

ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND SEX/GENDER ISSUES: BETWEEN SEXISM AND INCLUSIVITY

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This work aims to focus on two significant moments in the history of gender language in Italy: the period in which the topic develops into a public (and then scientific) discussion, which takes place in the 1980s, and the recent one, forty years later than the previous one, in relation to so-called inclusive language, which involves the use of a symbol in the place of male or female gender endings in names referring to human beings. The latter, despite having a great success especially - but not only - among young people, has proved to be inconsistent both with the linguistic system of Italian and with the recent sustainability policy described in the *Strategia Nazionale per la Parità di Genere* (2021-26) This advocates for the visibility of women through language as a means of achieving gender equality, as required by Objective 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations.

1. Introduction

The discussion on the connection between language, sexual difference and gender unfolded in the Eighties in Western countries, on the wave of the Feminist Movement in the US. The proposal to change language under the influence of the Women's Movement was, according to Marlys Hellinger, editor of one of the first collection of articles on this subject, "das als spektakulärste sprachliche Erscheinung der letzten fünfzehn Jahre" (Hellinger 1985, p. 1)¹. The starting point and reference point for the discussion which followed remains the proposal about the "sex/gender system", made by Gayle Rubin in her work *The traffic in Women: Notes on*

1 The most spectacular linguistic phenomenon of the past fifteen years.

the “*Political Economy*” of Sex (1975). According to Rubin, “*sex/gender system* is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin 1975, p. 159). This is not ‘natural’ but has been imposed on system: “The social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality. Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality” (Rubin 1975, p. 179). The male and female genders, however, are not in a balanced relationship: on the contrary, they have asymmetrical and discriminating ways of influence on life to the advantage of the male gender, and an unequal distribution of power. Language and its use give visibility and at the same time serve as an instrument of construction of this inequality. There was a growing conviction that language reflects a masculine and chauvinist structure of the world and determines its interpretation in these terms. In the following years the concept of gender has been widely discussed and revisited (Pezzini, 2014), but the gender binarism² that guided the first phase of the discussion, has remained – and is still for many people – at the base of the reflection on linguistic sexism.

The environment in which research on the connection between language and sexual difference developed was not, as we might have expected, academic. “It was the language activism associated with the women’s movement from the 1970s onwards that posed the first major female challenge to the male dominance of language. Women of all walks of life started to expose the biased portrayal of the sexes in language use and demonstrated that this portrayal was particularly discriminatory and damaging to women” (Pauwels 2003, p. 551).

In Italy too the discussion on the sexist use of the Italian language found fertile ground in the feminist movement, mainly thanks to Alma Sabatini, a feminist linguist educated both in Europe and US. In 1985, she published the essay *Occupational titles in Italian: changing the sexist usage*, in the volume *Sprachwandel und feministische Sprachpolitik: Internationale Perspektiven* (Hellinger, 1985), which collected a series of articles on possible alternative language models to the traditional ones in order to achieve equal linguistic treatment of men and women in European languages. Italian, German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Spanish and Greek

2 With “gender binarism” we intend that gender is classified into two distinct forms of masculine and feminine, and it aligns with the sex assigned at birth.

were examined, and the survey confirmed that feminist explorations into the representation of women and men revealed many points in common across speech communities, as well as across languages.

In her article, Sabatini pointed out that “the significance and the full cultural and political implications of sexist language have not yet been recognized in Italy and are just slowly gaining ground even in feminist circles [...] Studies are now being published about differences in the written style of women and men, about the whole symbolical apparatus of our man-made culture, about the importance of metaphors and especially of sexual metaphors. But what is still to be recognized is the importance of the one all-pervasive metaphor built into our language: I mean the metaphor of gender itself” (Sabatini 1985, p. 64).

In the same years scholar Patrizia Violi, who offered much food for thought, published the volume *L'infinito singolare. Considerazioni sulle differenze sessuali nel linguaggio* (1986). Her work starts from the assumption that “la differenza sessuale sia una dimensione fondamentale della nostra esperienza e della nostra vita e che non esista sfera della nostra attività che non ne sia in qualche modo marcata, segnata, attraversata”. According to Violi (1986, p. 9), the pervasiveness of sexual difference raises the question (a) whether language is in itself “neutral” and sexual difference emerges only from the speakers’ use of language, or (b) whether it is symbolised, in a way that has yet to be deciphered, within language itself. Following this second hypothesis, the linguistic category of grammatical gender would be connected to the extralinguistic reality of sexual difference. However, as Violi herself points out, this is a controversial interpretation: grammatical gender can also be interpreted in terms of arbitrariness, i.e. it can only be considered as the result of exclusively linguistic causes and forces³.

