women are seen as “our little cousins, our daughters' friends, or ditzy girls on their first outing”. She continues explaining how the use of a woman’s first name “in non-intimate contexts [...] reduces symbolic distance, express paternalism” and creates a sense of incapability as it “diminishes the authority of the position they hold” (Murgia, 2021:26) .

Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003) also explore “lexical differences in the way we talk about men with power, versus women with power”. To give an example, the use of different words “to address a similar or identical behavior by men and by women” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). It is argued that as “language shapes gender salience and ideology through discursive processes, we expect that the gender distinctiveness of a language will influence support among its speakers regarding gender equality” (LIU et al., 2018). In simpler terms, people’s description of objects often correlates with the object's given gender in a language. Moreover, the use of gendered language in everyday life, for example the use fireman, policeman, manpower or cameraman, reflects what Jule (2018:) talks of “the historical patriarchal hierarchy that has existed between men and women, where one (man) is considered the norm, and the other (woman) is marked as other – as something quite different from the norm”.

Additionally, Lakoff talks about ‘pronominal neutralization’ referring to the use of gendered language, such as “man and mankind which takes into consideration women members of the species as well”(Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:). “The structure of the lexicon” often perpetuates the “male as norm” principle creating “lexical gaps”, in which “word to denote women in a variety of role, professions, and occupations” are not to be found (Pauwels, 2003:553). On the other hand, where there is an absence of “male-specific nouns” to define roles or professions “seen to be female-dominant” the lexical gap is filled expeditiously even to the extent where it becomes the dominant form (Pauwels, 2003:553). This is discussed and relevant today, through the constant revindication of public recognition of women especially in high standard contexts. To

give an example, American congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wrote the following: "I wonder if Republicans realize how much they reveal their disrespect for women in the debates where they continually address the elected of the Congress with their proper names or nicknames, while using the titles and surnames when addressing men of equals. Women notice it. It reveals a lot" (Murgia, 2021:25). Not so far from the claims Lakoff made regarding the use of 'lady' or 'housewife' instead of 'woman' sustaining that "the presence of the words is a signal that something is wrong" (Lakoff, 1975:21). Moreover, the presence of different terms to address women by their marital status, such as Mrs. or Miss, compared to men's ambiguous Mr., reveals that the "discrepancies in supposed referential equivalents" are a clear example of "semantic sexism" (Thorne & Henley, 1975:106).

This chapter has attempted to define the history and early theories of sociolinguistics, starting from William Labov's pivotal theories on language variation in relation to social factors which demonstrated the interconnection between these variations and social categories, such as class, ethnicity, and age. Moreover, starting from the 1970s with the rise of feminism, sociolinguists' interest in the influence of gender in language resulted in one of the first attempts to understand the crucial role of gender in relation to language use, with the publication of Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975). Within the introduction of the concept of 'women's language', the scholar defined a particular linguistic style associated with women by analyzing some linguistic features such as the use of meaningless particles and adjectives, tag questions, hedges, intonation, and hypercorrect grammar. Lakoff argues that these linguistic features are a reflection of women's subordinate social status as they show tentativeness and lack of authority. This theory influenced further studies and debates, which often criticized the exclusive correlation of these features with gender, as other scholars point out the importance of other factors, such as social status and power dynamics.

Further studies carried out by O'Barr and Atkins (1980) showed that 'women's language' is better associated with the social status of women at the time, rather with that with gender, suggesting that these features are a sign of lack of power instead of femininity, defining them as characteristics of "powerless language" (Coates, 2016). Moreover, Lakoff's work has received criticism for its lack of empirical grounding. However, despite the criticism her work was essential in shaping the future direction for research on

language, gender and power, as many scholars started to explore the role of language in reinforcing social inequalities and reflecting social dynamics of power by focusing on lexical asymmetries and use of pronouns and titles which were found to perpetuate male-normed linguistic practices, underlining how the historical patriarchal structures influence women's speech and identities (Jule, 2018). Over the years new approaches to language and gender emerged, trying to better understand the relationship between language and gender identity and evolving into new key shifts in the field by rewriting the early narratives and myths about the subject.

Chapter Two

Approaches to Language and Gender

This chapter explores the various theoretical approaches to language that have evolved over time, focusing on the sociolinguistic perspectives that have emerged since the 1990s. I will examine how scholars have conceptualized the relationship between language and gender, highlighting key shifts and developments in the field. I will explore three approaches in particular: deficiency, dominance, and difference. I aim to explore in greater detail in what way language may reflect gender identity and whether it helps to constitute gender identity. Moreover, I will explore the possible myths that may constitute today's beliefs about language and gender.

2.1 The deficiency approach

The deficiency approach developed during the 1920s with Otto Jespersen's work *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922). Particularly, in Chapter 13 entitled 'The Woman' the scholar defines his theories on women's language which can be described today as an early example of "conventional stereotypes and preconceptions about women's language that consider it inherently defective relative to men's language" (Thomas, 2013:2). For example, he states that, in comparison to men, women from all cultures "avoid vulgarity and swearing", "speak more" and "leave more sentences unfinished" (Jespersen, 1922 in Thomas, 2013:6). In addition, Jespersen's belief that "women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and vulgar expressions" underlines the "instinctive" nature of women's speech which is described as an "inherent female characteristic" (1922 in Cameron, 2014: 282) derived from the "peculiarity of feminine psychology" (Jespersen, 1922 in Thomas, 2013: 8). His theories laid the groundwork for following linguistic studies on gender.

Lakoff's pivotal work *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) developed similar ideas to those of Jespersen as she identifies specific linguistic features related to woman speech, introducing the concept of 'women's language'. The features attributed to women's use of language, which are described in greater detail in Chapter 1, are defined as compromising and deficient compared to the language used by men. One of the most

criticized aspects of the deficiency perspective is the “androcentric or male-as-norm view of women’s language” (Baxter, 2009:57) as it subscribes to the belief that “male speech is superior to female speech, and that women should alter their speech to sound more like men” (Baxter, 2009:57).

2.2 The Dominance approach

In contrast with Jespersen’s view, however, Lakoff suggests that “the social discrepancy in the positions of men and women in our society is reflected in linguistic disparities” (1975:47), distancing herself from a biological standpoint. Over the years, a new perspective emerged: the dominance approach. Dominance theorists argue that “language patterns are interpreted as manifestations of a patriarchal social order” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:475) where male privilege is seen as the dominant factor to influence “asymmetries in the language use of women and men” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:475). As Holmes suggests (2003) differences in language related to gender are merely one factor of “more extensive differences reflecting the social hierarchy as a whole”, underlining the presence of power differences. Moreover, Cameron confirms Lakoff’s view stating that “women’s distinctive ways of talking both reflected and perpetuated their subordinate social status” (2009:13).

In the business context, Madsen (2017:113) talks about the role of language in “women’s performance of leadership” arguing that the “predominance of ‘corporate masculinity’” is influencing the use of language to perform leadership by women and men (2017:115). Moreover, Madsen defines the notion of ‘conversational dominance’ (2017:115) which addresses the domination of male speakers over women speakers in interaction (2017:115). The studies of West and Zimmerman (1983, in Talbot, 2011:164) on the correlation between interruption and male dominance suggest that interruptions are seen as reminders of “women’s social positions as subordinates” as they violate speakers’ rights. In their 1975 study the scholars examined 31 dyads, which means social groups that consist of only two people, of acquainted persons. They distinguish interruptions, as cutting across more than one “lexical constituent” and overlaps referring to “smaller stretches of simultaneous speech” (Talbot, 2011:164). This distinction established the differentiation between “violations’ of speakers’ rights’ and “transition errors” (Talbot, 2011:164). Briefly, their findings can be summarized in two tables (see Table 1.1, Table

1.2) where the first table shows the number of interruptions and overlaps between same sex dyad and the second defines the percentage distribution for each cross-sex dyad.

Table 1.1: Interruptions and overlaps, same sex (20 dyad)

Interruptions	7 ('violations')
Overlaps	22 ('transition errors')

Table 1.2: Interruptions and overlaps, cross-sex (11 dyad)

	M	F	Total
Interruptions	96% (46)	4% (2)	100% (48)
Overlaps	100% (9)		100% (9)

(Tablot, 2011:165)

It is notable that there is no evident distinction between female-female and male-male dyads. However, the results highlight that in mixed-sex dyads the percentage of interruption is higher and it mostly involves men (Tablot, 2011). West and Zimmerman (1983:106 in Tablot, 2001:165) argue that “reproduction of a similar pattern of predominantly male initiated interruption under these conditions offers evidence for the robustness of the phenomenon”. These studies have been criticized by many scholars (Talbot, 2011:167-169), accusing West and Zimmerman of overinterpreting their results. Moreover, Talbot (2011:177) claims that their studies on interruptions “had clearly a political function” and that “the correlation between interruptions and male dominance was of course far too straightforward”.

