



UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
DI PADOVA

## **Università degli Studi di Padova**

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

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

Tesina di Laurea

# *Analysis of gender reference on the English website of the University of Padua*

Relatrice  
Prof. Katherine Ackerley

Laureanda  
Linda Salvo  
n° matr.1169982 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2021 / 2022



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
<b>GENDER AND LANGUAGE</b> .....	5
<b>1.1 What is gender?</b> .....	5
<b>1.2 Gendered language</b> .....	7
<b>1.3 Gender-inclusive approach</b> .....	14
<b>1.4 Different ways of conversing</b> .....	16
<b>THE FOUR APPROACHES TO GENDERED LANGUAGE</b> .....	21
<b>2.1 Introduction</b> .....	21
<b>2.2 The “deficit” approach</b> .....	22
<b>2.3 The “dominance” approach</b> .....	26
<b>2.4 The “difference” approach</b> .....	28
<b>2.5 The “dynamic” approach</b> .....	31
<b>2.6 Conclusion</b> .....	31
<b>ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENCE OF GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE ON THE ENGLISH WEBSITE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA</b> .....	33
<b>3.1 Introduction</b> .....	33
<b>3.2 Analysis of “Occupational opportunities” section on degree course descriptions</b> .....	33
<b>3.3 An inclusive syntax: analysis of the page “Registering for graduation”</b> .....	40
<b>3.4 Gender reference in internship proposals on the career service page</b> .....	42
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	47
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	49
<b>SUMMARY IN ITALIAN</b> .....	55



## INTRODUCTION

The aim of my thesis is to analyse how gendered language produces and maintains gender bias. This term refers to a linguistic feature explaining prejudiced actions or thoughts based on the gender-based perception that women are not equal to men in rights and social position. It is important to hint that the language plays a leading role in the spread of these biases which still nowadays affect our society negatively. To be more precisely, a simple example of this phenomenon can be found in everyday working place: when a person refers to an individual by their occupation, such as “*stewardess*”, it is assumed that the individual is a female. As far as my analysis in this dissertation is concerned, I will examine the presence of gender-neutral language on the English website of the University of Padua. I chose to develop this topic above all because I became interested in gender and language studies after learning over the past few years that language is the primary tool for promoting gender equality in society. During the second year of university, I came across a Facebook post concerning the complains of students of my university. In this post, a girl shed a light on the presence of gendered language in the university website. For this reason, I decided to examine how inclusive language is used on the university website with the aim of promoting gender inclusivity.

In this dissertation, the terms ‘gender-neutral’ and ‘gender-inclusive’ are used interchangeably to refer to the use of language structure that avoids prejudice towards a particular gender. I opted for organising my analysis in three main chapters. In the first chapter I examined what the connection between gender and language is. First of all, I outlined which linguistic structures are considered a gendered language and later on which of them are suggested to promote the use of an inclusive approach. In the second chapter, I focused on all the different approaches that have been developed to underline the different problematic aspects of gendered language. These above-mentioned approaches are labelled as follows: the *deficit* approach, the *dominance* approach, the *difference* approach and the *dynamic* approach. The division of all the gender and language studies in four different approaches has been particularly helpful for me since I took it as a starting point on my analysis of gender reference on the English website of the University of Padua. Indeed, the last part of my dissertation is about the analysis of

three different sections of the university website. The first part analysed deals with the “Occupational opportunities” section on degree course descriptions. The second one focused on the analysis of the “Registering for graduation” page in order to observe which syntactic structure are used to reproduce an inclusive language. The third and last one studied the presence of gender references in internship proposals on the career service page.

The aim of the current dissertation is not only to clarify how the use of neutral language could be used to substitute the use of gendered forms in order to avoid gender discrimination, but also to provide a concrete tool that university can take advantage of to improve some linguistic structures that seem to maintain gender bias.

## GENDER AND LANGUAGE

### 1.1 What is gender?

“Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do, something we perform” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013).

Gender is the set of behaviours and performances carried out to emphasize the dichotomy between male and female (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013; Mills 2012; Coates 2015). Therefore, gender and sex are two different concepts, while the second refers to biological characteristics, the first refers to a social construction. In other words, gender is the social representation of biological sex, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) sum up saying:

“Gender is the very process of creating a dichotomy by effacing similarity and elaborating on difference, and where there are biological differences, these differences are exaggerated and extended in the service of constructing gender.” (5)

The gender process begins even before birth, when parents choose the child’s name and organize parties to reveal the child’s gender. From the discovery of the sex of the child will depend on the different behaviours of adults towards the new-born (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013:7-11; Coates 2015). The same actions will be interpreted differently depending on whether the child is male or female and also the way of speaking to him/her is different. Several experiments over the years have shown how adults interact more gently with a female child. Indeed, the use of diminutives such as “*horsie*”, “*doggie*” and “*mummy*” is more frequent when talking with girls (Gleason et al.1994) and also, it’s a common attitude among adults to use more inner state words, e.g. *happy*, *sad*, *scared*, *angry* and *anxious*, when talking to girls than with boys (Ely et al. 1995). As a result of the different ways in which they are treated, children internalize the gender difference since the age of three (Maccoby 2002).

Furthermore, the dichotomy between male and female is characterized by an asymmetry. As gender is the set of behaviours shaped by different possibilities and limits, and society enforced this division labelling some activities as female and others as male, children to become linguistically competent learn how to “do” masculinity and femininity in a particular community of practice, namely when they adopt a linguistic behaviour they contribute to maintaining the social order that creates gender distinctions

(Coates 2015). The result is that some behaviours are labelled as *male* but are accepted as appropriate for both sexes, while others are labelled as *female* and are considered appropriate only for females. Consequently, female behaviours are viewed as *marked* as feminine while the male's ones are considered unmarked, if a girl chooses to dress in blue, it is easily accepted, but if a little boy chooses to dress in a skirt or pink it is seen in a negative way, because certain clothes and colours are connected to the idea of femininity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). The asymmetry between the two genders is carried out by separation. Since childhood, boys and girls learn to behave in different ways: although many kids play in mixed groups, Maccoby (1998) observed a tendency to prefer same-sex playmates from the ages of three, to interact in different ways and that they learn that some game and colours are only for girls. The exhibition of behaviour that does not respect the label imposed by the social order is judged unequally as society is more rigid in disapproving gender-inappropriate behaviours for boys: it is not seen as a problem if girls act like a tomboy or plays with toy's viewed as male, but on the contrary, if a boy has practices that are associated with girls, he will be more easily excluded and mocked by his peers. This is due to an ideology that comes from the past, when for centuries the idea of superiority of men over women on the intellectual and biological level was widespread in order to justify the position of privilege occupied by men in society, indeed Connell (1995) highlights how the concept of masculinity is always associated with power, both physical and intellectual. Despite in recent years women have struggled and won equal rights, the idea of women's inferiority is still present in society at an unconscious level, for this reason boys who do not comply with gender standards are pointed out as "*sissy*" or "*gay*". The concept of power lies at the basis of our social structure and hence derives, as we will see below, a male-centred language.

Gender categorisation contains within it stereotypes on which the distinction between men and women is based. From an early age, children are told to "be a good girl" or "be a good boy", this simple statement highlights how adults expect children to behave differently. A boy who cries a lot will be teased with sentence such as "cry like a girl" and a girl who says swear words or answers back will be considered aggressive, this happens because these behaviours do not adhere to the characteristics defined in the concepts of "*masculinity*" and "*femininity*". Stereotypically, the woman is seen as very



accommodating and emotional, with a predisposition to take care of others, on the contrary, the man must be powerful and competitive. This distinction has been so deeply rooted in our society for years that it has influenced the division of labour for a long time: all those jobs that concerned caring for others, housing or education were considered to be women's jobs, while all the jobs that required strength or intellectual capacity were considered male jobs (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). A recurring idea that highlights the presence of stereotypes in the study of gender and language is that which connects women to politeness. Sara Mills (2012) states that the linguistic behaviour of women is interpreted through the use of stereotypes and emphasises that:

“Within English speaking communities politeness is often associated with being deferent which Brown and Levinson have classified as negative politeness, often associated with powerless and care for others, which is associated with stereotypes of femininity. Women's linguistic behaviour, in many accounts, because it is seen as displaying powerless is characterised as hesitant and unassertive and showing negative politeness for others through what is seen to be excessive use of respect use of respect and deference. These characteristics associated with deference and positions of unequal power become associated with the ‘natural’ behaviour of women [...]” (2012:178)

## **1.2 Gendered language**

Language is a structured communication system based on conventional spoken and written symbols and is used by humans to communicate. As many linguistic studies have shown, language is not static, but evolves over time and reflects within it the society in which it develops. Moreover, by observing how grammar is structured it is possible to see how gender is present in communicative practices. English is *a natural gender language*, this means that nouns are mainly gender-neutral and the reference to gender occurs through the use of pronouns. It differs from *grammatical gender languages* as in the latter every noun has a grammatical gender and the gender of personal nouns tends to express the gender of the referent (Sczesny et al. 2016). In the seventies, the Department of linguistics at Harvard University declared that the use of *he* as a generic pronoun was a merely linguistic matter, but Bodine states (1975) that the use of generic masculine was regulated only in the 19th century and is an acknowledgement of masculine superiority (Martyna 1980; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet

2013). A clear example that highlights the idea of man's superiority in the English language is the question of titles. The form "Mr." is used to refer to a man regardless of whether he's married or not. Conversely, women are defined according to their marital status, so "Miss" is the title used for an unmarried woman and "Mrs" for a married one. To drift apart from the convention that a woman achieves her own personal fulfilment through marriage, in the sixties the title "Ms." was introduced by feminist. The introduction of this new term aimed to increase equity between the two genders, but it took decades before it began to be used without being politically associated with feminism. As has been said before, the two genders are associated with qualities that justify the gender order. For example, phrases like "John married Mary", "Mr and Mrs. Rossi" or "husband and wife" implicitly hold within them the convention that the woman is a passive and inferior recipient and was made explicit by some grammarians who declared "let us keep a natural order, and set the man before the woman for manners Sake" (Wilson 1553:189; cited in Bodine 1975:134; cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). Even people who reject gender stereotypes often, in their way of expressing or saying something, participate unconsciously in the spread of certain ideologies because they do not realize that in the construction of their discourse there are backgrounded messages that are implicitly linked to the gender order and that lead to strengthen the asymmetry between the two genders. A demonstration of this phenomenon are the *false generics* studied by Paula Treichler and Francine Frank (1989): we refer with this term to those semantic constructions or words that want to be generic and inclusive but that in reality are not. Phrases such as "two students and two coeds graduated with honors" or , as in the examples reported by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013), "Over a hundred Muslim civils were killed, and many women and children" and "three Brazilians and a woman", even not using words marked as feminine, semantically they make a distinction and differentiate between man and woman, since "students" and "Brazilians" are sex-indefinite terms and therefore it would have been more correct to use " five students " and "four Brazilians". Moreover, in the second example, the journalist meant "including" but using the conjunction "and" it almost seems that women and children are not part of civilians, despite this word is not semantically marked as male.