The two approaches, that of semiotic reflection on the possible presence of sexual difference in language, and that of feminist linguistics aimed at denouncing and changing the sexist characteristics and use of language, did not merge. While Violi’s study nourished the discussion in the

3 A few years later one of the most influential scholars on the topic of ‘gender’, Greville G. Corbett, whose studies are also referred to by some Italian scholars, stated that languages with a grammatical gender system classify nouns into gender categories on the basis of morphological or phonological features. Whilst many have claimed that a grammatical gender system which classifies nouns in the masculine, feminine, or neuter categories is a purely linguistic invention, and is not linked to the extralinguistic category of biological sex, he (Corbett 1991, p. 34) acknowledges that “there is no purely morphological system” and that such systems “always have a semantic core”. This is particularly obvious in the gender assignment of human (agent) nouns, with most nouns referring to women being feminine, and those referring to male persons being masculine.

academic world, the activity of Alma Sabatini and of the group of feminists who collaborated with her, for some time remained restricted to the feminist circuit. However, it suddenly became known to the general public thanks to a set of favourable contingent circumstances that accompanied the publication of her best-known work, *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (Sabatini, 1987), which is still the reference point for studies on linguistic sexism in Italy⁴. One of the most noteworthy reasons for this is the fact that Italian politics was engaged in the international process of building equality between women and men. This involved replacing the traditional model ‘equality’ as the homologation of women to the male paradigm with, according to the ‘difference theory’, the representation and enhancement of women in the workplace and society. It was in this political and cultural climate that the Italian *Commissione per la Parità e le Pari Opportunità fra Uomo e Donna*, created in 1983 at the *Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*, promoted research on sexism in the Italian language and entrusted it to Alma Sabatini. The official venue in which the work of Sabatini was published - the *Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri* - guaranteed its wide circulation in institutional circles. Added to this is the interest of the press, which, as we shall see later, played a fundamental role in the circulation of the research.

2. The first complaints of linguistic sexism in Italy

Alma Sabatini’s work consisted of an analysis of the use of the Italian language in some Italian newspapers and magazines, and highlighted a number of sexist linguistic uses:

Per quanto riguarda la lingua italiana, come molte altre lingue a genere grammaticale, il principio del maschile non marcato pervade tutta la lingua, poiché qualsiasi sostantivo maschile (singolare e plurale) riferito a persona può ugualmente rappresentare i due sessi o il solo maschile: “gli italiani” possono essere sia “gli uomini italiani” sia “le donne e gli uomini italiani”. Le conseguenze che derivano [...] sono state denominate “dissimmetrie grammaticali” per indicare le disparità di trattamento riservato alle donne e agli uomini nelle

4 For an overview of the reactions to Sabatini’s proposals and the consequences on the language of education, institutions and media see Robustelli (2018).

forme grammaticali, distinguendole dalle differenze “discorsive” e di uso lessicale, definite “dissimmetrie semantiche (..)”. Le conseguenze linguistiche (...) producono effetti di cancellazione, marginalizzazione e riduzione delle donne (Sabatini 1987, p. 25).

According to *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, the Italian language shows an asymmetrical/dissymmetric treatment of women and men, both at the grammatical and semantic level, due to the practice of considering the man/the male as the prototype for human representation. As a consequence, the woman/female is reduced to the status of the ‘invisible’, or the ‘marked’ or the ‘inferior’ one. The lexical gaps, that is, the absence of words to denote women in a variety of prestigious roles, professions, and occupations, shows the low esteem in which women are held. Here are few examples (taken from the Sabatini’s original work):

