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Abstract: Research in psychology and linguistics identifies ways grammatically gendered language affects the ways in which people think, perceive, and make judgements in everyday life in ways that disadvantage women, and more recently, non-binary and trans people. Activists, scholars, and politicians have worked to identify and remedy the masculinist bias in the Italian language, with mixed results. In this research article we describe how ten Italian feminist LGBTQIA+ activists interviewed in Bologna in 2019 negotiate gendered language in their everyday lives and in their activism. Themes mentioned by the activists include how language constructs reality, both in its current restriction of possibilities and in its opportunities to change society; a delimitation of the different strategies used by activists to attempt to be more inclusive, including their preferences for and arguments against different approaches; and how activists perceive other people's reactions to the use of both gendered language and the strategies used to counteract it. Underlying all of these themes is an awareness that the use of gendered and gender-inclusive language has powerful political implications.

Key words: gendered language, Italian, LGBTQIA+ activism, feminism, non-binary

Power and Inclusivity: Bolognesi LGBTQIA+ Activists Reflect on Representation in the Italian Language

LAUREN E. DUNCAN, BRUNO GRAZIOLI[1]

Introduction

Civil space and society, which include associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, and human rights defenders, play a crucial role in upholding the rights contained in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as democracy and the rule of law.[2] The Civic Space Watch report notes that civic space in the European Union deteriorated between 2019 and 2023. In Italy, the focus of this article, the same NGO recently issued an alert concerning increasing restrictions on civic freedoms.[3] In particular, the rights of immigrants, women, LGBTQIA+ people, climate activists and others in Italy have faced repression and their right to peaceful protest has been limited.[4] The current right-wing government in Italy (the first since World War II) has certainly aggravated the situation as it has posed challenges to human rights since its election into power in September 2022.[5]

One of the strategies right wing forces use to maintain control is to restrict who is accepted as part of mainstream society.[6] In public discourse, this is primarily and effectively achieved by signaling a fundamental separation between us—those who have the right to inhabit and govern the land—and them (all the others). For example, anti-immigrant political arguments have always been at the core of political campaigns by the Lega (the Italian extreme-right secessionist party).[7] This has also been the case in the recent 2024 European Parliament elections for which the Lega's campaign was built around the slogan "Cambiamo l'Europa, prima che lei cambi noi" (Let's change Europe before it changes us) and even targeted individuals with aggressive rhetoric and exclusionary language.[8]

Interestingly, then, one way to signal the acceptance of a social group into mainstream society is by the use of language that includes members of these groups into the mainstream. Inclusive language has been a focus of feminists and activists for this reason. Historically, gendered language has been used to exclude women from positions of power occupied by men.[9] More recently, as our understanding of gender and sexuality have expanded to include non-binary and non-heterosexual conceptions, language has been used to exclude or misrepresent trans people and relationships between people who do not identify as heterosexual.[10] With this article, we hope to provide insight

[1] This research could not have been conducted without the generous support of Smith College, which financially supported Lauren Duncan's travel to Italy, transcriptions of interviews, and her study of the Italian language over many years. Thanks to Dickinson College's K. R. Nilsson Center in Bologna, Italy, for providing the necessary space where we could welcome, meet and converse with the activists. Thanks also to Abigail Stewart and her team at the University of Michigan for facilitating the processing and inclusion of these interviews into the Global Feminisms Project. Finally, we are profoundly grateful to the activists of the Cassero Center for generously donating their time to participate in these interviews. We are amazed and impressed with their accomplishments and deeply appreciate the openness with which they shared their life stories with us.

[2] See European Civic Forum, "Civic Space Report."

[3] See Antonaki, "Italy Alert."

[4] See Humans Rights Watch, "Events in 2022."

[5] See Tranchina, "The New Italian Government."

[6] See Duncan, "Power, Gender, and Collective Action"; Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place."

[7] Richardson and Colombo, "Continuity and Change," 180.

[8] *Il Post*, "I Manifesti Elettorali."

[9] See Crawford, "Gender and Language"; Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place."

[10] See American Psychological Association, "Inclusive Language Guide"; Crawford, "Gender and Language"; Weatherall, "Gender, Language, and Discourse."

into and to expand the conversation around the topic of gendered language, which reflects the debates about equality and inclusion, and are extremely relevant in today's Italian society and culture.

This article is the first outcome of a multi-year and multi-layered project on Italian Feminist Activist oral histories on which we have worked since 2018. The information and reflection offered in this article are the result of a professional collaboration, intellectual exchange, and friendship that we have entertained since 2013. In this project, we bring our expertise in two different disciplines and academic areas (Psychology and Italian Studies) and two different ways of conducting research and academic inquiry. This article is, therefore, inherently cross-disciplinary.[11] Oral histories were collected in two waves. In the first, Lauren Duncan interviewed six feminist activists living in Rome in July 2018 (among them was the late Michela Murgia) while, in the second wave, Duncan and Bruno Grazioli conducted interviews with eleven LGBTQIA+ feminist activists at the Dickinson College Center in Bologna in July 2019.

