
The Schwa-Pill: Backlash Against Italian Gender-Fair Language as a Gateway to Anti-Feminist Discourses

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Gender-expression in Italian

Italian: **inflectional language** with an overt expression of a morphological gender marking (Corbett 1991; Thornton 2006).

- *Il maestr-o* 'the teacher' M. SG. vs *La maestr-a* 'the teacher' F. SG

Sexist and non fair use of Italian language

- e.g. *cari tutti* 'dear all' M. PLU. for addressing a mixed audience;
- e.g. *Il presidente Stefania Rossi* 'the president Stefania Rossi' M.SG. addressing a woman

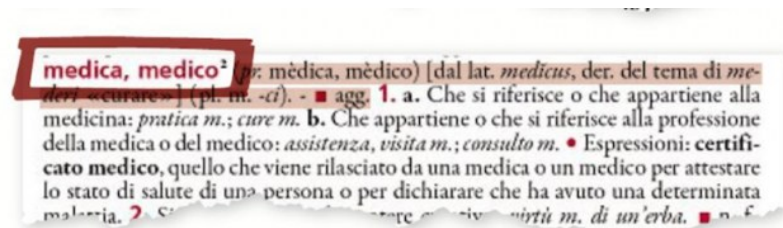
Gender neutralization and degendering strategies

- Linguistic representation of **gender fluid** and **nonbinary people**
- **New linguistic strategies: neutralization** of the morpheme that conveys the grammatical gender information
- **Graphical solutions:**
 - x** *carx tuttx* 'dear all'; -***** *car* tutt**; IPA symbol schwa [ə] *carə tuttə*,
-**u** *caru tuttu*
- Neutralization for nonbinary or for addressing mixed audience:
e.g. *cari tutti, care tutte, car* tutt** VS *car* tutt**

(Marotta & Monaco 2016; Gheno 2019; Maturi 2020; Manera 2021; Comandini 2021)

Gender inclusive language today

- Increasing use of **feminine forms** for professional titles (i.e. **Treccani vocabulary** lists both feminine and masculine forms)
- **Gender-fair language guidelines** adopted in schools and institutions
- **Schwa [ə] and asterisks *** used not only in informal contexts, but also occasionally in formal and academic communications, in linguistic communities, in communities of practice, in imagined communities (Formato & Somma 2024)



Italian debate on gender fair language

- **Strong opposition** to gender-fair language remains large
- **Polarization of public debate**
- **Sanremo Festival: female conductor requested *maestra* instead of *maestro***
- Gender-neutral strategies generate **disagreement across both progressive and conservative positions**
- Feminine forms often **contested by right-wing figures** (e.g., PM Giorgia Meloni prefers **il Presidente**)

**"Chiamatemi
maestra", chi è la
direttrice d'orchestra
che a Sanremo ha
corretto Laura
Pausini**

di Erika Cuscito

The manosphere

- **Manosphere:** online discussion spaces dedicated to dissecting gender relations (Ging 2019)
- Attention on men's challenges in romantic/sexual relationships (*sexual exchange market*)
- Various subcommunities with different ways of performing masculinity (**Pick-Up Artists - PUAs, Men's Rights Activists - MRAs, Men Going Their Own Way - MGTOW, Involuntary Celibates -Incels**)
- **Red pill:** a metaphorical awakening that allegedly allows them to see the world as it truly is, free from the conditioning of feminist ideology.
- **Backlash** (Faludi 1991) via **scientific-sounding language** and **appeals to objectivity**. Anti-sexism as a way to counter certain 'excesses of feminism' which harm women as well (Farci & Ricci 2021; 2024; Farci 2024).

Manosphere and evidence based misogyny

- “Evidence-based misogyny is a discursive strategy used by manosphere users online, in which evidence is **constructed as trustworthy through connections to accepted systems of knowledge generation and presentation**. [...] while evidence-based misogyny works to build, legitimate and sustain the manosphere’s deeply misogynistic view of gender relations, **its efficiency in creating this worldview and mobilizing supporters depends to a large degree on its ability to connect to a baseline of common-sense misogyny in mainstream society**. Therefore, what is needed going forward is first of all a deeper understanding of the **nuances of evidence-based misogyny, its variations across different groups and platforms**, as well as its changing use and form throughout the history of the manosphere” (Rothermel 2023: 4-5)

From manosphere to femosphere?

- The “pink pill” (Shearing 2025)
- **Reactionary feminism** (Kay 2025)
 - bio-essentialist conceptions of gender
 - aggressive sense of fatalism
 - rhetorical appeals to “feminism,” “class,” and “community” that obscure a profound hostility towards social justice and a relentless focus on individual strategy
- “Rebecca Hargraves [Blonde in the belly of the beast] explains to the presumed male audience that the reason **women are hesitant to reject ‘feminism, globalisation and liberalism’** and embrace ‘traditional gender roles’ is because **‘we [women] have a disproportionate societal advantage’**. This includes **‘occupational advantages because of diversity initiatives’**, advantages in the family court system [...] and people being ‘generally afraid to restrict women in any way’” (Shearing 2025: 124)

Our project

- Women who are **not part of the femosphere or the manosphere**
 - Evidence-based MRA rhetoric
 - Question feminism
 - Promote anti-sexism

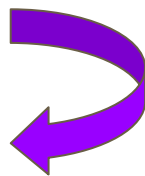
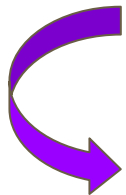
Influencers spreading this worldview through language-focused content, especially gender-inclusive language.

