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A MATTER OF GENDER:
ITALIAN SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND DIDACTICS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A VISIBLE FEMININE

ABSTRACT

Based upon the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which language influences thought, we may affirm how social stereotypes remain bound by stereotyped usages of language. Hence, speaking is never neutral as it is underpinned by a way of thinking, of communicating, of being. The sexist usage of language encapsulates a function of emphasis at the semantic level and an obscuring function in morphological terms. We thus question what sexism in language means in order to inquire as to how the ways we make use of language may influence our ways of thinking and, consequently, our ways of acting.

KEYWORDS: Linguistics- gender- stereotypes- sexism- teaching

> "*The linguistics system is not sexist. The norm is. The norm, which is the traditional realisation and social determination of the system, reflects an androcentric society in which the male is man and the woman is sex*"
>
> (Elisabeth Burr)

WHAT DOES LINGUISTIC SEXISM MEAN?

The term *linguistic sexism*, established within the framework of the American feminist movement of the 1970s, expresses the discrimination that a culture with a patriarchal structure exercises towards the female gender/sex. This prejudice has also extended to linguistic behaviours, frequently stereotyped and deceptive, and contributes towards inevitable discrimination, including at the social level.

Therefore, institutions, especially the media and educational establishments, were called upon to adopt respectful language towards females and make due alterations in the grammatical and lexical fields should such be deemed necessary and worthwhile.

This problem rapidly turned into an object for academic attention within the scope of *Gender Studies*, whether applied to linguistics, sociolinguistics or the prevailing lexicon.

In Italy the feminist movement, influenced by its American counterpart and understanding the urgency of the situation, intervened through the publication of a series of very important studies, including such highlights as *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (1987) by Alma Sabatini, which is still today considered a fundamental text and the point of departure for non-sexist analysis of the Italian language with concrete proposals for avoiding such sexism.

Language has always gained due recognition for its fundamental role in the social construction of reality and, therefore, also in gender identities. Hence, the need for its utilisation in non-sexist ways and so as to ensure there is neither any favouritism of the male gender nor that the language continues to convey an entire series of negative preconceptions of women. As Francesco Sabatini states (1987: 9) "*La lingua non è il riflesso diretto dei fatti reali, ma esprime la nostra visione dei fatti; inoltre, fissandosi in certe forme, in notevole misura condiziona e guida tale visione*."

Furthermore, the origins of gendered language do not arise from issues of a linguistic or grammatical nature but rather from social and cultural motivations. The superiority of the male in the language structure in fact corresponds to male superiority in society, also determined by the popular ways of speech.

The language we deploy contributes to fostering and reifying realities, even gender related realities.

Based upon the hypothesis proposed by Sapir and Whorf, stating that language influences thinking, we may correspondingly affirm that social stereotypes remain underpinned by the stereotyped usage of language that expresses what the mind thinks. Consequently, speech is never neutral and that which is not said, does not exist. Behind the uttering of each word, there are always two thoughts: an initial one to choose the word, and a second phase to interpret it. A word, therefore, is not neutral because of its underlying reflection of a way of thinking, of communicating, of reception, of being.

The sexist usage of language involves a function of emphasis at the semantic level (semantic asymmetries and gaps in terminology) and a function of obscurity at the morphological level (agreement in the masculine and male universality). For example, the male inclusive, erroneously considered "neutral", hides the presence of women just as it also disguises their absence, thus, non-nominated women simply do not exist.

Questioning sexism in language means asking in what way the usage we make of language may reflect and hold influence over our way of thinking and, consequently, on our way of acting.

The intentions in signalling such problems involve nurturing reflection on certain automatic usages of language, and therefore of thinking, usages that do not prove so innocent as regards those induced – and that getting induced – into belief.

THE ITALIAN CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN DEBATE

In the mid-1980s, studies by Alma Sabatini raised the question of how a neutral language, expelling from within any and all traces of indifference, might best express:

> ad un solo soggetto, apparentemente neutro e universale, in realtà maschile […] e ripensano alla lingua in una "prospettiva diversa, mirante a fare emergere e liberare le possibilità creative e vitali che la differenza sessuale racchiude in sé, nel momento in cui essa diviene luogo ove si esprimono due diversi soggetti, non simmetricamente definiti

The studies contained in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* do in fact still represent today the first and most notable publication ever in Italy: a type of counter-reading attentive to style, the lexicon and pragmatic and semantic aspects.