In this article, we first discuss the research delineating the impact of gendered language on social and cultural structures (e.g., inclusivity of women and girls, which women's movement activists and scholars have identified as an impediment to full gender equality).[12] We then review the history of attempts by activists, scholars, and politicians to make the Italian language more inclusive. Finally, we report on interviews we conducted with eleven currently active LGBTQIA+ feminist activists in Bologna, Italy. This article draws on one question in particular, which focused specifically on the gendered nature of the Italian language, its effects on people, ways in which the Italian language can be more inclusive, and how activists negotiate it in their everyday lives.

How Gendered Language Shapes Lived Experiences

Language shapes reality, and gendered language profoundly affects individuals' lives, opportunities, and material circumstances.[13] Since at least the 1970s, feminist researchers have documented a myriad of ways in which the use of gendered language impacts girls and women, and boy's and men's thinking about what is and is not appropriate for themselves and others.[14] The vast majority of this research has examined the impact of gendered language in English, a so-called "natural gender" language, in which most nouns are gender-neutral, but personal pronouns are gendered. By contrast, so-called "grammatical gender" languages (e.g., Italian) gender all nouns, and personal pronouns match the referent noun. Recognizing the pervasive gendered nature of these languages, scholars and activists have attempted to delineate ways in which to make the language more inclusive.[15]

Linguists have long debated the extent to which language shapes thought. Benjamin Lee Whorf proposed that language structures impacted how speakers of that language perceived and thought about the world.[16] More recently, linguists have conducted experiments to test if the ways in which languages treat spatial references (e.g., up and down), shapes and substances, and gender of

[11] In May 2024, the Italian Feminist Activist oral histories project was officially uploaded to the Global Feminism Project at the University of Michigan and is now available to teachers and researchers. See Global Feminisms Project, "Global Feminisms."

[12] See Crawford, "Gender and Language," 228–244 passim; Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place," 45–80 passim; Weatherall, *Gender, Language, and Discourse*, 10–31 passim.

[13] Crawford, "Gender and Language," 228.

[14] See Crawford, "Gender and Language"; Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place"; Weatherall, *Gender, Language, and Discourse.*

[15] See High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity, "Gender-Neutral Language." For a recent survey of the reception of linguistic relativity within the Italian debate on language and gender-related social inclusion, see Batisti, "La problematica ricezione della relatività linguistica."

[16] See Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality.*

objects have an impact on how speakers of these languages perceive and think about these things. These studies found that indeed, the way languages treated these different qualities affected how people thought about them in ways that reflected aspects of their language.[17]

In terms of gendered nouns, Lera Boroditsky and her colleagues ran a series of experiments that required German and Spanish speakers to describe an object that happened to be gendered as male or female in German but female or male in Spanish (e.g., key) and vice versa.[18] They found that speakers described objects in ways that evoked gendered stereotypes consistent with the gender of the object. For example, Spanish speakers were more likely to describe a key (gendered feminine) as little, lovely, and shiny, whereas German speakers were more likely to describe a key (gendered masculine) as hard, heavy, and jagged. Boroditsky concluded that "the seemingly arbitrary assignment of a noun to be masculine or feminine can have an effect on how people think about things in the world."[19] Indeed, this journal has published two issues dedicated to these questions.[20]

In the psychological literature, researchers have documented how the relative inclusivity or exclusivity of language have profound effects on how welcome and identified girls and women feel about their participation in fields that have traditionally been reserved for boys and men, and which, in turn, has an impact on their ability to succeed in higher-paying careers.[21] For example, in a series of experiments, Danielle Gaucher and her colleagues found that when job advertisements were worded in such a way to evoke masculine stereotypes (e.g., using words such as "competitive" vs. "collaborative"), participants rated these occupations as male-dominated.[22] Further, female participants (compared to male participants) were more likely to express that they would not fit into these jobs (expressing low belongingness) and found these jobs less appealing than jobs described using words evoking feminine stereotypes. Male-dominated professions, on average, pay more than female-dominated ones, and so encouraging women to enter these fields is one way that activists have worked for gender equality.[23]

The Italian Language and Sexism

The debate on linguistic sexism, defined by Vera Gheno as "the linguistic manifestation of the mentality, social behaviors, cultural judgements, and prejudices tinged with, or vitiated by, sexism," is widespread and heated in the Italian language.[24] Languages, Gheno continues, "cannot be considered intrinsically sexist, although they tend to reflect the androcentric cultures that they stemmed from. What can be sexist is the use we make of a language: Sexism does not lie in linguistic structures and mechanisms, but in our choices as speakers."[25]

The pervasiveness and the tension-generating debates currently focusing on language and gender, explains Gigliola Sulis in this same article, "can be read as the rebalancing of gender dynamics imposing itself in all its manifestations to become a defining socio-political issue: from sexism to the role and visibility of women, and to non-binary identities."[26] Attempts to overcome linguistic sexism

[17] See Boroditsky, "Linguistic Relativity"; Boroditsky et al., "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics."
[18] Boroditsky et al., "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics," 69–71.
[19] Boroditsky, "Linguistic Relativity," 920.
[20] Issue 2 (2025) of *gender/sexuality/italy* focused on gender domination and issue 3 (2016) on gender and language.
[21] See Cheryan and Markus, "Masculine Defaults"; Gaucher et al., "Gendered Wording"; Hentschel et al., "Kick-Starting Female Careers"; Liben et al., "Language at Work."
[22] See Gaucher et al., "Gendered Wording."
[23] See Kochhar, "The Enduring Grip"; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development "Joining Forces."
[24] Sulis and Gheno, "The Debate on Language," 156.
[25] Sulis and Gheno, "The Debate on Language," 156.
[26] Sulis and Gheno, "The Debate on Language," 154.

and rethinking the gender binary are not only specific to the Italian language and culture, but they are widespread in other languages as well.[27]

The Italian feminist movements of the 1970s laid the groundwork for the government's initiative to address sexism in the Italian language in 1984, when the Commissione Nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna (National Committee for Equality and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women) was created.

