



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i2/16379>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i2/16379

Received: 16 December 2022, **Revised:** 20 January 2023, **Accepted:** 08 February 2023

Published Online: 17 February 2023

In-Text Citation: (Catarinella et al., 2023)

To Cite this Article: Catarinella, P., Malek, M. R. A., Jee-Yeon, B., Kram, S., & Ridzuan, M. U. M. (2023). Is Italian a Sexist Language? “*Nomina Agentis*” and the So-called Overextended Masculine. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences*, 13(2), 1237 – 1256.

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Vol. 13, No. 2, 2023, Pg. 1237 – 1256

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Is Italian a Sexist Language? “*Nomina Agentis*” and the So-called Overextended Masculine

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Abstract

Italian is often accused of being a sexist language because the masculine form always prevails; feminine names are always a minority (compared to the masculine ones); very often, one word, used in the masculine form, has a positive connotation, but the same word, in the feminine, has a negative one. There are many kinds of sexism (linguistic, behavioural, political, implicit, and criminal) as well as many ways it can be conveyed in the real world. This paper will focus on the linguistic form. The Italian language makes extensive use of the so-called “*maschile sovraesteso*” or “*universale*” (overextended or universal masculine). In sentences where the nouns are all masculine or all feminine, the adjective keeps the same gender in the plural form. However, if nouns have different genders, the adjective follows the masculine plural form. For example: “*Ho fatto amicizia con un ragazzo ed una ragazza spagnoli*” (I made friends with a guy and a girl, both Spanish). “*Spagnoli*” is the Italian adjective for Spanish used in the plural masculine form. The gender does not change even if there are five girls and only one guy. The choice for the masculine plural form does not depend on the numerical majority. To prefer the masculine plural form in case of the coexistence of masculine and feminine singular nouns is discriminatory. Using the so-called universal masculine is a sexist way to write Italian.

Keywords: Italian, Language, Sexism, Gender Equality

Introduction

This research intends to focus on sexism in the Italian language, expressions still in use that place women in a perceived position of inferiority compared to men and relegate them to a

secondary place in society. Indeed, the term “sexism” has a broader meaning than male-female relationships since it can also affect other groups in society (people with disabilities, homosexuals) who may be subjected to discrimination, violence, and bullying (Dazzi, 2023), and it is not limited to language.

Sexism: what does it mean? Sexism is gender bias that originates from the perceived inferiority of certain groups of people based on sexual characteristics. It is a phenomenon of great social and linguistic interest because it is not limited to negative judgments about someone, but also deals with discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. The term “sexism” was born in the 60s by a group of feminists who intended to underline the social injustices perpetrated against women. It is a phenomenon of social and political nature, much like racism. Both are characterised by discriminatory behaviours and motivated by biological aspects. The psychological element of sexism can be found in the adversity women often face in society, with misogyny being the worst level; the word literally means “hate towards women”. This is usually the last, most serious, stage of sexist behaviour. The phenomenon of sexism is prevalent in relation to female issues, and much less in matters related to men or other gender minorities (Martini, 2020). All people with a gender identity who do not conform to that shared by the majority of the population are, more likely, to be subjected to discrimination. In general, sexism manifests itself in all situations in which, with words or gestures, the superiority of one gender over another is affirmed (Caramia, 2020). Sexism has its roots in the stereotypical roles of men and women within society. In the past, when gender roles were rigid and non-interchangeable, women were expected to be loving mothers and wives, dedicated to family, and attending to the home, and men had to go out to work to support the family financially (Schilirò, 2021). There was also a presumed predisposition of the female gender towards empathy and social relationships, while the male gender was associated with a less emotional and more cognitive, task-oriented mode of functioning. Those who did not respect the role assigned by society, or did not identify with it, were seen in a very negative light (Luce, 2020). Over the years, this rigidity has softened, but it has not completely disappeared.

There are many forms of sexism: 1) Hostile sexism: it is the most well-known. It is the classic gender bias, according to which the person should only follow socially acceptable roles. When social changes occur, some men find it difficult to accept them and resort to sexism. 2) Benevolent sexism: it is a rather insidious form as it is generally accepted by women as it can be expressed in a positive manner; this is the case of jokes, and very often, the line between jokes and teasing is not easily recognisable. However, it perpetuates gender differences because it supports inequality (Giannelli, 2022) at a social level. Currently, sexism has taken on more subtle and less obvious forms, presenting itself in every context, from social life to family and the working environment. 3) Extreme and violent sexism that leads to heinous crimes (Lo Russo, 2020) against women, including personal injuries and “femicide”. 4) Sexism that aims to discredit a person's physical appearance, such as body attributes (face, hair, skin, eyes, height, shortness, legs, body weight, and even the way of dressing), is known as body shaming. Unlike other types of sexism, which are aimed almost exclusively at women, it can equally affect all (Zeppilli, 2021) people (men, women, young and old, famous or not). 5) Linguistic sexism, which is the most relevant for the purposes of this research.