2.3 The difference approach

During the 1980s another approach emerged, in which male and female speech styles are seen “not primarily determined by power and status, preferring to see sex differences as deriving from the gender-specific subcultures that are formed in childhood play” (Cameron et al., 1989:79). The work of Maltz and Borker (1982) suggests that “gender is best understood in cultural terms, with distinctive female and male discursive practices emerging from gender-segregated play patterns in childhood” (in Holmes & Meyerhoff,

2003: 49). The scholars rely on the assumptions that “distinct male and female sub-cultures” are developed during socialization (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:475) and consequentially they “might function like ethnic differences” (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Cameron, 2007:82). The difference perspective entered popular consciousness through Deborah Tannen’s pivotal work *You just don’t understand* (1990), where she describes her approach as ‘cross-cultural’. The scholar uses Gumperz’s concept of ‘crosstalk’: a “systematic misunderstanding which neither group was conscious of” (Cameron, 2007:82). This concept developed from interethnic communication researches has been used by Tannen to study female-male communication suggesting that women and men use different styles of communication, trying to ‘divorce gender entirely from power’ (Cameron, 2009:77,81). The scholar argues that childhood separation creates differences in communication between sexes as the differences found in people of diverse nationalities or ethnicities. (Cameron, 2009). Through the theory that male speakers and female speakers are socialized differently, Tannen (1994) argues that they “developed patterns of interaction [...] serving their different conversational goals” (in Kendall & Tannen, 2001:553). For instance, women tend to prioritize “the connection dimension”, using a cooperative style of interaction, whereas men tend to emphasize more “the status dimension” learning a competitive style of interaction (Kendall & Tannen, 2001:553). One criticism leveled against the difference approach is that it seems to be based on essentialist stance, assuming that “male and females have a fundamental, distinctive nature, [...] whether biologically determined or produced through socialization” (Baxter, 2009:74).

These theories provide a fixed and static views about the male and female character, “which polarizes people into two opposing sexes”, ignoring any similarities between sexes and failing to recognize the existence of individuals who are intersexed or transsexual (Baxter, 2009:74). Overall, many scholars have argued that women and men are not homogeneous groups highlighting the “tendency to overgeneralize and disregard contextual differences” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:475). Furthermore, Baxter explains that one of “the key principle of difference theory is that the language of males and females, as signified by their speech styles, is different but equal” (Baxter, 2009:63). However, difference theorists sustain that these “contrasting cultural rules for conversations” adopted by males and females, could create misunderstanding between

the two sexes, leading to potential conflict during a conversation as equals (Baxter, 2009:63). The idea of the existence of distinctive styles of communication used by women and men has proved popular, but it represents some problems (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:475). Tannen's (1990) apolitical cross-culture model faced criticism as it seems to maintaining an unequal social structure and therefore it "calls for no change" (Giora, 1996:570). In fact, Crawford (1995) argues that assuming that "communication failures" between females and males exist as a "result of culture cross-blindness, no one is to blame" (in Giora, 1996:570). For example, in relation to violence against women (acquaintance rape), this view often leads to victim blaming, focusing on "monitoring women's but not men's behavior" (Giora, 1996:570).

Cameron (2009:89-91) reflects on the complaints of two women students who, at a Canadian university in the 1990s, reported to have been sexually assaulted by the same male student. The university tribunal decided to open proceedings which were recorded for a linguistic study. Even if in both situations the engagement with the male student begun consensually, they claimed "he had gone on to force them into further sexual activity which they made clear they did not want" (Cameron, 2009:90). At one of these proceedings, a tribunal member asked whether she acknowledged the fact that maybe her "signals were non coming across loud and clear" and, as the behaviour persisted, that he was not understanding what she wanted or did not want. He proceeded underline a problem in "getting signals mixed up", maintaining that different socialization can lead people to "read signals and give signals" in diverse way. Moreover, he questioned whether the victim was concerned that her signals "were not being read exactly" and as a result whether she considered changing the way she was communicating them (Cameron, 2009:91). Therefore, the situation was interpreted as a case of miscommunication, pointing out that the female student should have come to realization that her signals were not understood (Cameron, 2009:91). This assumptions mirrors "the traditional tendency of rape trials" (Cameron, 2009:91) trying to blame women for their "supposed linguistic deficiencies", such lacking assertiveness, or "minimizing conflicts of interest between women and men by redefining them as communication problems" (Cameron,1998:950). The belief spread by difference theorist about "male-female miscommunication [is] appealing to many people", as it focuses on communication problems and lack of understanding rather than underling different wants, as the case described above

(Cameron, 2009:96). Tannen's prospective "fails to recognize that gender does not operate as a variable independent from race, social class, culture, discourse function and settings" (Bing and Begvall year in Ahmed, 2011:1).

Moreover, many scholars have argued that "language itself is always multifunctional and contextually sensitive" therefore it cannot be defined as a "a simple correspondence between the sex/gender of the speaker and their use of a particular language style" (Baxter, 2009:72). The limitations of this approach is underlined by Crawford as she argues that questioning difference is the wrong approach for feminists, since it "locate[s] gender in individual subjects rather than in social relations and processes" (Cameron, 1998:950).

2.4 Myths about men and women's use of language

According to some scholars, such as Cameron (2014), all the above approaches help spread stereotypes about gender differences in language: "ideas about how women and men use language, and how they ought ideally to use it, have been a recurring theme in discourse about language produced by many societies in many historical periods" (Cameron, 2014:448). For instance, according to Cameron (2014:452) ideologies of language and gender "vary across cultures and historical periods, and they are inflected by representations of other social characteristics such as class and ethnicity". In the western world, various perceptions on the different use of language between man and women have developed over time: from Lakoff's assumption of 'women's language' as deficient, dominance theorists' correlation between language, gender and power, to Tannen's cross-cultural perspective.

Today, as Cameron (2007) highlights, myths about women and men's use of language are still a predominant concept in popular ideology: her work *The Myth of Mars and Venus* challenges the "proposition that men and women differ fundamentally in the way they use language to communicate" (2007:7). In particular, the scholar describes some of the main modern stereotypes, such as: "women talk more than men" and "are more verbally skilled than men"; "men talk more about things and facts, whereas women talk more about people, relationships, and feelings"; "men's way of using language is competitive" whereas "women's use of language is cooperative"; those differences "routinely lead to 'miscommunication' between the sexes" (Cameron, 2007:7-8). It is important to underline

that “as a representational practice, stereotyping involves simplification, reduction, and naturalization” that is used to maintain “social and symbolic order”; nevertheless, stereotyping is said to be “at the center of the notion of folklinguistics” (Talbot, 2008:470-471). Moreover, stereotypes tend to focus on subordinate groups, such as ethnic minorities or women, and “play an important part in hegemonic struggle” (Talbot, 2008:471). More recent research confirms that “the more we expand the range of men and women we study and the range of contexts in which we study them, the more difficult it becomes to maintain the belief that men use language in one way while women use it in another” (Cameron, 2007:58).

2.5 The discourse theory and dynamic approach

Many scholars have been concerned with “documenting gender-related patterns of language use” and “social and political aspects of gender relations” (Kendall & Tannen, 2001:549). However, in more recent research the concept of ‘discourse’ has emerged, defining a new approach to language analysis which aims to fill “the gap” and to investigate “change in language” in order to better understand “social and cultural change” (Fairclough, 1992:1). Fairclough (1992:63) describes the term discourse as the “language use as a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables”. Discourse theory implies not only that “discourse is a mode of action”, a way for people to “act upon the world and especially upon each other”, but also a “mode of representation” (Fairclough, 1992:63). Furthermore, discourse, as a social practice, is seen closely related to the social structure. In fact, it is not only “shaped and constrained” by all levels of the structure “according to the particular social domain or institutional framework”, but also “socially constitutive” as it contributes to “the constitution of all those dimension of social structure” that gives meaning to the world (Fairclough, 1992:64). The constructive effects of discourse can be divided into three aspects that define the “identity”, “relational” and “ideational” functions of language (Fairclough, 1992:64). The first refers to the construction of “social identities”; the second sees the formation of “social relationships between people”; and the third contributes to the “formation of knowledge and belief” (Fairclough, 1992:64). In simpler terms, the discourse approach analyses the ways in which discursive practice constructs, reflects and perpetuates social meaning and power relations.