Grammatical dissymmetries

- Use of the unmarked masculine:
 - Use of the words *uomo* - *uomini* with a generic value. E.g. *Uomo delle nevi* (‘snowmen’)
 - Male nouns (+human) with generic value. E.g. *Ragazzi americani* (‘American boys and girls’)
- Professional titles and institutional roles:
 - Masculine instead of feminine titles. E.g. *Marisa Bellisario è l’amministratore unico dell’Italtel*. (‘Marisa Bellisario is the sole director of Italtel’)
 - Suffix *-essa*. E.g. *Le vigilesse che protestano* (‘Protesting female traffic wardens’)
- Dissymmetrical use of first names, surnames, titles:
 - Use of first name/nickname. E.g. *Maggie* [Margaret Thatcher] *attacca i minatori* (‘Maggie attacks the miners’)
 - Use of *signorina* [the masculine *signorino* is very unusual]. E.g. *Centinaia di signore e signorine fanno la fila* (‘Hundreds of ladies and young ladies are queuing up’)

Semantic dissymmetries

- Use of adjectives indicating:
 - weakness. E.g. *Tutti questi baldi ragazzotti, tutte queste svenevoli fanciulle* (‘All these bold boys, all these fainting girls’)

- appearance, even when not required by the context. E.g. *Nel mio ufficio lavorano due ragazze graziose* ('Two pretty girls work in my office')

Sabatini also provides a series of "recommendations", i.e. alternatives compatible with the language system to avoid certain sexist forms of the Italian language, in order to "dare visibilità linguistica alle donne e pari valore linguistico a termini riferiti al sesso femminile" (Sabatini 1987, p. 96). The two most relevant recommendations are:

- (a) use both the masculine and feminine grammatical gender to refer to a group of women and men (*buongiorno ragazze e ragazzi* instead of *buongiorno ragazzi*)
- (b) use the feminine grammatical gender instead of the masculine one for titles indicating profession or prestigious institutional role referring to women (*avvocata / chirurga / notaiA Claudia Rossi* instead of *avvocatO / chirurgO / notaiO Claudia Rossi*).

Sabatini suggests 'creating' the feminine form if not already available and offers a detailed description of how to form the feminine, taking the lexicalised masculine form as a starting point.

It should be pointed out that Sabatini's proposals were all compatible with the Italian language system, with only one exception, concerning gender agreement. As a rule, in Italian when two or more nouns of different gender appear in a conjoined noun phrase, masculine plural agreement is required: *Anna, Paolo e Bianca sono andati a casa*. Sabatini proposed instead the agreement with the gender of the last noun:

Anna, Paolo, Mario e Bianca sono andatE a casa

or with the gender of the nouns that are in the majority:

Anna, Bianca Paolo, Mario e Laura sono andatE a casa

3. The first reactions of linguists and of the general public

Linguists reacted slowly to Sabatini's proposals. However, a review of Alma Sabatini's work by Giulio Lepschy (1987) introduced the question of *linguistic sexism*, which until then had been confined to feminist

discussions, into the scientific debate of Italian linguistics. Lepschy read the individual proposals of Alma Sabatini in the light of well-known issues of general linguistics (the relationship between language and thought, the notion of markedness, the relationship between language and culture/society, etc.), reconnecting her work to the perspective of international research on the relationship between language and sex. In the following years, Italian linguistics examined the question of the use of the feminine grammatical gender from many points of view: semantic, morphological, morphosyntactic, with special regard to word formation. The mechanisms of gender assignment and gender agreement, and the phonological, morphological and morphosyntactic rules involved in them were examined, starting with Thornton (2001 & 2003). Most studies, however, have examined the use of sexist language in particular contexts, such as media, public and educational communication. The *Accademia della Crusca* took part in the debate, promoted research projects and publications, including the volume *Sindaco e Sindaca. Il linguaggio di genere* (Robustelli, 2016), dedicated to the history and use of non-sexist language.

Public reaction to Sabatini's proposals was predominantly negative: the existence of linguistic sexism was mainly denied. Reasons for refusing them varied according to the status and linguistic expertise of the commentator. Non-experts rejected the claim on (folk) assumptions: I do not like the sound of the new feminine words; they are ugly; there is no need for new words; a masculine word can be used even to refer to a feminine noun; these new words seem incorrect; some accused Sabatini of giving only a list of 'prescriptions' for the purpose of changing the language, without having explained the reasons for it, and so on⁵. Women themselves rejected the use of feminine titles, even though these had become an important feature of the linguistic change that was needed to give value to them: *Tanta fatica per laurearsi e poi ti chiamano dottora!* ("So much effort to get a degree and then they call you *doctress!*") is one of the most famous headlines of the time.

