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Abstract: This essay describes the ongoing struggle of the author to change the culture of “tolerance” of women scientists in the academy and the “acceptance of a few exceptional women” into a culture of inclusion and diversity at the National Institute of Astrophysics of Italy, an endeavor advanced through the adoption of gender correct language. Language usage in the Italian scientific and academic environments offers a particularly interesting case, given its unusual and complex development. Over the course of the last 20 years, a new “gender-role-conservative” language that previously did not exist has become the norm. Notwithstanding commonly accepted grammatical rules, some scientists and organs of the Italian media have recently adopted the masculine for professions that had conventionally been declined in the feminine when referring to women. This is quite the opposite of what has happened in other European countries, including among Italian-speaking Swiss colleagues, for example. Despite the fact that the Italian government has issued guidelines for the use of more gender-neutral language in public institutions like universities and research institutes, these guidelines are blatantly disregarded. The author suggests that this owes to, and at the same time is a consequence of, Italian women scientists feeling insecure in the workplace.

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Fighting for Gender-fair Language at the National Institute of Astrophysics of Italy¹

MARINA ORIO

I am an astrophysicist, and for more than two decades I have split my time between the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States and Italy. In the nineties, I worked at the Observatory of Turin, part of a national network of Italian observatories operating in collaboration with, or as part of, the departments of astronomy or physics at nearby universities. As a professional group, astronomers started using e-mail in 1986, and gained research access to the World Wide Web beginning in 1990, shortly after it was established by our physicist colleagues at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). By the mid-nineties, scientific departments and institutes in Italy had made their websites available to the public, although a time lag followed after the internet had been opened for use by the general public.

When I was first hired by the Observatory of Turin at the end of 1988, I remember an appointment letter stating that I would be hired as a “ricercatrice astronoma.” The job title was declined in the feminine gender. This was the correct wording, and no one seemed to raise doubts about the way I should be addressed, given that my gender identification was clear. However, to my great surprise, when I came back to Turin in 1997 after a few years in Wisconsin, I realized that I had become a “ricercatore astronomo” on the new public website of the Observatory; that is, I had become a male astronomer. This rather bothered me. In years of militancy in women’s organizations in Italy and in other countries where I had lived (Germany and Israel, whose languages also have a feminine and masculine form for most titles), we always stressed that addressing women in the properly gendered form was an important step toward improving the community’s attitudes with regard to gender equality, something supported by research. I went to the colleague responsible for maintaining the website and explained that I thought that using gender-fair language was fundamental in obtaining gender equality in the workplace. In 1986, the Accademia della Crusca, a widely respected authority on the Italian language, and the Italian government (specifically, the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri) had issued a document written by professor and Academy member Alma Sabatini, with guidelines for gender-fair language in schools, public offices, and institutions. My request that all job titles or definitions that had a feminine form be declined as feminine in reference to women was clearly supported by these guidelines.

To my great surprise, when I pointed to the guidelines, I was told that they sounded “rather feminist” and that most women in our institute objected to what they perceived as “extremism.” I immediately felt that the community had shifted dramatically to very conservative positions in gender issues in the three and a half years I had spent in the US. How could they define grammatically gender-fair language as “extremist”? The web curator proposed a compromise: he would correct my title, but only mine, and the other women in the Observatory would have their titles in the masculine gender on the web page, because “after all, this is the correct expression, because we are all doing what was traditionally a man’s job.” (There were

¹ Marina Orio’s personal narrative on the perception of gender equality in Italian scientific institutes describes her struggle against masculine generic designations for both female and male professionals in her field, astronomy. We gladly accepted to publish her contribution, which is a stimulating response to *gender/sexuality/italy* 3, 2016 on “Gender and Language” (<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>. Web. Accessed 19 August 2017). We had an illuminating exchange with Orio about the English translation for “genere corretto.” With this term, Orio indicates the grammatically correct gender to designate professional positions occupied by women. We discussed a variety of possibilities and came to the conclusion that the right phrase is “gender-fair.” In English-speaking Western societies, the use of gender-neutral (without specific gender markers) is recommended vis-à-vis gender-fair (with specific gender markers) in the names of professions. However, in Italy, the concept of gender-neutral tends to coincide with the masculine gender (or gender-generic), a use that reinforces the concept of maleness as a habit and social norm. Orio’s struggle for the “gender-fair” use of “ricercatrice astronoma” instead of “ricercatore astronomo” reflects a systemic problem that is still evident not only in the common language but also in academia. Editors’ note.

indeed several women in astronomical observatories before the Second World War. However, in Italy as in the US and in other countries, they were called “computers” and were always supervised by an “astronomo,” a man. In the US, Pickering’s computers did Nobel Prize–caliber work). I objected that any regular name of Latin origin ending in “o” in Italian always switches to an ending in “a” when referring to a woman: this is a basic rule of grammar. My argument did not help. When I traveled to the US again I was asked by some American colleagues why I had a different job title than other women at my institute. “Because this is the correct use of the Italian language and I do not feel I should be flexible about it. My colleagues think that my position is feminist, and they are anti-feminist,” I replied. How else could I respond? I do not think anyone in the US understood; it all seemed rather embarrassing and unnecessary.