The data, gathered through a compilation of files – around 400 in total – clearly set out the most negative aspects of the use of the male grammatical inclusive and furthermore seek to convey the negative aspects at the symbolical level, of visibility for the female subject, especially when deploying agentive for professional roles.

A separate section details the data on recurrent lexical usages and stereotyped expressions, provocative and reductive as regards women.

Based upon this landmark work, many academics, linguists and philosophers began, or then returned to, the difficult task of discussing linguistic equality between the genders. A major contribution currently stems from numerous publications by the linguist Cecilia Robustelli, including *Lingua e Identità di genere* and, especially, *Donne, grammatica e media*, a new Italian dictionary written in accordance with the gender agreement strongly campaigned for by the journalists' association GIULIA (Giornaliste Unite Libere Autonome) and as presented to *Camera dei Deputati* on 11 July 2014.

Hence, courtesy also of the approval granted by the *Accademia della Crusca*[1], we know that it is correct to apply *ingegnera* and *chirurga*, *architetta* and *ministra*, *senatrice* and *prefetta*. Furthermore, *avvocata* is preferable to *avvocatessa*, while *professoressa* remains in vogue as does *studentessa* and *dottoressa* which have already entered common usage. This then sets out a series of operational proposals to overcome each difficulty before proposing easily applicable solutions for each case.

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[1] The position of the Accademia is documented through diverse initiatives: *Progetto genere e linguaggio* with the *Comune di Firenze*; *Il tema del mese* a cura di Cecilia Robustelli, published in March 2013 on the Accademia website as well as various interviews given by academics. President Nicoletta Maraschio reiterated the usage of the female grammatical gender to indicate those institutional and professional roles that only became available to women in recent decades as indeed happened with traditional jobs and professions.

In order to conclude this list of key texts relating to language and gender, we would recall the book by the sociologist Graziella Priulla – *Parole tossiche. Cronache di ordinario sessismo*, published by Settenove[2].

Priulla gathers and catalogues the insults flung by politicians and other public figures; analysing their daily usage and rendering explicit the historical, cultural and social context that each term reproduces (and regenerates): "*Le parole non sono inerti – sostiene l'autrice – ma definiscono l'orizzonte in cui viviamo*". Verbal violence generates violence both in mental formats and in the imaginary. Between the verbal violence and its development into physical violence lies social rejection and, therefore, its explicit condemnation in daily interaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE USAGE (AND TEACHING) OF NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE REFLECTING ON AUTOMATISMS

In Romance languages, and thus also in Italian, the masculine generally guides the rules for concordance (e.g. the adjective becomes masculine if there is only a masculine substantive existing in a group).

This rule became established in France in the mid-17th century by Dominique Bouhours, a Jesuit priest and grammarian, who justified the need by affirming that whenever two genders encounter, there is a need for the most noble to prevail.

Sexist forms therefore derive from **grammatical asymmetries**, such as the utilisation of the generic masculine (e.g. *i cittadini a*pplies the masculine to denote both men and women) and **semantic asymmetries**, that reflect social stereotypes (e.g. *un governante/una governante*).

An extreme case arrives with agentive usage as we may note in these examples drawn from expressions used in daily discourse: "Il sindaco di Cosenza ha partorito una bambina"; "Il ministro indossava un tailleur rosa"; "Il segretario di Stato (Hillary Clinton) ha accolto la notizia con animo virile".

Change might occur by following some simple rules:

Avoiding utilisation of the masculine as an unmarked gender (*diritti dell'uomo > umani*, *della persona*); prefixing the feminine to opposing pairs (*uomini* and *donne > donne* and *uomini*, alternating); avoiding words such as *fratellanza > solidarietà*; agreeing adjectives and participles in the feminine when the majority

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[2] Settenove is a direct reference to the year 1979. This was an important year for women because not only did the United Nations adopt CEDAW, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination towards Women, but also Rai had the audacity to broadcast the documentary *Processo per stupro*, by Loredana Rotondo, and it saw Nilde Iotti become the first woman in Italy to take on the third most important position in the state hierarchy.

of names, or the final name, is feminine: *Maria, Francesco e Giovanna sono arrivate*; avoiding citing women as if they belong to some separate category (*"questi popoli si spostavano con donne e bambini in cerca di…" como se as mulheres não fizessem parte do povo*).