The representation of the gender takes place in all levels of grammar, especially in the morphological, syntactic and semantic levels. Morphology is the branch of linguistics that deals with the study of the internal structure of words and changes in meaning with the variation of morphemes. The gender categories have a fundamental role in maintaining the dichotomy between man and woman, in fact, the androcentric structure of the English language, which is male-centred, is directly linked to the evolution of the language. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013), reporting the studies of Julia Penelope (1990), state that “most gender-differentiated category labels in Old English were symmetric polar opposition, but that gender-differentiated category labels in Modern English tend to be organized with male defaults”. Additionally, in Old English, the form “*mann*”, from which derives the compound *wifman* (the source of the word *woman*), primarily meant “*human*” or “*humankind*”, while the prefix *wer* (*werman*) labelled a male human being. It is only in Middle English that the word “*man*” changed its meaning and began to be used to refer to an adult male. Nowadays *man* is used both generically and to serve as an element of the opposition that marks woman as something distinct. From this dual use arises the debate against the use of masculine forms as generic that is carried on by those who support the use of an inclusive language and who argue that the masculine generic tends to increase male bias (Hamilton 1988). In sentences such as “Every man for himself” or “Anyone can do it if he really wants to”, the use of masculine generics should be used to refer to both woman and man, but numerous studies have shown that they are perceived by native speakers as masculine. With regards to this debate, an experiment was conducted by Gastil (1990), who presented to college students several sentences in which the three generic forms were present: *He*, *he/she* and *them*. The participants had to report whether in imagining the subjects of the sentences they had visualized a female, a male, both or not one. As expected, most of the sentences were imagined by students with male images, confirming the idea that the presence of masculine generic influences people to mentally produce male images, excluding females. In addition, experiments by Mackay and Fulkerson (1979) also support this view. In this case the participants had to listen to twelve sentences in which there were indefinite antecedents that referred to a mainly female class (model, secretary), a mainly male class (banker, judge) and a neutral class (student, artist) and there were masculine generics to refer to the antecedents. In

sentence such as "When the botanist is in the field, he is usually working", participants had to indicate whether each sentence could refer to a female by answering "yes" or "no". Because generic sentences referred to classes and not to individual subjects, the correct answer for each sentence was yes, but as a result they got 87% of wrong answers. They considered this as a confirmation of the masculine pronominal dominance theory as the specific interpretation of the gender depended on the presence of the pronoun "*he*" and not on the antecedent (Miller, M. M., & James, L. E 2009).

Modern English, unlike other Indo-European languages which have the division of nouns into masculine, feminine and neutral (for example Spanish or German), does not have a proper grammatical gender. The only influence of the Old English morphological system, in which three genders were present, is mainly the fact that English requires attribution of a gender in the use of personal pronouns. For the third singular person there are three pronouns: "*he*" when the referent is a male, "*she*" when it is a woman and "*it*" when referring to an inanimate object or animal. There is a tendency to use generic masculine to refer to unmarked generic terms and to animals, for example with "a member of congress" or "dog". The use of personal pronouns forces the speaker to emphasize the gender of the interlocutor, that because linguistic resources are used to achieve the aims of society which bases its structure in the distinction between male and female.

Another aspect of the morphology into which gender enters is the process of transformation of nouns according to whether it refers to males or females. Feminine nouns, especially those referring to jobs, are formed by adding the suffix *-ess* to the lexical base, a common example are the nouns "*actress*", "*waitress*" and "*stewardess*". The lexical base is implicitly considered masculine, in fact the suffix process starts from a masculine noun (such as *waiter*, *actor* or *assistant*) to create a feminine one. In the past, some jobs were done predominantly by men, while others by women, so for some jobs there is no form for the opposite sex. For example, *fisherman*, *fireman*, *doctor*, *policeman*, *congressman* do not present a female counterpart for years, at the same time work as *nurse* or *secretary* were typically female. When speakers specify gender, as in *lady doctor*, *male nurse* and *policewoman*, they make references to background information that starts from the assumption that nurses are typically women and policemen are typically men, contributing in this way to strengthen the connection

between gender and professions. Since women only began to enter the world of labour in the 19th century, the female version of the nouns indicating the professions is often based on the male one, although, as we shall see later, people are trying to create a more inclusive version of these words where the gender is not specified. This implies that certain forms conceived as masculine are used to refer generically, while female forms cannot. The simplest and clearest example for this is the forms of greeting: if a group is composed of boys and girls, it is correct to say “Hello guys”, while it will be considered wrong to say “Hello gals” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). This difference in the inclusiveness of the two forms stems from a past mentality in which everything concerning the female universe was considered inferior and therefore referring to a man using feminine nouns would have led to a devaluation of the social position of men. Unconsciously this idea has been handed down through the repetition of linguistic acts and even today being associated with feminist practices seems to go to belittle the masculinity of a man. In addition, the difference in nouns relating to professions reflects the view that certain skills and occupations are mainly associated with one of the two genders.

The language structures play a fundamental role in the dissemination of ideas, more specifically the syntax deals with explaining the relationship between the participants involved in the action described in the sentence. Speaking of syntactic choices in relation to gender, reference is made to the role that these choices have in maintaining and reinforcing the gender order. According to stereotypes women are represented as passive and men as doers, and the passive form is one of the syntax tools to assign responsibility for what happens in the action. The two sentences "John kissed Emily" and "Emily was kissed by John" convey two different meanings, although they describe the same event. In the first sentence the role of agent is underlined because it is the subject, on the contrary in the second sentence the subject has the role of theme, removing the attention from the agent that is instead inserted in the prepositional phrase. As linguist Julia Penelope has pointed out, the agentless passive is often used to deflect attention when describing episodes of male oppression and violence against women (Penelope 1990 cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). The use of agentless passive in many newspapers articles minimalizes the responsibility of man, so much so that the culprit is often not even mentioned. Moreover, these language choices almost attribute

responsibility to the victim. This way of recounting the violence is widespread even in major newspapers, Kate Clark (1992) in her research in the British newspapers reported that most of the time the perpetrators are not even mentioned, but aspects of the victims, like behaviours or clothing, are described as to attribute responsibility to the victim because of attitudes considered promiscuous. Clark gives an example of a title and the opening sentence of a Sun article published on December 12, 1986: "GIRL MURDERED WHILE MUM DRANK AT THE PUB [...] Little Nicola Spencer was strangled in her bedsit home-while her mum was out drinking and playing pool in local pubs" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). Examples of this kind of storytelling can also be found in more recent publications, such as in the article published by The Journal.ie on 23rd September 2021 entitled "UK police believe 28-year-old teacher was murdered as she Took five-minute walk to meet friend" or in the one published by the Independent on 12th September 2021 entitled "Pregnant woman shot and killed in New York breaking up a fight at her baby shower", neither of the two titles mentions the aggressor.

As for semantics, which deals with the study of the meanings of words and sentences, it should be highlighted that expressions that refer to women often undergo a semantic sexualization, reflecting the asymmetry in the relationship between male and female. The term "*hussy*" was originally an abbreviation of the Middle English word *husewif*, that is housewife. From the middle of the seventeenth century this word changed its meaning becoming an insult (Definition of Vixen, Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's most-trusted online dictionary). This change does not occur at once, but through the repetition of the term in the new context and the spread of use within the different communities of practice, which are groups of people who develop a common way of acting, of speaking and a common mentality. Another example is the word "*vixen*". At the beginning it was used to indicate a female fox but over the years its use has changed, firstly being used to indicate a woman with a bad character and in the twentieth century to refer to an attractive woman (Definition of Vixen, Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's most-trusted online dictionary). Moreover, pairs of words such as *master/mistress* and *bachelor/spinster* reflect the asymmetry between man and woman as the masculine terms do not carry within them the pejorative connotations that instead have the feminine ones (Lakoff & Bucholtz 2004).

A message is composed of an explicit part, that is what is literally said, and an implicit part that conveys an implied meaning. Sexual and gender stereotypes are often spread unconsciously as they are embedded in ways of talking that are part of a person's conceptual baggage. What an expression evokes in the listener depends on the presuppositions that the hearer takes for granted. These background messages are not communicated explicitly as they aren't based on semantic associations between words of an utterance but acquire meaning for those who participate in the conversation as they are the assumptions of shared conceptual baggage (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). An example of how these associations work is the term "wife beater", commonly used in Anglo-Saxon slang to refer to sleeveless white shirt. This term began to be associated with this piece of clothing after in 1947 newspapers published the story of a man from Detroit who had been arrested for beating his wife to death. Despite the seriousness of the literal meaning, this word has been used so frequently in recent years that it has entered the common language of many people. Moreover, expressions like "She's a beautiful blonde but exceptionally intelligent" and "Women are just as intelligent as men" are based on the same mechanism. These phrases would be meaningless if they were not inserted in a context where certain stereotypes are present. In the first sentence the existence of an incompatibility between the beauty of a woman and being intelligent is made explicit, even if in reality there is no correlation between the two things. Instead, in the second sentence, the speaker puts male intelligence as the standard for measuring female intelligence, following gender stereotypes that see man as the superior figure. Even the use of the female pronoun *she* contains many presuppositions, due to the fact that its use evokes expectations about how a woman should speak or act. It is important to pay attention to the presence of backgrounded messages because phrases such as "Boys will be boys" minimize problematic behaviours of some boys, using these idioms to limit their responsibility (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013:168).

Furthermore, another linguistic practice that is used to express common sense about gender is metaphor. This figure of speech with rhetorical effect implies a transfer of meaning, Lakoff stresses that "metaphor is not just a matter of language but is more broadly conceptual, a matter of habitual modes of thinking about some domains by drawing on common-sense thoughts developed in other domains" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013:179). As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest, sexual relations are often what

is called the tenor of metaphors, while sport is the vehicle. The courtship is seen as a game, whose victory coincides with the conquest of the woman. This way of seeing relationships reflects the asymmetry present in the heterosexual market, which sees the benefices of man as its final purpose. From this view derive expressions such as "trophy wife", "scoring" and "getting to first base". Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) quote Hellen Haste to stress that the sexual metaphor is fundamental to maintaining the gender order present in our society. Indeed, these constructions support male dominance, feeding stereotypes that see the woman as weak and submissive to the decisions of others. In addition to sports metaphors, there are others that associate the female figure with food or animals. While the first type is used to talk about sexual desire, often comparing the woman to a food that can satiate the "hunger" (common are phrases like "I'm starving for you " or referring to a girl as "the dessert"), the second type is used in an offensive way, both to criticise the physical appearance, and to judge some behaviours.

### **1.3 Gender-inclusive approach**

Gender-neutral language is language that avoids bias towards a social gender. The need to use inclusive language was supported from the 1970s by feminist groups to avoid gender discrimination. Language is one of the main tools for regulating the social order, for this reason in recent years new forms have been inserted into the language to avoid marginalization and the perpetuation of stereotypes. The use of the masculine generic has been criticized by supporters of gender-neutral language because they believe it implies masculine superiority and reflects the asymmetry between the two genders (Coates 2015). Moreover, as reported in the article "Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination?" written by Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser (2016), people tend to interpret the use of generic masculine in a male-biased way. The two main strategies used to make language gender-neutral are neutralization and feminization. Feminization consists in increasing the visibility of women in speech by explicitly and symmetrically referring to women and men through the use of feminine forms. A problem found in this strategy concerns the order in which the forms are mentioned as typically the first-mentioned form is considered more important than the second. On the other hand, neutralization consists in replacing masculine forms with



gender-unmarked forms. This strategy is mainly used with natural gender languages (e.g. English, Danish, Norwegian) and for genderless languages (e.g. Finnish) (Sczesny et al. 2016). Words that end in "man" are the most frequently used gendered nouns in English, the first step to make language inclusive is to avoid the generic use of “man” and replace those nouns with neutral forms. This linguistic transformation has had a greater influence in the field of job titles. In other word, the use of neutral occupational labels is a strategy to counter the practice of labelling which maintains a gendered division of labour (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). Here is a list of gendered nouns and some neutral alternatives:

Gendered noun	Gender-neutral noun
Mankind	Humankind, human beings, humanity
Man-made	Artificial, synthetic
Chairman	Chair
Mailman	Mail carrier, postal worker
Policeman, Policewoman	Police officer
Fireman	Firefighter
Fisherman	Fisher, Fisherfolk
Steward, stewardess	Flight attendant
Actor, actress	Actor
Headmaster, headmistress	Head, headteacher
Businessman	Businessperson, executive
Male nurse	Nurse
Congressman	Legislator
Freshman	First-year student
Children	Child

These changes in terminology have helped to improve the position of women in society and their working conditions.