Many believe that the Italian language has many sexist expressions towards women (Cavagnoli, 2021). For example, when a feminine word has a negative and derogatory connotation, the corresponding masculine one may have a positive and flattering one. It is true that in the Italian language, there are words that have a legitimate meaning in the

masculine form but, in the feminine, suddenly change their meaning and always refer to prostitution (Cortellesi, 2021). Here are some striking examples: 1) "*Cortigiano*" (Italian masculine noun) means a member of the Royal House, but the same noun in the feminine (*cortigiana*) means bitch. 2) *uomo di strada* (masculine noun) means humble man, while the feminine noun (*donna di strada*) means whore; 3) *uomo disponibile* (masculine) means a kind and thoughtful man, but the feminine (*donna disponibile*) means wench; 4) *uomo allegro* (masculine) means a cheerful man, but the feminine (*donna allegra*) means a woman who accepts money for sex; 5) *uno squillo* (masculine) means a phone call, but the feminine (*una squillo*) means call girl; 6) *gatto morto* (masculine noun) means dead cat, while the feminine (*gatta morta*) means girl/woman who flirts with everyone. Italian society has made enormous strides forward since the end of World War II, and the socio-economic-cultural position of women has changed radically compared to the last century. However, an important question remains: is language able to influence the socio-political values of a country? The answer should be yes (Fioravanti, 2022) since language - written and spoken – provides a snapshot of society at any given moment in history. Attempts to change a language (even just a grammatical rule) with coercion, i.e., by means of an act of will imposed from above, are often doomed to fail (Blu, 2022). When a country's socio-political values fall terribly low, any contribution that attempts to lift them at least a little should be greeted with enthusiasm and hope. Linguistic changes always happen naturally and are never forced; language is spoken and decided by the use that people make of it at the time (Betti, 2021); the same goes for grammar (De Santis, 2022). Language is constantly changing because it is closely linked to human activity and historical, social, cultural, and geographical factors; ageing like a physical object with some terms or expressions abandoned over time, to be replaced by something new or seemingly more modern (Renzi, 2017).

Literature Review

Male-female relationships have undergone enormous changes over the years. Certainly, today woman's perceived roles and conditions are not the same as they were in the 1950s, since society has changed radically from the post-war period until today. However, in 1999, the UN introduced the "international day against violence on women" - which is marked on the 25th of November – as a reminder that there is no absolute equality between men and women, and often the latter are victims of violence, both physical and verbal (Redazione, 2022).

Lorenzo Gasparrini is the author of the book "*Non sono sessista, ma... Il sessismo nel linguaggio contemporaneo*" (I am not sexist, but... Sexism in contemporary language) which deals with the often underestimated issue of sexist language (Gasparrini, 2019); it is everyone's duty to be vigilant to recognise elements of sexism, even in a simple form. Men often use language, sometimes even unconsciously, made mostly of stereotypes, idioms, and clichés that derive from a long-lasting patriarchal culture. Gasparrini analyses and studies the forms of sexist language, where they originated from, how they have changed over the years, and how the feminist movement has carried on battles for equality. The book is a guide to recognising sexism inherent in the words we choose to use, to understand how sexism can be imposed on us and how it can be avoided. Another relevant resource is "*Toccare la lingua è come toccare la persona stessa. Il sessismo linguistico in italiano tra le lingue europee*" (Touching the tongue is like touching the person. Linguistic sexism in Italian and European languages), which focuses on the theme of linguistic sexism in Italian, French and English, a controversial topic addressed both inside and outside the academic fields (Di Costanzo, 2020).

It offers a broad perspective, attempting to clearly outline how the different languages approach (and try to resolve) the issue. The topic of sexism is addressed from a linguistic and also a sociological point of view.

"Campo di Battaglia" (Battlefield) is a book that some people call "feminist" (Capria, 2021). The writer Carolina Capria states that all parts of the female body - from youth to old age - become the subject of discussion, dispute, criticism, and judgment. Judgment of the female body is not limited to the media, but the entire society sets specific, sometimes contradictory, criteria on the parameters and conditions of female bodies. Women must be strong but also delicate, beautiful but also natural, and clever but not intelligent. Women and their bodies are always under observation. On one side, an ancient tradition that tries to keep women "in their place", on the other, a process of economic, technical, and communicative evolution that continuously produces new needs, new dissatisfaction, and new imperfections. Is there a way out from this heavy but subtle form of slavery? Why should only a woman's body be kept under observation?