The essay "Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana" (Recommendations for a Non Sexist Use of Italian Language) written by linguist, feminist, and activist Alma Sabatini, is considered the turning point in the debate on language and gender in Italy.[28] Sabatini's essay was also included in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana / Sexism in the Italian Language* published in 1986 by the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (Presidency of the Council of Ministers) and Commissione Nazionale per la Parità e le Pari Opportunità tra uomo e donna (National Committee for the Equality and Equal Opportunities Between Men and Women). This publication gave three recommendations: firstly, to avoid so-called generic or unmarked use of masculine forms; secondly, to avoid asymmetric usages in referring to men and women (traditionally, a definite article is used before women's surnames but not to men's: e.g. *la Merkel* vs. *Johnson*); and finally, to use feminine forms of nouns denoting professions, jobs, or roles.

These recommendations were received with skepticism and sometimes openly mocked by journalists.[29] They were also discussed by some linguists, who pointed out that some of the recommended choices were not "allo stesso livello di accettabilità" (at the same level of acceptability) (e.g., *pretora, questora, assessora, professora* sounded foreign to the ears of Italian speakers).[30] In subsequent years, new sets of recommendations tempering some of the most radical proposals by Sabatini were adopted by various public local administrations.[31]

Many town and city administrations have now adopted recommendations for non-sexist language use, in particular with respect to equal treatment of women and men. However, the application of gender-fair formulations is still not widespread, not even in official documents by local and national administrations. Some women also oppose the usage of feminine forms of agent nouns for self-reference.[32] In 2016, the President of the House of Representatives Laura Boldrini sparked criticism when she advocated for the adoption of the feminine form of all titles and job descriptions on electronic badges: some female employees disagreed with this decision, arguing that the masculine noun *segretario* (secretary) refers to a more highly qualified job than the feminine *segretaria*.[33] The gender debate has once again arisen in recent times with the election of the first woman as Italy's Prime Minister. Giorgia Meloni, head of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia, chose to refer to herself using the masculine form of her new title, sparking a debate on the issues of female empowerment and political correctness.[34]

Clearly, the adaptation of the Italian language to become more gender-inclusive is a complicated and thorny problem. We were interested in exploring how a group of feminist LGBTQIA+ activists navigated the issue of sexism in language in their everyday communications. Toward that end, we interviewed ten activists in Bologna in 2019 about this topic.

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[27] See Sulis and Gheno, "The Debate on Language," 153–174 passim.
[28] See Sabatini, "Un uso non sessista."
[29] *La Repubblica*, "Se il ministro diventa ministra"; Placido, "Questori e questrici."
[30] Cardinaletti and Giusti, "Il sessismo nella lingua italiana," 182; See also Lepschy, "Sessismo e lingua."
[31] See Robustelli, *L'uso del genere.*
[32] See Thornton, "Designare le donne"; Voghera and Vena, "Forma maschile, genere femminile."
[33] Cuzzocrea, "La battaglia delle impiegate.'"
[34] Reuters, "Male or Female Title?"

Method

Participants and Procedures

In July 2019, Duncan (a native English speaker) and Grazioli (a native Italian speaker) interviewed eleven Italian feminist LGBTQIA+ activists in Bologna. Grazioli had contact with Cassero, a local LGBTQIA+ resource center, and we were able to recruit participants through the center. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in Italian, video-recorded, transcribed by native Italian speakers, and then translated by Duncan and checked by Duncan's native Italian language teacher, Alessandro di Mauro.[35]

Activists ranged from 25 to 56 years of age, with an average age of 39. Interviews ranged in length from 71 minutes to 120 minutes, with a mean of 92.50 minutes (SD = 15.50). Activists hailed from all over Italy, and most had come to Bologna to work or attend university. All had the equivalent of at least a bachelor's degree. Nine of the activists identified as lesbian or queer; one identified as straight; and one identified as trans.

Interview Protocol

Interviews were designed to ask about activists' lives and motivation for participating in feminist and LGBTQIA+ activism as part of the Global Feminisms Project.[36] The project includes, to date, interviews with activists from fifteen countries who advocate for the rights of girls and women, is open-access, and consists of video interviews, transcripts, podcasts, and teaching resources. We began with a list of 27 questions and asked clarifying or follow-up questions as needed. As part of the interview process, we included a question about how activists felt about and negotiated gendered language in their everyday lives, and in their activism. That question, as originally formulated, was

> The process of obtaining civil rights is also reflected in the evolution of the language. American English, for example, has evolved to include terms like intersectionality, or strategies such as replacing singular gendered pronouns with plural pronouns, etc. to indicate inclusiveness. Does this also happen in the Italian language?