As Baxter explains, people use language as “vital resource to present themselves in different ways and thereby to construct multiple identities for themselves as required by role, position, relationship and context” (2009:9). It is important to highlight that discursive practices contribute to the reproduction of society in conventional ways of using language; however, they have the power to transform society using more creative means of expression (Fairclough, 1992). In fact, taking into consideration the concept of social identities, the term ‘gender’ refers to “cultural constructions of what it means to be a sexed individual in the 21st century western world” (Baxter, 2009:14). Therefore, when talking about femininity/masculinity or feminine/masculine styles of speech, discursive scholars do not refer to “innate characteristics of being female” or male but the “cultural associations with being a woman” or a man which varies “from one culture to another, one historical period to another” (Baxter, 2009:14). The dynamic or social constructionist approach developed from these theories and frameworks, starting to redress systematic gender ideologies. In the late 1980s and 1990s, “the shift away from gender as a binary and from views of women’s language as lacking, powerless or simply different, towards discursive and post-structuralist perspectives”, has led to questioning “in what ways gender is an effect of language use, rather than a determinant of different uses of language” (Litosseliti, 2006: 43-44). This approach focuses on the “dynamic aspects of interaction” identifying gender as “a social construct rather than as a ‘given’ social category” (Coates, 2016:6).

Through the concept of “gender as performative” carried out in Butler’s (1990) theoretical work *Gender Trouble*, ways of thinking about language and gender changed, influencing further research. Butler explains that “gender is not viewed as a stable, pre-discursive construct residing in individuals; rather it emerges in discourse and in other semiotic practices” as individuals “are always actively involved in the “doing” of gender” (Ehrlich, 2014:4). Referring to Goffman’s notion of ‘framing’, defined as the “definition of a situation that interlocutors establish in interaction” in everyday social and situational human experiences (1974:10; Gordon, 2015: 325). *Dynamic scholars state that individuals ‘frame’ themselves “based on societal gendered norms for appropriate behaviour” (Litosseliti, 2006:127). The fundamental assumption that “people become gendered, or do gender [...] through discourse” inherently asserts a “discursive accomplishment of gender (and other) identities” (Litosseliti, 2006:61). Therefore,

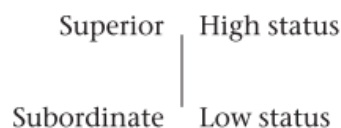
‘accomplishing’ gender through linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours suggests that individuals “produce rather than reflect a priori identities as ‘women’ and ‘men’ in particular historical and cultural locations” (Lazar, 2005: 12; Litosseliti, 2006:61). Bulter’s idea that identities are solely constructed by their expression it is more noticeable in an individual’s expression of identity which departs from “what we take to be their “true” identity” (Ehrlich et al., 2014:4). Nevertheless, it is important to assert that even the “most normative of identities” are “discursively produced and require repeated iterations” (Ehrlich et al., 2014:4).

The use of language for expressing and doing gender identity will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Another issue related to language and gender is that of the variation of speech use, as it is seen as deeply related to context, and dependent on the “community of practice” (CofP) in which individuals regularly participate (Baxter, 2009:73). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998 in Baxter, 2009:73) found that “the norms and values of differing CofPs” influence speech styles considerably, for example with family at home or with colleagues at work (Baxter, 2009:73). In fact, sociolinguists draw particular attention to the “social dimensions” in which the speech is enacted, defining four different dimensions that characterizes each individual context (Holmes, 2013:9). These are:

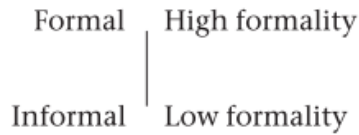
1. A social distance scale, that defines “speaker’s judgment about a relationship” (Holmes, 2013:9)



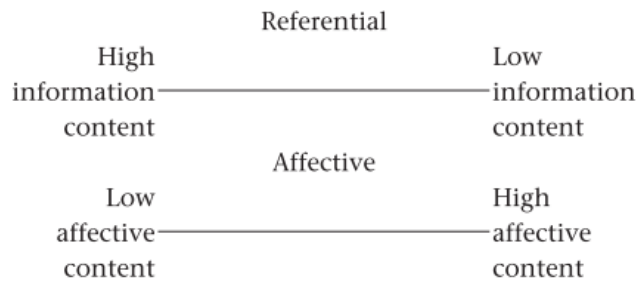
2. A status scale which describes “relevance of relative status” in linguistic choices, such the use of ‘sir’ to address a higher status person recognizing that they are “entitled to a respect term” (Holmes, 2013:10)



3. A formality scale which relates to “the setting or type of interaction”, such as the use of colloquial language in a friend-to-friend interaction (Holmes, 2013:10).



4. Two functional scales relating to the “purposes or topic of interaction”, conveying “objective information of a referential kind” or expressing feelings. For example, withing gossip we can provide new referential information and also disclose feelings about them (Holmes, 2013:10)



Moreover, starting from the concept of CofPs, Terjesen and Singh (2008 in Baxter, 2009:73-74) highlight the importance of conceptualizing gender differences not just from a ‘person-centred’ perspective or a ‘organization’ or ‘situation-centred’ standpoint but from a ‘social-system’ or ‘macro-level’ framework, as those differences are “institutionalised as common practices at societal level and so infuse daily practices”. Furthermore, this understanding of gender and language sees gender as variable, which tends to “accommodate ideas of individual agency, and of gender (identity) as multiple, fluctuating and shape in part by language”, underling the equally crucial social and individual position (Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002:6). In addition, the use of the plural term “identities” reflects the fact that our sense of identity “as professionals, parents, partners, members of different groups in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and so on – is neither singular nor fixed” (Litosseliti, 2006:60). For instance, identities are at the same time individual and social, as we shape ourselves based on “the ideas, beliefs, and possibilities available in our social contexts” (Litosseliti, 2006:60); that is to say, our sense of identity is constantly “shifting as our relationships with other people and social groups are changing” (Litosseliti, 2006:60).

Through the exploration of various approaches, this chapter has provided the key theoretical frameworks that have shaped the field of language and gender studies. From

the deficiency model, which defines women's language as inferior, to the dominance approach, which linked language differences to patriarchal structures and ideologies, and the difference approach, which examined gender difference in the use of language linked to distinct cultural subcultures as result of different processes of socialization between women and men. The progression in the study dynamics between women's and men's language underlines the important role of myths and stereotypes in shaping ideologies about gender, both in academic discourse and folk linguistics. In fact, despite the evidence suggesting that communication styles and behaviours are far more complex and context-related, most gender assumptions are still to this day rooted in the perception of gender as a fixed and binary category, reflecting this belief in how language is used and how gender is talked about.

However, the introduction of discourse theory and the dynamic approach define a pivotal shift in contemporary ideologies, as gender started to be viewed as actively constructed and performed through language within various contexts. With the new perception of gender as fluid and dynamic, the language and gender field started to focus on the importance of social dimensions and context in which it is enacted, highlighting the relevance of discourses in everyday interactions. Moreover, thanks to the rise of interest in "diversity and socially constructed identities", queer theory emerged in representation of different approaches that critically focus on heteronormativity and the idea of gender identities as a continuum (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:229). In the next chapter I will address in greater detail the role of language in shaping and expressing gender identities, focusing on the linguistic experiences of non-binary and transgender people. I aim to investigate how agency and language choice can be important to deconstruct and reshape binary ideologies of gender.

Chapter Three

Non-binary and transgender identities

The relationship between language and identity has become a pivotal area of study, especially with the development of queer theory. In Chapter 2 the study of the deficit, dominance and difference approaches led to the conclusion that those perspectives tend to reinforce fixed and binary understanding of gender, and therefore define language use on the restrictive binary ideologies, failing to account the multifaced and fluid reality of gender. In this chapter I aim to explore the role of language in constructing and expressing gender identity analyzing the impact of constructivist prospective of gender in relation to early sociolinguistic approaches. The active construction of social reality and gender identity is studied through everyday discourse practices, focusing on the agency and self-identification of individuals identity to negotiate and reshape their sense of identity through language choice.

Transgender and non-binary identities are the focus of this chapter, as I aim to explore the dynamic relationship between gender, sexuality, and language, focusing on Bulter's concept of performativity which allows a new understanding of language that early theories fail to recognize. By focusing on terminology currently used to represent those identities and the cultural value associated with, this chapter explores the complex role of language and language tactics to negotiate and affirm trans identities, emphasizing how language can challenge binary and normative structures and ideologies, as they are deeply related to linguistic practices. As language practices usually reinforce binary gender roles, a focus on inclusive language is needed, as well as the recognition of the challenges non-binary and transgender people experience on their day-to-day lives.

3.1. Role of language in shaping end expressing gender identity

At the basis of language constructionism theories, language is seen as “a tool for expressing thoughts and emotions, but also a means of constructing social reality” (Hao, 2024:58). Therefore, people tend to use language “to signal their membership of particular groups and to construct different aspects of their social identity” (Holmes, 2013:131). It is argued that whereas “groups and categories themselves are often preexistent”, such as “Mexican” as national identification, “an individual memberships

are socially constructed through their own (and others') language and social behavior" (Fuller, 2007:106). Language is seen as "a crucial means of constructing and sustaining social reality, particularly in the process of shaping gender identity" (Hao, 2024:57). Indeed, gender identity rely on "the self-identification and societal recognition of an individual's gender role" which is shaped through "a range of expectations, behaviours, and roles typically associated with being 'male' or 'female'" (Hao, 2024:58). The linguistic constructivist perspective underlines the significant relationship between gender identity and discourse practices by "emphasizing the role of discursive power in gender identity construction and the agency of individuals in the process of language use" (Hao Yongbing, 2024:57).

