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**Abstract:** This paper introduces the theme of the roundtable, that is those discourses of gender and sexuality circulating in Italy oriented in a homophobic, transphobic, sexist and misogynist way, but also the ways in which language can become a tool to fight discrimination. The author subsequently introduces queer linguistics, a branch of linguistics that aims to challenge essentialist, hegemonic and naturalized notions of gender and sexuality, and that can be useful in unmasking the work of heteronormativity in the formation of public discourses. In order to illustrate the productivity of such a paradigm, the legal and media language used in a case of rape, the so-called “stupro della Fortezza da Basso” is investigated. The paper shows how the “non linear life” of the victim, a judgment based on her presumed disinhibited bisexuality, works towards undermining her reliability as a witness.

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# Roundtable on Gender and Language Queer Linguistics: Language Inclusivity and the Subversion of Hegemonic Notions of Gender and Sexuality

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I would like to open this roundtable with a brief introduction of my research interests, by framing them within the overarching theme of the roundtable, and then illustrate an example of use of legal and media language in relation to a past case of rape in Italy, which, I believe, lends itself well to an analysis that takes into account a feminist and queer perspective, and more specifically a queer linguistic one.

This roundtable aimed to explore “the mutual relationships between social change and evolution of language usage in connection to gender and sexual orientation” and to look at discourses of gender and sexuality explicitly or implicitly oriented in a homophobic and trans phobic as well as sexist and misogynist way in Italy, but also at the ways in which language can become a tool to fight discrimination.<sup>1</sup> The idea of the roundtable is based on the topics, which will be investigated in the themed issue of *g/s/i* on gender and language. The papers that we have received for this themed issue tackle the subjects of female visibility in the Italian language, gendered linguistic asymmetry and sexism, language of gender (women’s language), analysis of *femminicidio* (through the lexicon utilized by newspapers), and the use of the asterisk as a device for language inclusiveness promoted by the LGBTQI groups in Italy. The special issue then covers an array of topics, some of which will be discussed in this roundtable, in the specific, language inclusiveness (Juliet Guzzetta’s paper), linguistic asymmetry (Cinzia Russi’s paper) and homophobic/heteronormative language (mine and Serena Bassi’s paper).

As for myself, my training and background is partially in Linguistics as in 2005 and 2010 I conducted research on bilingualism, and mainly in Translation Studies and Gender and Sexuality studies. In the last years, I have been paying specific attention to the translation of the LGBTQ language into Italian (as an example the translation of gay “bear” speech and the use of the term “queer” in LGBTQ spaces in Italy) and to the translation into Italian of code-switched terms (often related to the female body) in Italian-Canadian and Italian-American writing. I am currently interested in analyzing sexist and hetero-normative language within the branch of queer linguistics.

According to Heiko Motschenbacher,

queer Linguistics is not to be equalled with a “gay and lesbian” approach to language. It rather transfers ideas from Queer Theory to linguistic research, building on the integration of work by poststructuralist scholars such as Foucault, Butler and Derrida in order to provide a critical investigation of the discursive formation of heteronormativity.<sup>2</sup>

Queer linguistics is a branch of critical discourse studies and is basically a reaction of essentialist, hegemonic and naturalized notions of gender and sexuality. As a field of studies, it has gained momentum and in a sense informed the presence of the word “sexuality” alongside “gender” in

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<sup>1</sup> Call for papers for the roundtable on gender and language held at the AAIS conference in Baton Rouge on 21-23 April 2016, accessed July 11, 2016,

[http://www.societadilinguisticaitaliana.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=456:call-for-papers-gender-and-language&catid=12:notizie&Itemid=9](http://www.societadilinguisticaitaliana.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=456:call-for-papers-gender-and-language&catid=12:notizie&Itemid=9).

<sup>2</sup> Heiko Motschenbacher, “Taking Queer Linguistics Further: Sociolinguistics and Critical Heteronormativity Research,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 212 (2011): 149.

recent linguistic studies. We can think, for example, that the journal *Gender and Language* has changed its name, in 2012, in *Journal of Language and Sexuality* as stated by Koller.<sup>3</sup>

Queer linguistics proposes the use of a more inclusive language accounting for the multiple ranges of genders and sexualities. Debates around the use of forms other than the grammatical masculine and feminine for pronouns, like the introduction in the Swedish dictionary in 2015 of the neuter pronoun “*hen*” alongside the masculine “*han*” and the feminine “*hon*,” or even the use of the asterisk as an inclusive device to account for trans-genderism, an initiative born within LGBTQI groups, can be inserted within this perspective. However, the choice of the asterisk as a linguistic device has not been favoured by some strands of feminism, because it would allegedly make the feminine gender invisible.<sup>4</sup> In connection to this, in a 2014 book that Rachele Borghi, Olivia Fiorilli, and I co-edited on Italian drag kings, we used the asterisk and the final capital -U for the ending of nouns referring to people whose gender did not fall either in the feminine or in the masculine spectrum.<sup>5</sup> The final ending in -U resembles the neuter in Latin and we decided to use it for pronunciation reasons, as the asterisk cannot be pronounced (and its rejection was partially based on this reason)<sup>6</sup> and following a practice already in place in some Italian collectives (although some argue that the -U is cacophonous and coincides with the grammatical masculine suffix in some Southern Italian dialects).

