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Linguistic Relativity and Gender Inclusive Language: General remarks upon the debate on Italian

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This paper aims at accomplishing three tasks.

The first one is mainly descriptive. I will describe the main stages and features of the debate, both academic and public, around some proposals for modifying the Italian language in a more gender-inclusive way. Italian is a Romance language with two grammatical genders, masculine and feminine and the grammatical mark must be expressed in this binary choice. This general rule impacts extensively nouns, adjectives, pronouns, verbs.

In recent years, as the queer community in the Italian society grew in numbers and in its self-awareness, innovative proposals to adjourn the Italian language were put forward. While they differed in the specific graphic and phonetic solutions, they all shared the same rationale, as follows. When it comes to people, the masculine and feminine grammatical genders grant proper representation only to individuals (or groups) who identify as male and female, respectively. Since people who do not identify with either of the two traditional genders have equal rights to linguistic representation, the language must be modified in order to grant adequate reference. Therefore, speakers of Italian should find ways to refer to gender-neutral people in writing and speaking.

This is the point at which specific solutions differed. Let us consider the case of adjectives of the first class. The masculine suffixes are *-o* (sg.) / *-i* (pl.) and the feminine ones are *-a* (sg.) / *-e* (pl.). For instance, *nostro, nostri* (m.), *nostra, nostre* (f.) (“true”) are the four forms normally allowed. Inclusive proposal included the following forms: *nostru, nostr*, nostr_, nostrx, nostr@*. Except for the first solution listed here, the others all shared the problem of their pronunciation. The various signs (*, _, x, @) could be pronounced as a blank, as if they weren’t there. However, This interpretation proved to

be quite problematic. Let us now turn to the first alternative, the final *-u*. This letter is not normally a suffix for adjectives and names, so it is not marked for what concerns gender. In fact, many pronounce the symbolic suffixes (the asterisk, the underscore, etc.) as if it were a *u*. A minor, but not dismissable downside to this particular solution is that in some regional varieties and dialects of Italian, especially in the South of the country the *-u* suffix is used for masculine, in place of the *-o* that belongs to standard Italian.

But an even more innovative and creative solution appeared at some point: using the schwa (ə). The schwa belongs to the International Phonetic Alphabet and is described as the most neutral vowel sound. This sound, however, does not belong to Italian phonetics, much less its graphic representation. The gender-neutral version of the adjective *nostro* would look like this: *nostrə*. One of the first proponents, an activist, proposed a plural form for the schwa, using another sign as a suffix, calling it “long schwa”: *-3*. On this inclusive proposal, Italian should then display 6 different forms, three singular and three plural: *nostro/nostri* (m.), *nostra/nostre* (f.), *nostrə*, *nostr3* (n.). Another remarkable example of a modification in this sense is the gender-neutral singular third-person personal pronoun: *lui* (m.), *lei* (f.), *lai* (n.). However, the plural gender-neutral form has not gained much favor, compared to the singular form, so I will not discuss it any further.

The schwa proposal, originally born in grassroots contexts of queer and feminist activism, was illustrated to the general public by a not particularly well-known sociolinguist, Vera Gheno. The discussion then snowballed in newspapers, social media, and the editorial market, throughout a few years, amounting now to five, more or less. The debate between linguists became, in a word, polarized between three poles: conservatives, moderates, sympathizers.

Conservatives (D’Achille 2021, Simone 2021, Arcangeli 2022, De Santis 2022, De Benedetti 2022, Moro 2022, Pani 2022) denounced an attempt to corrupt not only the purity of the Italian language but also the correct functioning of its mechanisms: since grammatical gender must be expressed in many occasions, modification to that element will have wide-ranging effects on how texts and utterances will be formed and used. Supporting arguments towards a total rejection of the schwa (including any different solution as listed above), included the denial of the problem in the first place. Masculine

forms are used in generalized ways by convention so no discrimination whatsoever is implied even if other genders are not explicitly represented in grammatical forms (feminine only, or feminine and any other gender expression).