In practice, we brought up the question in a variety of ways, usually in response to something the activists said. We always made sure the activists talked about ways they did or did not avoid gendered language. One activist inadvertently was not asked the question about language, so a total of ten activist interviews were coded.

Coding

Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's method for thematic analysis, Duncan copied and pasted all of the questions and answers pertaining to language, by activist, creating a data set from the corpus of the interview text into a new document.[37] The data set contained 10,729 words. Both authors

[35] The interview with Camilla Ranauro was conducted over Zoom, as she was attending a conference in Slovenia at the time.
[36] Global Feminism Project, "Global Feminisms."
[37] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

then independently went through three activists' answers, generating unique codes relevant to gendered language. As suggested by Braun and Clarke, we edited the codebook as we went along, sometimes collapsing codes, other times refining codes, sometimes adding codes.[38] We then coded the remaining answers, splitting up the work so that one author took the lead on coding half of the answers and the other coded the other half, and then we reviewed the other coder's answers to indicate agreement or disagreement with the codes. All disagreements were resolved through discussion, although we agreed more than 90% of the time.

Results

The final codebook (see Table 1) consisted of 19 unique codes, organized under 4 themes: (1) language constructs reality; (2) connections to power; (3) inclusive language strategies; and (4) emotional reactions to inclusive language strategies.

Table 1: Gendered Language Codebook by Themes

Code	Example
Theme 1: Language Constructs Reality	
Language constructs reality; Italian language is limited	"Language constructs reality" (Biagi) "We don't have adequate words to express certain subjectivities" (Lombardi)
Affects thinking	"I believe that it is also really fundamental for changing minds… we have to just train ourselves to rethink our ways of thinking about thing" (Coco)
Makes change; inclusive language helps to better represent reality; inclusive language as activism	"but the words are important: to say 'gay,' to say 'lesbian,' to say 'trans' carries weight" (Roberti) "so we try to adjust the language where we can" (Lombardi)
Important to use inclusive language	"The linguist claims that the Italian language can't do it, but I don't give up. I think that, rather, we can do it." (Roberti) "the Italian language is a gendered language in all aspects and so we can definitely find strategies" (Ranauro)
Language is in flux, changeable, able to represent new categories (nonbinary)	"I think that maybe it is something that will change again, it isn't definitive" (Lombardi)

[38] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 88–89.

Theme 2: Connections to Power	
Describing what is, reality, how the masculine = neuter or the norm	"It's only the mirror of our times and of what we want to bring out…It's just a matter of habit" (Dal Molin) "I realize that often when I speak, I talk with women who talk about themselves in the masculine, both individually and collectively. Sometimes you find yourself at feminist assemblies where maybe 98% are women and they use the masculine" (Coco)
A new awareness; politicization; important to educate oneself and others	"I now feel this sensitivity that before I didn't have, I am educated on this" (Biagi) "When I met them months ago, maybe a year, they weren't so attentive to this issue. I made them understand that I thought they had to pay attention to language" (Roberti)
Using inclusive language signals to others that person recognizes discrimination; can educate others about discrimination	"if I recognize discrimination, I will be able to show you that there's discrimination" (Biagi)
Gendered language is political; invisibility in language = less power	"to not use the masculine, because masculine is hegemonic" (Coletta) "I use the feminine to specify that it's an open feminine, which includes everyone, that it is nice to regain exactly that space that for so much time has been denied" (Coco)
Theme 3: Types of Inclusive Language Strategies	
Inclusive language strategies-using both feminine and masculine versions	"Why not use the feminine when you say 'buongiorno a tutti'—why not also say 'buongiorno a tutte?'" (Catena) "I personally tend to put masculine and feminine because it's an exercise and it isn't an easy exercise" (Dal Molin)
Inclusive language strategies-using feminine	"I always use the feminine version of words, I also like this" (Biagi) "very often in some contexts we support using the feminine political plural" (Ranauro)

Inclusive language strategies-using "u"	"I usually use … tutte/i/u when I am not sure of the situation" (Lombardi) "I tried … to not end the sentences with the obligatory masculine or feminine declension, maybe turning toward the 'u'" (Roberti)
Inclusive language strategies-using "*" or "x" or "_"	"I prefer the asterisk, however I started with the asterisk" (Dal Molin) "by now the asterisk is, I don't know, I think that it's accepted by everyone, at least in the trans-feminist or LGBT movements" (Coletta)
Inclusive language strategies-using "gender neutral word"	"to use a series of circumlocutions so as to not use the masculine or the feminine, for example I often say 'people' instead of saying 'the guys, the girls that I met' I say 'the people I met' to try to use the neutral word, right?" (Biagi)
Theme 4: Emotional Reactions to Inclusive Language Strategies	
All strategies are valid; depends on personal choice	"I am not fond of one mode more than another" (Biagi) "It is discussed, but for me 'you want to express yourself like this?' Okay, but don't ask me to express myself the same way because it doesn't represent me"' (Peressoni)
Preference for one of the strategies	"I propose to always use the feminine as the neutral" (Coletta) "I am a strong supporter of the 'u': I love it deeply" (Roberti)
Resistance to one or more of the strategies; including institutional or personal resistance	"This issue [*use of 'u'*] still isn't so accepted within the community itself" (Roberti) "Instead it's the spoken and literary language that causes problems in the use of the 'u' because it's ugly, that is the language has to also be beautiful to hear" (Coletta) "there's a problem of use, because it is difficult for me, like so many other people like us or of my generation or even older, to convert the language with adequate linguistic rule" (Picciaiola)