But the time for a change had come also, thanks to the international climate. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) had reaffirmed that "it is essential to design, implement and monitor, with the

5 In all likelihood, Alma Sabatini would have developed the data, of which she had only given an initial description in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, in other scientific works, complete with in-depth information and bibliographical references, had she not unfortunately died in a tragic car accident the following year, in 1988.

full participation of women, effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes, including development policies and programmes, at all levels that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women”⁶. In the following years, the first results would begin to be seen in the language of newspapers, institutions and schools, as well as in everyday language.

4. The other proposals of feminist linguistics

Raising awareness of gender bias in language, and getting the speech community to change linguistic habits in order to promote gender equality, as Sabatini tried to do, has been one of the main goals of feminist linguistics. But it was not the only one. There have been other linguistic proposals linked to specific trends of feminism the goal of which was not to change the standard language, or ordinary language, by finding alternatives, as Sabatini tried to do, but to contest the heteropatriarcal system reflected in the use of language through creative, experimental linguistic solutions capable of destroying the binary logic of language, after disregarding the rules of the language system in use.

The discussion on some of these proposals, which belong to well-defined theoretical positions and phases of the feminist movement, has not been opened to the general public, as was the case with Sabatini’s, but has remained confined to feminist circles and scholarly studies. These proposals have remained virtually unknown also in traditional Italian linguistic academic circles. However, recent positions taken today by some transfeminist groups seem to recall them, even if not overtly, and the general public, as we shall see in Section 6, has welcomed them as an absolute novelty and enthusiastically supported them, without knowing that they are somehow rooted in the past. Here then, briefly, are a few hints.

French post-structuralist feminism, for instance – represented by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous – based its proposal on the idea that what we conventionally regard as ‘feminine’ is only a reflection of what is constructed as masculine. Since the present language system was not capable of expressing a woman’s point of view, they called for the creation of a new woman-centred language, that deviates from traditional masculine

6 <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf>

styles of writing. The need for a creative writing approach led to the use of experimental language⁷ and the creation of new languages⁸ - which largely remained in the domain of creative writers - able to build a new “image of a woman created by a woman for a woman”. The concept of the so-called *Écriture féminine* emerges especially from the work of Hélène Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word *silence*, the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end” (Cixous 1975, p. 350).

The materialistic feminist Monique Wittig shared the interpretation of society as a heteropatriarchal system and the need to elaborate the concept of gender. She considered heterosexuality as a political regime that must be overthrown. According to Wittig, the category of *man* and *woman* exists only in a heterosexual system: to destroy the heterosexual system will end the categories of men and women:

The category of sex is the one that rules as “natural” the relation that is at the base of [heterosexual] society and through which half of the population, women, are “heterosexualised” (the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals) and submitted to a heterosexual economy. For the category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society that imposes on women the rigid obligation of the reproduction of the “species”, that is, the reproduction of heterosexual society (Wittig 1982, p. 66).

The criticism of the grammatical categories of gender proposed by Monique Wittig and her linguistic experiments (e.g. the universalisation of the female grammatical gender) is only an aspect of the linguistic theory she elaborated, aimed at the destruction of traditional forms of the use

7 See the linguistic experiments by Brantenberg, in her novel *The Daughters of Egalia* (1977), to show how words used in society are based on patriarchy.

8 For example, the science fiction writer and linguist Suzette Haden Elgin created the engineered language Láadan for science fiction series for the specific purpose of expressing the perceptions of women in a world where women are still denied civil rights (Elgin, 1988).

of language (Feole 2020, p. 49). A full political transformation of words, notions and concepts was also required (Garbagnoli 2020, p. 14).

Postmodern feminism is another trend that has left its mark on feminist linguistics and generated linguistic proposals. One of its most known theorists, Judith Butler, argues that gender is constructed through language (Butler, 1999). Cutting her thinking to the bone, gender identity is established through behaviour and is performative, therefore it is possible to construct different genders via different behaviours.