For names, cognomens, titles: avoiding the asymmetric signalling of women and men (es. la Boldrini e Renzi > Boldrini e Renzi); using *signora* (symmetrical to s*ignore*) and not *signorina*; when referring to a couple, also using the woman's cognomen (*il signore e la signora Curie > la coppia Curie-Slodowska*).

For professions, this applies the feminine rules in keeping with those already existing (thus, there is nothing new from the grammatical point of view): terms ending in –sore change to –sora: *assessora, difensora*; terms ending in –o, –aio/ario, –iere change to –a, –aia/aria, –iera: *chirurga, colonnella, ministra*; and terms in –tore change to –trice: *redattrice, senatrice, rettrice*.

In the following cases, there is no appropriate morpho-phonetic form in the feminine but only the prefixing of the feminine article: terms in –e or in –a *la parlamentare, la vigile*; composed with -capo *la capofamiglia, la capotreno*.

If we carry out an Internet search to verify how newspapers deal with professions in the feminine, we discover the following:

- *Carabiniera* (28,600), *donna carabiniere* (372), *carabiniere donna* (288), *carabiniere in gonnella* (31), *carabiniere in rosa* (1);
- *Poliziotta* (162,000), *donna poliziotto* (6,830), *poliziotto donna* (500), *poliziotto in gonnella* (142), *poliziotto al femminile* (1).

AVVOCATA OR AVVOCATESSA?

The usage of the suffix *–essa* appears to indicate the wife of whom exercises a role and not the person who engages the respective role.

This became established at a particular point in time, above all, for titles of nobility: *baronessa, contessa* and entered into regular use with words such as *professoressa, dottoressa*.

Dottoressa, however, through history until the early twentieth century served in a predominantly negative and derisive sense to label know-it-all and presumptuous women. The Rigutini-Fanfani Dictionary highlights: "femm. di Professore; ma si userebbe più spesso per ischerzo: "Vuol far la professora, ma non sa nulla".

Among words retaining such an ironic and discriminatory tone are the words *ministressa* and *medichessa*.

Despite the feminine forms not being particularly well-accepted in Italy, in France in fact there is regular recourse to *la ministre, la présidente*; in Germany,

Angela Merkel is *kanzlerin*, a female minister is *ministerin*; and in the case of Spain, there is even *la presidenta*, *la profesora*, backed with all the authority of the Real Academia. In Portuguese, there is *a professora*, *a juíza*, etcetera. This all aids in better understanding how this does not stem from any grammatical problem but is rather a cultural issue.

THE PROBLEM OF WOMEN IN LANGUAGE

When making reference to women, linguistic sexism is intrinsic to language and the usage of language. The image of women emerging from linguistic practices always highlights the most obvious contrast between the social rise of women and the rigidity of a language built by and for men.

The language applied to indicate the feminine is frequently replete with metaphors which reference bodies and beauty, always using a stereotypical approach.

We may still today encounter the asymmetric usage of diminutive terms such as *sposina*, *mogliettina*; expressions such as *mamme stressate e insicure*; *superdonna stanca* and *strapazzata*; recurrent adjectives such as *nevrotica*, *imprevedibile*, *candida*; counterbalanced against *appariscente* mas *tranquilla*, *minuta* mas *volitiva* (the sexual reference being a constant presence).

This in no way improves when we turn to discourses made up of the "popular wisdom" of proverbs with their fairly recurrent explicit sexism as detailed in the following examples:

> Chi dice donna dice danno.
> Le donne hanno lunghi i capelli e corto il cervello.
> Donna che sa il latino è rara cosa, ma guardati dal prenderla in sposa.
> Buona o cattiva che sia, alla moglie si dà con il bastone

Sexist comments and the references to sexuality contained in the majority of insults in Italian represent part of daily life and are deemed not only fully acceptable but also amusing.