In simpler terms, while early theories view language as a reflection of gender and gender norms, constructivists underline the central role of language in creating gender through interaction and agency. In fact, individuals actively construct and express their gender identity in everyday discourse practices. Moreover, gender identity is approached as a "process" rather than a "given category" defining social identities through "a range of linguistic resources" (Holmes, 2013:320-321). Through the lenses of poststructuralist and postmodern theories the new view of gender as socially constructed challenged, as argued by Butler, "the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions" that indirectly function to suppress "the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification" (Cordoba, 2022:11). Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) posited gender as performative, claiming that gender is "a result of people's behaviours rather their internal and intrinsic essence" (Cordoba, 2022:11). By defining gender as performative, Butler underlined the "varied, flexible, and context-responsive ways in which people 'do gender'" (Bernabéu, 2019). In particular, discourse practices are seen as "a part of social practices" that are actively creating gender and that both reflect and shape the social structure providing a "framework for individuals to express, negotiate and reshape their gender identity" through "everyday self-narratives, labeling by others, and gender performances on social media" (Hao, 2024:58).

This new perspective highlights how early studies view language as passively reflecting traditional social structures, which are those of patriarchy and heteronormativity. I would argue that the ideological definition of what it means to be a woman or a man are deeply embedded in our society, to the point that even the first feminist sociolinguistics studies

are influenced by a fixed and binary view of gender, which led scholars to search for differences rather than similarities. For example, Lakoff's definition of 'women's language' as lacking compared to men's normative one, reinforced the perception of women's language use as powerless. In my view, societal definition and treatment of women as lacking, has led women themselves to question whether or not they truly are, even today. For example, the writer Paula Stone Williams¹ (2024), a transgender woman, who transitioned during adulthood, explains how she never thought she had privilege when she was a man. In fact, only after her transition she started to experience different kinds of treatment, such as mansplaining, just because she was perceived as a woman.

Moreover, the complexity of gender is argued by Aikhenvald (2016) which divides the multifaceted notion of gender into three categories: linguistic gender, natural gender, and social gender. The first describes gender as a "linguistic term" referring to classes of nouns which are "marked" in specific ways, for example the class of words "referring to females is called 'feminine', similarly for males and 'masculine'" (Aikhenvald, 2016:1-2). As "imperatives and commands" are seen as a reflection of relationship between individuals, Linguistic Gender "tends to mirror social and cultural stereotypes and patterns of human perception" functioning as a "repository of beliefs about what women and men are like and how they behave, and features which are 'male'-like or 'female'-like" (Aikhenvald, 2016:4). Moreover, there can be found strong correlations between some "linguistic categories" and "cultural values, social hierarchies, and their conceptualization" (Aikhenvald, 2016:4). However, gender classes may expand beyond female and male individuals as gender is assigned also to "plants and natural phenomena" which "may reflect their role in legends and metaphors, and reveal folk taxonomies" (Aikhenvald, 2016:2).

Sustaining Aikhenvald, Williams et al. (2021) state that, in a vast number of languages, inanimate nouns possess grammatical gender. Linguistic Genders are a tool for "categorize inanimate entities"; it can be argued that "a gender labelled 'feminine' would include more than just females" and the same way for the 'masculine' label, especially when gendering inanimate nouns "with no connection to female or male sex" such as French *maison* 'house' (feminine) and *château* 'castle' (masculine). Historically,

¹ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAz8yFKhjm4> (2024)

inanimate nouns' grammatical genders have been seen more "idiosyncratic and less meaningful than the grammatical genders of animate nouns" (Williams et al., 2021:139). However, many researchers suggest that "gender-related information may affect cognitive processes" as Boroditsky et al. (2003) carried out a research showing that German speakers choose "stereotypically feminine adjectives to describe [...] bridges" whereas Spanish speakers selected "stereotypically masculine adjectives" reflecting that the word bridge, *brücke*, in German is grammatically feminine, on the other hand, in Spanish the word used for bridge, *puente*, is grammatically masculine (Williams et al., 2021: 139-141). Boroditsky et al, (2003) argue the "existence of a stereotype effect" sustaining that "speakers of gendered languages reveal gender stereotypes when choosing adjectives to describe inanimate nouns" (Williams et al., 2021:141).

Nevertheless, the presence of the term 'neuter' in some languages can be used to refer to "a gender which includes inanimate (or irrational) beings"(Aikhenvald, 2016:5). The second face of gender is Natural Gender which is described by Aikhenvald (2016:2) as "what was until recently simply called 'sex' – male versus female" which "entails anatomical and hormonal differences". The scholar underlines that Natural Gender and Social Gender are functioning in correlation "creating stereotypes of behaviour in each society and culture" (Aikhenvald, 2016:3). Numerous societies go beyond the binary and have "groups whose gender identities and enactments" are not constricted to the "sociocultural norms for women and men" and are define as "a third sex, or a third (Natural) Gender" such as transgender people (Aikhenvald, 2016:3). The third face of gender is Social Gender which mirrors "the social implications, and norms of being a man or a woman" or something in between and consequentially it deeply relates to the "contrasting social roles of the sexes " and the way these "are embodied in cultural practices". (Aikhenvald, 2016:2).

Recent research underlines the important role that language has in transmitting "specific expectations about gender", starting from childhood education (Hao, 2024:58). In concomitance, textbooks, media reports, advertisement and films are reinforcing "traditional gender roles" by adopting "language expressions of gender stereotypes" (Hao, 2024:59). For example, in literature and classic films, we can found the concept of the 'Cinderella Complex' which portrays female characters as dependent on male characters for happiness and fulfillment, suggesting that women's joy and safety often lie

outside their own agency. In advertisements, the showcasing of traditional family roles is frequent, emphasizing male roles as active and physical while women are described as passive and domestically focused. Moreover, media and textbooks continue to portray women and men through binary and heteronormative lenses, shaping a fixed understanding of genders from a young age, influencing how gender is perceived and enacted in every day life. In fact, social theorists emphasize “the role of social processes in the formation of gender identity” arguing that “ongoing social interaction conditions children to behave in gendered ways” (Mukoni, 2019:310).

However, socialization theory fails to recognize “individual agency” and the variation of gendered behaviors (Mukoni, 2019:310). Mukoni (2019:310) underlines the contribution of individual’s agency in shaping gender identity as he argues that “individuals actively construct and impact upon the word”. Thanks to the theorization of gender as performative, researchers started to focus on the “agency and creativity of social actors in the construction of gender” (Ehrlich, 2014:7) rather than viewing language as a mere reflection of society. In fact, sociolinguists in recent years have acknowledge the power of speakers’ agency “in using linguistic resources to construct identities”, however remaining aware that the “representations which give gendered meanings to certain ways of speaking” are still holding a great influence of language use (Cameron, 2014:294).

Additional research was carried out on “linguistic behavior that transgress and contests gender-linked expectation and ideologies” acknowledging individuals’ agency in constituting gender identities with the “options of resisting and transgressing sociocultural norms of linguistic behavior” (Kendall & Tannen, 2001: 560-561). Hao (2024:59) argues that language strategies are a powerful tool in “reconstructing gender identity” giving the opportunity to “subvert and challenge traditional gender roles” by using “irony, mimicry, and humor”. The latter is shown to be a valuable tool for gender deconstruction, which humorists can use to “create an alternative perspective and even alter power normative structures” (Bernabéu, 2019:113). In particular, a crucial function found in women’s humor is “resistance to dominant constructions of femininity” achieved by trying out “different social constructions of what it means to be a woman at this moment in history” and reflecting in humor practices the “social and political changes wrought by the feminist movement”(Crawford, 2003:1425).

Bulter underlines the “dialectic between structure and agency” in the construction of gendered individuals (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:28). Moreover, she argues that categorizing led individuals to “learn to engage in a styled repetition through time”, although there is the possibility to break or subvert “repetition of that style” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:28). It is argued that “style is the key to performativity” as stylistic practice takes place at the “level of qualities, stances, momentary activities” which are “overtly associated with gender or sexuality” and are related to the type of individual “we want to be in that moment” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:29). In fact, the concept of speech style which developed during the 1980s, gained popularity as it defined two opposing and fixed discourse practices between women and men (Cameron et al., 1989). However, by taking a performativity perspective, I would argue that people can use different styles of speech in everyday interactions, as the stylistic choice of using a more cooperative or more competitive language is influenced not only by gender but also by other important variables, for example the context in which we perform. Moreover, the fact that we associate femininity and masculinity to certain styles of speech underlines how deeply engrained gender stereotypes have become.

