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g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: It's Not Only a Matter of Pronouns. Journal Editorial

Journal Issue: [gender/sexuality/italy 3, 2016](#)

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Publication date: December 2016

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Editorial"

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/its-not-only-a-matter-of-pronouns/>

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Abstract: The editorial describes the genesis and structure of *g/s/i* 3, 2016. The author contextualizes the theme of gender and language making reference to the Anglophone world and the romance languages. She briefly discusses the contemporary debate on gender and language in Italy, drawing examples from gender markers in job titles in the Italian public discourse. She emphasizes how the current issue of *g/s/i* goes beyond the heteronormative framework.

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It's Not Only a Matter of Pronouns. Journal Editorial

NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

Gender domination, the theme of [gender/sexuality/italy 2, 2015](#), spanned from BDSM to linguistic topics such as the linguistic behavior tied to gender in female and male adolescents, the issue of power and authority in Italian dictionaries, and the linguistic practices of gender domination on the web.¹ This variety generated compelling responses, now hosted in the Open Contributions section, and spurred inquiries and proposals from scholars of gender and sexuality, linguistics, and translation. That momentum has shaped the current themed issue [gender/sexuality/italy 3, 2016](#), which focuses on gender and language in Italian culture, literature, and media. This issue is guest edited by Michela Baldo (University of Hull, UK), Fabio Corbisiero, and Pietro Maturi (both from Università di Napoli Federico II, Italy). Baldo, Corbisiero, and Maturi designed the call and, alongside the principal editor, co-edited this issue. The Invited Perspectives presents contributions that further develop the main theme, including the video recordings of the animated roundtable on gender and language held at the American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) annual conference in Baton Rouge, USA, in April 2016.

The multiplicity of topics discussed in *g/s/i* 3 reflects the amplitude of the discourses on gender and language, which expand across chronological, geographical, and sociocultural boundaries, and challenge the articulations of, and attitudes to, gender as they are defined in society. In the Anglophone world, the question of sexism has dominated the discourse on gender and language for over a century. Indeed, in 1849, John Stuart Mill recommended to use “person” instead of “man” in all official documents.² In 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton for the first time denounced the use of masculine generic pronouns as instrumental to the oppression of women and proposed using the gender-neutral pronoun “they.” Since the 1970s, feminist linguists have questioned the use of masculine generics as gender-neutral markers. But recently, the feminine/masculine heteronormative polarity has given way to a broader discussion concerning non-heteronormative gender identities as well as to a more inclusive and nondiscriminatory use of language. To date, gender-exclusive pronouns have started to decrease decisively in English.³ Several North American universities, professional and academic associations, and governmental agencies have implemented gender neutral and inclusive language policies.⁴ In 2011, the LGBT Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (USA) created a chart—which has been circulating widely among universities and on the media—with

¹ See Ellen Nerenberg's “The Fifty Shades of (the) Grey (Zone), or, the Absent BDSM Essay in the *g/s/i* Issue on Domination. Open Contributions Editorial,” *gender/sexuality/Italy* 2 (2015):I-IV. Web. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/open-contribution-editorial/>, Rita Fresu's “Il linguaggio femminile e maschile’ uno scenario (stereotipico) in movimento,” *gender/sexuality/Italy* 2 (2015):91-109. Web. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/il-linguaggio-femminile-e-maschile-uno-scenario-stereotipico-in-movimento/>, Eva Nossem's “Potere e autorità nei dizionari,” *gender/sexuality/Italy* 2 (2015):110-24. Web. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/potere-e-autorita/>, and Ombretta Frau's and Juliet Guzzetta's “Il blog è mio e lo gestisco io.’ Dominio di genere nel web italiano,” *gender/sexuality/Italy* 2 (2015):75-90. Web. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/il-blog-e-mio-e-lo-gestisco-io-dominio-di-genere-nel-web-italiano/>. All articles accessed 15 December 2016.

² Marie-Marthe Gervais-le Garff, “*Liberté, Égalité, Sororité*: A New Linguistic Order in France?” *Women and Language*, XXV, 2 (Spring 2002): 1.

³ See Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, and Brittany Gentile, “Male and female pronoun use in US books reflects women's status, 1900- 2008.” *Sex Roles*, 67, (2012): 488-493.