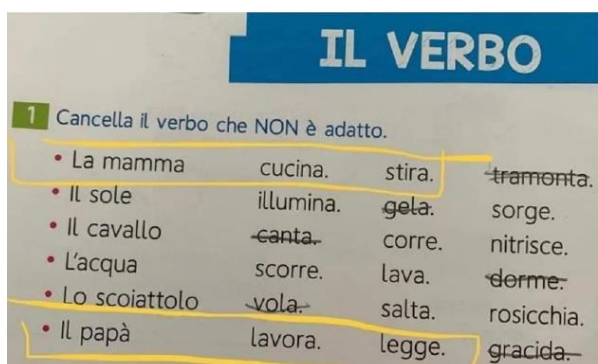
"Sessismo nella lingua italiana; trenta anni dopo Alma Sabatini" (Sexism in the Italian language. Thirty years after Alma Sabatini) is a book that highlights how the worst forms of discrimination affect women even if advances have been made towards gender equality (Somma-Maestri, 2020). The authors believe that certain words or expressions must necessarily be abandoned if certain situations concerning women in society are to be changed. More than thirty years after the fundamental research on sexism in the Italian language curated by the linguist Alma Sabatini in 1987, the book recalls different experiences that show how real gender equality and equal opportunities between men and women have not been reached yet. Somma and Maestri believe that we all need to make an effort, on a linguistic, political, social, and cultural level, for a truly plural and inclusive community.

Riccardo Burgazzi's book *"Il Maschilismo Orecchiabile": mezzo secolo di musica leggera italiana imperniata di sessismo"* (the Catchy Maschilism: fifty years of sexism in Italian pop music) is very instructive from a cultural point of view (Burgazzi, 2021). It reviews approximately one hundred and seventy texts of famous Italian pop songs, from the end of the 1950s to the year 2000, in which "woman" is "sung" in a sexist, vulgar, derogatory, or offensive way. In many of Lucio Dalla's songs (a popular Italian singer-songwriter and musician, 1943- 2012), women are seen as capable only of arousing erotic passions (Godano, 2013). In 1967's song *"Sono tremendo"* (I am terrible) the chorus is: *"Con tutte le ragazze sono tremendo. Le lascio quando voglio e poi le riprendo"* (with all the girls I'm terrible. I leave them when I want and then I take them back again). Women are treated as objects that can be taken or abandoned when the man decides to do so. Adriano Pappalardo's 1979's song *"Ricominciamo"* (Let's start again) uses these words: *"Non perdi occasione per darti da fare"* (you always like to meet new men), alluding to a woman's promiscuity and libertine behaviour. Also: *"Guai a quello che ti tocca"* (nobody else has the right to see you), a man decides that a woman has no freedom at all to choose about her personal life. 1981's Marco Ferradini's song *"Teorema"* says that a woman (Castoro, 2019) should be treated with kindness only during the sexual act: *"Prendi una donna, trattala male, lascia che ti aspetti per ore, non farti vivo e quando la chiami fallo come fosse un favore, fa sentire che è poco importante, dosa bene amore e crudeltà, cerca di essere un tenero amante ma fuori dal letto nessuna pietà"* (Treat a woman badly, let her wait for you for a long time, make her feel that she is not important, dose love and cruelty, try to be a tender lover but out of bed no mercy). 1992's Roberto Vecchioni's *"Voglio una donna"* (I want a woman) whose lyrics (Vecchioni, 1992) are: *"Voglio una donna, non una col pisello o col cervello"* (I want a woman, weak and

without a brain); *“che la piantasse un po' di andarsene in giro”* (I do not want her to go out at night); *“Abbiamo un mare di figli da pulirgli il culo”* (We have many kids and she is the one who must take care of them). 1980's Vasco Rossi (Rossi, 1980) *“Colpa d'Alfredo”* (Alfredo's fault). The singer is about to pick up a woman when his friend distracts him by ruining his evening. From here, the woman becomes a “slut” who prefers a “nigger” who doesn't even speak Italian well but seems to be very rich; *“Ho perso un'altra occasione buona stasera. È andata a casa con il negro, la troia!”* (I missed another chance today. She went home with a nigger, the whore!). 1995's Marco Masini *“Bella stronza”* (Beautiful bitch). This song (Masini, 1995) would be judged sexist nowadays. However, in 1995, it became very popular on Italian radio and TV, and Marco Masini was an idol to many women.

“Il mostruoso femminile. Il patriarcato e la paura delle donne” (Feminine Monster. Patriarchy and Women's fear) considers how (Doyle, 2021) machismo is actually still rooted in our society without realising it. The writer not only deconstructs the role of daughter-wife-mother that has always been assigned to women, but also wants to encourage the younger ones “to be cruel”. The book is irreverent, sometimes even violent. “Feminine monster” is an essay on the wild nature of femininity, making use of myths and literature, crime news, and horror cinema, showing the primordial fear that patriarchy has always nurtured towards women. Doyle discovers women's power, breaking the chains of historic patriarchal oppression. Reading this book allows us to understand who they are, and the abuses they suffered, such as oppression, injustice, and cruelty. The world is not yet a safe place for the female gender and the weakest sections of the population. If we want to fight sexism and prevent society from being pervaded by it, textbooks for elementary school children must also avoid it.