As previously mentioned, the third singular person in English is gendered and makes it difficult to speak of someone without presupposing a gender attribution. Moreover, choosing between *he* or *she* inevitably leads to gender assumptions, that is to say the pronoun *she* assumes that the referent is a woman, triggering presupposition about the characteristics that distinguish males and females. English to respond the need for a non-gendered pronoun introduced the use of *singular they*, for example “I say to each person in this room: may they enjoy themselves tonight!”. The use of *they/them* in singular form is not yet widespread, even colloquially it is infrequently used with definite antecedents, e.g. “My teacher promised they would write me a letter of

recommendation”, but in recent years there has been a frequent use of *they* to refer to people who are undergoing a gender/sex transition process, as the use of *you* would be restrictive. Moreover, numerous studies have shown that the use of *they* would seem to be the most appropriate pronoun to use as generic, since even the use of *he/she* tends to evoke mainly male images (Gastil 1990; Hamilton 1988; Miller and James 2009). Another technique to avoid references to the gender of the referent is the use of plural forms and the use of the imperative or passive form (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013).

#### **1.4 Different ways of conversing**

Another aspect widely treated in the study of gender and language is conversational practice. Many studies, influenced by stereotypes about behaviours, tend to emphasize women’s strategies for cooperative and supportive talk, while man’s style is characterized as competitive. The way women converse is based on supportive overlap (Eckert 1990) and provides numerous backchanneling (Bilous and Krauss 1988; Roger & Nesshoever 1987, cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013), while the way men converse is based on competitive chatter and the establishment of a hierarchy (Kiesling 1997). An example of the stereotypical view of language behaviour was found by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) in Melanie Anne Phillips’s online manual that offers to teach transgender women how to speak like a woman:

“[S]ome words are more masculine or feminine than others. Part of this again derives from the brokering of power. For example, a man usually “wants” something while a woman “would like” something. “Want” means “lack” and implies “need” which further implies the right to have. This reflects the aggressive side of the power equation. On the other hand, “would like” states a preference, not an intent, and therefore runs the idea up the flagpole to see if anyone is against it before acting. This reflects the submissive side of the power equation. You can notice the difference in the way men and women will order at the speaker of a drive-through fast food restaurant. A man will say, “I want a Big Mac” whereas a woman will say “I’d like a salad, please”.

Once more, instead of attributing the two different constructions to the use or not of the form of courtesy, the gender stereotypes that see the woman satisfied in pleasing others and men as holders of power are reinforced. As Sara Mills (2012) pointed out,

numerous studies on gender have as a starting point these stereotypes, assuming that they represent a "normal" behaviour and describing women's speeches as powerless and overpolite as a result of the stereotypical view of femininity. Mills proposes to analyse this topic by moving away from the classification of discourse as masculine or feminine, focusing on the proper use of communication strategies in order to avoid a system in which women can't speak in a strong way. She uses the term "discourse competence" to refer to discourses that are both assertive (depending on speaker need) and co-operative (depending on group needs). Speaking in a competent way involve being assertive enough to ensure that the speaker's face is maintained, while at the same time displaying sufficient care for the maintenance of the interlocutor's face (Brown and Levinson 1978; Goffman 1972; cited in Mills 2012). Discourse competent speakers know a variety of strategies and are able to choose the one most appropriate to the situation. On the contrary, discourse incompetence is characterized by the use of the same speech style for all contexts.

In English speaking communities the main rule for conversations concerns the sequencing of turns among participants and the presence of a short silence between turns. Simultaneous talks with this rule are not tolerated, but people are expected to show their attention to the main conversation through vocalisms such as *yeah, really?* and *no kidding*. The use of vocalisms as reinforcement is called *backchanneling* and its application has been analysed in numerous studies, which have found that women use this technique more than men (Bilous & Krauss 1988; Roger & Nesshoever 1987; Edelsky & Adams 1990) and that above all they are used differently. In particular, women use *yeah* and *uh-huh* to exhibit attention, while men use these minimal responses to display agreement (Maltz & Borker 1982). Regarding intrusive interruptions, Anderson and Leaper (1988, cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013) found that the difference is not much about the two genders, but more about power. Dominant partners tend to interrupt more regardless of gender, while in couples with balanced power interruptions occur fairly. It is different for the overlaps used as a conversation support strategy, Tannen (1994) and Coates (1996) pointed out that women use this strategy a lot within informal conversations to support statements made by other people. Moreover, Annette Hannah and Tamar Murachver (1999) have found

that people tend to talk more when the interlocutor has a facilitative speech style, regardless of the gender of the speaker.

Another language practice widely treated in gender studies is questioning. Asking many questions has been interpreted as the demonstration of the lack of confidence that distinguishes the way women speak. Lakoff (2004) in her study on the woman language, which as we will see in the next chapter is based on the deficit approach, focuses on analysing the use of tag questions. These tags are an interrogative fragment that is added to a declarative clause, they are formed with the inverted form of the auxiliary that is determined by the one of the declarative and the polarity of the main clause is reversed in the question tag. Lakoff claims that women use question tags more than men and that their use express the lack of confidence of the speaker and the search for approval. On the other hand, Deborah Cameron (1989) pointed out that tags can have different functions: they can indicate insecurity and request confirmation from others, in this case it is called *epistemic modal* function, or they can be *facilitative*, encouraging others to contribute to the conversation. Unlike Lakoff who considers weak and problematic the use of epistemic tags because it implies the unwillingness of those who speak to take responsibility for what is said, Cameron suggests that epistemic use can “signal the speaker’s position towards the content of the main clause and generally invite the address to help evaluate that content” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). Furthermore, Cameron (Cameron et al. 1989) found that a higher portion of tags are used by women with facilitative function and a larger portion is used by men with a confirmation-seeking function. More specifically, the mitigating use of tags is associated with women in conversation between acquaintances and with more powerful in the hierarchical order, while the epistemic use by men takes place in conversations between peers and with people with powerless people. In addition, modifiers like *probably*, *sorta*, or *kinda* and discourse particles such as *you know* or *like* are used to cover the uncertainties of the speaker about what they are saying. For example, Holmes (1986; cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013) found out that women use *you know* more than men and they use it to connect with others and to use the addressee as potential support.

As Lakoff also pointed out, when it comes to women and language, a recurring idea is that women are specialized in "making nice" and the best examples for this attitude are compliments. Compliments follow a hierarchical order and for this reason, when they

do not follow the hierarchy, they are often classified as inappropriate. Moreover, they also show the recipients what others value about them. Thanks to the analysis of several corpora on English compliments, such as those of Herbert (1990) and Holmes (1995), researchers have shown that both men and women compliment women more and that their compliments are mainly on their physical appearance. This result shows that compliments are a fundamental part of regulating the gender and social order. As previously said, adults have different behaviours to children depending on their sex, in this case they usually compliment boys for their courage and girls for their beauty. In this way it is unconsciously spread the idea that for women is more important their appearance while for men count instead their abilities, contributing in this way to spread the idea of the woman as an object to look (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). Moreover, Deborah Tannen suggests that women compliment and are complimented more to strengthen relationships with others within a community of practice, while for men it is primarily a way to establish authority. The phenomenon of *stranger compliments* from man to woman, which in recent years has been called *cat calling*, is an example of the role of compliments in building gender order, men feel free to make appreciations because in the social context in which they live there is still a sexist mentality that allows the existence of an asymmetrical relationship between the two genders.

In contrast to "making nice" there seems to be assertiveness and the use of a "strong" language. Assertiveness can be understood as being confident and forceful in expressing views and setting goals. Usually, women are idealized with a lack of assertiveness in work and daily life, but Linda Carli (1999; cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013) has shown that, in the workplace, women who use hesitant language are seen as incompetent but exert more influence than assertive women. As a result of this perception Carli observed that the use of an assertive language is often combined with many "making nice". With regard to the use of strong language, swearing is associated with the expression of anger. Cursing is considered inadequate for women according to the idea that sees them avoid direct conflict and associate them with politeness, while for men expressing anger is considered a natural expression of masculinity. In the past people expressed discomfort in hearing profanity words from women, for this reason it has spread the use of euphemisms to replace tabooed words, e.g. "oh my gosh" instead

of "oh my god", "fricking" instead of "fucked", "Jeez" instead of "Jesus", and the use of acronyms such as "F-word", "S-word" and "B-word" (Coates 2015). Although in recent years, as reported by Diane Vincent in 1982, the use of swear words is also more common among girls, it is still common to hear adults say "girls do not say such words".

## THE FOUR APPROACHES TO GENDERED LANGUAGE

### 2.1 Introduction

The field of gender and language studies has developed quite recently. The activity of the feminist movement during the 1970s and 1980s encouraged an analysis of the link between gender asymmetry and language in order to highlight the presence of gender bias in speech. After recognizing that language influences society through structures that are repeated, linguists began to analyse syntactic constructions, lexical choices, metaphors, and speech acts to understand how language and gender affect accomplish social ends (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). The publication of the book "*Language and woman's place*" by Robin Lakoff in 1975 is considered a symbolic moment for the development of this field in sociolinguistics. There are two major areas of study that deal with gender differences in language: Anthropology and Dialectology. The former examines the different use of language between gender from a morphological, phonological and lexical point of view, the latter studies how gender interacts with other variables in the production of prestige forms and innovative forms of speech. In the last-mentioned research area, however, there are few studies that include women within the speech communities examined, preferring male as informants. Among dialectologists there are two points of view: the first sees women's speech closely linked to the standard form, the second considers women less conservative linguistically. These visions have led to the marginalization of women as informants as scholars consider male language closer to vernacular forms and more interesting than the standard spoken by women (Coates 2015).

In "*Women, Men and Language*", Coates (2015) presents gather together different studies on gendered language and outlines the different positions in the four approaches known as: the *deficit* approach, the *dominance* approach, the *difference* approach and the *dynamic* approach. Even if they develop in historical sequence, often different approaches coexist in a certain period of time. The first approach, the *deficit* approach, is characteristic of early studies and is typically attributed to Jespersen after the publication of "*The Woman*", a chapter of the book "*Language: Its Nature and Development, and Origin*" (1922) and to Lakoff following the book "*Language and Woman's Place*" (1975). This approach is based on the dichotomy between women's

and men's language and defines the language spoken by male as the standard, and women's language as deficient. Lakoff in her work defines the language of women weak and not assertive and compares it with the male one that is instead seen as the norm. This approach has been widely criticized as Lakoff's work is based on empirical theories and because it presupposes the inferiority of women (Coates 2015; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). The second approach, the *dominance* approach, sees women as a subordinate group and interprets linguistic differences between the two genders as the result of male supremacy. The consequence of male dominance is a male-centred language. One of the major exponents who adheres to this approach is Dale Spender, in the book "*Man Made Language*" she claims that the English language is man-made and that men use language to perpetuate male dominance and female oppression (Spender 1980; Coates 2015). The third approach, the *difference* approach, differentiates men and women as belonging to two different subcultures as a result of a different socialization during childhood. Deborah Tannen (1990) in her work compares gender differences in language to cultural differences and this allowed to study the different communicative styles of women and men. As Coates (2015) points out, this approach enables women to emerge from the inferiority position to which they were previously bound, allowing scholars to analyse the potential of female's language strategies without limiting them to a position of powerlessness. The latest approach is the *dynamic* or *social constructionism* approach. In this method gender identity is seen as a social construct, for this reason the focus is on the dynamic nature of interactions. The different aspects of language are not divided into predetermined gender categories, but as Coates (2015) states, it is more correct to speak of "doing gender". Indeed, gender is no longer analysed as something static, but as a social construct performed by the speaker and so communicative styles should be analysed as the result of context.