Investigating the adoption of feminist language change implies exploring which types of changes are being adopted: e.g. changes resulting from linguistic disruption strategies; women-centred language developments; form-replacement proposals, etc. It also involves investigating whether these changes spread through a speech community and by which processes this occurs. So far, however, there has been no adoption of changes at a community level linked to the strategies of linguistic disruption or women-centred language developments, although some feminist publications in English, German, Dutch, French, and Spanish continue to use linguistic disruption as a way of keeping readers aware of gender bias in language. Also, the adoption of non-sexist generic nouns and pronouns in English, that dates back to the Eighties, has not been fully implemented. As Pauwels wrote twenty years ago, “developing women-centered languages has remained a preoccupation of poets and creative writers” (Pauwels 2003, p.556). In fact, the linguistic disruption strategy was not intended to be adopted by the community at large; rather, it was used by linguistic activists to raise the community’s awareness, sometimes in a more provocative manner⁹. However, in Italy, a proposal rooted in transfeminist linguistic policy has been put forward in recent years, provoking a wide-ranging discussion, especially in the public eye.

5. The proposals of the network *Non Una Di Meno*

In Italy new linguistic – and disruptive - practices have been recently proposed. They are rooted in the transfeminist network *Non una di meno* (NUDM), which published the *Piano femminista* in 2017, intended as:

9 In recent years the discussion has also extended to translation, in relation to the language, with Luise von Flotow, for example, Olga Castro, etc.

il frutto della scrittura collettiva di migliaia di donne e soggettività alleate, che ha preso le mosse dalla condivisione di vissuti, esperienze, saperi e pratiche di resistenza individuali e collettive alle molteplici forme della violenza maschile sulle donne, della violenza di genere, della violenza dei generi e dei ruoli sociali imposti che colpiscono ognun@ di noi (Non una di meno 2017, p. 4).

Harkening back to old feminist theories such as those we mentioned above, *NUDM* interpreted grammatical gender as a reflection of the heteronormative oppression of society because of its strict binarism, based precisely on heterosexuality, which prevents the expression of other gender differences. According to their approach, neither the use of only masculine gender (the unmarked masculine, symbol of male dominance) nor the use of both masculine and feminine gender (reflection of heteronormative oppression) are enough, because there are people who escape the binary paradigm, do not identify nor want to be ‘included’ in any of the two canonical genders, but still want to be represented in the language. Therefore, grammatical endings that identify the grammatical gender are considered harmful and offensive because they are “exclusive” of a section of human beings. To make the language inclusive, it is therefore necessary to eliminate the grammatical endings and replace them by a symbol, able to include all those who do not identify themselves in the binary paradigm. The proposed graphic solutions were * and @ in writing, -u in speech¹⁰. As for the concrete effects of these proposals on the use of language, it should be noted that: the @ symbol has been rarely adopted; the * symbol has been used to abbreviate the two grammatical forms (masculine and feminine) by replacing the desinences with * (*buongiorno ragazz**), but only in the opening and closing of written text; the -u desinence is currently used in writing and speech only by the *NUDM* community.

10 “Il linguaggio non è solo un’istituzione sociale o uno strumento di comunicazione, ma anche un elemento centrale nella costruzione delle identità, individuali e collettive. La lingua italiana è una lingua sessuata, che già dalla sua grammatica riproduce e istituisce un rigido binarismo di genere (tra nomi, pronomi e aggettivi che cambiano a seconda se maschili o femminili) e una specifica gerarchia, in cui predomina il maschile, presentato come universale e neutro. In questo piano abbiamo scelto di svelare la non neutralità del maschile utilizzando non solo il femminile, ma anche la @ per segnalare l’irriducibilità e la molteplicità delle nostre differenze. Consapevoli che le lingue mutano e si evolvono, proviamo a rendere il nostro linguaggio inclusivo per avere nuove parole per raccontarci e per modificare i nostri immaginari” (Non una di meno 2017, p. 9).