“Educazione sessista. Stereotipi di genere nei libri delle elementari” (Sexist education. Gender stereotypes in elementary school books) is a research book on texts used in schools (Biemmi, 2017). Primary school books still show images of women as 1950s housewives and men as the heads of families, authoritarian, dedicated to work and the economic management of the family. This type of representation has not only not improved, but it has also become slightly worse. Male protagonists have an overwhelming presence compared to female ones (they are almost double in number). Professional jobs are the prerogative of men (in the sample of



texts analysed, as many as ninety-two professional types are counted for men, and only thirteen for women, with the latter mostly related to educational and care jobs). Boys have a wide choice of games in various formats (video games, electric trains), while for girls, playing with dolls is still the main activity (Pizzimenti, 2020). The picture shows a primary school textbook's page where *“la mamma cucina, stira, il papà lavora, legge”*

(the mother cooks and iron clothes, while the father works and reads books), stereotypes of a society that no longer exists.

Methodology

This qualitative research is based mainly on readings of current Italian newspaper articles (2020-2023) that show linguistic sexism not only still exists in many fields (working places - factories, schools, offices -, politics, sports, personal relationships, songs, movies) but how it has evolved during the years. It is also necessary to analyse; A) The relationship between

sexism and male chauvinism (or machismo). Sexism is an attitude of men or women who tend to justify, promote or defend the idea of the inferiority of the female sex compared to men and the consequent discrimination against women in the socio-political, cultural, professional, or simply interpersonal fields. More general this is displayed as a tendency to discriminate against people based on their gender. Male chauvinism is a term used to indicate the adherence to behaviours and attitudes (personal, social, cultural) with which males in general, or some of them, express their belief in their superiority over women on an intellectual, psychological, biological level, and justify the privileged position they occupy in society. B) If the Italian language and society have made significant steps ahead after Alma Sabatini's 1987 "Sexism in the Italian language; guidelines addressed to schools and educational publishers to propose the elimination of gender stereotypes from language" publication or if, instead, there has been a linguistic, political and social involution in male-female relations. Alma Sabatini (born in 1922 and died in 1988) was the author of many pamphlets/books about women's rights - abortion, prostitution, marriage, sexuality, and equal opportunities between men and women - and a political activist in the Italian Radical Party. C) If women's conquest of ever more critical roles in the field of politics, entrepreneurship, sport, and high-level professions has effectively eliminated any gap between men and women and, in this case, the Department of Equal Opportunities - today incorporated into the Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare - should be abolished (Quaranta, 2022). If the recent international economic crises (notably the Covid pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war) and the increased and unregulated use of social media have had severe repercussions for the weakest categories of the labour market. 4) What is the relationship between "linguistic sexism" and the so-called "politically correct" that severely limits the free expression of thought for all of us (Leardi, 2022)? Sometimes it is impossible to make a distinction between them, and heated debates about the desire of "Nazi-feminism" to impose its own language upon society versus the argument for the purity and beauty of the Italian language continue to take place (Cuccia, 2022) very often.

Results and Discussion

Now we will discuss two specific accusations of sexism in the Italian language which, in our opinion, are the most relevant.

- A. **The overextended masculine (also called generalised or universal).** Italian is a language with only two genders, masculine and feminine, and in the case of mixed multitudes, it requires the use of the generalised masculine. The overextended masculine is applied in the Italian language (Ballerini, 2020) in many cases: "*I politici italiani*" (Italian politicians) to indicate women and men in politics; "*I diritti umani*" (human rights) refer to everyone (men and women). Sexism in the Italian language exists because the masculine plural form always prevails, and women seem to have a subordinate position compared to men. The masculine form in Italian has a predominant position not due to linguistic machismo, but for historical and grammatical reasons, given that the masculine also plays the role of the "neutral" gender (that does not exist in Italian grammar). Those who do not accept the grammatical rule of the overextended masculine because they feel the language might become sexist, are free to do so. The Italian language allows for an alternative way of expressing the same meaning without the use of the generalised masculine. The above expression, "*politici italiani*" (using the masculine plural form), can be replaced with