Moderates (Robustelli 2021, 2022, Sbisà 2019, Thornton 2022, see also Iacona 2022) include especially scholars who worked in the past few decades to contrast the linguistic invisibilization of women through the preponderant use of “overextended” or “universalized” masculine forms in standard Italian. While being aware of the importance of, for instance, coining and actually using feminine forms for job titles (*chirurgo* > *chirurga* [surgeon]; *avvocato* > *avvocata* [lawyer]) (see Gheno 2021a), they were not too welcoming towards the gender-neutral proposals. One argument, for example, using a neutral form would end up being another tool of invisibilization of the feminine (and of women, consequently) (Cettolin 2018). They also shared technical objections to the possibilities of an actual successful implementation of the schwa into the system of the Italian language. From a historical point of view, this whole group of positions follow the line of the milestone in feminist linguistics in Italy, namely one document by Alma Sabatini (1986) about ways to employ the Italian language in a non-discriminatory way towards women.

Lastly, the sympathizers started to defend in academic outlets (Gheno 2021b, 2022, Baldi 2022, Giusti 2022, Manera 2022, Spinelli 2023) and, elsewhere, to use this form in other contexts, sometimes without the necessary linguistic mastery on how to practically handle the proposal, given its wide-ranging reverberation on text productions. It was also employed for very specialized functions, such as translations of books where gender-neutral forms were used in the original language (Tiburi 2020). Sympathizers held, perhaps surprisingly, actually the most moderate views on what the schwa solution should be, namely, used only when necessary and alternating with other ways of resorting to the standard masculine forms. The latter ways (basically stylistic devices in syntax and word choice) were available all along and are perfectly integrated into the grammar of standard Italian. Moreover, taking a step back, the marginalized communities that originated the proposal without the intention of becoming a mainstream object of discussion, and much less an academic one, insisted on the social origin and value of gender-inclusive linguistic forms.

The second task of this paper is metatheoretical. I will focus on how in the Italian debate references were made to linguistic relativity which I consider a fundamental premise of this operation of linguistic reform. Both proponents and critics were inconsistent in naming it in their discussions. The depth and the accuracy of those references can be assessed as mediocre, in most cases. Misconceptions and mischaracterization were frequent. Many of them are “classic” when it comes to linguistic relativity (confusion between relativity and relativism; confusion between its principle and its empirical versions; allegations of being an “unscientific” idea; and so on, see Batisti in press, 2019), or not unheard of, even if they are risible (e.g., the alleged ties with racism Moro 2019, 2022).

The third task is theoretical. Leaving aside the debate on Italian or any other specific language, which merit is there to the fundamental idea? What do contemporary psycholinguistics tell us about this issue? I will review the few studies that have directly addressed this specific incarnation of linguistic relativity (acknowledging that the principle is not monolithic at all and is subject to various understandings, depending on many metatheoretical factors, see Batisti 2020, Blomberg and Zlatev 2021). They employ quite different methodologies and perspectives, from philosophical analyses to psychological experiments, including corpus linguistics and clinical evidence (De Franza et al. 2020, Franco Martínez 2020, Scoto and Pérez 2020, Gygax et al. 2021, Baiocco et al. 2023, and more). I will try to assess the overall strength of the argument for modifications in grammatical gender as a partial enhancer of gender inclusion (or as blocker of gender discrimination) in communities of speakers.

I will conclude by highlighting that complex problems require diversified answers. When polarization in public and academic discourse is resorted to even by scholars, too high a price is paid. It is perhaps ironic that the controversy on linguistic relativity between the 1990s and the 2000s is informative in this sense (see Levinson 2003 opening paragraph, Nodari 2021). Finally, I will report considerations by a queer lecturer and activist (Vasallo 2023) whose remarks on the merely “symbolic” (thus lacking impact on “reality”) value of battles in favor of gender-neutral language are engaging and, at the same time, at odds with clinical reports (Baiocco’s et al., 2023) that the use of gender-

neutral language seems to matter to non-binary folks in terms of their psychological well-being indeed.

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