It turned out that my request at the Observatory of Turin was only the beginning of a long struggle that I have continued to engage in over the years, apparently with very few results, always feeling that I am hitting a rubber wall that I cannot penetrate and that bounces me back. During the Berlusconi years in Italy, I felt that basic rules of citizenship were not as respected as they had been during the previous administrations in Italian government during my adult years. I was frustrated. I belonged to an intellectual and liberal world of the *petite bourgeoisie* that many Italians now considered obsolete. The Italians with whom I had grown up used politically correct language, sometimes hypocritically so, because the words did not correspond to the practice, but at least the idea that everyone deserved equality and respect seemed predominant. In the late nineties and the first decade of the twenty-first century, all of a sudden it was OK not to be politically correct. And yes, it was also OK to state that the official guidelines on gender-fair language had been drafted by some “feminist,” and that “feminist,” much to my dismay, was a bad word. In general, I started feeling like I lived in a bubble, in which my relatives and closest Italian friends were included, but not the majority of Italians, including those with PhDs in astrophysics, who were better educated than the average. Yet I was proud of my values and I was looking to expand the bubble, certainly not to withdraw into it. I continued to receive official letters and documents in which I was referred to as a man, and this was only the first layer of verbal disrespect and aggressiveness towards me and other women. I quickly discovered the other layers, like inappropriate jokes and reinforcement of stereotypes that were denigrating to women. When I reacted, my colleagues seemed to think that I had no sense of humor.

This refusal to grammatically decline job titles in the feminine form, after years of using them in the correct gender-fair way, seemed like a backlash against gender theory and against the public declaration of the Accademia della Crusca that even words that had never before been heard in the feminine form, like “lawyer” or “mayor,” if grammatically declinable, should also be declined as feminine. I also found out that many of my colleagues, including women, resented that there were official guidelines issued by the government about titles. Italians are notoriously rebellious to anything that is imposed as a “rule”; this is their mentality.

In 2006, after another long period in the US, I came to work at the Observatory of Padua, after all the astronomical observatories had been merged into the National Institute of Astrophysics of Italy (INAF). When the web manager, a position at the time occupied by a woman, asked what I would like to link to my profile on the website, I replied that first I wanted to suggest that gender-fair language be used for all the web pages, starting with the job titles declined as feminine when referring to women. I was met by an awkward silence. “But . . . we are doing a job that was traditionally a man’s job, we should be proud of it! Moreover, it is much better not to state our gender explicitly if we want to avoid discrimination!” I was told. The first objection, which I had already heard in Turin, sounded terribly wrong to me; the second was just . . . funny, I should say, since the website gave the first names of all the staff members, and women’s names are distinctly recognizable in Italian. Again, the webmaster offered that my title would be declined as feminine, whereas all my women colleagues would have theirs declined in the masculine. I objected, but nobody listened.

I objected to many other things, about which no one else seemed to care. A large exhibit on astronomy and astro-particle physics was organized in Rome, open for schools from all over Italy to visit. I looked at the program and found that the exhibit featured about ten short movies about the current life of an astronomer or physicist. Only one was about a woman, a young post-doctoral fellow the camera followed as she went to a beautiful location to practice rock climbing. She was asked what was more difficult, rock climbing or astrophysics (not exactly a significant question, I thought), and she replied: “Definitely astrophysics is more difficult! As a woman, I can climb to the top of this mountain, but on the job, I will never be allowed to climb to the top because I am a woman!” I was very sad she felt that way, but I also thought that she said those words in a less than appropriate forum, since the exhibit was meant to encourage young students to go into physics, astronomy, or other STEM fields. As if this were not enough, seven or eight keynote speakers had been invited, who were going to lecture in person and answer questions from high school students visiting on certain dates, and they were all men. I called the chief organizer, a particle physicist who had been serving in the administration of several institutes, including on the INAF board, and suggested that the selection of movies and keynote speakers be made more encouraging for young girls. He treated me like a nuisance and clearly hinted that I must be jealous of my men colleagues he had invited to display their life and work. He finally said he would try to recruit an additional woman keynote speaker, and thanked me for the suggestion. However, he did not change the list of speakers.

I was particularly disturbed by the alternate use of certain words in the feminine and masculine forms, which were being chosen according to the perceived role of the woman. Several of my Italian colleagues clearly stated that a woman “director” was to be called “direttrice” (feminine) if she managed a day care center, and “direttore” (masculine) if she managed a research institute or a bank. They thought that a woman high school teacher should be called “professoressa” (feminine) but that a university professor should be called a “professore” (masculine). What these people (wrongly) perceived as importance or hierarchy of the job determined the gender declination.