⁴ See United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Guidelines on gender-neutral language*. (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2009) <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001149/114950mo.pdf> Accessed 12 August 2016, and American Psychological Association, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Washington, DC: APA, 2010).

all possible combinations of gender-inclusive pronouns as a how-to guide for everyday conversation (Fig. 1).⁵ The Center also offers suggestions on how to select the right pronouns when in doubt and how to get by with errors and misunderstandings.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------|--------|--------|---------|------------|
| (f)ae | (f)aer | (f)aer | (f)aers | (f)aerself |
| e/ey | em | eir | eirs | eirself |
| he | him | his | his | himself |
| per | per | pers | pers | perself |
| she | her | her | hers | herself |
| they | them | their | theirs | themself |
| ve | ver | vis | vis | verself |
| xe | xem | xyr | xyrs | xemself |
| ze/zie | hir | hir | hirs | hirself |

Figure 1. The chart with gender-inclusive pronouns published on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center website at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

The gender and language dilemma continues to generate controversy, but it seems reasonable to foresee that in the near future gender-inclusive charts may appear not only in LGBTQ spaces, but also in English textbooks. In other words, gender-inclusive forms may become grammatical habits in English and contribute to reshaping the social norms that have defined gender for centuries in western societies.

The situation in the romance languages is more complicated: it is not only a matter of pronouns. Besides being regulated by a two-gender system and therefore lacking gender-neutral pronouns, most of the romance languages also assign gender to inanimate objects. As cognitive science suggests, not only biological sex and gender identity, but also grammatical gender has been proved to shape our thoughts and how we represent the world around us. Grammatical gender has an influence even “on the way people think about inanimate objects,” assigning them stereotypically feminine or masculine features.⁶ An example from the scholarship by Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips is instructive:

⁵ See the LGBT webpage at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Web. Accessed 12 August 2016. <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>

⁶ Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips, “Sex, syntax, and semantics” in *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Cognition*, edited by Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2003), 63.

if the noun that names a toaster is masculine, then perhaps its metallic and technological properties may become more salient; but if the noun is feminine, then perhaps its warmth, domesticity, and ability to provide nourishment are given more importance.⁷

Furthermore, romance languages present gender markers in past participles, nouns, adjectives, and articles, both in singular and plural forms. All of these markers require agreements and establish a gender-driven set of references and (not-so-much) implicit expectations. When speaking or writing of a gender-mixed group of people, Italian grammatical norms prescribe the use of masculine gender, regardless of the number of women in that group, let alone people who do not identify as either men or women. Language users seem to accept this highly regulated system unproblematically as they perceive gender-exclusive language forms as “transparent.”⁸ Incidentally, this is not only a problem of romance languages: German has a three-gender system, for example, and Swahili has sixteen gender forms. One wonders how they get by with it.

In reality, gender exclusion is not the result of morphological patterns. Quite the contrary; grammatical taxonomies have evolved substantially across time to reflect social changes. Habits and intentions play a major role in this area. In a recent study, historical linguists showed that not only was Old Italian—Old Tuscan to be more precise—based on a three-gender system, but also that four-gender systems existed “in a substantial part of the Romance language family.”⁹ Traces of this original variety are still present in a few Italian words, which show an interesting fluctuation between the masculine singular and the old neutral plural: i.e. *braccio/braccia* (arm, arms), *labbro/labbra* (lip, lips), *sopracciglio/sopracciglia* (eyebrow, eyebrows), and *osso/ossa* (bone, bones), among others. Italian users do not perceive these plurals as neutral nouns anymore, but as irregular words varying from masculine singular to an anomalous feminine plural. This is evident in the alternation of masculine and feminine articles for singular and plural (i.e. *il braccio-le braccia*, *il labbro-le labbra*, *il sopracciglio-le sopracciglia*, and *l'osso-le ossa*). The reasons behind the progressive erasure of functional neutral gender/s are not merely morphological, but psychological and social. Psychological research has demonstrated that gender-exclusive language is often deliberate and may involve gender discriminatory intentions and attitudes.¹⁰ It is also true that users are not fully in control of their language choices in matter of gender, since linguistic habits develop as certain behaviors become socially prevalent and cue language patterns. In other words, what is behind the use of masculine gender as a gender-neutral marker is maleness affirmed as a habit and social norm within a heteronormative framework.¹¹

As many of the articles included in this issue of *g/s/i* point out, the question of gender in language came up with great emphasis in the early 1980s as feminist theories, politics, and practices were applied to the use of language. In France, Spain, and Italy, government agencies, individual scholars, as well as activists have conducted and published research on sexist language in everyday life. Besides highlighting the use of masculine pronouns and agreements as abstractly normative, these analyses brought to the fore the discrimination triggered by the use of masculine gender in the

⁷ Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips, “Sex, syntax, and semantics,” 69.

⁸ See Sabine Sczesny, Franziska Moser, and Wendy Wood, “Beyond Sexist Beliefs: How Do People Decide to Use Gender-Inclusive Language?” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41, 7 (2015): 943.