People are confused when inclusive language is used, including transgender; or don't like it	"we have a very technical language, sophisticated, that I would never use when I have a political meeting, a public discourse, when I have a diversified platform, saying cis-hetero or cis-patriarchal and the people don't know what we're talking about" (Coletta) "it can be difficult for a trans guy to use the feminine" (Coco) "If you talk with people, we live in a bubble, it's useless to think that they understand this" (Catena)
Negative emotional reaction to people using gendered language	"It bothers me when they talk to me using the masculine and I am not considered because they don't recognize the fact that I am there" (Lombardi) "Sometimes you find yourself at feminist assemblies where maybe 98% are women and they use the masculine. I go into a fury, I go bonkers there" (Coco)

Activists recognized the importance of language in shaping people's understandings of what is possible. In particular, they reflected on the fact that the Italian language is, at its core, gendered, and limits people's ability to imagine or understand, as normal, circumstances outside of the norm (e.g., female politicians). In addition, because the language has two mutually exclusive genders, it is unable to accommodate non-binary conceptions of gender in its current state. Activists explicitly linked the fact that language constructs and shapes reality to power systems, arguing that language has been used as a tool to legitimize advantaged groups' experiences and make invisible the experiences of disadvantaged groups. At the same time, activists recognized that the language is constantly changing, and therefore can be used to challenge the status quo and make alternative realities possible. Activists discussed the ways in which they worked around the current gender binary of Italian language to create new possibilities through language activism, and also their own and others' emotional reactions to these attempts.

Theme 1: Language Constructs Reality

The first theme consisted of five separate codes representing the awareness that our understanding of the world is shaped and limited by the words that we have to describe it. Eight of ten activists (80%) mentioned at least one comment that was coded under this theme. These codes ranged from a simple acknowledgement that the Italian language is limited by its reliance on gendered language to a recognition of the transformative possibilities of language. Elisa Coco began by recognizing the connections between language and thought:

> In my opinion, language is fundamental. It is very linked to the way we think about things. It's difficult to say what comes first—if it's the thought or the word—but if we have ways of saying things and we don't have others, this also affects the way we think about things… If you say it with the masculine,

> you think about the masculine. It means that you completely eliminate the horizon of feminine subjectivity whatever you want to include.

Similarly, Alice Biagi discussed the critical role played by language activism (e.g., using non-gendered language or the feminine as neutral) in changing conceptions of what was possible: "To me, using inclusive language or using the feminine has habituated me to think in a different way—that is, the change starts from me and I use it because the first effect that it has is that it changes my head." Although she is not sure what material effect her use of inclusive language has had on the people she works with, Biagi knows that at the very least they are starting to use inclusive language, which, if language constructs reality, plays a role in making the world more inclusive:

> I use inclusive language and the people who work with me have started to use inclusive language, people who have nothing to do with activism, who are far from it. After four years, occasionally they use inclusive language. So they understand it because I use it. Language works miracles, more than the feminist harangues work miracles.

When talking about language as activism, Ranauro made a useful distinction between lexicology (meanings of words) and morphology (grammar) in the Italian language:

> When we go in the schools with the Cassero school group, we explain what a transgender person is, but we explain that there's another word, too, cisgender, that describes what for them is the norm. So giving names to things, naming them, spreading … knowledge—in this sense, it's the lexical level. At a different level, the morphology of the language is much more complicated because the Italian language is a gendered language in all aspects and so we can definitely find strategies.

Several of the activists focused on how the creation of new words (in the Italian language) could make visible and validate the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people. For example, Elisa Dal Molin argued that "it is … important to begin to introduce a whole series of new words. For example, "omogenitorialità" *(same-gender parenting)* is a word that has been around for ten years… Now we're starting to talk about "omoaffettività" *(love between two people of the same gender)* which is still a little more inclusive."

Similarly, Valeria Roberti discussed the importance of people actually starting to use these new words in everyday life: "The words are important: to say 'gay,' to say 'lesbian,' to say 'trans,' carries weight. There's still a need to push a bit on this, I think. This isn't very easy… actually having a term helps, in the sense that it really simplifies your life." All of the activists understood that the Italian language is alive and constantly changing. For example, Dal Molin stated:

> I think this, regardless: language isn't something fixed and immutable. If we say "google" we can also say *la sindaca* (the female mayor). It's only the mirror of our times and of what we want to bring out, meaning the language must absolutely be changed. It's not true that you can't say *l'assessora* (the female councilwoman), *la ministra* (the female minister)*, la sindaca* because you can say it, because earlier you couldn't say other things, but again, if we say "you googled" you can also say *la sindaca*, which is even more Italian. It's just a matter of habit, a matter of developing an ear.

