

# **Gender-Fair Language and Institutional Normativity in Italian Universities**

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## **Abstract**

This presentation focuses on the domain of language standardisation and linguistic institutions, examining how gender-fair language is regulated, negotiated and resisted in Italian academia. While Italian offers various gender-fair strategies, both those that involve making different gender identities visible and those that obscure gender information, their uptake within institutional contexts remains highly binary and politically charged (see, e.g., Agenzia delle Entrate, 2020; Cancelleria federale, 2023; Città Metropolitana di Milano, 2023; MIUR, 2018; Università di Bologna, s.d.).

Building on recent work in the political philosophy of language and on Thornton's (2022) referent-based framework, this presentation outlines the key strategies available in Italian and discusses how their perceived appropriateness is shaped by institutional formality and normative expectations. The empirical core of the talk is a comparative analysis of gender-fair language guidelines adopted by Italian universities. Drawing from a corpus of institutional documents (e.g., communication manuals, anti-discrimination protocols, and DEI policies), I identify dominant patterns in the selection and framing of gender-fair strategies.

Preliminary findings suggest that most universities adopt a moderate and binary-inclusive model, favouring feminisation and double forms, e.g., "tutte e tutti" (all[F] and all[M]), while largely avoiding non-binary solutions such as the schwa (ə) or asterisk (\*). This selective implementation reveals a form of institutional resistance: although inclusion is nominally promoted, more radical or non-normative strategies are often excluded on the grounds of clarity, accessibility, or linguistic legitimacy. Such justifications often conceal a deeper cultural backlash or institutional conservatism that reasserts the gender binary and marginalises non-binary identities.

By situating the Italian case within wider debates on language policy, normativity, and gender justice, the presentation highlights how linguistic institutions function as gatekeepers in the contested process of gender-fair language standardisation. I argue that institutional regulation, far from being a neutral process, can become a terrain of resistance and backlash, simultaneously enabling and constraining the scope of inclusive language.

## References

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## **Bio**

I am Martina Giovine, a PhD student in Philosophy of Language at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University, supervised by Professors Bianca Cepollaro and Martina Rosola. My research focuses on Italian gender-fair language in administrative contexts. Currently, I am interested in exploring the topic of non-binary linguistic solutions and understanding how strategies can be chosen according to the communicative context. I have written guidelines on gender-fair language for San Raffaele University. I also completed a placement at SWIP Italia, where I conducted a statistical study on the underrepresentation of women in academia.