A few years after the establishment of INAF, it was decided that a national Equal Opportunities Committee should replace the local ones at each institute, like the one I had served on at Turin committee. At that time, INAF had also incorporated a number of other local institutes of astrophysics that had previously belonged to the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (National Council for Research), and had grown considerably in size (though alas, not in funding). I proposed my candidacy in the election for the national Committee, to which not all members were to be elected. In my campaign, I stated that the use of gender-fair language, as proposed by the guidelines written by Alma Sabatini and in later, similar guidelines issued by the Italian governments over the years, would be one of the focal points of my time in office. I received a fair number of votes, but I was only elected as an alternate, a deputy member who in the end was never called to the meetings. Another woman obtained the largest number of votes, and she was a militant Catholic, opposed to abortion and quite conservative. I was told that people loved her because she had helped many younger colleagues through battles to obtain their full benefits when they had to be caregivers, especially after pregnancy. “Yes,” I thought with some bitterness, “she does help other women, whenever they want to conform to what she thinks is our biological role.”

In 2014, I tried to push forward with my personal struggle for gender-fair language one last time. I wrote to the INAF president, asking him and the board to issue clear guidelines for our websites and official documents, in accordance with government guidelines for public institutes, which had meanwhile been rewritten with clear explanations by Prof. Cecilia Robustelli of the University of Pisa. I forwarded the letter to a public e-mail list, and I learned only later that it became the subject of very, very animated discussions in some local institutes, especially among women.

I did not receive a written answer, but the president approached me at a conference after a couple of months, and explained that he had no objections to “using the so called gender-fair language as outlined in Prof. Robustelli’s document,” but that many INAF women had strong objections to it. The president said that he felt especially conflicted, because one senior woman scientist on our board, who defined herself as a “very liberal person” and had been a member of the Communist Party of Italy before the fall of the Berlin Wall, had posed very strong objections, and had gone so far as to say something along the lines of “the document she refers to (Cecilia Robustelli’s) is absolute rubbish.” So, the president said, he wanted no wars on the board, and he would leave people free to use the language they wanted, so long as it was not “particularly offensive.” After we spoke, two younger women scientists who had heard the conversation approached me and said: “We did not realize that you are the woman who wrote that letter. It was a powerful letter, and it caused heated and passionate arguments between the women of our local institute. Two of our colleagues had to be separated and taken away from each other because things ended up in a brawl; they seemed to want to be physically aggressive with each other . . . all because of the issue of this so-called gender-fair language that you raised, by making your letter public.”

I also sent the letter to my local director, asking him to demonstrate a vision of gender equality and to switch to the correct use of gender to designate the professions of women on the Observatory of Padua’s website. He avoided putting anything in writing, but he refused to do as I had requested. We ended up having a conversation in which it turned out he did not know basic rules of Italian grammar, and did not bother to learn them. I was very disappointed.

A new, broader, Equal Opportunities Committee was elected at INAF in 2015. This time I did not run to be elected as a member, but as soon as the new council was in place I sent them a version of the letter I had sent to the president the previous year, asking them to demand that the guidelines for gender-fair language be imposed. Their answer can be summarized as “maybe.” They issued a recommendation to the president and the board asking that Robustelli’s guidelines be taken into account in official documents whenever possible, “although the council members are deeply aware that a language is made by the people who speak it, and it is not up to us to decide what really is correct. We are aware that the cultural norm is made by the speaker in each case, and would not condemn anybody who chooses not to follow these guidelines.” In short, they proposed what I saw, in my frustration, as a typically “Italian solution,” by deciding not to decide. I wrote them back, saying that I personally felt deeply discriminated when I or my colleagues are addressed with gender-non-specific language, that I had been subject to bullying after making my request public (a strong accusation, but a true one), and that I felt deeply disappointed, upset, and offended about their decision not to support my request. The Committee president answered that the tone of my letter was not acceptable to her, but she graciously agreed to discuss the issue again at the following Committee meeting, in which they slightly changed the wording of their recommendation. Nothing happened . . .

. . . Or is something happening? I found out that two local institutes of INAF are now following Robustelli’s guidelines, including the one where I held my previous job, the Turin Observatory. The instances of “astronomo” have been switched once again to “astronoma,” which was used in official documents from the late eighties. Most other local institutes refrain from specifying the job title, or write it in a gender-neutral way (for instance, in English). Only four of the nineteen local institutes that constitute the INAF network, Padua included, write the job title of women using the masculine form. Oddly enough, two have women as directors, and one was directed by a woman in the recent past (she has since passed away). I still cannot understand why a woman astronomer would not want to be called by her full title according to the rules of Italian grammar; why she would want to hide behind a man’s title. I asked one woman, a local director in another Italian observatory, some time ago, and she answered: “I am so proud to have succeeded in job and committee selections among so many men, now I want to be treated like a man!” I looked at her black and brown outfit that so resembled the suits of

Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in the sixties, and I felt a little sad for her. Everybody is free to dress as they please, I am absolutely certain of this, but I thought that perhaps a necklace, or a colorful scarf, would have made my colleague happier, and less afraid of the men around us. I sadly remembered that *Mi piace vestirmi di rosso* (*I like to dress in red*) is the title of a documentary dedicated to the life of Alma Sabatini, the writer of the original guidelines from 1986.