Theme 2: Connections to Power

Just as common as the first theme, the second theme, connections to power, consisting of four separate codes, was mentioned at least once by 80% of activists. These codes ranged from a simple

acknowledgement that in the Italian language the masculine is treated as the default or neutral option to explicitly stating that visibility via language is power.

For example, Valentina Coletta, a transwoman from Naples, points out that "in correct Italian grammar, the neutral is masculine." She meant that in the absence of a gender identifier, the proper Italian word use the masculine form. Biagi stated that "an overwhelming 99% of women talk about themselves in the masculine." Picciaiola relayed an anecdote from her own life that illuminated the absurdity of the masculine default: "Recently for personal reasons I had a hospital form from the gynecology department that said "*il paziente"* (the male patient)… in gynecology! We can't do it." Picciaiola argued that this was a strong form of "adjustment to power." In fact, when she pointed out to the doctor how inappropriate it was that a form used for gynecological patients used the default masculine article, "it was as if I had said for the first time that the earth was round. He looked at me and said, 'You're right, I never realized it before!'" Picciaiola's anecdote illustrates the embeddedness of the masculine default in the Italian language.

Coco explicitly connected gendered language to the exclusion of women from positions of power and influence:

> Over the decades there has been an enormous linguistic exclusion of women, and an invisibility, non-representation of all feminine parts, attached tightly to gendered political motives. That is, in Italy the feminine was used for certain things and not for others because there was a division in the roles. So, all jobs linked to caregiving were feminine and it was difficult to recreate them in the masculine. Whereas all jobs linked, for example, to politics or socially prestigious roles, or even of recognition … were all masculine because the division of power was that way. In Italy the political professions are not declinated with the feminine because for many years there weren't any women in politics… and so the words didn't exist because in those cases they were the exceptions, and as exceptions they returned to the masculine.

Coco went on to argue that gendered language is discriminatory not just in the morphologically binary structure it imposes on speakers, but also because anything that deviates from it (any possible suggestions about how to make language more inclusive) is perceived as inherently wrong. "The system of power behind language is very strong, so strong that it convinces people to not use certain words. It seems like a question of cacophony, aesthetics—that word sounds bad."

In a variety of ways, activists agreed that, since language constructs reality, to modify language is also to modify the perception of the world around us. For example, whereas activists generally recognized that replacing the ending of nouns or adjectives with a different vowel modifies the nature of the Italian language, some also recognized how important such action is on many different levels to increase inclusivity of the language. One strategy with which all of the activists were familiar was the use of the vowel "u" to replace gender-specific vowels at the end of adjectives or nouns. Biagi endorsed the "u" as a way to make discrimination visible to both herself and others: "If we educate ourselves, we recognize discrimination. If we don't educate ourselves, we are unable to some degree to recognize discrimination." Samanta Picciaiola, a cis straight woman, described the process of educating oneself as a form of training, arguing that teachers have more of a responsibility to spearhead this movement: "You should get there and work on it first as teachers, and also continue training."

Theme 3: Inclusive Language Strategies

Not surprisingly, because we explicitly asked activists about it, all of the participants mentioned at least one strategy they used to deal with gendered language. Strategies ranged from simple changes in

sentence structure or word choice to replacing gendered noun and verb endings with alternatives that were not associated with a particular gender, captured in five separate codes. Sixty percent of participants mentioned that when speaking to mixed gender groups, instead of relying on the masculine default, they tried to use feminine versions as well as masculine versions of words. For example, Biagi said that she "always tr[ies] to say 'tutti e tutte.'" More radically, 80% of participants said they avoided the use of the masculine default altogether, instead using the feminine to represent groups of people. For example, Carla Catena says that she tend[s]

> to use the feminine universal when we are in a group. Sometimes we can do this even when we're in a mixed gender group, when there are people, some guys, who also have an awareness of this, and who do it, therefore, because it's important to do it. Each one of us in every context, depending on the context where we are, uses a more just language to make sure in some way that everyone (male and female) is included. So… if I go somewhere where there's a group of people and someone is talking and only using the masculine, it is very likely that I will say … "But why are you using the masculine if we are eight women and two men? Why not use the feminine plural?" Also, why not use the feminine when you say "buongiorno a tutti" (good morning, everyone) why not also say "buongiorno a tutte?"

Coletta proposed that we should

> always use the feminine as the neutral—even in the language, in the correct Italian grammar, the neutral is masculine. But coming from the experience of … my regional culture, where everything that is fluid, like the *femminelle*, is feminine. So it also has a cultural, political sense of the feminine, everything that isn't male hetero-patriarchal. It could be a solution … everything feminine. In fact, many gay activists of the generation before mine sometimes use the feminine, a bit "gender bender" to refer to the group as feminine, to not use the masculine, because masculine is hegemonic. Instead, the feminine encompasses many different identities within.

Ninety percent of participants mentioned that, particularly in written language, they skirt the issue of gendered word endings by replacing them with alternatives that are gender-neutral: for example, the "u," "x," "*," or "_." This is more difficult to do in spoken language; as Catena says, "I cannot use the "u" because [non-activists] don't even know what I am talking about."