In 2006, the *Donne e Media in Europa* report defined Italy as a "*Paese in resistenza*", in which stereotypical representations are deemed an anthropological characteristic so deeply rooted that there are no prospects for any opposition by "evolutionary" policies. Furthermore, within the same framework are the results of the latest **Gender Gap Report** in which Italy is to be found in the lowest places as regards the gap between women and men, be it in employment, education, economic or social fields, and others.

OBJECTIONS TO CHANGE

There are many negative defensive positions alleging some sort of threat from linguistic and social change. The path that needs to be taken unfortunately remains long as the main problem stems from having to change an already deeply rooted mentality. The recent opinion poll *Linguaggio e Stereotipi di Genere*, released on the Internet by the group *Se non ora quando Genova*, identifies strong resistance to change both among men and among women.

Among the motivations of those rejecting such changes, one woman maintains "*il lavoro è un lavoro, non un genere*", while a man defines the declination of names into the feminine as "*violenza femminista*", and goes on to add "*chiamare una donna chirurga o architetta sarebbe riduttivo per la donna stessa!*"

The non-feminisation of prestigious agentives shows a certain classist characteristic, never mind a macho dimension, an expression of the social hierarchies applied to gender relations. However, there is no problem when it comes to such cases as *operaia*, *cassiera*. This demonstrates the extent to which the openness to variation proves inversely proportional to the social value of the respective job/position.

And we should not overlook how there is a broad feminine side entirely beyond the scope of debate, ignorant of the "feminine condition" and therefore still more indifferent to this problem becoming a matter for open discussion. Women, who in feminine contexts may adopt a sexualised language, in mixed contexts then re-appropriate the traditional linguistics code. As Alma Sabatini (1987: 102) affirms:

> […] la gente ormai si vergogna al solo pensiero di essere tacciata di 'classista' o 'razzista'. Quando ci si vergognerà altrettanto di essere considerati 'sessisti' molti cambiamenti qui auspicati diventeranno realtà 'normale'

Schools, as educators and preparers of tolerant, responsible and respectful future adults, might begin by applying a teaching method that takes into account the importance that language plays in the construction of identity, fostering this process with the small and legitimate grammatical changes detailed above and campaigning to modernise already obsolete curricula and produce text books in which the presence of women is both conspicuous and real.

> […] richiamerei – sostiene Francesco Sabatini (1987: 11) – l'attenzione della scuola, come altro organo primario della comunicazione: un profondo senso di responsabilità dovrà guidare chi insegna ed educa perché porti a far maturare nelle generazioni crescenti la coscienza di tali problemi, linguistici e non, e non pretenda invece adesione cieca all'una o all'altra norma, cioè a quella prescelta dall'insegnante.

In 1998, an attempt was made at progress in this field through a European project, which involved Spain and Portugal in addition to Italy, called POLITE (Pari Opportunità nei LIbri di TEsto).

This sought to raise awareness among the authors of school textbooks that women and men, the protagonists in culture, history, politics and science, might establish their presence in publications without any gender-based discrimination. This also formulated a code of self-regulation that sought to rethink language in non-sexist terms and including gender, the avoidance of stereotypes, avoiding the exclusion of either gender, and updating and ensuring the appropriateness of the choice of pictures and illustrations.

Very little was done and even less was put into practice.

The role of the teacher would be fundamental and determinant in the campaign against expressions prejudicial to gender parity. Furthermore, this would begin in the crèche so as to ensure a certain way of talking and behaving no longer imposed by traditionally constructed differences between "maschi" and "femmine" becomes perfectly normal to the adults of tomorrow.

In fact, the type of education getting taught to children has not changed in the last three decades. Regarding this, we may refer to a book by Elena Gianini Belotti (1973), a study of the sociocultural limitations of roles and the gender identities of girls conveyed in children's literature, in school books, on television, etcetera. The same theme was later taken up by Loredana Lipperini (2003).

CONCLUSIONS

Parity of rights, the social recognition of women and the construction of respective gender identities also involves the correct and non-discriminatory use of language. This certainly constitutes a still long and very twisting path as this first involves changing mentalities. However, this is not impossible and, with the assistance of the teaching establishment, should become a political choice with the objective of attaining respect and visibility for those who have been hidden away for far too long.

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