### The case of “Stupro della Fortezza da Basso.” Sexual ambivalence and unreliability

Queer linguistics, as said above, works to critically uncover the work of heteronormativity and homophobia in the formation of public discourses. I would like to briefly discuss a case of rape in order to provide an example of analysis informed by a queer critical perspective. The case is the so-called “Stupro della Fortezza da Basso,” a gang rape of a 23 years old woman which took place in the late July of 2008, in Florence.<sup>7</sup> Six men were found guilty of gang rape but after they appealed against the first sentence they were cleared of the accusations in June 2015. The news of the acquittal sparked a lot of online and offline criticism, which targeted the motivations of a sentence that reads like a moral condemnation of the victim based on her lifestyle.

The elements on which the acquittal sentence draws are the fact that the victim did not sufficiently oppose her assailants and that they failed to interpret appropriately her intentions.<sup>8</sup> The words used in the sentence are the following:

Tutti avevano mal interpretato la sua disponibilità precedente. [...] Non vi è alcuna cesura apprezzabile tra il precedente consenso e il presunto dissenso della ragazza, che era poi rimasta “in balia” del gruppo. [...] [Questa fu una] iniziativa di gruppo non ostacolata.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Paper presented by Veronika Koller at the BAAL workshop in Liverpool on April 8, 2016, with the title: “Critical Discourse Studies on language and Sexuality,” accessed on July 11, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/24264462/Critical\\_discourse\\_studies\\_of\\_language\\_and\\_sexuality\\_The\\_past\\_ten\\_years](https://www.academia.edu/24264462/Critical_discourse_studies_of_language_and_sexuality_The_past_ten_years)

<sup>4</sup> See the following article for a description of the controversy around the asterisk: Claudia Campese, “Oltre l’8 marzo, una lingua per tutt\*,” *Meridionews*, 8 March, 2015, accessed September 20, 2016, <http://catania.meridionews.it/articolo/32030/oltre-l8-marzo-una-lingua-per-tutt/>.

<sup>5</sup> Michela Baldo, Rachele Borghi and Olivia Fiorilli, *Il re nudo. Per un archivio drag king in Italia* (Pisa: ETS, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For a rationale against the use of the asterisk based on the fact that it represents an obstacle to the comprehension of a text, see Cecilia Robustelli, “Linee guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo,” in collaboration with Accademia della Crusca (2012), accessed September 20, 2016, [http://www.rai.it/dl/docs/1354527785476guida\\_robustelli.pdf](http://www.rai.it/dl/docs/1354527785476guida_robustelli.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous online articles on this event which was reported in various major newspapers and blogs. See a list of some of these in the reference list.

<sup>8</sup> See “#Firenze: Testo Sentenza di assoluzione per stupro di gruppo alla Fortezza da Basso,” *Al di là del Buco, verso la fine della Guerra fredda (e pure calda) tra i sessi* July 23, 2015, accessed July 11, 2016, <https://abbattoimuri.wordpress.com/2015/07/23/firenze-testo-sentenza-di-assoluzione-per-stupro-di-gruppo-alla-fortezza-da-basso/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Everybody had misinterpreted her previous willingness (to have sex) [...] It is not possible to identify the moment in which the preceding consent became the alleged disapproval of the girl who had then found herself ‘at

However, we also apprehend from the sentence—which includes the reports of some witnesses—that the woman was drunk at the moment of the attack so that it would seem obvious that she would have not been able to fight back six assailants in such a state. The reasons of the acquittal are based not only on the morality, or better lack of morality of the victim, as already anticipated, but also on the episode itself, as the following shows:

Carattere disinibito ed eccentrico di costei volto ad attirare l'attenzione degli uomini. [...] Carattere esuberante e disinibito della parte offesa che col fidanzato non aveva una relazione stabile [...]. Fermo restando dunque il giudizio di disvalore morale su una condotta poco edificante di tutti i giovani, parte offesa compresa. [...] Il contorno della vicenda [...] fa di questa incresciosa storia, non encomiabile per nessuno, un fatto penalmente non censurabile.<sup>10</sup>