In addition, 40% of participants mentioned that they try to use gender-neutral words whenever possible (e.g., person instead of men or women), but those words are less commonly used than gendered words in Italian. Lombardi extends this discussion to encompass the situation of non-binary people, saying, "It is necessary to find words like, for example, 'sibling' in English. We have fewer words that are able to represent both men and women with 'x' subjectivity, which is a problem. We also don't have words that can speak specifically of non-binary people, for example, which isn't 'all genders together.'"

Theme 4: Emotional Reactions to Inclusive Language strategies

Although we did not specifically ask activists about their own and others' emotional reactions to using inclusive language strategies, all of them mentioned something that was coded under this theme. Points of view ranged from openness to different language strategies to strong emotional reactions toward some of them (captured in five separate codes).

Biagi, for instance, supported the idea that all strategies are valid and that they depend on personal choice. She said, "I think that they are all valid strategies and I think that each one chooses the path that is most appropriate and which, in my opinion, accustoms our heads to thinking in a

different way." While being open to what strategy to use, Biagi admitted to detesting when people do not mindfully use the language correctly to reflect the plurality of identities they interact with. "If something isn't declined correctly, it's wrong, it's wrong" she said, and added, "I can't stand it—it bothers me, when people use masculine word endings" where the masculine plural is a catch-all for all genders.

Antonia Peressoni, instead, expressed preference for one of the strategies, particularly using both the feminine and masculine plural to refer to a collectivity of people: "What is so bad about saying 'tutte e tutti'?" At the same time, Peressoni also manifested her personal resistance to another strategy, the replacement of the gender-specific vowels at the end of a word (particularly adjectives when used to make agreements) with the gender-neutral "u." "Like they say 'tuttu' for example. I don't like this one bit because the Italian language, even with its flaws, is a beautiful language, and it seems to me crippling to be forcing it in a way that isn't necessary."

The issue of how the language sounds is one that came up in three of the interviews: two activists supported finding strategies that would not detract from the beauty of the language, and one dismissed this argument as an excuse to avoid inclusivity. For instance, when asked about her personal opinion on certain recommendations on how to make the Italian language more inclusive, Coletta replied: "I am a bit opposed to some forms that have been chosen in Italy because they are aesthetically ugly. Ugly, because the Italian language has a beautiful sound. The language is very aesthetically pleasing. Using things like the "u" for the neutral is a horrible thing! I don't... I don't feel it."

A couple of the activists rejected the use of the "u" in spoken language because it could hinder understanding for people not well versed in inclusive language strategies. Ranauro, for example, emphasized that inclusive language must be used intentionally, with awareness of the audience, so as not to alienate people and undermine inclusivity:

> From a communicative point of view, [inclusive language strategies] can create confusion and can become pretentious—it's difficult to act in that environment, in my opinion. I don't know, for example, very often in some contexts we support using the feminine political plural. In a non-feminist context, I would create confusion. That is, it can give me an involuntary sense of exclusion of men, in that moment, in that conversation, and so practically speaking this strategy is a bit limiting from a communicative point of view.

Catena reinforced this point by extending her considerations to the realm of linguistics: the "u" is not philologically accurate, so, in a way, it does not even exist: "If you talk with linguists, they tell you that from the point of view of the evolution of the language this 'u' thing doesn't make much sense because in the Italian language there's no such thing as the 'u,' just like there isn't a neutral."

Discussion

The ten feminist LGBTQIA+ activists we interviewed for this study provided articulate and nuanced reflections on the gendered nature of the Italian language and how it constrains reality but also provides opportunities for change. We highlighted four themes that reflected their sentiments, each of which were reflected in 80-100% of activists' answers. Themes mentioned by the activists include how language constructs reality, both in its current restriction of possibilities and in its opportunities to change society; a delimitation of the different strategies used by activists to attempt to be more inclusive, including their preferences for and arguments against different approaches; and how activists perceive other people's reactions to the use of both gendered language and the strategies used

to counteract it. Underlying all of these themes is an awareness that the use of gendered and gender-inclusive language has powerful political implications.

Almost universally, activists recognized that (1) *language shapes people's understandings of what is possible*, and that, because the Italian language is intrinsically gendered, people can be limited in their ability to imagine or understand circumstances outside of the norm (e.g., female politicians, transgender or non-binary people). Their comments reflect an understanding of how language shapes reality, which has become increasingly important as the prevalence and visibility of women in non-traditional roles, non-binary and trans people, and people living in historically non-traditional family structures has increased.[39] Although at times their insistence on inclusive language was ridiculed by others, these activists understood that language inclusivity is a marker of acceptance into mainstream society.[40] Several activists discussed how their own use of inclusive language influenced the people around them to begin using such language (e.g., Biagi), showing that consistent use of inclusive language can contribute to change in society.

Coupled with the understanding that language shapes reality is the awareness that this does not happen in a value-neutral way. Importantly, activists almost universally identified the (2) *power disparities inherent in gendered language*, arguing that language is used to legitimize advantaged groups' experiences and make invisible the experiences of disadvantaged groups. Feminist scholars have been arguing this point since at least the 1970s, documenting the myriad ways in which language reflects gender stereotypes, and how this hinders women's progress in achieving equality in work and political domains.[41] More broadly, exclusionary language is often used by right-wing political parties to contest the existence of gender-non-conforming individuals, a tactic that continues to be used in Italy and elsewhere in the world.[42] Because the real issue at hand is about access to power and resources, inclusivity in language becomes a very important signal of equality to these activists.