The recognition of limiting ideologies shaping language use is starting to change the view of sex/gender in the Western world. However, these changes have been met with “strong resistance” associated with “binary views of gender/sex, prejudice against nonbinary people and opposition to the use of gender-neutral pronouns” (Morgenroth et al., 2021:731). Relying on social identity theory, Morgenroth et al. (2021:732) argue that challenging the binary thinking “threaten the clear distinction between the groups of “women” and “men” as their “own psychological investment in gender” which is seen as a “self-defining category”. Moreover, the sex/gender binary defines “the complex social world into two clear categories” making it easier to navigate (Morgenroth et al., 2021:732). Needing closure is associated with “pressure to uniformity and resistance to change” (Morgenroth et al., 2021:733); which construct discourse practices that not only shape “social meaning of gender” but as well restrict “the expression of gender identities” (Hao, 2024:59). In the early 1990s, gender studies expand their research to “explore gender diversity by deconstructing the gender binary” and underlining “the limitation of binary thinking” (Cordoba, 2022:10).

3.2. Definition of non-binary and transgender identities

While awareness and understanding about non-binary and transgender identities seems to be increasing at a cultural level, it is crucial to define “words, language and terminology currently being used to discuss gender” (332:Walker, 2014). The term trans, abbreviation for the word transgender, it is defined by Currah as an “umbrella term for people who do not identify as the gender they were assign at birth” (Cordoba, 2022:4). The process of “sexing a person” starts before they are even born by learning about their sex organs and after birth starts “the process of gendering” which is fortify through various factors such “society gender expectations, the person’s biological markers” and “discourses about binary gender” (Cordoba, 2022:2). Therefore, the sex assigned at birth, is enabling people to “decipher the person’s sex/gender as they grow up” (Cordoba, 2022:3). As sex and gender are at times “understood and used in the same way in public and medical discourse”, it is important to distinguish the two, as gender is “abstract and socially constructed” while sex “is physical and biological” (Cordoba, 2022:3). Historically, sex has biologically defined maleness and femaleness however as Fausto-Sterling argues the extremes ends of “complete maleness and femaleness” have encourage the belief that “they are not only natural [...] but normal” as they emblemize “both statistical and social ideal” (Cordoba, 2022:3).

Furthermore, the acknowledgment of intersex people challenges the “endosexist perspective” of sex as “an immutable binary system” demonstrating that sex “is far from binary” (Cordoba, 2022:6). The term intersex defines an expansive variety of “biological sex variations” such as “chromosomes, hormones, primary and secondary characteristics ” (Cordoba, 2022:6). The binary thinking around sex has been contested by biologists such as Frausto-Sterling who suggests that “aspects of sex are just as diverse as the gender identities that are encounter in society” (Cordoba, 2022:7). As medical and scientific scholars tend to “determine the ‘true’ sex of intersex infants”, intersex condition becomes “framed as obstruction of an underlying universal binary” (Zimman, 2011:3). In fact, term cisgender is used to describe people who “posses, from birth and into adulthood, the male and female reproductive organs typical of the social category of man and woman” (Lennon & Mistler, 2022).

Cisnormativity is correlated to the idea that “gender is coherent overtime” emphasizing the “normalizing power of the cisgender assumption” which marginalize “intersex” and diverse “non-binary bodies and experiences” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:289). However, the sex which is “assigned at birth based on their visible sex characteristics may not always ‘align’ with their gender identity” during the course of one’s life (Cordoba, 2022:4). Within the term trans it is capture “the complexity and diversity of gender identity by those who transgress gender boundaries” and it may enclose “those who identify as transgender, genderqueer, trans, transsexual, androgynous, agender, bigender, two spirit, and gender non-conforming” (M. Walker, 2014:334). In fact, trans individuals gender expression is identified as non-conforming as “their identities place them outside the societal expectations defined by their birth-assigned sex” (Anderson, 2020:324). Similarly, the term non-binary is also used as an umbrella for people “who may identify as and/or express: no gender, two genders, a partial gender, a fluid gender and/or a political and/or personal gender that disrupts the gender binary” (Cordoba, 2022:5). Thanks to the increasing discourse challenging the “binaries of boy/girl, woman/men and masculinity/femininity” in the Western, “vocabularies of gender identity/expression” are taking more space (Cordoba, 2022:5).

3.3 Overview of non-binary and transgender identities in sociolinguistics

The theoretical developments on gender and language contributed to the creation of queer theory, which investigates the modalities in which “different gender and sexuality identities are enacted through language” in order to “de-stabilise and de-essentialise gender, sex, and sexuality” by rejecting concepts such as heteronormativity and cisgenderness as “unmarked categories”(Cordoba, 2022:37). It is important to notice that the notion of the existence of more than two genders is not new in some non-Western cultures. In fact, gender diversity was “documented throughout history and across cultures” in particular in “the Indian subcontinent, Thailand, North America, Brazil and Polynesia” despite “colonial erasure” of gender fluidity (Cordoba, 2022:9). For example, the world Hijra has been present for thousands of years, in the Indian subcontinent, as an umbrella that include people who are “intersex, transvestite, transgender, and feminine bisexual, and homosexual men” (Cordoba, 2022:9). Even if the Hijra is recognize as the “third gender”, they became a “marginalized community” facing discrimination and stigma as an effect of colonialism (Cordoba, 2022:9). However, queer theories have

enable a discourse around “genderqueer and non-binary gender identities”, in particular Monro elaborated a theory addressing gender plurality, which defines gender as a “spectrum, a field, or intersecting spectra or continua” (Cordoba, 2022:12). The scholar underlines the importance of “naming particular spots within the spectrum” transforming non-categories in categories “which people can inhabit” (Cordoba, 2022:12). According to this perspective, trans people who do not want to conform with “binary requirements for womanhood or manhood” are able to inhabit categories that fall outside or between these “territories” and consequently challenging gender and linguistic normativities (Cordoba, 2022:12). Moreover, queer theory suggests that “cultural ideologies of gender normativity ” are strictly correlated with “assumption of heterosexuality” and explores “the linguistic means” by which heterosexuality is seen as the “default sexuality” in relation to other sexualities which are marked as ‘non-conformative’ (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:340).

Sauntson defines key concepts of temporality, spatiality and normativity within ‘queer applied linguistic’ (QAL) in order to account the modalities through which distinctive gender and sexuality identities “emerge in, and are enacted through, language” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:339). Leap (2020) argues that temporality is a crucial factor in relation to gender and sexuality as “discriminatory language [...] are real-world problems which are historically (temporal) constructs” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:342). This notion of temporality is linked to the principle discussed by Hall (2013) which suggests that “heteronormativity itself is not stable across time and space” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:342). The concept of normativity is seen as “relative to spatio-temporal contexts” therefore is not stable, even though there is a tendency to “orient towards a shared notion of normativity in [...] language practices” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:343). In fact, as Fausto-Sterling argues, scientific narratives are everchanging through the cultural and social expectations about what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘deviant’ (M. Walker, 2014:334). Moreover, as gender variance still usually “falls into diagnostic categories that pathologize variance”, scholars emphasize that “pathologizing gender-atypicality when there is a lack of consensus on gender appropriateness is untenable” (M. Walker, 2014:333).

To date, education has been a key focus of queer theory especially to the study of language, as alongside with “linguistic methods of analysis” it examines the “discursive

construction of ‘normal’ and ‘queer’ gender and sexuality in school classrooms” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:343). Researchers argue that schools are sites where there is the assumption “that students are heterosexuals” and are characterized by homophobia and heteronormativity (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:344). Pakula et al (2015) defines the concept of ‘gender-triggering points’ in texts when gender became relevant “through the interaction taking place” such “gender roles being ascribed to characters or social actors”, “explicit linguistic instantiations of heterosexuality of heteronormativity” and femininity and masculinity represented in “stereotypical or non-stereotypical” ways (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:344). Sociolinguists came to understand that gender and sexuality are “closely intertwined” and the norms surrounding “masculinity and femininity are heterosexual” (Coates, 2016:9). The concept of heteronormativity relies on the organization and regulation of sexuality “in accordance with certain societal beliefs about what is normal, natural and desirable” (Coates, 2016:9). Queer linguistics explore the influence of heteronormativity not only on the “linguistic behaviour of male and women” but also study “the linguistic practices of lesbian, gays, bisexuals and transgender speakers” (Coates, 2016:9).