## **2.2 The "deficit" approach**

As has already been said, this approach includes all studies on gender and language that take as a benchmark the male one and that see women's language as a deviation from the presumed standard form. In addition, Lakoff states that "women's register" is composed of language forms that reflect the subordinate position that female have in society. This view is shared by Otto Jespersen in his book published in 1922 in which



he dedicates a chapter to the analysis of the relationship between women and language. In his work, the view of female language as inferior begins with the statement that women contribute minimally to linguistic changes and that their conservatism is due to the fact that they do not have many opportunities to hear different ways of speaking and therefore it is more natural for them to use the language they learned when they were young, unlike men who, thanks to their social position, come into contact and produce more innovative forms. However, women are held responsible for a change in many languages that consists in the weakening of the vibrating consonant *r*. This change is interpreted as a consequence of a social change, the author claims that the old pronunciation was necessary when life was conducted primarily outdoors, while life conducted indoors, and especially domestic life, prefers less noisy speech forms. For this reason, this pronunciation is typically associated with women as their role in society often led them to be on the edge of public life. Following the analysis, Jespersen (1922: 248) states that “the vocabulary of a woman as a rule is much less extensive than that of a man” and also that because of the less extensive education that girls receive, they prefer to use common words that concern the main aspects of their lives, avoiding all those that are too technical or far from the most common topics. On the contrary, men are attributed the use of new or more refined words in order to express their thoughts in the most appropriate way. Moreover, he suggests that “Woman is linguistically quicker than man: quicker to learn, quicker to hear, and quicker to answer. A man is slower: he hesitates, he chews the cud to make sure of the taste of words, and thereby comes to discover similarities with and differences from other words, both in sound and in sense, thus preparing himself for the appropriate use of the fittest noun or adjective”. So, even though stereotypes show that girls learn faster and that they talk more than boys, this is not being analysed as positive, but once again it is an aspect that demonstrates the inferiority of the language of women compared to that of men, because the slowness of the latter is interpreted as a consequence of the deeper knowledge of the various aspects of the language. The great use of intensive adverbs such as *vastly*, *so* and *such* it is used as an example. In sentences such as “The house is *vastly little*”, “She is *vastly pretty*”, “It is *so lovely*” and “You are *such* a good writer”, the adverbs used are empty, this means that their use does not affect the meaning of the sentence. The explanation proposed by the scholar is that this typically feminine use of adverbs is due to the fact

that women often end their own claims before completing the sentence as they begin to speak before they have fully thought about what to say. For example, the sentence "I am so happy to see you" would seem to require a clause with *that*, but in the rush to speak the consequence that would complete the sentence is left unexpressed (It could be for example "So happy that I want to hug you!"). This criticism of the speed of women in some linguistic practices is then taken up by the author to comment on the results of some tests in which women were more successful than men because they were faster at reading and at understanding the texts proposed. Indeed, Jespersen states that it was found that:

“This rapidity was no proof of intellectual power, and some of the slowest readers were highly distinguished men. Ellis explains this in this way: with the quick reader it is as though every statement were admitted immediately and without inspection to fill the vacant chambers of the mind, while with the slow reader every statement undergoes an instinctive process of cross-examination [...]” (Ellis 1904 cited in Jespersen 1922: 252)

The other scholar to whom the *deficit* approach is attributed as we have already said is Robin Lakoff (2004). She identifies the "Women's register" and states that its use helps to systematically deny women access to power because they demonstrate that they cannot hold it through their linguistic behaviour. This register includes the use of words related to specific interests of women (for example in naming colours as "*lavender*", "*aquamarine*" and "*magenta*"), in the use of "*empty*" adjectives (such as "*divine*", "*cute*" and "*lovely*"), in the use of hedges and intensive, in the use of ascending intonation even in declaratives (through the use of question tags and rising intonation), in the use of hypercorrect grammar and superpolite forms. In her work she points out that the difference between the language of men and that of women reflects the fact that men and women are expected to have different roles in society and that the difference in the use of particles indicates the relationship between the speaker and the listener and between the speaker and the topic. As examples of the weakness that distinguishes the way women speak, Lakoff analyses the use of expletives and intonation. Regarding the first example she assumes that in an experiment in which the sentences "Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again" and "Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again" are proposed, people would have no doubts in attributing the first sentence to a woman and the second to a man. This as a

demonstration of the fact that expletives are reserved for men, because the difference in using swear words (such as “*damn*”, “*hell*” and “*shit*”) and using euphemisms (such as “*oh dear*” and “*oh fudge*”) lies in the force with which the speaker expresses himself. Since childhood girls are taught to behave like ladies and boys are taught to behave according to the rules of masculinity, thus the use of assertive forms is typically associated with male language while female one is characterized by its weakness and lack of assertiveness. As for the second example, the author uses intonation as a demonstration of the lack of confidence of women in making claims. For this reason, an intonation pattern that presents the form of a declarative answer but with the ascending intonation typical of yes-no questions it is examined. The speaker using this pattern seems hesitant and looking for confirmation. The author attributes the use of this pattern exclusively to women, arguing that these structures serve to transform statements into polite request rather than order, as an order would assume the speaker’s superior position. Another aspect that is analysed is the existence of euphemistic terms for “*woman*”. Lakoff states that “*lady*” is used as a euphemism for “*woman*” and that the difference between the two terms is in the sexual connotation present in the second. In addition, she underlines the fact that even in the use of “*lady*” there is a negative connotation because it is associated with a not serious and trivializing tone. To this is connected the problem of the nouns used to indicate jobs, in addition to the fact that feminine nouns derive from the male form, there is a subsequent trivialization of the role of the woman. Indeed, there is a further dichotomy regarding the use of *lady*. Names such as *saleslady*, *cleaning lady* and *lady sculptor* are frequently used, but the use of *lady doctor* would seem to be an offense. This is because this term brings with it the idea of a lack of seriousness, in addition to the fact that the presence of a marked trait for female nouns is already a demonstration of the disparity between the two genders. Moreover, this dichotomy does not even exist in the masculine form, as *salesman* is the only correct option (never \*sales gentleman). Another aspect that Lakoff studies are forms of politeness. A recurring idea in the study of gender is the one that connects women to politeness, feeding stereotypes that describe the woman as specialized in “making nice” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013). The linguist suggests that politeness follows three principles: formality, deference and camaraderie. The first rule uses formal politeness in order to distance those who speak from the addressee and

from what is said. Furthermore, this rule suggests the speaker's superior position. In order to maintain the distance, different modalities are used: the use of the academic passive (e.g. "in this essay it has been shown..."), hypercorrect forms (prestige grammars) and colloquialism, the use of the impersonal pronoun *one* and technical terms. The second rule give options to the addressee and usually indicates the recipient's superiority. It is characterized by the presence of question tags, hedges and question intonation, for examples "Mario is kinda short" or "You want to go away, don't you?". Finally, the third rule serves to express the will of the speaker in being friendly, for instance through backslapping, joke telling and colloquial language. Lakoff states that the politeness of women is based primarily in the first and second principles showing deferential manners combined with polite forms and hyper-correct grammar. In addition, another example of women subordination that is expressed through language is the primary feminine use of terms such as "*love*", "*honey*", "*sweetie*" to refer to people with whom one does not have an emotional relationship.

The studies that belong to the *deficit* approach have been extensively criticized over the years as they are based mainly on the views of the authors, not on research. Indeed, many scholars claims that these studies in order to demonstrate the deficiency of female language take as their starting points the gender stereotypes on language and that the procedures are biased in favour of men since male language is taken as the norm (Spender 1980).

### **2.3 The "dominance" approach**

One of the major scholars to whom this approach is attributed is Dale Spender. In the book "*Man Made Language*" published in 1980 she states that, in a patriarchal society that is based on the dominance of one of the two sexes, language is used by the dominant group to implement the oppression of women. Indeed, men through their position of power have the opportunity to regulate language structures so that they can express their point of view and allow the maintenance of their superior role in society, thus devaluing the language of the woman who is then defined as lacking in forcefulness and effectiveness.

Moreover, the claim that English is a man-made language with bias in favour of men is shared by numerous studies including Bodine (1975) and Mills (2015). Starting from the semantic aspect, Spender (1980) cites the theory of the semantic derogation of women by Schulz (1975). All words, regardless of their initial meaning, when associated with women acquire a negative meaning, while the use of masculine terms to refer to female is not a problem. An example of this phenomenon is the sexualization of female nouns and the use of titles. Since the meaning acquired by words like “*lady*” and “*mistress*” has already been analysed previously, now we will focus on the other aspect. Words like “*bid*”, “*tart*” and “*harlot*” changed their meaning from a positive to a negative conception. If they were once words used to express affection (a tart was a little pastry and a harlot was a peer of either sex, although it was used more frequently to refer to men), they are now used to refer to women as sexual objects. The semantic derogation of women helps to maintain and confirm the view of women as inferior. Furthermore, as women have a subordinate role in society they have not participated in the production of language and in naming objects and for this reason women’s experiences are expressed through the use of metaphors. It is only in recent years that a process has begun to rename terms used for women’s experience and new words are created to express meanings that were left out by taking a masculine view as a reference point for language. An example is the coinage of the word “*sexual harassment*”, until the late 1960s there was no term indicating this behaviour that women experienced, and men did not feel the need to create a word that would undermine their prestige as long as there was a semantic rule that allowed them to position themselves as positive (Spender 1980). Renaming the world is the first step that feminists want to take in order to get the woman out of the invisibility condition to which she is forced.

Another aspect of language functional to the existence of patriarchy is the silence of women which is analysed by Ardner (1975 cited in Spender 1980) in the theory “The dominant and the muted”. Men are labelled *dominant* because they have built a language that allows them to express their point of view, on the contrary, women are *muted* as they have been excluded from the formulation and therefore there is no terminology that allows them to express meanings other than male ones. Furthermore, men maintain dominance by controlling women’s talk. Spender states that “Interruption is a mechanism by which (a) male can prevent females from talking, and (b) they can

gain the floor for themselves; it is therefore a mechanism by which they engineer female silence” (1980:44). Interruptions are violation of the turn-taking rules, break the symmetry of the conversation and tend to follow the relationship of dominance and submission between the interlocutors. They are used as a strategy to control the topics of a conversation and to gain the floor (Coates 2015). As a consequence of this attitude, several studies have shown the preference of women for single-sex talk. Studies by Aries (1976 cited in Spender 1980) have shown that when women speak in mixed groups they are restricted in the choice of topics, in their talking time and in the style they can use. Men use conversations as a way to express the hierarchical view relationships and for this reason their way of speaking is characterized by the use of competitive discourse strategies. In mixed-group conversations, this greatly affects and ultimately minimizes women’s participation in the conversation as they typically use a cooperative style.

Regarding language structures, Spender analysed the use of "*man*" and "*he*" as a sexist linguistic structure. Historically, Wilson stated in 1553 that it was more natural to put the man before the woman in phrases such as "he/she", "husband and wife" and "brother and sister". Later, in 1746 Kirby formulated a grammatical rule stating that "the male gender was more comprehensive than the female gender". Spender defines this rule as a sexist principle that allows men to increase their central position and the invisibility of women. The use of the generic masculine form instead of the female forms further aggravates the position of subordination of women, as while men know from the beginning if they are included in the speeches, women need more information to know (For example, from the subject or the context of the speech). Moreover, the experiments of Martyna (1980) on the use of "he/she" have evidenced that this structure leads the readers to an image prevalently masculine, removing ulterior visibility to the women.