Recognizing the ways in which language exclusion hinders equality, all of the activists described (3) *ways that they and others work around the gendered Italian language to be more inclusive*, recognizing that the language is a living, and thus changeable, communication system. Most of the strategies used have been recommended by the High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity at the European Parliament.[43] One aspect of this conversation that emerged from our interviews is that activists had different interpretations and recommendations on how to use the Italian language in a more inclusive way. Some of these opinions were in stark contrast to one another. Indeed, individual preferences or habits toward actively employing one or another of the various options available for an inclusive use of the Italian language were deeply connected with an activist's life experience and personal form of activism.

For instance, Roberti, who defined her early activism as "provocatorio" (challenging, defying) and recounted anecdotes of how she had always used the language to send a message and shock others, admitted to being deeply in love ("la amo profondamente") with the use of the suffix "u" as a marker of gender neutrality. As opposed to the asterisk, which she uses in written communications, using the "u" for her is a comfortable way to achieve the goal of inclusivity while maintaining the fluidity of the

[39] See Boroditsky, "Linguistic Relativity"; Boroditsky et al., "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics"; Carroll, *Language, Thought and Reality*.

[40] See Duncan, "Power, Gender, and Collective Action"; Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place."

[41] See Cheryan and Markus, "Masculine Defaults"; Crawford, "Gender and Language"; Gaucher, et al. "Gendered Wording"; Hentschel et al., "Kick-Starting Female Careers"; Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place"; Liben et al., "Language at Work"; Weatherall, *Gender, Language, and Discourse.*

[42] See Duncan, "Power, Gender, and Collective Action"; European Civic Forum, "Civic Space Report"; *Il Post*, "I Manifesti Elettorali."

[43] See High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity, European Parliament, "Gender-Neutral Language."

spoken language. For Dal Molin, instead, whose activism has mainly centered around supporting the rights of same-sex families, promoting a more inclusive Italian language means using it to describe the reality of LGBTQIA+ families: "famiglia omogenitoriale" (same-sex parent family) instead of "famiglia omosessuale" (same-sex family). Picciaiola's example is another case in point. As a cis heterosexual woman who identifies as a LGBTQIA+ activist and who works as a teacher in a rural primary school, Picciaiola is committed and determined to educate children, but also the larger community, to question reality and to use the language to reflect it in a more expansive manner. For Picciaiola, this begins with using both the feminine and masculine plural to represent both genders rather than letting the masculine represent everyone. She has also worked to increase the visibility of women in history, by petitioning to change the names of streets in her town from generic names (e.g., "via di sopra e di sotto") to the names of prominent Italian women.

One final aspect that emerged is that interviewed activists recognized how difficult it is to develop one clear approach to an inclusive use of the Italian language, and also that they use the language differently based on audience. According to them, there cannot be one solution, but rather a plethora of recommendations that are sensitive to context. Clearly individuals must be free to choose what works for them and their situations, based on their experiences, the causes they are working for, and their professional goals. The ability to express one's values and accurately represent the human experience through language touches individuals' lives, and is especially important for those whose identities are excluded or underrepresented in mainstream society. Feeling included in society is essential for mental health and encourages the development of a more positive sense of self.[44]

Finally, all of the activists talked about their own and others' (4) *emotional reactions* to attempts to work around the gendered Italian language, some of which might be interpreted as resistance to changing the status quo, and others which might simply reflect the difficulty in trying to change a language in which gender is so deeply entrenched.[45] As a key element shaping human identity, language is deeply connected to culture and to a sense of belonging to a specific community. Whenever language is questioned, criticized, manipulated, or used as a tool of discrimination, people are likely to have a strong reaction to it. The pool of activists we interviewed confirmed this trend both because they attested to how the use of inclusive language is met with antagonism by those who do not participate in this debate, and also, as mentioned above, because activists do not unanimously agree on all the various recommendations on how to make the Italian language more inclusive.

Our study provides us with a snapshot of how committed feminist LGBTQIA+ activists, living and working in Bologna, Italy, in 2019, grappled with the limitations of the gendered Italian language in their everyday lives. All of the activists recognized the importance of inclusive language for improving the social, economic, and political situation of girls, women, non-binary, and trans people, and as such, made efforts to find strategies that allowed them to work to promote inclusivity. This is clearly not a problem with an easy solution, as evidenced by the long history of discussion and commitment of linguists, activists, and politicians to promoting inclusivity.[46] Nevertheless, the creativity and engagement evidenced by these activists demonstrates that these debates filter down to affect the experiences of everyday people and that they find ways to be true to their values within the constraints of the language.

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[44] Baiocco et al., "Italian Proposal."

[45] See D'Achille, "Un asterisco sul genere"; Iacona, "Cari tutti"; Thornton, "Designare le donne."

[46] See Sulis and Gheno, "The Debate on Language." For example, in 2021, the use of the "schwa" as a gender-neutral suffix in written and spoken language became a heated topic of discussion when the municipality of Castelfranco Emilia posted on Facebook that they were going to adopt its universal use. See Il Post, "Un comune emiliano"; Baiocco et al., "Italian Proposal."

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