the following: *“gli uomini politici italiani e le donne politiche italiane”* (Italian male and female politicians). The two sentences give exactly the same meaning; one is shorter (if we use the universal masculine), the other slightly longer. Even Italy’s Constitution uses the generalized masculine to recognise some fundamental rights, but it does not mean that only men can enjoy them. Article 21 quotes: *“Tutti hanno diritto di manifestare liberamente il proprio pensiero con la parola, lo scritto e ogni altro mezzo di diffusione”* (everyone has the right to freely express their thoughts in speech, writing, and any other means). The term everyone (*tutti*), in the masculine plural form, obviously refers to every human being and not only those belonging to the male sex. Article 4: *“La Repubblica riconosce a tutti i cittadini il diritto al lavoro e promuove le condizioni che rendano effettivo questo diritto. Ogni cittadino ha il dovere di svolgere, secondo le proprie possibilità e la propria scelta, un’attività o una funzione che concorra al progresso materiale o spirituale della società”* (Italy recognizes the right to work for all citizens and promotes the conditions that make this right effective. Every citizen has to carry out an activity that contributes to the material or spiritual progress of society). The term “citizens” (*tutti i cittadini*), used as a universal masculine form, is all-encompassing, without distinction between males and females. Women are not left out. Article 3 reminds us that the expression “all citizens” must be interpreted “without distinction of biological gender” (Senato, 2023). Will someone feel the need to change the text of these “sexist” articles and start the procedure of the Constitution’s revision? It cannot be ruled out (Buccilli, 2021) because some academicians, in Italy and other European countries, have already asked for a change (Oppes, 2020), to make it “inclusive” and respectful of the principles of equality between men and women. For some people, followers of an exaggerated feminist ideology, the use of the overextended masculine in legal acts is intolerable (Baldin, 2016). The Italian Constitution often speaks of equality (between men and women), but it is an ambiguous and ineffective equality and, therefore, there is still a lack of “equal democracy” (D’Amico, 2020). Sexist and non-inclusive language is not only wrong and unacceptable from a moral point of view, but can quickly lead to psychological and physical violence towards women (Vettorato, 2022). The European Parliament paid attention to the issue of sexist language, and it was one of the first international organisations to adopt guidelines on language gender neutrality in 2008. “Neutral-gender” language refers to the use of non-sexist, inclusive, and gender-respectful language. The purpose of neutral-gender language is to avoid expressions that could be interpreted as biased, discriminatory, or degrading because they are based on the implicit assumption that males and females are destined for different social roles. The use of fair, inclusive, and neutral-gender language also helps to combat stereotypes, promotes social change, and contributes to the achievement of equality between women and men (Papadimoulis, 2008). A language is a powerful tool that simultaneously reflects and influences attitudes, behaviours and perceptions to ensure equal treatment of all genders, and can remove any sort of prejudice against anyone. After the European Parliament, other international and European institutions (United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the European Commission, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) have adopted guidelines for a bias-free language (Servidori, 2019). In April 2020, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) adopted the Gender-Inclusive Language Manual that offers crucial guidance for Western military

officials regarding the use of “communication as a basis for advancing gender equality” (Stiles, 2022). The manual was “drafted as a tool for all civilian and military personnel across NATO” to encourage and strengthen the use of inclusive language. Language structures thought and dictates culture. The words we speak shape our thinking in subtle, subconscious ways, which, in turn, influence our actions. Language is inherently dynamic and ever-evolving. It is also gendered and therefore plays a central role in human cognition and behaviour as one of the most common mechanisms by which gender is constructed and reinforced. Neutral-gender language is important as it frames the understanding of equality; it shapes our views of women’s roles, and directly impacts women’s participation in all aspects of society. Language is a reflection of the attitudes and norms within a society. The way it is used not only reflects social structures and biases but also may reinforce preconceptions and inequalities related to gendered roles in everyday life. While women play an active role in all parts of society, language that ignores or minimises their contributions is still often used, for example, by the dominance of and defaulting to masculine words for general reference. Gender-inclusive language is about writing and speaking in a way that does not discriminate or marginalise based on gender and does not promote or perpetuate gender stereotypes. Therefore, using gender-inclusive language proactively and consistently is imperative for furthering gender equality. In March 2019, the Council of Europe approved a recommendation for preventing and combating sexism, recalling that gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, and good governance. Women and girls can be subjected to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and may face sexism combined with other norms or behaviours which are discriminatory, hateful, or harmful (Council, 2019). In short, language must be inclusive, no gender can be excluded, and stereotypes must be avoided (Biemmi, 2017). Therefore, the grammatical rule of the overextended masculine seems not to be accepted by everyone. If judged sexist and not inclusive, it is not mandatory to use it anyway because it is always possible to reformulate the sentences in a different way (Carrada, 2021). These are clear examples. On the left side, in black, the overextended masculine is used. On the right side, in red, the same sentence, with the same meaning, without its use.

- 1) Ready to discover the program? The Italian word “*pronto*” (ready) is written in the masculine singular form. We can write: Do you want to discover the program? Or be ready to discover the program
- 2) Are you an employee? “*Un lavoratore*” (employee) is a masculine singular word. The sentence can be changed with the following: do you work for a company?

Pronto a scoprire il programma?	Vuoi scoprire il programma?/ Preparati a scoprire il programma!
Sei un lavoratore dipendente?	Lavori alle dipendenze di un'azienda?
Iscriviti alla nostra newsletter per restare aggiornato.	Iscriviti alla nostra newsletter per non perdere tutti gli aggiornamenti.
Grazie per esserti iscritto.	Grazie per la tua iscrizione.
Benvenuto sul nostro sito.	Ti diamo il benvenuto sul nostro sito.
Scopri i servizi al cittadino.	Scopri i servizi per la cittadinanza.
Ti sei divertito?	È stato divertente?
Gli inglesi.	Persone di nazionalità inglese.
Centinaia di clienti soddisfatti ogni anno.	Centinaia di clienti felici ogni anno. / Soddisfiamo ogni anno centinaia di persone.
Sei soddisfatto del tuo acquisto?	Il tuo acquisto ha soddisfatto le tue aspettative?
Tutti possono partecipare.	Chiunque può partecipare.