#### **2.4 The “difference” approach**

The *difference* approach supports the idea that men and women belong to different subcultures as a consequence of the different socialization during childhood which has led to the development of different communication styles. Indeed, the language environment in which children grow up is responsible for boys and girls learning to socialize in a gender-appropriate manner. Girls are led to prefer a style that aims to

maintain the addressee, while boys are led to prefer a style that affirms a hierarchical relationship and self-affirmation (Coates 2015). The result is that there are two different communication styles: one collaboration-oriented for women and one competition-oriented for men. Tannen (1990) proposes the analysis of the conversations of children when they play, specifically she analyses children's talk while playing doctor as an example. She notes that boys use sentences like "Lie down", "Gimme your arm" and "Give me a medicine", while girls tend to prefer sentences like "Let's sit down and breath", "We could try this medicine", "let's try to move the arm". This shows how male tend to use the imperative and to give commands even when they are playing, while female prefer to make proposals using the form "Let's..." or including itself in the request. This way of formulating demands highlights the collaborative style of women, who make proposals rather than giving orders in a way that avoids a competition-oriented response.

In the book "*You just don't understand: women and men in conversation*", Tannen (1990), one of the leading exponent of the *difference* approach, analyses the way women and men converse, stating that as males and females learn to socialize in such different ways that communication between the two genders can be defined as a cross-cultural communication. Boys and girls grow up having a different range of words. As girls learn to speak in a language of connection and boys in a language of independence, it has been said that they speak different genderlects. The discourses of women should be interpreted using intimacy as a means of connection between different relations, to minimize the differences between people and avoid the differences in social positions. On the contrary, the speeches of men must be interpreted as having independence as the key. Communication is a continuous balancing act, and it is these two different ways of interpreting reality that create different visions of the same situation, leading then to misunderstandings in conversations in mixed groups. The problem behind misunderstandings are metamesages, that are information about the type of relationship between the interlocutors and their attitude towards what is said and who says it. The tone of the speaker and the way in which the speaker confronts the interlocutor contribute to create different metamesages. Tannen uses the act of offering help as an example. If interpreted in a key of connection, offering help is an act of kindness useful to consolidate relationships, but in the asymmetry between the relationships present in

the competitive strategy, helping someone is an act that places those who do it in a superior position.

Another aspect that the author analyses is the difference between “*report-talk*” and “*rapport-talk*”. She states that men tend to prefer a style called “*report-talk*”, a style that allows them to maintain their social status by demonstrating their knowledge and skills with the result that men are more comfortable doing public speaking. Women are instead attributed the style called “*rapport talk*” that is characterized by the sharing of personal experiences and the attempt to establish connection. For this reason, unlike men, women prefer private speaking. These concepts are at the basis of the misunderstandings between men and women which are subsequently taken up in the stereotypes on the relationship between the two sexes. An example of the difference in approach is the different way of dealing with troubles. While men tend to focus on the message of the talk and thus offer solutions to problems, women, who typically talk about their difficulties with friends, focus on the metamessage of discussion. In fact, for them to talk about their problems with other people is an attempt to get understanding from others and a way to strengthen relationships. This leads to the resentment of women for the attitude of men, as what they wanted was to hear “I know how you feel” and not receive advice.

Finally, the last topic debated by Tannen is the organisation of conversation, often referred to as turn-talking. She claims that “Women and men feel interrupted by each other because of the differences in what they are trying to accomplish with talk. Men who approach conversation as a contest are likely to expend effort not to support the other’s talk but to lead the conversation in another direction, perhaps one in which they can take centre stage by telling a story or joke or displaying knowledge” (1990:107), while at the same time the strategy of overlapping used by women as a demonstration of support is often considered by men as an attempt to gain the floor. Actually, the difference between overlaps and interruptions is underlined by Zimmerman and West (1983) who define the former as “instance of slight over-anticipation by the next speaker” (Coates 2015) and the latter as “violations of the turn-talking rules of conversation” (Coates 2015).



## **2.5 The “dynamic” approach**

The most recent approach used in the study of gender and language is the *dynamic* or *social constructionist* approach in which gender is analysed as a social construct rather than as a category and the focus is on interaction between speakers and how gender is reproduced in an appropriate manner according to the norms of society (Coates 2015). West and Zimmerman, the main exponents of the *dynamic* approach, in the article "*Doing gender*" published in 1987 suggest that it is more correct to talk about "doing gender" as people every day are committed to perform femininity and masculinity. In society the production of gender performance is mainly implemented through the use of certain linguistic behaviours. Indeed, Goffman states that “femininity and masculinity are regarded as prototypes of essential expression-something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual” (Goffman 1976: 75 cited in West and Zimmerman 1987). Focusing on interactions is evident there are different ways of doing masculinity and femininity. As mentioned above, the strategies used in same-sex talk diverge considerably from those in mixed groups and it is precisely within the same-sex group that men and women tend to adopt behaviours that differ from those attributed to them by social norms, thus having the possibility of reproducing different version of masculinity and femininity (Coates 2015, Spender 1980, Tannen 1990).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Grouping all studies on gender and language within four approaches allowed scholars to highlight what aspects of language are gendered and how they are gendered. Within each approach there are studies that highlight different aspects considered problematic in gendered language, emphasizing how the use of certain terms or certain syntactic choices contributes to maintain the discrimination against women. I will use the studies mentioned in this chapter as a starting point on my analysis of gender reference on the English website of the University of Padua.



## **ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENCE OF GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE ON THE ENGLISH WEBSITE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this third chapter I will analyse the presence of gender-neutral language on webpages in English on the website of the University of Padua. The University invests time and resources in creating an inclusive environment for its students by organising conferences to raise awareness about diversity and inclusion, by promoting initiatives that aim to develop the skills needed to create inclusive contexts. In my dissertation I will examine webpages in English of the University website to find out how gender-neutral language is used to avoid gender bias. The analysis will be structured in three parts and will use as a reference the studies illustrated in the previous chapters. Firstly, I will focus on analysing the "Occupational opportunities" section on the description of thirty degree courses and observe the different ways in which gender differentiation is avoided. Subsequently, I will examine the "Registering for graduation" page to indicate what syntactic choices have been made to make the text inclusive. Finally, in the last part I will analyse the job internship proposals on the career service page<sup>1</sup> to check whether gender-unmarked forms are used in the job offers and to research how gender-neutral language is used in order to avoid gender reference in the workplace.

### **3.2 Analysis of “Occupational opportunities” section on degree course descriptions**

Within the university website, the pages dealing with the description of degree courses are probably among the first pages that students look at and, therefore, can be considered as linguistic tools to express the university's commitment to creating a gender inclusive environment. As has already been said in the previous chapters, it is precisely in the world of work that gender differentiation is maintained through the use of gendered nouns for working professions and it is for this reason that new neutral terms are proposed. In the analysis of the "job opportunities" sections of the different courses I will highlight which linguistic strategies are used to express inclusivity through the use of gender-neutral language as the university should be the first institution that promotes gender equality in working employment. In order to carry out

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://careers.unipd.it/en/#/portale/stage-estero/offerte/vetrina>

this analysis, I examined the description of thirty degree courses and some of these will be given as examples of the linguistic strategies used within them.

The first strategy used to avoid gender bias is the use of gender-neutral terms when making generic references. Through the process of neutralisation, masculine forms are replaced by unmarked forms, which makes it possible to counteract the practice of labelling that maintains a gender-based division of labour. Gender-neutral terms (such as *manager*, *officer*, *expert*) are used in the university website to refer to both genders in texts illustrating the occupational opportunities of various degree courses, as in the following excerpts from the (1) *Human Rights and Multi-level Governance*<sup>2</sup> and (2) *Theatre, Film, Television and Media Studies*<sup>3</sup> course pages:

(1) “Job positions suitable for MA graduates are, among others: *human rights officer* in international organisations and agencies, in the diplomatic service, and in the local and national public sector;[...] *expert staff* in any governmental or non-governmental structure implementing public policies on human rights, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, women's and persons with disabilities' rights; *project manager* of non-governmental organisations' specialised units; *expert staff* of intercultural mediation agencies; *officer* in social and consumers' rights advocacy agencies; *expert staff* of ethical committees; *expert personnel* of social responsibility units and international relations departments of corporate organisations; *journalist* and *expert* in the media sector.”

(2) “The degree courses train: [...] *Editors*, *consultants* and *technicians* in all branches of publishing and communication.”

In addition, even if in the past some job titles had a different form for the female counterpart, such as *manager/manageress*, it was established that the unmarked form should be used as a neutral form to refer to professionals of both sexes. In order to adhere to the norms that transform the use of nouns to make language more inclusive, gender-neutral terms are used on the university website to refer to professions, for instance in the sentence “Graduates in Information Engineering can work as innovation *managers*”.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/second-cycle-degree/economics-and-political-science?tipo=LM&scuola=EP&ordinamento=2013&key=EP1980&cg=sociology>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/second-cycle-degree/human-and-social-sciences-and-cultural-heritage?tipo=LM&scuola=SU&ordinamento=2017&key=LE0615&cg=cultural-heritage>

In example (1) it is also possible to identify the use of a semantic construction that intends to be generic but in fact is not. Specifying "*women and persons with disabilities*" after talking about "*human rights*", a neutral term, contributes to evoking underlying messages in which a distinction and differentiation occurs between those explicitly mentioned and those included in the generic term.

In the previous chapters, numerous studies (Coates 2015, Hamilton 1988, Mackay & Fulkerson 1979) have been cited to support the debate against the use of the masculine as a generic form. One technique for avoiding gender bias caused by the use of the masculine generics is the use of constructions that make the discourse gender neutral. In the texts analysed for this dissertation, neutral constructions are obtained through the use of the passive form, the use of plural forms and by omitting gendered nouns and pronouns. With regard to the use of the passive form, the texts of (3) *Bioengineering*<sup>4</sup> and (4) *Theatre, film, television and media studies*<sup>5</sup> courses descriptions can be used as examples:

(3) “The graduated in Bioengineering *can be employed* in: Biomedical, biotech and pharmaceutical industries, [...] Public and private health care systems, medical instrumentation, telemedicine and e-health services, specialized laboratories, private practice”.

(4) “Graduates *are also qualified* to: Engage in school teaching, once teacher certification has been completed, and all relevant public examinations required by current legislation have been passed.”

In example (4) the use of the passive form combined with plural form allows the formulation of a sentence in which there is no reference to gender. Furthermore, the use of plural forms can be seen as a strategy for gender-neutral language since in English plural terms are neutral in any cases. In (3) the passive form makes it possible to refer to a job through the use of a prepositional phrase instead of a noun that could imply the gender of the person in question in a context where it is not necessary.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/second-cycle-degree/engineering?tipo=LM&scuola=IN&ordinamento=2020&key=IN0532&cg=engineering>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/second-cycle-degree/human-and-social-sciences-and-cultural-heritage?tipo=LM&scuola=SU&ordinamento=2017&key=LE0615&cg=cultural-heritage>

Another technique that can be observed is the use of the plural form in order to avoid the use of gendered pronouns. In fact, the use of plural subjects requires the use of plural pronouns, thus circumventing the use of the generic masculine as in the following examples:

(5) “*Graduates* will find employment in public and private research labs (pharmaceutical companies), which will focus on the design, synthesis and development of drugs and health products, biological evaluation and pharmacological activity of drugs and products for health. *They* can find employment in pharmaceutical industries dealing with production, development and quality control. *They* may also exercise the profession of pharmacist or chemist after having obtained the necessary professional qualification.” (From the “*Chemistry and Pharmaceutical Techniques*”<sup>6</sup> degree course page)

(6) “*Health assistants* can practice *their* profession, performing functions independently, in the structures of the National Health Service, in private companies or institutes and foundations, as employees and / or freelancers. In particular, *they* can find employment in the staff of the Directorate General and Health, in the Public Relations Offices, in the Prevention and Protection Services, in the Departments of hospitals, in the Corporate and Regional Epidemiological Services, in the Quality Services, in the Prevention Departments- Hygiene and public health services (vaccinations, health surveillance, cancer screening, sports medicine) - Hygiene prevention and workplace safety services, Food and nutrition hygiene services, Health education and promotion services, in the operating units / District services socio-health and in those oriented towards integrated social and health activities for elderly people with disabilities in children and adults. *Those* who have graduated can also practice *their* profession with general practitioners and / or pediatricians of free choice, in the territorial psychiatric services, in the family consultants, childhood and adolescence for family support, in the addiction services, in the pediatrics of community, in Diabetes Services, with the competent medical doctors of the public and private sectors. Finally, *they* can find positions in foundations, in nursing homes (RSA), in the regional offices of the National Center for Disease Prevention and Control, in the regional directorates of health planning, in penitentiary health, in the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/5-years-single-cycle-degree/medicine?tipo=CU&scuola=ME&ordinamento=2009&key=FA1733&cg=pharmacy>

at Work (INAIL), in the Provincial Directorate of Labor.” (From the “*Health Assistance*”<sup>7</sup> degree course page)

(7) “*Graduates* acquire skills that qualify *them*: to carry out functions of significant responsibility within central and local administrations of cultural heritage [...]” (From the “*History of Art*”<sup>8</sup> degree course page)

The use of plural forms in the presentation of degree courses is a technique widely used on the university website as it seems to be the easiest way to be more gender inclusive. Indeed, the use of the singular in the preceding sentences would have required a choice between using the generic he or the combined use of the masculine and feminine form “he/she”, e.g.:

(7a) “Graduate acquires skills that qualify *him*: to carry out [...]”