What is considered despicable in this context is not the rape as a criminal act against a person, but the immorality of this 'uninhibited' woman, and the immorality of the gang bang scene taking place in a public space. This should not be surprising if we think that until the year 1996 Italy rape was considered a crime against the public morality, and that sexuality should be banned from the public space and reserved to the private space, especially if this sexuality is outside the norm, as remarked by geographers of sexuality like Rachele Borghi.<sup>11</sup>

As part of the moral condemnation of the victim, not only her occasional sexual encounters are under attack but also her bisexuality, as in the following phrases:

Un soggetto femminile fragile, ma al tempo stesso creativo, disinibito, in grado di gestire la propria (bi)sessualità, di avere rapporti fisici occasionali di cui nel contempo non era convinta [...]. Apprezzabile è stata la volontà della teste di stigmatizzare quella iniziativa di gruppo comunque non ostacolata, volontà che si è estrinsecata in una serie di comportamenti successivi ai fatti, espressione di una presa di coscienza e di una energica reazione [...] evidentemente per rispondere a quel discutibile momento di debolezza e fragilità che una vita non lineare come la sua avrebbe voluto censurare e rimuovere. In effetti il racconto della ragazza configura un atteggiamento sicuramente ambivalente nei confronti del sesso, che evidentemente l'aveva condotta a scelte da lei stessa non pacificamente condivise e vissute traumaticamente o contraddittoriamente [...].<sup>12</sup>

In another part of the acquittal sentence, we are indeed presented with details about the sexual life of the woman, such as the fact that she had had a lesbian relationship for two years, had lived

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the mercy' of the group. [...] [This was] a group initiative, which was not opposed." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> "She has a disinhibited and eccentric character aimed at attracting men's attention. [...] Exuberant and disinhibited character of the injured party who did not have a stable relationship with her boyfriend. Given our negative judgment of the moral value of an unedifying act performed by all the young men involved, including the victim [...] The circumstances of the event [...] makes this unfortunate case, dishonorable for everybody, a non punishable act."

<sup>11</sup> Rachele Borghi, "Performance de-genere. Pratiche di resistenza all'(etero)norma nello spazio pubblico," *Doppiozero*, September 17, 2014, accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/soglie/performance-de-genere>.

<sup>12</sup> "A fragile woman, but at the same time creative, disinhibited, able to handle her own (bi)sexuality, to have occasional sex encounters even though she was not happy about them. [...] There has been a significant will by the victim to stigmatise this group's initiative, which was, however, not opposed. This will can be shown in a series of acts put in place by the offended party following the event, which indicate that she had become aware of what had happened to her and that she had strongly reacted to it [...] clearly as a mean to challenge that controversial moment of weakness and vulnerability that the victim, who lived a non-linear life, wanted to censor and remove. The girl's account conveys indeed her ambivalent attitude towards sex, which had obviously led her to make choices which she experienced as traumatic or conflicting."

together with a boy for another year, and had two occasional sex encounters with boys prior to the evening of the attack. This information, along with her participating as an actress in a splatter film directed by one of the accused, in which, according to the sentence, she “stood well the scenes of sex and violence,” her taking part to a sex seminar, “Sex in transition,” and being a LGBT rights activist, were used to justify the fact that she was having a *vita non lineare* a “non-linear life,” that is, a non-conforming lifestyle.

Analyzing these discourses from a queer feminist perspective helps unmasking the sexism and misogyny underpinning this sentence, which are part of broader heteronormative system of beliefs, and which can be well exemplified by the noun phrase “non-linear life.” Moreover, such analysis helps understanding how these discourses function in undermining the credibility of the victim. How?

First of all, the sexism and misogyny of the scene are apparent in the fact that the victim is stigmatized for her “disinhibited” sexuality, which is considered a bad sexuality (as opposed to a presumed good “inhibited” one). This discourse is based on the underlying patriarchal moralist binary, which allows women to occupy either the category of saints or whores, a binary, which can easily justify violence against those who are deemed to occupy the latter. The victim is indeed addressed by one of the assailants as a “slut” and the sentence contains details about the fact that she wore red underwear (so, in a sense, sexy underwear). The binary logic underneath this is even more evident when the rape accusations of the woman are justified with her presumed feelings of shame and repentance at her group sexual acts and with her attempt to reject the slut stigma fallen on herself.

The sexism underpinning the sentence is part of heteronormative conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity which propose well-known traditional contrary and complementary gendered and sexual role scripts which are invariably heterosexual and see men in powerful positions and women as the “weak sex”.

The bisexuality of the victim is certainly an element challenging this normative order and is indeed stressed in order to add ambivalence to her recount of facts as though, being bisexual can automatically undermine one’s credibility. As various bisexuality studies confirm,<sup>13</sup> being bisexual is perceived as going through a phase, being confused or undecided and even lying. Moreover, according to a study by Sigurvinsdottir and Ullman,<sup>14</sup> it also appears that bisexual women receive lower social support and experience more negative reactions to disclosure of sexual assault than heterosexual women.