3) Subscribe to our newsletter to stay updated. “*Aggiornato*” (updated) is an Italian adjective used in the masculine singular form. Rephrase: subscribe to our newsletter to not miss the updates.

4) Thank you for signing up, where the Italian word “*iscritto*” (signed up) is used in the masculine singular form. The new

sentence: thank you for your subscription.

- 5) Welcome to our website, where the word “*benvenuto*” (welcome) is used as an adjective masculine singular. Change to: We welcome you to our website. In this new sentence, “*il benvenuto*” is not an adjective referring to a male or a female but is a noun.
- 6) Discover the services to the citizen; “*cittadino*” (citizen) is an Italian masculine singular noun. A different way of writing: discover the services for all citizens, where the word “*cittadinanza*” (literally= citizenship) is used as a feminine singular noun to mean all citizens.
- 7) Did you enjoy yourself? “*Divertito*” (enjoy) is a masculine singular word. New way: Was it fun?
- 8) The British people, where the term “*inglesi*” (British) is used in the masculine plural form to indicate all people from the UK. The new sentence can be: people of British nationality.
- 9) Hundreds of satisfied customers every year. The Italian masculine plural word “*soddisfatti*” (satisfied) refers to everyone (male and female). Rephrase: hundreds of happy customers every year or, we please hundreds of people every year.
- 10) Are you satisfied with your purchase? “*Soddisfatto*” (satisfied) is an Italian adjective used in the masculine singular form but does not refer to males only. Change to: did your purchase meet your expectations?
- 11) Everyone can participate where the word “*tutti*” (everyone) is used in the same way as article 21 of the Italian Constitution. To avoid the “overextended masculine” we can write: whoever can participate.

B). “**Agentives**” – *nomina agentis* – are nouns that designate professions, positions, and special titles. For many years, when certain jobs were carried out only by men (for historical-cultural reasons, not because they were legally forbidden to women), a masculine term was used (Latos, 2018). In the 50s and 60s, the presence of women in certain workplaces (in politics, the armed forces, and skilled professions) was almost zero. Today, women carry out all the jobs that were once a prerogative of men only and it does not make sense to talk about men's or women's jobs (Del Pidio, 2016). In Italian, when singular nouns ending with the letter “e” are used, for example, “*presidente*” (president), “*direttore*” (director), “*giudice*” (judge),

“*docente*” (lecturer), grammatically speaking, these nouns are neutral (neither masculine nor feminine). The term indicates only the function of the job. To understand if it is done by a man or a woman, the masculine article (*il, lo*) or the feminine one (*la*) must be written in front of the noun. Thus we will have “*il presidente*” (male) or “*la presidente*” (female), “*il giudice*” (male) or “*la giudice*” (female). From a linguistic point of view, the terms “*il presidente*” (masculine form) or “*la presidente*” (feminine form) are both correct when referring to a woman (Girardi, 2022); the first is not at all sexist or offensive because the woman has the right to decide how to be called; moreover the term “*il presidente*” does not sound more prestigious than “*la presidente*” because the noun refers only to the position held (Giuli, 2022). In the past, only three women have been Chamber of Deputies’ presidents: Nilde Iotti (1979 - 1992), Irene Pivetti (1994 - 1996), Laura Boldrini (2013 - 2018). Only the latter insisted on being called “*la presidente*”. Indeed she even went further, coining a completely new term “*la presidenta*” (the female president with the final letter “a”). The other two opted for “*il presidente*”. Even names that end with the letter “o” - for example “*ministro*” (minister), “*sindaco*” (mayor), “*avvocato*” (lawyer) - refer to the job or the position and the fact that the word has the final “o” (typical of male nouns) does not mean that the person must be necessarily a man. Also in this case, masculine or feminine articles are used to distinguish the biological sex of the person who carries out that job (i.e. “*il ministro* or “*la ministro*”). However it is not wrong, nor sexist, to call a woman using the masculine noun, even without the feminine article before. The Italian language offers two choices to call a female lawyer: “*avvocato*” - final letter “o” – (Perri, 2023) or “*avvocata*” – final letter “a”, typical of feminine nouns – (Ossino, 2023). However, in recent years, due to protests and battles in the name of



feminism (Lepore, 2020), according to which “Italian uses the masculine for males and the feminine for females”, a woman should always ask to be addressed with feminine nouns. Because of this, today, it is not necessary anymore to use the article in front of nouns to understand if the job is carried out by a man or a woman but all words must have a feminine version (Biserni, 2022). So there are words used and known in the exclusively female form, accepted by all and officially stated in prestigious Italian dictionaries – “*presidente/presidentessa*” (male/female president); “*professore/professoressa*” (male/female professor); “*giudice/giudicessa*”