6. The current debate in Italy

The proposal of replacing the grammatical endings with a symbol is not a novelty, as it had been circulating even before the publication of the NUDM's *Piano femminista*, within the discussion on the so-called "(gender) inclusive language" that had widely developed in Europe. But it was the proposal to use a new symbol, *schwa*, thanks also in this case - as had already happened with Sabatini's proposal thirty years earlier - to the circulation in the media, and above all on the web, that aroused the interest of the general public and thus became a topic of discussion. The proposal came first from Luca Boschetto¹¹, not a linguist but, as he wrote

un'appassionatə di temi relativi all'inclusività di genere e linguistica, che, dopo aver sperimentato di persona le modifiche recentemente utilizzate in lingua inglese per renderla inclusiva, si è resə conto che l'italiano aveva bisogno di un intervento piū radicale, a causa della natura flessiva della lingua stessa, e che le soluzioni finora adottate (asterischi, chiocciole, alternanza, uso della *u*, di cui parliamo qui) non erano sufficienti.

In 2015 he proposed the use of the IPA symbol 'schwa' ə, ɜ. The schwa would have the advantage over the others of being pronounceable, although with difficulty since it is not a standard Italian sound, and of having a different form for singular and plural.

The 'schwa proposal' immediately attracted the attention of the LGBTQI+ group, as it was presented as a tool for liberation from the linguistic binarism represented by grammatical gender, and for the representation of non-binary gender. The discussion quickly spread outside the movement thanks to the buzz of social media, especially youth groups that took over the discussion. Soon the press took notice and spread the news through newspapers, making it public knowledge. Other social media did the rest. But it was when a newspaper article - *Allarmi siam fascistə* by Mattia Feltri (La Stampa, 20 July 2020) was published - that newspapers and the web "exploded".

One may wonder why this proposal has aroused wide discussion, and especially because it convinced so many people to adopt it, while all

11 From the website <https://www.italianoinclusivo.it>. The specific contribution can be found in the repository: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FQ0_e456qEmd0pj9mPeXtB-GLfuhfEAACHp0LVWAh7o/edit

the previous proposals to replace grammatical endings with the symbol * or @ did not have a great impact on public opinion. A possible answer is that the proposal was presented as a solution which could be applied easily and obtain certain result: a symbol would wipe out centuries of sexual and gender discrimination, recognise non-binary people, provide the language with an extraordinary means of communicating equality. But in actual facts replacing the grammatical gender endings with a symbol destroys the morphological references in the text, its cohesion, and ultimately communication¹². Another answer to explain the success of such a proposal may be seen in the fact that the political and cultural period was particularly receptive to any issue related to the theme of inclusion and of binarism, which was one of the main ‘LGBTQI+ issues’, and the proposal of using a “non binary language” seemed very appealing.

The position of the academic world against the proposal was immediately clear thanks to articles published in large-circulation newspapers and periodicals, as well on radio and TV programs¹³. The *Accademia della Crusca*, too, pressed by the increasingly heated debate, was forced to take a position. Paolo D’Achille, current President of the *Accademia della Crusca*, in his article *Un asterisco sul genere* (D’Achille, 2021) considered the proposal “ancora meno praticabile rispetto all’asterisco”, and Claudio Marazzini (2022), former President of the *Accademia della Crusca*, stated that

I cambiamenti sostanziali, invece, hanno inciso e incidono proprio su quel livello in cui vogliono intervenire ora i riformatori che lanciano il sasso e nascondono la mano, negando l’intenzione di scardinare l’italiano; e tuttavia si accingono davvero a scardinarlo, certamente in buona fede, senza rendersi conto del peso di ciò che propongono.

A petition *Lo schwa(ə)? No grazie. Pro lingua nostra*¹⁴ against the use of this symbol was even launched by the linguist Massimo Arcangeli - an event that resonated widely also in the international press¹⁵ - attaining more than 23,000 signatures.

12 See the observations by Robustelli (2021a; 2021b) and De Santis, (2022a; 2022b), and the analysis of Thornton (2022) and Giusti (2022).

13 See, for instance, Antonelli (2021), Betti (2021), Fiori (2021), Loewenthal (2021), Robustelli (2023) and Simone (2021).