(7b) “Graduate acquires skills that qualify *him/her*: to carry out [...]”

In sentence (7a) the use of the generic masculine could potentially contribute to increase male bias as the use of “*he*” could be perceived as masculine, excluding women. As for sentence (7b), this formulation avoids gender differences but could be perceived as less inclusive than the sentence in example (7).

With reference to the use of pronouns, it has been said that one of the possible strategies to increase the inclusiveness of a text is the combined use of the masculine and feminine form to avoid the use of the generic masculine. This strategy is also used on the University of Padua website on the presentation page of some courses, e.g.:

(8) “Thanks to *his/her* language competence (Italian and English, both oral and written), and to *his/her* knowledge in literature, fine arts and music, as well as history, *s/he* will be able to work in the following fields: centres for the dissemination of Italian culture, both in Italy and abroad, where *s/he* will be able to plan and organize activities for the dissemination of Medieval and Renaissance Italian culture; for instance, *s/he* will be able to collaborate to the organization and management of exhibitions or events dedicated to Italian culture; book publishers, periodicals, digital or multimedia publishers, where *s/he* will be able to collaborate to the preparation of documents,

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/first-cycle-degree/medicine?tipo=L&scuola=ME&ordinamento=2015&key=ME1860&cg=healthcare-professions>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/second-cycle-degree/human-and-social-sciences-and-cultural-heritage?tipo=LM&scuola=SU&ordinamento=2008&key=LE0609&cg=cultural-heritage>

leaflets, and information material, to prepare programmes for the dissemination of the knowledge of Medieval and Renaissance Italian culture; museums and libraries, where *s/he* will collaborate to the cataloguing and enhancement of Italian artifacts of the Medieval and Renaissance periods.” (From the “*Italian Medieval and Renaissance Studies*”<sup>9</sup> degree course page)

(9) “The graduate carries out *his/her* professional activity in the field of exercise and sports education in public and private structures, in sports organizations and in recreational and social associations, in the field of sports tourism and in sport-related economic activities.” (From the “*Human Movement Sciences*”<sup>10</sup> degree course page)

Although this technique is accepted as a strategy for inclusive language, some scholars including Martyna (1980), Gastlin (1990), Mackay and Fulkerson (1979) claim that the use of both pronouns may contribute to gender differentiation. The results of their research would seem to confirm the theory of masculine pronominal dominance which contributes to increasing linguistic invisibility caused by gendered language. For example, in Mackay and Fulkerson's study, participants were asked to listen to sentences containing the generic masculine and to indicate whether each sentence could refer to females. As a result, they observed an 87% margin of error in interpreting the gender of the subject because the presence of the pronoun "*he*" causes a gender-specific (masculine) interpretation. Therefore, in order to use a linguistic construction that cannot cause misunderstandings, a different formulation of the extracts from the previous examples might be a better solution. For example, a different formulation might be:

(8a) “Thanks to *their* language competence (Italian and English, both oral and written), and to *their* knowledge in literature, fine arts and music, as well as history, *graduates* will be able to work in the following fields: centres for the dissemination of Italian culture, both in Italy and abroad, where *they* will be able to plan and organize activities for the dissemination of Medieval and Renaissance Italian culture; for instance, *they* will be able to collaborate to the organization and management of exhibitions or events dedicated to Italian culture; book publishers, periodicals, digital or multimedia

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/first-cycle-degree/human-and-social-sciences-and-cultural-heritage?tipo=L&scuola=SU&ordinamento=2021&key=SU2594&cg=humanities-and-language-studies>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/first-cycle-degree/medicine?tipo=L&scuola=ME&ordinamento=2013&key=IF0375&cg=sport-sciences>



publishers, where *they* will be able to collaborate to the preparation of documents, leaflets, and information material, to prepare programmes for the dissemination of the knowledge of Medieval and Renaissance Italian culture; museums and libraries, where *they* will collaborate to the cataloguing and enhancement of Italian artifacts of the Medieval and Renaissance periods.”

(9a) “*Graduates* carry out *their* professional activity in the field of exercise and sports education in public and private structures, in sports organizations and in recreational and social associations, in the field of sports tourism and in sport-related economic activities.”

Finally, during my analysis I found on the page of the *Applied Pharmaceutical Sciences*<sup>11</sup> course a description of job opportunities that seems to use gendered language:

(10) “Formulation, quality control, packaging and marketing of medicinal plants with the aim of improving both the product and its use. *He* can work as technician for the protection of wild medicinal plants and check their collection in the administrations of the Region and the Province. *His* professional activity can take place: in herbalist's shop and pharmacies with herbal department, in the manufacturing, wholesale and import of medicinal plants, as well as in companies involved in plants extraction, transformation and control of raw plant materials; in pharmaceutical companies operating in the production of herbal remedies, homeopathic products and dietary supplements made from medicinal plants; in areas involving the promotion and advertising of products made from raw plant materials; further occupational areas include public and private organizations dealing with awareness on products based on raw plant materials.”

As can be seen in the extract, the masculine pronoun is used twice in this paragraph. Although the use of the generic masculine is traditionally recognised as grammatically correct, its use seems to contribute to the subordinate position of the woman by making her linguistically invisible. Since the use of the pronoun “*he*” seems to lead to a mainly masculine interpretation of sentences, its use in the description of a degree course might make it seem that the course is addressed to male students and female students might be discouraged from enrolling. In order to avoid using a structure that might be perceived

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/first-cycle-degree/medicine?tipo=L&scuola=ME&ordinamento=2008&key=FA0243&cg=medicine-and-surgery>

by readers as purely masculine, neutral language could be used to rephrase the text. A different solution might be:

(11) “Formulation, quality control, packaging and marketing of medicinal plants with the aim of improving both the product and its use. *Graduates* can work as technician for the protection of wild medicinal plants and check their collection in the administrations of the Region and the Province. *Their* professional activity can take place: in herbalist's shop and pharmacies with herbal department, in the manufacturing, wholesale and import of medicinal plants, as well as in companies involved in plants extraction, transformation and control of raw plant materials; in pharmaceutical companies operating in the production of herbal remedies, homeopathic products and dietary supplements made from medicinal plants; in areas involving the promotion and advertising of products made from raw plant materials; further occupational areas include public and private organizations dealing with awareness on products based on raw plant materials.”

The use of a plural neutral class noun instead of the masculine personal subject pronoun "he" allows speakers to avoid any reference to gender in the subject and requires the use of plural pronouns in the rest of the paragraph. In this way the text would be more inclusive because, as pointed out by Gastil (1990) and Spender (1980), the presence of the generic "he" favours a masculine imagery in the readers.

### **3.3 An inclusive syntax: analysis of the page “Registering for graduation”**

On the University of Padua website, it is possible to observe different strategies through which language is used as a tool to promote gender equality, inclusiveness and to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes. As highlighted in the book "*Generi e Linguaggi. Linee Guida per un Linguaggio Amministrativo e Istituzionale Attento alle Differenze di Genere*" published in 2017 by the University of Padua<sup>12</sup>, all textual materials on the webpages in Italian were reviewed to check that gender-inclusive language was used appropriately. In the first part of this chapter, we analysed the description of job opportunities on the pages of various degree courses, but now we will look at the "Registering for graduation" page to see what other syntactic choices are used to reproduce an inclusive language.

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/sites/unipd.it/files/2017/Generi%20e%20linguaggi.pdf>

(12) “In order to graduate *you* must register for graduation on Uniweb by the deadline set for each graduation period. The registration procedure is broken down into several steps and requires *your* supervisor to approve *your* dissertation title. In order to graduate, *you* must also have sat and recorded all the examinations of *your* study plan at least 15 days before the graduation dates. *You* must also have paid the tuition fees and have submitted *your* dissertation in accordance with the procedure and by the set deadlines. If *you* do not pay the revenue stamp for graduation, *your* student’s records cannot be approved.”

As we can see in the extract, the second person singular is used in order not to specify the gender. This technique makes it possible to refer directly to the reader and it is particularly effective as it is used in a text that explains the procedure for graduating to the individual student, so that the use of the plural form could have been superfluous. As for the strategy of using neutral class nouns, in this case the substitution of "*you*" for "*student*" would have necessitated the substitution of "*your*" with a possessive pronoun that in the third person requires specifying gender, thus becoming an ineffective technique if the objective is to avoid any reference to gender in a context where it is not necessary. Another possible formulation that would be gender-neutral is the one using the impersonal form, which is in fact the strategy used in the Italian version of this page, the construction of the text in this case would be:

(12a) “In order to graduate, it is necessary to submit an application on Uniweb within the deadlines set for each degree period. The procedure involves several stages and requires approval of the title of the thesis by the supervisor. In order to graduate, it is also necessary to have taken all the examinations envisaged in the study plan at least 15 days before the start of the graduation call, to be in order with the payment of taxes and to respect the dates and methods of delivery of the thesis. It should be noted that failure to pay the tax stamp relating to the degree application prevents the profit assessments from being recorded.”

The second person singular is used throughout that page, it would seem to be the most appropriate technique because, given the context, it makes it possible to avoid any reference to gender through a formulation that is very clear to the reader. Moreover, it’s also more communicative to address the reader as ‘*you*’.

### 3.4 Gender reference in internship proposals on the career service page

One of the university's most important services is the Career Service<sup>13</sup>, which is responsible for putting students in touch with companies in the local area and acting as a support for them in finding new jobs and internships. The use of inclusive language in internship offers is crucial to promote equal opportunities and to avoid the use of language that perpetuates gender discrimination in the work environment. For this reason, in the last part of my analysis I will look at the work proposals in the career service window in order to outline which linguistic strategies are used for neutral language and whether there is language which could create a gender bias.