(male/female judge); “*ministro/ministra*” (male/female minister); “*sindaco/sindaca*” (male/female mayor); “*avvocato/avvocata*” (male/female lawyer). What about names ending in “a” that also refer to males such as “*autista*” (driver), “*barista*” (bartender), “*violinista*” (violinist), “*artista*” (artist)? The final letter “a” is the general norm of female names in Italian so should we create new, but truly cacophonous words (“*autisto*”, “*baristo*”, “*violinisto*”, “*artista*”) if the work that the word indicates is done by a man to seek gender equal language? The extreme and ideological feminism of some women (De Lorenzo, 2016) is not a battle of all Italian women and men (Villani, 2020). When in Italy, at the end of 2022, a woman was appointed prime minister (the first in 76 years of Republican history), the new premier Giorgia Meloni chose to be called “*il Presidente del Consiglio*” (Prime Minister) on official occasions. A conquest of the female gender in the panorama of Italian politics where women remain a minority: only one out of twenty regional presidents is a woman, and there are seven mayors

out of one hundred and six provincial capitals (Serughetti, 2022). Giorgia Meloni – choosing “*il presidente*” and not “*la presidente* –” took her personal, autonomous, free and linguistically correct decision (Soblone, 2022) as stated by “*Accademia della Crusca*”, the oldest Italian linguistic academy, established in Florence in 1582, whose institutional task is to take care of the language’s purity (Boddi, 2020). Nonetheless, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni was attacked violently because of her choice by those feminists who, in words, say they always want to fight for women's rights. Having Giorgia Meloni head of government, is not a realistic goal for women according to Dr. Alessandra Viola, because she does not carry on the battle for female names; she wants to present herself as a neutral leader, and she does not want to fully recognise that she is a woman (Garau, 2023). The first Italian female Prime Minister has therefore chosen to be addressed as “*il presidente*” and not “*la presidente*”, preferring the male declination due to the institutional roles she covers. Does her choice make her less feminine? Of course not. Less feminist? Maybe yes, if feminism is meant as hysterical and ideological that carries on battles that threaten to change only Italian grammar rules (Porro, 2022). Alternatively, the one that invites us to fight against sexism and toxic masculinity in a provocative way, like those high school students who, on 10th November, 2021, in Monza (Italy), showed up at school wearing skirts (Zanghi, 2021). According to Michela Murgia (an extremist feminist), it is not the sex of the people in power that matters but how the power is used and Giorgia Meloni's model of power is the male one (Galici, 2022). At this point a question arises: is it really so important if Giorgia Meloni has chosen to be called “*il presidente*” or “*la presidente*”? For anyone living in the reality of this historical moment obviously not, since there are more important battles to fight. Nevertheless, for those who live in an exclusively ideological context far from real issues, obviously yes. According to Laura Boldrini (left-wing feminist), who has started a real ideological battle over Giorgia Meloni's decision to call herself “*il presidente*” and not “*la presidente*”, it cannot be accepted that a woman agrees to be called like a male, using the masculine article in front of the title of the position held; it is an affront to all women. Ideological clashes and petty issues are absolutely not important, and the new Italian Prime Minister replied: “I believe that women must be judged on their merits, I never thought that their freedom could depend on an article of grammar, but it is based on more concrete things” (Curridori, 2022). Therefore “*il presidente*” is a completely legitimate term even for a woman because it is not an “agrammatical” or “antigrammatical” choice, but simply a traditional use” (Metronews, 2022). Another case that aroused useless and partisan controversies was the one involving Beatrice Venezi (one of the few women to conduct orchestras of international standing), who chose to be called “*il direttore d’orchestra*”, making use of the masculine article. Her role is more important than her biological sex. For this reason, she was heavily criticised by radical feminists, but Beatrice Venezi shrugged off the criticism. Today extreme and radical feminism is useless because it has been demonstrated that women are able to reach top positions in any work field and the so-called “female quotas”, which are very humiliating for women, should be cancelled. It is like asking women: “Do not try to be the best in a group. You will get your title anyway”. “Female quotas” imply that women are unable to achieve higher positions despite their personal abilities. Unfortunately, this way of thinking is opposed by the feminist movement (Galici, 2022). Many Italian women, therefore, believe that using the masculine noun for a position of a certain level is entirely legitimate for them and not at all demeaning. In Italian politics, we are witnessing a return to tradition. In official communications, for example, Erika Stefani (of the Northern League Party) signs as Mr. Minister Erika Stefani (“*il ministro Erika Stefani*”), while on the government website, feminine words like “*Ministra*” (Minister) and

“*Sottosegretaria*” (Deputy Minister) have disappeared for all women members of the Cabinet (Legnani, 2018).