The crucial role of language in “the articulation of trans identities” explains the “deeply gendered nature of language itself” (Zimman, 2017:89). Ochs (1992) argues that the correlation between “linguistic feature and social category is rarely a direct one” explaining that those features “index particular stances, acts, and activities” which are “ideologically linked to salient social categories” (Angouri & Baxter, 2021:38). Moreover, Ochs (1992) underlines that in English few forms index gender directly, which “became salient” for those experiencing a “shift in gender role or presentation” (Zimman, 2017:89). For example, the ‘she’ and ‘he’ third person singular pronouns refer exclusively to women and men, and explicitly gender nouns such as “woman, female, girl and lady or man, male, guy and dude” index the referent’s gender, characterizing it socially (Zimman, 2017:89). Even though, these words represent a fraction of language, they are “high frequency” words, and their use rarely allows a person “not to be gendered” if they play a “significant role in a speaker’s discourse” (Zimman, 2017:89). In addition, the majority of “linguistic forms” convey gendered meanings indirectly, for example by choosing between ‘beautiful’ or ‘handsome’ we can characterize a person or by

implementing “grammatically standard or non-standard forms” or producing “certain kinds of phonetic features” (Zimman, 2017:89).

Ochs (1992) sustains that the crucial characteristic of indexicality, is that “it constitutes” instead of reflecting, social meaning (Zimman, 2017:90). In fact, it is argued that the selection of “linguistic forms that index femininity” is not related to being a woman; rather being a woman is an effect of “repeatedly engage in practice that index femininity” (Zimman, 2017:90). Moreover, being represented “as a woman linguistically” it is related to the way language is used by other people, such as their use of “a gendered third person pronoun” (Zimman, 2017:90). Consequentially, trans identities affirmation is accomplished or repressed “through everyday discourse” expressing one’s genders using “linguistic performativity” (Zimman, 2017:90).

Trans people underline the “strict separation” between gender identity and the sexed body, as in a “cissexist cultural environment, “bodily characteristics” and “body shape” play a primal role in the “gender attribution process” (Zimman, 2017:90). In fact, in preference of “equating gender with externally defined characteristics” self-identification or self-determination is seen as the best possible way to “determine an individual’s gender identity” (Zimman, 2017:90). This concept is highly relevant in many trans communities as they view the recognition of gender as conditioned “solely by self-identification” (Zimman, 2017:92). To give an example, an individual who defines “herself as a woman is a woman” paying no attention to “the physical or social characteristics normatively associated with women” (Zimman, 2017:92). Despite the fact that we still live in a system where “gender attribution enables – even requires”- assumptions about “one another’s gender identities” through the practice of “assigning gendered language”, trans people emphasize the importance of “authority on their own gender” (Zimman, 2017:92). The recognition of the primacy of agency, even if viewed as “highly individualistic”, is crucial to overcome the fixed binary “linguistic construction of identity” which is linked to a major problematic within cissexism, the idea that “trans people can always be identified based on their appearance, embodiment or voice ” (Zimman, 2017:92-93).

3.4. Importance of inclusive language

Gender expression refers to how individual’s “gendered understanding of self is embodied and communicated to others” (Anderson, 2020:324). It plays a crucial part for

those who “defy gender expectations” as it may be used to create a “more self-aware conscientious embodiment” and needs “constant negotiation of others’ evaluation” (Anderson, 2020:324). Moreover, when individuals which are assigned male at birth present with social and cultural characteristics associated with femininity and vice versa, these individuals gender expression are defined as non-conforming (Anderson, 2020). Expressing gender diversity through language is crucial as it enable individuals “to encompass various gender identities” (Hao Yongbing, 2024:60). Different strategies have been suggested to challenge binary gender expectation, such as de-gendering and multi-gendering (Morgenroth et al., 2021). The term de-gendering applies to “policies and practices” that intend to “remove or minimize the gender/sex division and salience” by removing gender/sex on official documents or using ‘they’ instead of ‘he/she’ pronouns (Morgenroth et al., 2021:732); and promoting “gender neutrality” (Zimman, 2017:97). On the other hand, multi-gendering underlines the concept that “gender/sex in not binary” by “legally recognizing a third gender/sex” and introducing new pronouns (Morgenroth et al., 2021:732); and advocating for “gender inclusivity” (Zimman, 2017:97). On this note, in the 21st century the call for inclusive language that includes “all gender and none” advocated linguistic reforms from “trans, non-binary, intersex, and genderqueer activists” (Ludbrook, 2022:24). Trans-inclusive gender reform covers issues with the use of gendered language such as “gender identity labels” (e.g. woman, man, trans, non-binary and so on), “kindship terminology” (e.g. mother/father/parent, sister/brother/sibling and so on), direct gender indexes as professional roles (e.g. waiter/waitress/server, masseuse/masseur/massage therapist, etc.) and pronouns (Zimman, 2017:91). A great work to increase non-binary pronouns has been done, since the unsuccessful attempts in the 1970s, here is a list of possible pronouns:

___ laughed.	Ask ___!	That's ___ pen.	That pen's ___.	Did ___ enjoy ___?
co	co	cos	cos	coself
en	en	ens	ens	enself
ey	em	eir	eirs	emself
he	him	his	his	himself
she	her	her	hers	herself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
xie	hir ("here")	hir	hirs	hirself
yo	yo	yos	yos	yoself
ze	zir	zir	zirs	zirself
ve	vis	ver	ver	verself

Figure 1: Examples of pronouns

Source: <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/pronouns-inclusive-language> (2024)

Studies have started to investigate the use of pronouns, even though many people use pronouns associated with their sex assigned at birth, gendered pronouns can create a daily stressor for LGBTQ youths. For example, The Trevor Project² (2020) carried out a research on pronoun usage among LGBTQ youth, discovering that one in four LGBTQ young people chose to adopt pronouns or pronoun combination that falls outside the binary construction of gender. Despite the fact that 75% of young people use he/him or she/her pronouns exclusively, 25% of LGBTQ young people use they/them pronouns exclusively or a combination of he/him, she/her or they/them. While 4% of LGBTQ young people use neopronouns such ze/zir or xe/xim.

² Source: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/> (2020)

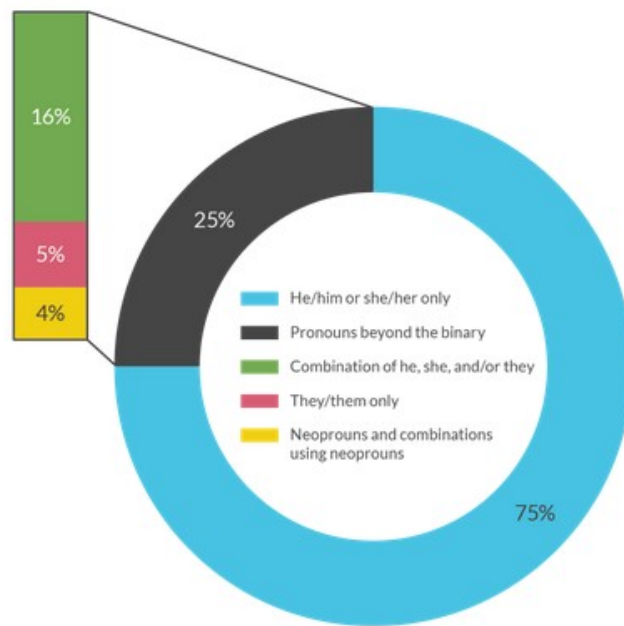


Figure 2: Pronoun usage among LGBTQ youth

Source: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/pronouns-usage-among-lgbtq-youth/> (2020)

Moreover, it became more common to include individuals “choice of pronouns in their signatures blocks”, “webpages” and social media profiles and there is been a rise of encouragement for people to “share their pronouns at work” through their “name badges and emails” underling that gender identity should be “treated with respect and sensitivity” (Ludbrook, 2022:25-26). In addition, the singular ‘they’ used as a “nonbinary personal pronoun” turn out to be “an essential term in gender inclusive language” (Ludbrook, 2022:26). As a matter of fact, in 2019 the authoritative American dictionary, selected ‘they’ as its World of the Year to recognize the risen by 313% of research over the preceding year (Ludbrook, 2022:26). Gender neutral language has been used to create new forms of “honorific reference” adding, in the 1990s, to the traditional Mr, Mrs, Ms and Miss, the new title Mx which was initially used “as a gender-neutral title” for women and men, “with no indication of marital status” (Ludbrook, 2022:21). However, Mx gradually started to identify “transgender, gender-queer, nonbinary, and intersex people” eliminating any reference to the person’s gender (Ludbrook, 2022:21). Moreover, as stated above, the use of gender-neutral tools are primary to avoid “the assumption that a

person's gender identity" perhaps is easily deductible and interpretable based on stereotypes (Zimman, 2017:96). Using "epicene versions of words" which are typically gendered for example child instead of girl or boy; or spouse instead of husband and wife (Zimman, 2017:96-97). Moreover, for addressing a larger group of individuals the use of "honored" rather than "ladies and gentlemen" can affirm "non-binary gender identities", since "non-consensual gender attribution" often refer to the "gender binary" (Zimman, 2017:97).