OFFER DETAILS	
Offer Description (*):	Javascript Engineer (m/f/d) - Internship
Number of people requested (*):	1
Tasks to perform (*):	<p>This is a crucial role in the Kreatize Tech Organization, where you report directly to your Tech Lead. With a wide range of tasks and learning opportunities, you will be working on the core product of KREATIZE.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Design/implement systems to make custom part procurement as easy as ordering pizza</li> <li>- Build solutions to improve and scale our supply chain facing software</li> <li>- End-to-end responsibility to develop production ready software</li> <li>- Develop highly performant RESTful APIs using Node.js and beautiful looking frontends using modern JavaScript frameworks</li> <li>- Work in a cross-functional agile team with other Software Developers and Mechanical Engineers.</li> </ul>

Figure 1: "Gender-neutral formulation"

Offer Description (*):	Translation/Interpretation Internship
Number of people requested (*):	5
Tasks to perform (*):	<p>Contacting linguists for translation projects, assisting the project manager in coordinating both large and small projects, formatting, reviewing, and working with various software that aid project management.</p> <p>You'll also get to proofread and quality check documents which have been completed by our Linguist department.</p> <p>The Translation Project Management internship is one which is fast paced, with a wide variety of tasks to perform. Please note: Translation Project Management interns do not perform the translations themselves but assist with Project Managers in the above tasks.</p>

Figure 2: "Gender-neutral terms"

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, the use of gender-neutral terms for professions and functions in the description of the desired profiles is the first step to promote inclusiveness in the workplace. In the past, job titles were one of the most important

<sup>13</sup> <https://careers.unipd.it/en/#/portale/stage-estero/offerte/vetrina>

tools to strengthen the connection between gender stereotypes and professions. Indeed, the use gender-specific job titles would imply a reference to the gender of the person required for the job, contributing to the diffusion of gender stereotypes on the division of labour, which Spender interprets as one of the strategies through which women are relegated to a secondary position in society.

OFFER DETAILS	
Offer Description (*):	Business Development Internship
Number of people requested (*):	5
Tasks to perform (*):	<p>You'll be partaking in proactive outreach activities – speaking to new clients about our services, and how we can help them break into new and exciting international markets. You'll have contact with clients over the phone and via e-mail, and you'll bring a friendly, persuasive approach to managing your own portfolio.</p> <p>You'll have the opportunity to create a database of new clients you'd like to contact, focussing on specific industries which may interest you, or have a need for our services.</p>

Figure 3: "Second person singular"

With regard to the task description, in most job offers the technique used to avoid gender bias is the use of the second person singular or the omission of gendered language structures. The use of the pronoun "you" allows to make clear what the job of the candidate will be and is also inclusive because it refers directly to the reader of the proposal, avoiding any reference to gender as it is never called into question through the presence of forms that recall it. In addition, the sentences describing the various tasks are structured in such a way as to omit the subject, which could also be redundant, as in "Contacting linguists for translation projects, assisting the project manager in coordinating both large and small projects, formatting, reviewing and working with various software that aid project management."

Descrizione dell'offerta (*):	E-COMMERCE SUPPORT (M/F/X) INTERNSHIP
Numero di persone richieste (*):	1
Compiti da svolgere (*):	<p>The resource, reporting to the Marketplace Expert, will have the opportunity to learn the main methods and procedures relating to the management of direct to consumer online sales. The resource will support the growth of the employee sale channel, consumer loyalty programs, smallB2B and D2C e-marketplaces for all Brands of the Group including De'Longhi, Kenwood and Braun.</p> <p>As an Ecommerce Support she/he will be working closely with the Group team, to ensure the effective day-to-day running of the above mentioned channels.</p> <p>In particular, <i>he</i> will be involved in the following activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Scout new opportunities in terms of corporate sale networks as well as loyalty programs ensuring full coverage in selected European and no-European countries</li> <li>-Ensure the right product assortment and prices are uploaded on all required touchpoints</li> <li>-Liaise with third party networks in order to execute planned online paid communications such as newsletters, online merchandising and advertising</li> <li>-Continuously measure sales performance optimising user experience, catalogue offer and prices</li> <li>-Collaborate with ecommerce team to ensure alignment with the overall ecommerce proposition and strategy</li> </ul>

Figure 4: "Generic he"

The job offer in Figure 4 can be taken as an example of a text formulation in which strategies for an inclusive language seem to be used in an ineffective way. In many proposals a singular noun is used as the subject of sentences (as "*the resource*"), thus requiring the presence of pronouns of the third person singular. This leads to two main options being used: the use of the generic "*he*" or the combined form "*he/she*". The use of '*he/she*' has been widely criticised because of its interpretation mainly as masculine and especially because the repeated use of this form in a text risk making the text less immediate and clear. Nevertheless, in the text in Figure 4 it is possible to notice the use of the female-male order in "*she/he*", which is suggested by the university of Padua to increase the visibility of the female gender. Moreover, in this example the use of the generic *he* can lead to making the recruitment process biased and attracting more male candidates. Reading the sentence "In particular, *he* will be involved in the following activities", the first interpretation seems to be that the candidate who will have to perform those tasks will be a man, since the presence of the pronoun "he" acts as a specific reference to a gender. The best way to prevent gender bias in the recruitment process is to avoid the use of any language that invokes gender differentiation. Since the university aims to offer equal opportunities, the best solution might be to avoid the use of the generic masculine by favouring neutral formulations through the use of the plural forms, neutral terms or by omitting pronouns directly, so as not to cause misunderstandings.

Finally, there is one last strategy that needs to be highlighted: namely, the replacement of morphemes responsible for masculine and feminine forms with an asterisk.

CARATTERISTICHE OFFERTA	
Descrizione dell'offerta (*):	Logistics Specialist Internship
Numero di persone richieste (*):	1
Compiti da svolgere (*):	<p>L* stagista sarà inserit* all'interno del team Stock&amp;Reverse, dipartimento Planning Logistics.</p> <p>Sarà dedicat* al supporto del team tramite reportistiche ed analisi trasversali alle società del gruppo OTB e coinvolt* in attività relative alla reverse logistic.</p> <p>In particolare:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Raccolta delle informazioni per pianificazione/monitoraggio dei resi merce verso i Distribution center dai local hubs Extra UE, e conseguente gestione dei rapporti con provider logistici nei vari local hubs (UK, Svizzera, Norvegia + filiali US e Shanghai)</li> <li>- Creazione/aggiornamento reportistica per monitoraggio stock e gestione rapporti con gli enti coinvolti (CG, Logistic STAFF e OTB, SSC, CS)</li> <li>- Creazione e monitoraggio reportistica trasversale ai vari uffici del dipartimento planning.</li> <li>- Supporto nell'operatività day by day dell'ufficio stock&amp;reverse</li> </ul>

Figure 5: "Asterisk"

This technique is used with *grammatical gender languages*, such as Italian, and the asterisk makes gender-specific nouns gender-neutral. The presence of inclusive language is immediately highlighted as the asterisks are visually the first thing the reader notices. In this way the interpretation of gender is left free to the candidate, completely avoiding reference to gender in a context where it is not necessary. The negative aspects of this technique are the risk of making the text too impersonal and that its use is also little supported by scholars because it is limited only to written language as it does not have the corresponding phoneme.

The results of the analysis of the presence of gender-neutral language on webpages in English on the website of the University of Padua show that the university is committed to avoiding gender bias, even in English through the use of several linguistic strategies, including the use of gender-neutral terms, the use of plural forms and the use of the passive voice. Indeed, it was also observed that the only linguistic form that could be interpreted as the use of gendered language on the university website is the use of generic masculine in some internship proposals and in the description of at least two

degree courses: the *Applied Pharmaceutical Science* course and the *Agricultural Science and Technology*<sup>14</sup> course.

---

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.unipd.it/en/educational-offer/second-cycle-degree/agricultural-sciences-and-veterinary-medicine?tipo=LM&scuola=AV&ordinamento=2017&key=AG0063&cg=agricultural-forestry-and-food-sciences>



## CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to examine how gendered language maintains gender biases and how gender-neutral language can be used to replace the use of gendered forms in order to promote gender equality. Moreover, the purpose of the current study was to determine the presence of gender-neutral language on the English website of the University of Padua. This study has shown that the representation of the gender takes place in all levels of grammar, especially in the morphological, syntactic and semantic levels. Concerning the morphological aspect, one of the most significant results that emerged from this analysis is that the use of the generic masculine, although grammatically correct, does not seem to work as a strategy for inclusive language. Several experiments have confirmed the validity of the theory of masculine pronominal dominance, according to which the presence of the pronoun '*he*' leads to a gender-specific interpretation and tends to increase male bias. Furthermore, the presence of a marked trait for female nouns is a demonstration of the disparity between the two genders and of the androcentric structure of the English language as male nouns are used as a lexical base in the derivation process required to form the nouns used for their female counterparts. As far as semantics is concerned, the acquisition of negative meanings in words associated with women, regardless of their initial meaning, shows that English is a man-made language in which women contribute only marginally to its production. The marginal role of women in the production of language seems to be one of the major causes contributing to the maintenance of women's subordinate position in society. For this reason, those who promote the use of inclusive language to achieve gender equality argue that the first step is to bring women out of their condition of linguistic invisibility. Several possible strategies have been outlined to achieve this goal: the use of gender-neutral terms, the use of the second person singular, the use of plural pronouns and the use of the passive form.

As far as my analysis is concerned, the findings suggest that in the textual materials on the University of Padua website, masculine forms are replaced by unmarked forms through the process of neutralisation. Gender-neutral terms (such as *manager*, *officer*, *expert*) are used in the university website to refer to gender in texts illustrating the occupational opportunities of various degree courses. Furthermore, the use of a plural

neutral class noun instead of the masculine personal subject pronoun “he”; allows to avoid any reference to gender in the subject and requires the use of plural pronouns in the rest of the paragraph. Finally, the only linguistic form that could be interpreted as the use of gendered language on the university website is the use of generic masculine in the description of some degree courses and in some internship proposals. Since numerous studies have pointed out that the use of the masculine form as generic seems to increase gender differentiation, a better choice to avoid misunderstandings would be to avoid its use within the textual material of the website, replacing it with gender neutral forms.

To conclude, we can say that the University's commitment in creating an inclusive environment is visible in the use of different strategies that aim to use gender-neutral language while avoiding those linguistic structures that might maintain gender differentiation. It is my hope that the work done in this dissertation can then be used as a concrete tool to modify those linguistic aspects that could be interpreted as problematic since their used seems to favour gender bias.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, K. J., & Leaper, C. (1998). Meta-analysis of gender effects on conversational interruption: who, what, when, where and how. *Sex Roles*, 39, 225-252.
- Ardner, E. (1975). Belief and the problem of women. *Perceiving women*. Malaby, 1-28
- Aries, E. (1976). Interaction patterns and themes of male, female, and mixed groups. *Small groups behaviours*, 7, 7-18
- Bilous, F. R., & Krauss, R. M. (1988). Dominance and accommodation in the conversational behaviours of some same- and mixed-gender dyads. *Language and Communication*, 8, 183-194.
- Bodine, A. (1975). Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular “they”, sex-indefinite “he” and “he or she”. *Language in Society*, 4, 129-146.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena. In Goody. E. (ed.), *Questions and Politeness*, 56-311. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universal in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, D., McAlinden, F., & O’Leary, K. (1989). Lakoff in context: the social and linguistic function of tag questions. In Coates & Cameron 1989, 74-93.
- Carli, L. L. (1999). Gender, interpersonal power, and social influence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 81-99.
- Clark, K. (1992). “The linguistics of blame”: representation of women in *The Sun*’s reporting of crimes of sexual violence. *Language, Text, and Context: Essays in Stylistics*, ed. by Michael Toolan, 208-226. London and New York: Routledge.
- Coates, J. (1996). *Women Talk: Conversation between Women Friends*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Coates, J. (2015). *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language (Routledge Linguistics Classics)* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

- Corbett, G. G. (2015). *The Expression of Gender (Expression of Cognitive Categories (Ecc))*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: Cambridge University Press.
- Definition of Hussy, Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's most-trusted online dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hussy> (Accessed 23/09/2021).
- Definition of Vixen, Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's most-trusted online dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vixen> (Accessed 23/09/2021).
- Eckert, P. (1990). Cooperative competition in adolescent girl talk. *Discourse Process*, 13, 92-122.
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2013). *Language and Gender* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Edelsky, C., & Adams, K. (1990). Creating inequality: breaking the rules in debate. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 9, 171-190.
- Ely, R., Gleason, J. B., Narasimhan, B., & McCabe, A. (1995). Family talk about talk: mothers lead the way. *Discourse Processes*, 9(2), 201-218.
- Frank, F. W., & Treichler, P. A. (1989). *Language, Gender, and Professional Writing: Theoretical Approaches and Guidelines for Nonsexist Usage*. New York: Modern Language Association.
- Gabriel, U., Gygax, P. M., & Kuhn, E. A. (2018). *Neutralising linguistic sexism: Promising but cumbersome?* *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 21(5), 844–858. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218771742> (Accessed 23/09/2021).
- Gleason, J. B., Perlmann, R. Y., Ely, D., & Evans, D. (1994). The baby talk register: parents' use of diminutives. *Handbook of Research in Language Development Using CHILDES*, ed by J. L. Sokolov and C. E. Snow, 50-76. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goffman, E. (1972). On facework: an analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. In Laver, J., & Hutchinson, S. (eds), *Communication in Face to Face Interaction*, 34-53. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gastil, J. (1990). Generic pronouns and sexist language: The oxymoronic character of masculine generics, *Sex Roles*, 23, 629-643. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226958099\\_Generic\\_pronouns\\_and\\_sexist\\_language\\_The\\_oxymoronic\\_character\\_of\\_masculine\\_generics](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226958099_Generic_pronouns_and_sexist_language_The_oxymoronic_character_of_masculine_generics) (Accessed 5/11/2021)
- Goffman, E. (1976). Gender display. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, 3, 69-77.

