

Building identities: the case of Inclusive language in Italian

The need for a more inclusive language is at the centre of a fierce debate in many languages (specifically, grammatical gender ones such as Italian, Spanish, and French), from an academic point of view and from public/media perspectives. In this talk, I focus on the Italian language, discussing Italy as a specific epistemological site (a term used by Sunderland, 2014 and revised by Formato, 2019), one that continues to institutionally discriminate against LGBTQIA+ communities. The aim of this talk is to enrich the existing literature on several languages (see Abbou 2011; Kinsley 2020 for French; Hord 2016 for Swedish, French, and German).

The three linguistic inclusive devices that have so far emerged and are being employed by speakers are schwa (ə), -u and asterisk (*), as, for instance, in *tuttə*, *tuttu* and *tutt** (Eng. everybody/all). These devices replace other forms: the sexist generic masculines (*tutti*), the binary split forms (*tutti/tutte* or *tutte/tutte*) and the generic feminine (*tutte*). Some linguists, such as Gheno (2021) and Manera (2021) strongly advocate for these strategies as fruitful options to make Italian an inclusive language. Some others, on the contrary, oppose the same strategies, arguing that the use of feminine and masculine forms (as, for instance, in the pair form, *senatrici* and *senatori*, female and male MPs from the upper chamber of the Italian parliament) are enough to reconstruct a gender fair linguistic landscape. In their opinion, this is related to the difficult *journey* into speakers' acceptance of feminine forms. On this topic, research (Formato 2016, 2019; Nardone 2016, 2018) shows that generic masculines are still widely used to refer to women in several contexts such as newspaper articles, job adverts and the Italian parliament. From yet another perspective, other speakers, among whom professors, writers and journalists, have launched a petition to ban inclusive linguistic strategies or have shown hostility towards them.

Another aspect that I wish to discuss is the interesting intertwining between language inclusivity and language neutrality, as there are overlaps but also differences in how language is employed. For instance, the construction *chi lavora in senato* (those who work in the Upper Chamber) replacing *senatrici and senatori*, can be perceived as ambiguous in relation to *motivated* inclusivity. In Formato and Somma (forthcoming), we frame inclusive Italian into political, feminist and determined efforts to produce a fairer society, on the basis that choosing language can modify "the value of the terms and remove the option of political neutrality" (Cameron 1995: 120).

I maintain that the tension and opposition might disregard some relevant issues which are at stake in speakers' *motivated* (Abbou 2011) linguistic choices, that is self-representation and one own's identity work, as well as allyship work. More specifically, the debate(s) rarely focus on seeing language choices as part of "symbolic resources available for the cultural production of identity" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 379). In considering identity work, this talk reviews linguistic choices that can be used for self-representation/allyship in speech communities (Labov 1989), communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1998, 2007) and imagined communities (Anderson 1983). Specifically, I am interested in linguistic "resistance" devices which are not meant to overthrow gendered language but to complement it with yet further options for those who do not identify within the binary or use language to narrate their inclusive vision of the world. To show how language can construct resistance, I am going to employ a corpus of tweets 2019-2022, collected through a python programme. I present some qualitative findings in relation to how social gender, or ideas around it, can be seen through language choices.

Parts of this talk form part of a more comprehensive project, that is a book titled *Feminism, corpus-assisted research and language inclusivity* (under contract with Cambridge University Press), where I also present a novel synergy between theoretical and methodological frameworks, that are CADS (corpus approaches to discourse studies, Partington, Duguid and Taylor 2013) and FCDA (Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Lazar 2014, 2017).

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