3.5 Challenges in representation of non-binary and transgender voices

With the word cisgender entering the "lexicon of a broader (cis) population", the concept of cissexism or cishnormativity started to take more space (Zimman, 2017:86). Cissexism refers to the belief that cisgender identities are "'natural', 'normal and 'good'" in contrast to transgender identities which are identified as "'unnatural', 'abnormal' and 'bad'" and language is one of the most influencing tools to constructing it. (Zimman, 2017:86). In fact, cissexist language is an effect of cisgenderism, which is defined as the "cultural and systematic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth" (Lennon & Mistler, 2022:63). However, to eliminate cissexism "language reform", such as the introduction of cisgender, is not enough to "transform social attitudes and undo structural oppression" (Zimman, 2017:88). As Ehrlich and King suggests "language reform is most successful" when promoted in a community that "supports the change in question and its social implications" (Zimman, 2017:88). Moreover, as Zimman (2017:93) argues that the "most common solution" to adopt trans-inclusive language is "asking people which pronouns they would like others to use". Nonetheless, many people still find asking for pronouns "intrusive" as a response to a "model of gender" that provides an easy identification of "a person status as a woman or a men" implying that if a individual's gender is "not obvious" they have "fail to enact that gender correctly" (Zimman, 2017:94). In fact, the majority of people are usually "referred to as he or she" based on their external characterization which is view as a "cishnormative assumption that delegitimizes linguistic gender diversity" (Cordoba, 2022:22).

Activists like Alok Vaid-Menon³ (2019) have been advocates for challenging societal gender binaries and subvert conventional understanding of the LGBTQIA+. Alok underlines how gender expectations and norms limit full expression of ourselves as they trap us into defined categories. They often share personal stories about the cost of gender non-confirming visibility, sustaining that as a gender non-confirming voice themselves, everyday Alok and many other trans people need to make the choice between authenticity or safety. In one of their many speeches, Alok states that “the fact that I’m often the first person who looks like me that people have encountered speaks to how there’s an orchestrated effort of hundreds of years to remove our mid, our image from public imagination” (Alok Vaid-Menon, 2019).



Figure 3: Alok Vaid-Menon

Source: <https://magazineantidote.com/societe/alok-vaid-menon-interview/>

Indeed, people still mistakenly label trans and non-conforming people as a ‘new trend’ even though, as mentioned above, they have always been here as their existence has been documented through time, centuries, and multiple societies across the world. The lack of

³ Source: <https://youtu.be/S1AqxFyoOCA?si=4FkFUmJ5jWLCmBij> (2019)

visibility was promoted by a major cancel culture that has been encouraged not only at a societal level but also has been reinforced at a political and legislation level. The concept of cisgenderism, which was defined above, feeds the belief that cisgender identities deserve to be valued more than transgender identities perpetuating “an inherent system of associated power and privilege” which creates “hierarchy” in many cultural institutions, including “the law”, consequentially enabling “prejudice and discrimination against the transgender community” (Lennon & Mistler, 2022:63).

For example, as Alok Vaid-Menon (2019) underlines, cross-dressing laws existed specifically to restrict the mobility of non-confirming people ensuring they were kept outside of public view and his type of legacy, of maintaining trans people on the margins, continues today. Indeed, Dangerous Speech Project, a nonprofit research team studying dangerous speech, carried out a study in anti-trans dangerous speech during the 2024 U.S. Election. Trans lives are endangered not only during elections but every single day as for example, up to 526 anti-trans bills have been introduced in the first three months of 2024 in order to limit trans people’s access to public or social spaces and basic necessities, such health care and school activities (Shahbazian & Buerger, 2024). The research has shown that the dangerous speech aimed to falsely create the belief that trans people are a threat to children or a danger to the moral character of the nation(Shahbazian & Buerger, 2024).

The narratives targeting the trans community in contemporary political discourse focus on denying trans people’s identities and dehumanizing them, claiming they are a treat to women and children; and lastly, framing trans issues as a threat to American morality and/or culture. In this political climate, failure to pass as a woman or a man effectively is still dangerous for transgender and gender non-conforming people. That is why trans visibility has been considered by many activists a political project, in particular activists sustain that the pass of these legislations was made to incentivize people to target trans lives. Alok describes the importance of de-gendering, starting from the fashion and beauty industries, that play a significant role in shaping regressive and violent gender stereotypes. The activist argues that gender neutrality is not forcing people to be non-binary or erasing the concept of men or women but rather it is about creating more expansive images of femininity, masculinity, and beauty for everyone. Moreover, as the way of presenting through clothes, language neutrality and pronouns are crucial to the visibility of trans and non-binary people.

Jude Guaitamacchi⁴ (2022), a transgender model and activist, speaks out about his experience as most of his life he had absolutely no idea he was transgender. In one of his speeches, he describes how at the age of four he played dress up, which was accepted for his age and because he was in the privacy of his home. In his late teens, he believed that if he tried harder to fit into his assigned gender, he would find the answer to his sense of shame and unhappiness. By sharing his journey of self-discovery, he brings to surface the power of ‘conditioning’, a process of training or influencing a person so that they do or expect a particular thing without thinking about it, that our society has put into place to define what we believe is normal. In fact, he suggests that he was not taught or encourage to express himself and be his authentic self, and he wonders how many of us relate to picking up certain beliefs of who we think we should be and learn to discard who we really are.

As the digital age has given youth the opportunity to find their voice, by using platforms as Instagram, Tiktok and Facebook, where representation of trans lives is increasing, exposing people to diverse and positive portrayals of trans people. While trans representation in the media has come a long way, there are of course, areas that need improvement, especially to ensure a positive and secure experience online. In fact, trans people online are still victim of aggressions, cyberbullying, and hatred comments, as they are been targeted by intolerance and transphobia. As Alok Vaid-Menon (2019) mentions, whenever they use their social media platform they are victim of abuse, even to the point where they receive death threats.

Moreover, the recent disqualification from the IBA Women’s World Boxing Championships of the boxer Imane Khelif, creates another example on how pronouns and gender representation in language are deeply correlated to trans and non-binary visibility. In fact, due to a “gender eligibility test” which identified allegedly “high levels of testosterone”, Khelif was disqualified as she might be intersex. Subsequently, this treatment provoked conversations about the intersection of gender, sports and the marginalization of non-binary and intersexed people. Especially in the sport world, where the division between male and female lines of competition is strict, all the athletes that do not conform to typical sex or gender expectations are often forced into situations of

⁴ Source: https://youtu.be/tOqH2nXK2yM?si=QvXgT3_d_SD9_90T (2022)

exclusion and discriminations. Moreover, many media outlets incorrectly referred to her as a transgender woman, even though the case was issues on the IBA's gender eligibility criteria rather than any confirmed gender transitions.



Figure 4: News about Imane Khelif

Source: <https://www.snopes.com/news/2024/08/05/imane-khelif-not-trans/> (2024)

This misinterpretation underlines a broader issue of misgendering and how assumption on someone's gender and the correct use of gender terminology are deeply impactful on one's life. Moreover, the use of a binary structure of language persists in medical forms, legal documents, and general social everyday speech, often erasing intersex and non-binary people from social visibility. In fact, modern Western medicine still leaves no space for bodies that do not conform to the binarism of sexes, as even medical and scientific scholars are still influenced by normative understanding of gender.⁵

⁵ Source: <https://www.snopes.com/news/2024/08/05/imane-khelif-not-trans/> (2024)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of language and gender has changed significantly, from the early binary-focused approaches to more inclusive and dynamic models. I would argue that early studies on language and gender focused on finding differences between women's and men's use of language as the scholars themselves were influenced by the deeply embedded gender ideologies and norms. These frameworks of research were all based on binary understanding of gender, which marginalized those identities that do not fit into traditional female/male categories and overlooked and oversimplified the relationship between gender, language and society. In fact, in the 1970s, gender roles were more fixed and established by a rigid patriarchal structure of society, that saw the man's style of talk as normative and 'right'. Therefore, linguistic behaviours were deeply associated with generalizations of how women and men should talk to fit their gender categories and to be recognized socially. The social expectations of language use were one aspect of a more complex system of expectations and stereotypes that confined and influenced not only the perception of speaking behaviours of women and men, and the way of living and experiencing the world, but also created preconceptions that were at the root of early language and gender studies.

In my view, the concept of styles related to gendered speech developed as a reflection of what people believe it means to speak like a woman or men, in a given society and time. The many approaches studied that tried to highlight the differences between women's and men's language use have showed the complexity of identifying linguistic gendered patterns. The search for differences between women and men enhances the binary ideology of language. Whether scholars found these linguistic differences as a result of social inequity or diverse socialization, I argue that the focus on difference rather than similarity is deeply embedded in our patriarchal social structure. Lakoff's (1972) definition of 'women's language' is a good example of how language can reflect ideologies about gender that construct our patriarchal society, which was developed to create rigid hierarchies in which man hold more power than women and their roles were clearly separated, perpetuating extremes ideals of womanhood and manhood.