- Graziosi, G. (2021, September 12). Pregnant woman shot and killed in New York breaking up a fight at her baby shower. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/pregnant-woman-killed-new-york-baby-shower-b1918776.html> (Accessed 23/09/2021).
- Guidelines for Inclusive Language | Linguistic Society of America. (2016). *Linguistic Society of America*. <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/guidelines-inclusive-language> (Accessed 23/09/2021).
- Hamilton, M.C. (1988). Using masculine generics: Does generic he increase male bias in the user's imagery?. *Sex Roles*, 19, 785–799. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00288993> (Accessed 5/11/2021)
- Hannah, A., & Murachver, T. (1999). Gender and conversational style as predictors of conversational behaviours. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 18, 153-174.
- Herbert, R. K. (1990). Sex-based differences in compliment behaviour. *Language in Society*, 19(2), 201-224.
- Holmes, J. (1986). Functions of “you know” in women’s and men’s speech. *Language in Society*, 15, 1-22.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, Men and Politeness*. London and New York: Longman.
- Jespersen, O. (1922). *The woman. Language: its nature, development, and origin*. Hamlin Press.
- Kiesling, S. F. (1997). *Power and the language of men*. in Johnson and Meinhof 1997, 65-85. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, R. T., & Bucholtz, M. (2004). *Language and Woman’s Place: Text and Commentaries (Studies in Language and Gender)* (Revised ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Maccoby, E. (1998). *The two Sexes: Growing up Apart, Coming Together*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Maccoby, E. (2002). Gender and social exchange: a development perspective. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 95, 87-106.
- MacKay, D. G., & Fulkerson, D. C. (1979). On the comprehension and production of pronouns. *Journal of Verbal Learning & Verbal Behavior*, 18(6), 661–673. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(79\)90369-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(79)90369-4) (Accessed 5/11/2021)

- Maltz, D. N.; & Borker, R. A. (1982). A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In *Language and Society Identity*, ed. by J. J. Gumperz, 196-216. Cambridge University Press.
- Martyna, W. (1980). Beyond the “He/Man” Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language. *Signs*, 5(3), 482–493. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173588> (Accessed 5/11/2021)
- Miller, M. M., & James, L. E. (2009). Is the generic pronoun he still comprehended as excluding women? *The American Journal of Psychology*, 122(4), 483–496. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27784423> (Accessed 5/11/2021)
- Mills, S. (2012). *Gender Matters: Feminist Linguistic Analysis*. Equinox Publishing.
- Penelope, J. (1990). *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers’ Tongues*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Press Association. (2021, September 23). UK police believe 28-year-old teacher was murdered as she took five-minute walk to meet friend. *TheJournal.Ie*. <https://www.thejournal.ie/sabina-nessa-murder-london-park-5556054-Sep2021/> (accessed 23/09/2021)
- Roger, D. B., & Neshoever, W. (1987). Individual differences in dyadic conversational strategies: a further study. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 247-255.
- Schulz, M. (1975). The semantic derogation of women. In Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds), *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, Newbury House, Rowley, Mass,64-75.
- Sczesny, S., Formanowicz, M., & Moser, F. (2016). Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00025> (Accessed 5/11/2021)
- Spender, D. (1980). *Man made language* (2nd ed.). New York University Press.
- Tannen, D (1990). *You just don't understand: women and men in conversation*. New York, NY: Morrow.

Tannen, D. (1994). The relativity of linguistic strategies: rethinking power and solidarity in gender and dominance. In *Gender and Discourse*, ed. by D. Tannen, 19-52. Oxford University Press.

Thomson, R., Murachver, T., & Green, J. (2001). Where is the gender in gendered language? In *Psychological Science*. 12 (2), 171–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00329> (Accessed 5/11/2021)

University of Padua website: <https://www.unipd.it/en/> (Accessed 2/03/2022)

Vincent, D. (1982). *Pressions et impressions sur les sacres au Québec*. Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, Office de la langue Française.

West, C., & Zimmerman, H. (1983). Small insults: a study of interruptions in cross-sex conversation between unacquainted persons. In *Language, Gender and Society*. Newbury House, Rowley, MA.

West, C., & Zimmerman, H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, 1 (2), 125-151.

Wilson, T. (1553). *Arte of Rhetorique*. Gainsville: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints.





## SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Lo scopo di questa tesi è analizzare come l'uso di un linguaggio di genere contribuisca a generare e diffondere stereotipi di genere e come le strutture linguistiche neutre possano essere utilizzate per promuovere l'uguaglianza tra i due generi. Nello specifico, analizzerò la presenza di un linguaggio di genere neutro nelle pagine web in lingua inglese dell'Università di Padova per osservare come viene utilizzato un linguaggio non discriminatorio al fine di veicolare valori di equità e inclusione. Ho scelto di sviluppare questo argomento perché negli ultimi anni mi sono interessata agli studi sul genere e il linguaggio dopo aver constatato che il linguaggio è lo strumento principale per promuovere la parità di genere all'interno della società. Durante il secondo anno di università, mi sono imbattuta in un post su Facebook riguardante le lamentele di alcune studentesse della mia stessa università. In questo post, una ragazza si lamentava della presenza di un linguaggio non inclusivo nel sito web dell'università. Per questo motivo, ho deciso di esaminare come viene utilizzato il linguaggio inclusivo nel sito web dell'università con l'obiettivo di promuovere l'inclusività di genere.

Ho scelto di organizzare la mia analisi in tre capitoli. Nel primo ho esaminato qual è la connessione tra genere e linguaggio. In primo luogo, ho delineato quali strutture linguistiche sono considerate un linguaggio di genere e in seguito quali di esse sono consigliate per promuovere un approccio inclusivo. Nel secondo capitolo, mi sono concentrata nel delineare i quattro approcci che sono stati sviluppati da Coates per sottolineare i diversi aspetti problematici del linguaggio di genere. Questi approcci sono chiamati: *“deficit approach”*, *“dominance approach”*, *“difference approach”* e *“dynamic approach”*. La suddivisione di tutti gli studi linguistici sul genere in quattro diversi approcci è stata particolarmente utile poiché è stata utilizzata come punto di partenza per la mia analisi sulla presenza di un linguaggio di genere nel sito web in lingua inglese dell'Università di Padova. Infatti, l'ultima parte della mia tesi riguarda l'analisi di tre diverse sezioni del sito web dell'Università. Nella prima parte vengono analizzati i paragrafi *“Occupational opportunities”* presenti nelle descrizioni dei diversi corsi di laurea. Nella seconda parte è presente l'analisi della pagina *“Registering for graduation”* al fine di osservare quale struttura sintattica viene utilizzata per produrre un

linguaggio inclusivo. Infine, nella terza ed ultima parte ho verificato la presenza di riferimenti di genere nelle proposte di stage presenti sulla pagina del Career Service.

Il linguaggio non è un sistema statico, ma un'entità dinamica che si evolve nel tempo e riflette la società in cui si sviluppa. È uno degli strumenti principali attraverso cui viene rafforzata l'asimmetria tra i due generi e vengono diffusi stereotipi, ma allo stesso modo può essere utilizzato come strumento per promuovere la parità di genere. La rappresentazione del genere avviene a tutti i livelli grammaticali, soprattutto a livello morfologico, sintattico e semantico. Per quanto riguarda l'aspetto morfologico, uno dei risultati più significativi emersi da questa analisi è l'uso del generico maschile: sebbene grammaticalmente corretto, non sembra funzionare come strategia per il linguaggio inclusivo. Diversi esperimenti hanno confermato la validità della teoria della dominanza pronominale maschile, secondo la quale la presenza del pronome 'he' porta a un'interpretazione specifica di genere e tende ad aumentare i pregiudizi verso il genere femminile. Inoltre, la presenza di un tratto marcato per i sostantivi femminili è la dimostrazione della disparità tra i due generi e della struttura androcentrica della lingua inglese in quanto i sostantivi maschili sono utilizzati come base lessicale nel processo di derivazione necessario per formare i sostantivi utilizzati per le loro controparti femminili. Per quanto riguarda la semantica, l'acquisizione di significati negativi nelle parole associate alle donne, indipendentemente dal loro significato iniziale, mostra che l'inglese è una lingua prodotta dagli uomini in cui le donne contribuiscono solo marginalmente alla sua produzione. Il ruolo marginale delle donne nella produzione del linguaggio sembra essere una delle principali cause che contribuiscono al mantenimento della posizione subordinata delle donne nella società. Per questo motivo, coloro che promuovono l'uso di un linguaggio inclusivo per raggiungere l'uguaglianza di genere sostengono che il primo passo è quello di portare le donne fuori dalla loro condizione di invisibilità linguistica. Sono state delineate diverse possibili strategie per il raggiungimento di questo obiettivo: l'uso di termini neutri rispetto al genere, l'uso della seconda persona singolare, l'uso di pronomi plurali e l'uso della forma passiva.

Per quanto riguarda la mia analisi, i risultati suggeriscono che nei materiali testuali in inglese del sito dell'Università di Padova le forme maschili sono sostituite da forme non marcate attraverso il processo di neutralizzazione. I termini di genere neutro (come *manager*, *officer*, *expert*) sono utilizzati nel sito web dell'università per fare riferimento

al genere nei testi che illustrano le opportunità professionali dei vari corsi di laurea. Inoltre, l'uso di un sostantivo plurale al posto del pronome personale maschile "he" consente di evitare qualsiasi riferimento al genere nel soggetto e richiede l'uso di pronomi plurali nel resto del paragrafo. Infine, l'unica forma linguistica che potrebbe essere interpretata come l'uso di un linguaggio di genere sul sito web dell'università è l'uso del maschile generico nella descrizione di alcuni corsi di laurea e in alcune proposte di tirocinio. Poiché numerosi studi hanno sottolineato che l'uso della forma maschile come forma generica sembra aumentare la differenziazione di genere, una scelta migliore per evitare malintesi sarebbe quella di evitarne l'uso all'interno del materiale testuale del sito web, sostituendolo con forme di genere neutro.

Per concludere, possiamo affermare che l'impegno dell'Ateneo nella creazione di un ambiente inclusivo è visibile nell'uso di diverse strategie che mirano a utilizzare un linguaggio neutro rispetto al genere evitando quelle strutture linguistiche che potrebbero mantenere la differenziazione di genere. Mi auguro che il lavoro svolto in questa tesi possa poi essere utilizzato come uno strumento concreto per modificare quegli aspetti linguistici che potrebbero essere interpretati come problematici in quanto il loro utilizzo sembra favorire una distinzione di genere.