The stereotypical views of bisexuals as sexually irresponsible and instable make the woman victim of this rape an unreliable witness, someone vulnerable and fragile<sup>15</sup>, who does not know what she wants and constantly regrets her choices. This is well expressed by rhetorical devices such as the use of contrastive conjunctions, such as those encountered above and those below:

La vittima era non sobria ma presente a se stessa [...] un soggetto femminile fragile, ma al tempo stesso creativo, disinibito in grado di gestire la propria (bi)sessualità, di avere rapporti fisici occasionali di cui nel contempo non era convinta.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Among the other studies, see: Shiri Elsner, *Bi: Notes From A Sexual Revolution* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2013); Fritz Klein, *The Bisexual Option* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Naomi Tucker, ed., *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, and Visions* (New York and London: Haworth Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Sigurvinsdottir Ranveig and Sara R. Ullman, “Sexual Assault in Bisexual and Heterosexual Women Survivors,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 16, no. 2 (2016): 163-80.

<sup>15</sup> In the acquittal sentence the rape event is described as a “moment of weakness of the woman”. See the article “Assolti da stupro di gruppo, giudici: ‘Fu momento di debolezza della ragazza’”, in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. July 17, 2015. Accessed July 11, 2016. <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/07/17/assolti-da-stupro-di-gruppo-giudici-fu-momento-di-debolezza-della-ragazza/1885295/>

<sup>16</sup> “The victim was not sober but alert and lucid. A fragile woman, but at the same time creative, disinhibited, able to handle her own (bi)sexuality, to have occasional sex encounters even though she was not happy about them.”

Analyzing these discourses from a feminist queer linguistic perspective means to uncover the patriarchal dictates of compulsive heterosexuality and the inner workings of slut shaming, with the whore stigma attached to women who do not follow such dictates. This sentence, as I said above, sparked a lot of criticism as the acquittal was based on the sexual and private life of the victim, and, as a consequence, a series of counter discourses appeared in the social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and various blogs) by queer feminist groups. A feminist blog like *abbattoimuri*, on top of publishing a resourceful document like the entire acquittal sentence on which my positioning paper is based, also published a letter of the victim written in response to the verdict, which overtly unmasks the paradoxes analyzed in this paper.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, many initiatives of solidarity for the victim of this rape were born after the verdict was made public. The organization *Rete della conoscenza* launched a popular one, inviting people to post in Twitter, under the hashtag #nessunascusa (no excuse to rape), a photograph of themselves and a personalized phrase. Messages such “my way of dressing is not an excuse” or “my glass of wine is not an excuse,” and other similar ones populated the web for a while.<sup>18</sup>

Two public demonstrations followed this initiative. One of this, with the slogan “La libertà è la nostra fortezza” (Freedom is our Fortress), was held in Florence on the 28 July 2015, and was organized by various feminist and LGBTQ groups.<sup>19</sup> Another event called *Camminata romana solidale contro la ragazza della fortezza* was organized in Rome by queer feminist groups.<sup>20</sup> The slogan of the solidarity walk was the following: “Santa puttana o disinibita decido io sulla mia fica./Pazza ubriaca o pervertita decido io della mia fica.”<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, it is useful to go back to the Call for Contributions for this roundtable on gender and language and specifically, to the question on what to do in order to foster change. I think that online activist queer trans feminist groups in Italy are working very effectively in the attempt to change the *status quo* by producing counter-discourses, which take into account the claims of queer linguistics.

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<sup>17</sup> See “Chi sono,” *Al di là del Buco, verso la fine della Guerra fredda (e pure calda) tra i sessi*, accessed July 11, 2016, <https://abbattoimuri.wordpress.com/chi-sono/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Rete della conoscenza*, accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.retedellaconoscenza.it/organizzazione-nazionale/>.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Bonaiuti, “Firenze in piazza per la ragazza della Fortezza che aveva denunciato lo stupro,” *La Repubblica Firenze*, July 27, 2015, accessed on July 11, 2016, [http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/07/27/news/in\\_piazza\\_per\\_la\\_ragazza\\_della\\_fortezza-119918782/](http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/07/27/news/in_piazza_per_la_ragazza_della_fortezza-119918782/).

<sup>20</sup> See “Roman walk in solidarity of the woman of the Fortress,” *Facebook Event*, accessed July 11, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1471765256451610/>.

<sup>21</sup> “Saint, slut or disinhibited, it’s me who decides on my cunt. Crazy, drunk or pervert it’s me who decides on my cunt.”

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