⁹ See, respectively, Michele Loporcaro, Vincenzo Faraoni, and Francesco Gardani, “The Third gender of Old Italian.” *Diachronica* 31:1 (2014): 1–22 and Michele Loporcaro and Tania Paciaroni, “Four-gender systems in Indo-European.” *Folia Linguistica* 45/2 (2011): 1.

¹⁰ In this regard, see Sczesny, Moser, and Wood, (cit.), 943.

¹¹ See Sczesny, Moser, and Wood, 945.

professional and political realms. They showed that the pervasive use of masculine designations in positions characterized by economic and political power erased the presence of women in professions traditionally held by men.¹²

In the context of the heteronormative polarization still dominating Italian public discourse, the recent arrival of a new generation of women in Italian politics who have attained leadership roles ushered in also recommendations conceiving professional titles, which until then had been ignored by the press and public discourse. The reactions have been harsh.¹³ The current debate is symptomatic of the social and political changes in Italian society. The growing polemic on the use of *ministro/ministra* (secretary of cabinet) and *sindaco/sindaca* (mayor) is a case in point. While in English the professional title “Secretary” is gender neutral, in Italian the general masculine *ministro* is most commonly used both for men and women. Only recently did the feminine alternative *ministra* begin to circulate consistently in the progressive press, raising awareness about the gender and language issue but also stirring misogynist reactions among the community of Italian speakers. The same happened with *sindaca*, which has been increasingly used to designate the recently elected (women) mayors of Rome and Turin, respectively, Virginia Raggi and Chiara Appendino. What follows is an interesting story on the diatribe about *ministro/ministra* and *sindaco/sindaca*.

On March 12, 2014, during the TV Italian show *Le invasioni barbariche*, journalist and current director of TV public channel Rai 3 Daria Bignardi introduced former Secretary of Constitutional Reforms of Italy Maria Elena Boschi. Bignardi asked Boschi if she preferred to be addressed with the feminized version *ministra*. Boschi's answer put an immediate end to the dilemma:

- DB Ladies and gentlemen, *ministro* Maria Elena Boschi! [...] For the first time at the *Invasioni barbariche*... well, after all... since when have you been a *ministro*?
- MEB Since a few days, two weeks.
- DB [...] *ministro* or *ministra*, what do you prefer?”
- MEB *Ministro*, I like *ministro*” (fig. 2).¹⁴

When journalist Sarah Varetto interviewed Boschi two years later, the Secretary used the feminine alternative *sindaca* for the newly elected mayor of Rome Virginia Raggi, this time setting in motion a longer and more nuanced exchange on the issue of gender marking in job titles:

- MEB *Sindaca* Raggi was chosen by the citizens
- SV [incomprehensible] I'm calling you *ministro*, uh?
- MEB I will pretend not to hear, I mean, it's not so crucial anyway, but

¹² In Italy, see Alma Sabatini's seminal study *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (Sexism in Italian Language), (Roma: Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri-Direzione generale delle informazioni della editoria e della proprietà letteraria artistica e scientifica, 1987), now accessible online (Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato: 1993). Accessed 15 December 2016, https://web.uniroma1.it/fac_smfn/sites/default/files/IlSessismoNellaLinguaItaliana.pdf. See also Cecilia Robustelli's interview in *g/s/i* Invited Perspectives, in which the linguist recapitulates her many contributions to this topic. Cecilia Robustelli and Nicoletta Marini-Maio, “Intervista a Cecilia Robustelli,” *g/s/i* 3 (2016):95-100. Web. Accessed 15 December 2016, <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/10-intervista-a-cecilia-robustelli/>

¹³ See Cecilia Robustelli's guidelines on the use of gender markers in job titles, *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo*, available on the *Accademia della Crusca* website. Web. Accessed, 15 December 2106, http://www.accademiadellacrusca.it/sites/www.accademiadellacrusca.it/files/page/2013/03/08/2012_linee_guida_per_luso_del_genere_nel_linguaggio_amministrativo.pdf.

¹⁴ *Le invasioni barbariche*. “Intervista barbarica a Maria Elena Boschi.” S14, Ep. 24. Directed Fabio Calvi. Written by Daria Bignardi. *La7*, 12 March 2014. My English translation and added emphasis. Web. <http://www.la7.it/le-invasioni-barbariche/video/lintervista-a-maria-elena-boschi-13-03-2014-128259> Accessed 17 September, 2016.