Conclusion

The Italian language (which has only masculine and feminine gender, but not neutral) is not



sexist *per se*. It has its own grammatical rules, and a vast number of words, verbs, prepositions, and adjectives which, taken individually, are not sexist or offensive, but can be constructed in a way which makes the language sound sexist, vulgar or scurrilous. For instance, if we want to contest somebody’s idea or criticise another person, there can be a million ways; one of them can be sexist. When asked directly if the Italian language is sexist, many answer no (Longo, 2020), but it is

certainly possible to use it in this way. We have choices: we can write in a polite and respectful way (“I am sorry, but I totally disagree for the following reasons”) or in a sexist and offensive way (“You are really stupid, and your idiot face shows it clearly”). This is a typical example of “body shaming”. Synchronised swimming champion Linda Cerruti recently posted a photo of herself to showcase the eight medals she won in 2022. She received many comments, some of them vulgar and sexist, that offended her. Even if we wanted to say bad things about her picture and body’s physical attributes, we could do it without using sexist language. However, Linda Cerruti decided to report the comments to the police, and their cyber security division has not only identified the authors but also searched their homes and brought them before the Magistrate Court (Prisco, 2023). Sexism is not only blameworthy because it is offensive, but can also result (Cucchisi, 2022) in criminal consequences (defamation, harassment, insult, personal injury, inducement to suicide). Sexism exists, especially in workplaces where, often, women and girls receive hurtful comments or unwanted attention (Lo Porto, 2022) from male colleagues and employers. An advice brochure distributed by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region in early January 2023 to all women on places to avoid, how to dress, and how to behave in public places caused a lot of discussions: “Extravagant, showy or skimpy clothes, ironic or provocative smiles to strangers” were not recommended. This pamphlet has been judged sexist - by most but unfortunately not by all - because it places blame on the women, does nothing to prevent aggression, and recalls the ancient male chauvinist concept that “man is the hunter and woman is the prey.” The advice attributes passive behaviour to women and aggressive one to men (Alliva, 2022). Today, however, everything can be sexist, with the risk that this concept turns into an anti-democratic ideology based on a single thought. Any comment, photo, advertisement, song, film, satire, comic, art, or clothing can be sexist because the judgment on sexism is completely subjective (as in the Friuli Venezia Giulia’s brochure case). Furthermore, sexism does not exist (but the topic deserves a separate and more in-depth discussion because it involves legal and jurisprudential issues) if the author’s “psychological element” (the so-called “intentional misconduct”) is missing (Amaolo, 2017). We also believe that to talk about sexism, the comment, photo, behaviour, and message, be addressed to an identified individual. In this



case: the Italian newspaper “*La Repubblica*” published Prime Minister Meloni’s picture with the word “diktat” and a microphone near her mouth. The photo and caption are sexist for some (Cesari, 2022). For others, they are fair and expressive (Tinnirello, 2022). However, if this is missing (for example, a song, movie, or advertisement that is aimed at a multitude of people), it is entirely improper to talk about sexism because the judgment of each of us is undoubtedly different and intrinsically subjective. Popular Italian singer “Madame”



was supposed to present her song entitled “*Puttana*” (Prostitute) at the “*Festival di Sanremo*” but had to replace it with another one (“For better or worse”) because otherwise she would have been excluded from the singing competition (Turco, 2022) due to song’s “sexist” title. The Sanremo Music Festival, officially the Italian Song Festival, is the most famous Italian song contest and awards ceremony, held annually in the city of Sanremo, Liguria. It is the world's longest-running annual TV music competition and the basis and inspiration for the annual Eurovision Song Contest. Unlike other

awards in Italy, the Sanremo Music Festival is a competition for new songs, not an award for previous successes. This case represents a fundamental “politically correct” censorship that prevents an artist from making a free choice. It seems that current Italian society is obsessed with “sexism”. Another example is the famous children’s tale “*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*”, which is seen as sexist because of one scene where a guy is kissing a girl while she is sleeping; therefore the kiss is not consensual, and she is sexually abused (Libreriamo, 2021). A statue inaugurated in Salerno, which represents a country girl from southern Italy who leaves her job to join the anti-Bourbon insurrection organised by patriot Carlo Pisacane in 1857, is judged sexist because it highlights woman’s curves (Porro, 2021). Truly pure and toxic madness. However, are not art and science free, as stated in Article 33 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic? Is a billboard advertisement, with women or men (or both) almost undressed, and in soft sexy poses, sexist? Is sexism one-way (aimed only at women) or two-way? The answers are extremely subjective. Why does nobody judge this man’s aftershave ad as sexist? Most people would reply that is simply because it is a man. Would the issues of sexism arise if a woman’s picture is posted in the ad? The answer would probably be yes. In order for an advertisement to be consciously noticed, it must surprise, irritate, arouse specific emotions, annoy or be particularly funny. Nowadays, many



companies extensively use nudity to get more attention from the public because this is a winning market strategy. The debate on sexism, in Italian society, is far from over. Despite the linguistic changes the Italian language underwent to become fully “neutral-gender”, sexism is very much alive, and far from diminishing in the Italian society; people need to keep the pressure on to achieve a less patriarchal, less discriminatory, and more equal society. Of course, women’s opinions, acts, speeches, and ideas can be criticized without using sexist words or images. This research has shown that absolute equality between men and women does not exist yet in the so-called “civil society”.

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