14 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/02/10/politically-correct-gender-neutral-symbols-endangering-italian/>

15 <https://www.change.org/p/lo-schwa-%C9%99-no-grazie-pro-lingua-nostra>
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/italian-intelligentsia-launch-petition-against-gender-neutral-schwa-symbol-vzkm3q328>

The adherence to the use of the schwa involved public figures, including some of the Italian intelligentsia, publishing houses (e.g. Casa editrice effequ), the press, the media, writers, educational institutions and even municipal administrations. On case in point is the Municipality of Castelfranco Emilia, a small town in central Italy, that decided to “adopt the schwa”¹⁶. All these subjects share the goal of making language *more inclusive* and exercising the power of ‘linguistic creativity’ that no one should be denied. However, so far these proposals have been formulated, and supported, without a real understanding of the theoretical background to which they relate. There is also no verification of the communicative effectiveness of the language after adopting the use of the *schwa*. After all, all attempts to use the schwa failed. Michela Murgia’s - a well-known and appreciated Italian writer - linguistic experiment to use the schwa in the book she wrote with Chiara Tagliaferri *L’uomo ricco sono io* (Murgia-Tagliaferri 2021) also failed, as shown by the numerous examples of inconsistency, when the grammatical ending was maintained (p. 18, *le solite poesiole per bambini*, etc.) instead of being replaced by the symbol.

7. Reflections and suggestions

From a social perspective, there is no doubt that the demand to make language more inclusive corresponds to a strong personal need of those who feel unrecognized by the language itself. It is a need that is also recognized and shared by those who, as in my case, nevertheless reject the ways proposed for this purpose. The reasons for taking a position ‘against’ the use of a symbol are solely linguistic.

Proposed changes need to take account of the structural properties of a language; for example, languages which mark gender through morphological processes may have different options from those that do not. This is a proposal that is difficult to implement in languages, such as Italian, which have a rich morphology in which the mechanisms of gender agreement are indispensable on a syntactic and textual level.

16 The announcement by ANSA, the National Associated Press Agency of Italy, can be accessed at https://www.ansa.it/emiliaromagna/notizie/2021/04/13/nel-modenese-un-comune-adotta-la-schwa-nei-post-ufficiali_2147c3d5-4220-4888-b417-8f64068ce39a.html

A quick reaction is available at <https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/modena/cronaca/la-prof-robustelli-boccia-la-schwa-ma-castelfranco-non-rinuncia-e-un-simbolo-di-inclusione-1.7103303>

Replacing grammatical endings with a symbol in Italian means eliminating morphological references within a text and destroying its textual cohesion.

The possibility of intervening in the language in use and changing it right down to its fundamental mechanisms in the name of creativity and linguistic freedom can result in slowing down or preventing its communicative function. As we have noticed in Section 4, the feminist proposals to intervene in language were not aimed at modifying the language in use, but at ‘inventing’ a new one, with the purpose of recognition, of identity, or of protest. To return to the demand for enhancement of the female presence through the use of feminine grammatical gender for women (see Alma Sabatini’s proposals), replacing grammatical endings with a symbol contributes to “oscurare la presenza delle donne nel discorso culturale e a renderle una minoranza culturale, assente nelle professioni di prestigio, rafforzando gli stereotipi di genere” (Giusti 2022:16). And this is the main reason for which many currents of feminism refuse this proposal. In addition, today women’s visibility and the use of appropriate language to achieve it, which is fundamental for the construction of gender equality, are included in the objective 5 of the *UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development*, and are part of the implementation measures contained in the *Strategia Nazionale per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile* (2017) and the *Strategia Nazionale per la Parità di Genere* (2021-26) launched by the Italian Government¹⁷.

To conclude, it seems that the proposal to eliminate grammatical endings, and replace them with a symbol, does not increase the level of inclusiveness of a language for a number of reasons¹⁸, of which the most important - from a linguistic point of view - is that the destruction of morphological cross-references between sentences hinders comprehension of a complex text and prevents its drafting. This reduction in editorial possibilities can go unnoticed by those who still have limited communication needs regarding the use of the written medium, and by those who attribute an identity rather than communicative function to the use of language. But it is unacceptable for those who want to be able to use all the expressive and communicative possibilities offered by the Italian language.

17 For a reflection on the role of women’s visibility in language as a tool for the implementation of gender equality and therefore as a contribution to sustainability, see Robustelli (2023).

18 For example, pronunciation and reading difficulties, the lack of knowledge and diffusion in the speech community, the problems it poses for people with dyslexia.

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