- SV Is it important to you?
- MEB Well, I believe that when Crusca is telling us that it's right to say *ministra* in Italian, we follow Crusca's rules. Since Crusca is a much higher authority than we, we use the feminine nouns.
- SV Frankly, I never considered this significant because I think that women's problems are much worse than that in this country.
- MEB Absolutely, but I believe that, it's obvious that women's problem are not a matter of language, absolutely, I think, however, that maybe in language there is a higher sensitivity, attention, because it's a little bit of a message that is very slowly going through, that certain roles are for women too, and not only for men, therefore one thinks of them in the feminine even in the way to address, no? women" (fig. 3).¹⁵



Fig. 2 Daria Bignardi and Maria Elena Boschi in the 2014 interview at *Le invasioni barbariche* in La7.it. The exchange on the *ministro/ministra* dilemma opens the interview.



Fig. 3 Maria Elena Boschi interviewed by Sara Varetto in 2016.

Boschi's use of *sindaca* instead of the broadly preferred generic masculine *sindaco* was a bold statement compared to her 2014 candid answer, "*ministro*, I like *ministro*." In the 2016 interview, she also emphasized she would "pretend not to hear" that Varetto addressed her with the masculine *ministro*. She claimed that including the feminine gender marker in job titles could convey a message of empowerment for women, making it possible for "certain roles" (i.e., leadership and high-rank professional jobs) to be thought as feminine. Yet, Boschi sounded hesitant and lingered on apologetic attenuations and litotes such as, "*a little bit* of a message ... is *very slowly* going through," and "women's problems *are not* a matter of language" which "*is not* so crucial."

In fact, the issue is far from reaching a peaceful solution. Former President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano recently addressed the female Secretary of Education Valeria Fedeli with *ministro* and immediately made a polemic statement on the topic: "I insist on taking the freedom ... to react to the transformation of dignified words of Italian language into the horrible appellative of *ministra* or

¹⁵ Elisa Sola, "E Boschi bacchetta Varetto: 'Chiamatemi ministra, lo dice la Crusca.'" *Corriere TV*, September 4, 2016. Accessed 17 September, 2016. My English translation and added emphasis. <http://video.corriere.it/boschi-bacchetta-varetto-chiamatemi-ministra-dice-crusca/8b1b792a-72e2-11e6-9754-0294518832f8>.

into the abominable appellative of *sindaca*,” then he turned to the (female) Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini, well known for being a strong advocate for the use of feminine gender in job titles, and boldly stated: “I will continue to call you *Madame Speaker*”(fig. 4).¹⁶



Fig. 4 Snapshot of the original videoclip with Former President Giorgio Napolitano's polemic address and the readers' comments.

The audience applauded and welcomed with “bravo!” President Napolitano's moralistic tirade against the “horrible” and “abominable” *ministra* and *sindaca*. Likewise, the newspaper's readers filled the comments with misogynistic arguments against the “cacophony” of *ministra*, *sindaca*, other feminine alternatives of administrative job titles, and political correctness altogether. Boschi's decisive, yet timid change of approach from 2014 to 2016 as well as Napolitano's polemic and its reception are anecdotal but indicative examples of how the debate on the feminine/masculine gender marking in job titles is problematic in Italy.

Nevertheless, the guest editors of the current issue of *g/s/i* point out that the relationship between language and gender is constantly evolving in Italy. They claim that, despite the fact that mainstream society adopts linguistic norms, practices, and politics in order to preserve the status quo

¹⁶ Giorgio Napolitano's polemic statement is accessible in Francesco Giovannetti, “Napolitano e il lessico della politica: ‘Ministra vocabolo orribile, Sindaca abominevole,’” *RepTV*, December 15, 2016, <http://video.repubblica.it/edizione/roma/napolitano-e-il-lessico-della-politica-ministra-vocabolo-orribile-sindaca-abominevole/262738/263096?ref=HRESS-4>. Accessed 15 December 2016.

and perpetuate homotransphobic discourses, language can be instrumental to change in matters of gender. Their proposal for *g/s/i 3* aimed—quite successfully, I believe—to deepen the debate and go beyond the heteronormative framework that still dominates the Italian public discourse. The contributions they collected emphasize how sexist and heterosexist uses of language remain prominent in Italian society, but also highlight the sociolinguistic transformations within the context of the international scenario.¹⁷

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¹⁷ See Michela Baldo, Fabio Corbisiero, and Pietro Maturi, “Ricostruire il genere attraverso il linguaggio: per un uso della lingua (italiana) non sessista e non omotransfobico. Themed Section Editorial,” *g/s/i 3*, 2016, XII-XVIII. Web. Accessed 15 December 2016. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Editorial-Guest-Editors-.pdf>

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