Through the dominance approach, this imbalance of power was acknowledged, but however the studies still reinforced the binary views of gender. In fact, women and men

were still analyzed as fixed categories without any possibility of resisting or subverting hierarchies. The issue brought to my attention was that those fixed beliefs deeply influenced women's and men's perceptions of themselves and of one another, to the point in which whether one or the other tried to escape a normative way of speaking related to their own gender; they felt as if they did not belong to their designed category in society or they were punished or marginalized, as is happening with gender non-conforming people today. Therefore, people who do not adhere to their preestablished gender or gender role are treated as they do not have a place in society. In fact, as society took a turn from defined gendered roles, especially with the emancipation of women, the difference in language use seems to have become less relevant.

Especially with the new concept of gender as fluid and performative carried out by Butler (1990), the distinction between how men and women talk started to be viewed as forced and essentialist. However, as gender ideologies are at the structure of our society and our beliefs, it is difficult to adopt language behaviours that are not normatively associated with our gender, as by using language in a certain way we are constantly confirming to ourselves and others our gender and gender identity, which still these days are a crucial aspect of our social lives. Moreover, I would argue that the colonialist beliefs of the binary of gender and fixed gender roles societal structure was a great tool to create social order in society, to the extent that it affected our vision of the world, that is to say, not only is gender binary, but also women are essentially different from men. To me, the essential view of differences in language use is an effect of the presence of fixed stereotypes in our social structure and system. However, these generalizations are not representation of social reality but of social stereotypes that enable society to function in categories that simplify the complexity of our human experience. In fact, adapting to social gendered expectations is misleading and limiting to the expression of our true selves because, I believe, every person is unique, and there is no right way to talk or behave like a woman, a man or whatever gender identity we identify with. Men can use a more cooperative style of interaction, and women can adopt a more competitive style of interaction without deceiving their expression and own perception of gender.

The focus on the study of language and gender through everyday interactions and Communities of Practice and the new concepts of gender as performative and not binary was crucial to redefine the means by which we understand and experience the world

around us. This dissertation argues that language not only reflects gender ideologies, of a given society and time, but also influences, reinforces, and redefines them. The modern concept of gender as fluid and gender identity as dynamic and context related reveals that gender norms and ideologies are changing overtime reflecting how language can be used for both personal expression of gender identity and for challenging social normativities about how different gender identities ought to use language to fit into fixed gender normative roles. It is important to notice that as society changes, language does too.

I believe we are living a crucial shift right now, thanks to the great achievements of the feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements, which has led to an increased emancipation of women and non-conforming people. In this time in history in most western countries, women are more emancipated than ever, which has led to a crisis of gender roles, as hierarchies of power within the social sphere are changing, promoting more equality between women and men. Thanks to the new understanding of gender, especially women, but also men, can try to redefine their conception of what it means to be a woman or a man, without being forced to conform to predicated social behaviours and expectations. In fact, we are reshaping the perception of gender which is being recognized as more dynamic and is enabling people to create and redefine words and realities that better reflect their experiences of gender, escaping fixed and binary gender roles.

Moreover, the exploration of the influence that gendered language has in shaping our understanding of gender was important to better comprehend the pivotal role of language in constructing our social reality, which is still embedded in a binary view of gender. Moreover, Queer theory emphasizes the principal role of gendered language on the reinforcement of binary norms, starting from how gender is enacted and defined at an educational level. The use of inclusive language was discussed as it is a pivotal tool to raise awareness on the complex dynamics of gender and to recognize diverse gender identities. However, we are still facing a great amount of resistance as binary views of gender and social roles are still promoted and viewed as normal and natural by more traditional and conservative parts of society and politics. The oppression that non-conforming people still have to face today underlines how powerful their voices are.

The increasing visibility of gender non-conforming people, especially in western countries, and the affirmation of gender inclusive terminology such as gender-inclusive

language, de-gendering and multi-gendering strategies open the discourse on the existence of diverse gender expressions and identifications, especially from the youth, challenging the dominance of cissexism, heteronormativity, and binary understanding of gender. However, as visibility increases, many trans and non-binary people are more exposed to danger and transphobia. Language is a powerful tool that enables people to self-determine their gender and social world. In fact, agency is extremely relevant today, as it helps to create new narratives and redefine the societal structure through every day interaction, slowly changing what we consider normal or natural. Finally, I think that the study of language and gender should focus its research on trans and non-binary use of language, as today not many studies have been conducted. In my view, the more researchers focus on inclusion and intersectionality, the better the understanding of the complex concept of gender will be.

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Riassunto in italiano

Questa tesi si propone di esaminare come la lingua venga utilizzata da donne, uomini e altre identità di genere. Nel Capitolo 1, definisco il percorso evolutivo della disciplina, partendo dalle importanti critiche avanzate da William Labov, il quale sostiene che il linguaggio sia fortemente influenzato dai fattori sociali. Grazie all'ascesa del pensiero femminista, vari sociolinguisti hanno iniziato a prendere in considerazione il rapporto tra linguaggio e il genere, considerato un fattore sociale determinante che influenza le diversità linguistiche tra uomini e donne. A partire dai primi anni 70 del Novecento, Robin Lakoff affronta nel suo libro *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), il concetto da lei definito come 'women's language', cioè il linguaggio delle donne. La studiosa definisce questo linguaggio studiando le varie caratteristiche che costruiscono il parlare delle donne, sottolineando come la situazione inferiore a livello sociale di queste influisca sulle loro scelte linguistiche e su come vengono descritte da altri attori sociali. E' importante sottolineare come questo studio sia stato criticato da molti studiosi, in particolare per la mancanza di prove empiriche. Nonostante ciò, rimane uno degli studi più influenti all'interno degli studi del linguaggio di genere, che influenza ancora adesso alcune convinzioni sociali riguardanti diverso utilizzo del linguaggio da parte di donne e uomini. Nel Capitolo 2, viene fornita una panoramica dei vari approcci sociolinguistici che studiano le dinamiche tra linguaggio e genere. Partendo dal *deficiency approach*, il quale vede il linguaggio attribuito alle donne come 'inferiore' rispetto a quello 'normativo' degli uomini; si passa al *dominance approach*, che giustifica l'utilizzo di determinate forme linguistiche da parte delle donne in quanto riflettono il ruolo sociale a loro attribuito, sottolineando un'inequità di genere anche a livello sociale. Il *difference approach*, invece, sottolinea come le differenze nell'utilizzo del linguaggio siano dovute a una diversa socializzazione in età infantile tra donne e uomini e come questo influenzi la creazione di diverse 'culture'. L'approccio più recente, il *dynamic approach*, vede il linguaggio come una pratica sociale, focalizzandosi sulle dinamiche interazionali nelle quali il genere è visto più come un costrutto sociale che una categoria fissa.

Attraverso lo studio di questi approcci, ho cercato di comprendere come l'ideologia di genere influenzi l'uso della lingua da parte di uomini, donne e altre identità di genere, e viceversa. Questo mi ha permesso non solo di osservare le caratteristiche linguistiche legate al genere, ma anche di approfondire come tali caratteristiche siano modellate e

condizionate da norme sociali associate all'ideologia di genere. Infine, nel Capitolo 3, ho analizzato il rapporto tra linguaggio e identità di genere, che viene riconcettualizzato grazie a nuove teorie come la *queer theory*. Questo capitolo analizza l'utilizzo del linguaggio da parte di persone non-binarie e transgender e come questo sia un importante strumento per la costruzione e la ridefinizione della propria identità di genere. Concepire l'identità di genere come un processo dinamico che viene costantemente riaffermato attraverso il linguaggio, ha aperto il discorso sull'importanza dell'utilizzo di un linguaggio inclusivo e ha sottolineato come la *agency* linguistica di ogni individuo sia fondamentale nella costruzione della propria identità di genere, nei vari contesti sociali e interazioni quotidiane. Infatti, le singole scelte linguistiche, dall'utilizzo di pronomi neutri a la scelta di adottare un linguaggio inclusivo, possono ridefinire le norme e ideologie sociali riguardanti l'identità di genere.

In conclusione, l'obiettivo della mia tesi era quello di capire se e in che modo donne, uomini e altre identità di genere utilizzassero la lingua in modo differente. Il genere è un fattore fondamentale da tenere in considerazione nello studio di differenze linguistiche tra vari attori, ma è importante ricordare che è uno dei tanti fattori che le influenza. Infatti, grazie alle nuove prospettive negli studi del linguaggio, si teorizza che sia donne, che uomini e altre entità di genere, adottino comportamenti linguistici diversi in vari contesti, essendo influenzati da molteplici altri fattori sociali. La presenza del genere in ogni interazione sociale, anche a livello grammaticale, di certo rafforza una concezione binaria di genere, che si riflette anche nella ricerca di differenze in comportamenti linguistici tra donne, uomini e altre entità di genere.