Seemingly neutral, non-ideological discussions of language serve as a vehicle for **ideology**, reinforcing a backlash against feminism framed as anti-sexist.

Discursive shift: from language to misogyny

Persuasive, manipulative and **discursive** legitimization of *sexist* and *misogynistic* forms of discrimination

- Critique of gender-fair language
 - Delegitimization of gender-related issues
 - Normalization of misogynistic antifeminist positions



Data

- **Transcriptions of 4 YouTube videos by a well-known influencer typically focused on linguistic issues**
- **Two timeframes:**
 - 2021
 - 2024-2025

→ **for each timeframe, we chose 2 videos:**

- 1 video explicitly addressing gender-fair language
- 1 video addressing broader gender issues

Methodology

- **Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)** to Critical discourse studies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2016)
 - discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 1992)
 - discourse is understood, interpreted and analysed as part of a broader historical, social, and political context
 - analysing discursive strategies that contribute to the construction of a **positive self-presentation** vs **negative other-presentation**

Methodology

- Reisigl & Wodak (2001) focus on five recurring **discursive strategies**:
 - **Referential strategies**: how social actors are referred to
 - **Predicational strategies**: what is said about social actors, what is said about self
 - **Argumentation strategies**: what are the arguments that justify the (discriminatory) claims
 - **Perspectivation**: how is the discourse framed, from what point of view the events are narrated
 - **Mitigation and intensifying strategies**: “qualify and modify the epistemic status of a proposition by intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force” of discriminatory utterances (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001:45)
- Discursive strategies are not discrete, but rather intersections that are often hard to disentangle

Methodology

- **Argumentation strategies**

Identification of **topoi**: topoi as 'conclusion rules', bridges between a **claim** that usually contains a controversial statement and the **argument**. 'If x, then y', or 'y, because x'. (Reisigl, 2014; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016)

- **Referential and predicational strategies**

Identification of elements that are used to refer to or define the persons or groups involved in the discourse

Results: gender-fair language videos

Claim: innovative gender-neutral morphemes and fair language are not correct nor necessary in Italian

Results: gender-fair language videos

- **Arguments:**

- topos of **authority**: “X is right because A (= an authority) says that it is right”
- topos of **danger/threat**: “If an action or decision bears specific dangerous, threatening consequences, one should not perform it”
- topos of **reality**: “Because reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be performed/made”
- topos of **uselessness**: “If one can anticipate that the prognosticated consequences of a decision will not occur, the decision has to be rejected”
- topos of **justice**: “If persons are equal in specific respects, they should be treated in the same way”
- topos of **impartiality**: “if an idea or a stance is not impartial, then it should not be considered”
- topos of **rationality**: “if an idea or a stance is not rational or logical, then it should not be considered”

Results: gender-fair language videos

- **Arguments:**

- topos of **authority**: “It is written so in linguistics books”, “The only solution is correct scientific information”
- topos of **danger/threat**: “Communication will fail”, “Official documents will be confusing”
- topos of **reality**: “G-f morphology cannot be used in Italian, so we should stop discussing about it”, “This is how language works”
- topos of **uselessness**: “Grammatical gender is not really important”, “Language will not change like this”
- topos of **justice**: “You act outraged at something just because it is right-wing”
- topos of **impartiality**: “Scholars who support g-f morphology are ideologically-driven”
- topos of **rationality**: “Language change cannot take *your needs* into account”, “Their reasoning is fundamentally wrong”

Results: gender-fair language videos

- **Referential and predicational strategies for negative other-representation:**
 - *linguists, sociolinguists, language experts*
 - **incompetent:** sociolinguists who look at language in a partial way; support refuted theories; let their ideology influence their research
 - **manipulators:** the need for linguistic inclusivity is not a real need, it is induced by activists and pro-schwa linguists
 - **dishonest:** they seek popularity through supporting politically correct agenda at the expense of scientific accuracy; they want to monetize
 - **intolerant:** scholars who take a critical stance towards inclusive language are silenced, they risk consequences for their public image and even for their career

Results: gender-fair language videos

- **Referential and predicational strategies for negative other-representation:**
 - **hypocrites:** they criticise people who make grammar mistakes, but they accept the use of inclusive language
 - **incompetent:** they ignore basic grammar rules, they underestimate its importance
 - **illogical/irrational:** their proposals lack of scientific accuracy, their reasoning is not logic
- **Mitigation** strategies in self-representation; use of sarcasm, exaggeration, and expletives to **intensify** negative other representation.

Results: gender issues videos

Claim: contemporary feminism does not promote gender equality, rather it creates forms of sexism against men

Results: gender issues videos

- **Arguments:**

- topos of **danger/threat**: “Men are demonized”
- topos of **numbers**: if the numbers prove a specific topos, a specific action should be performed/not be carried out. “Contents against men are becoming pervasive”, “The chance of being assaulted in the street is extremely low”
- topos of **justice**: “If feminists really cared about gender equality, they would also care about men’s rights”
- topos of **rationality**: “Their reasoning is incoherent”

Results: antifeminist videos

- **Referential and predicational strategies for negative other-representation:**
- feminists:
 - **manipulators:** they function like a cult, they take advantage of naive/weak people
 - **dishonest:** they want to monetize, they exploit gender based violence to make content
 - **hypocrites/incoherent:** they do not care about men's rights, they are hostile towards them
 - **ideological:** their stances are not based on rational

Results: antifeminist videos

- **Referential and predicational strategies for negative other-representation:**
- “people”:
 - **irrational:** they are afraid of data, numbers and evidence
 - **naive:** they get easily manipulated, they fall for feminists’ agenda
- **Intensification** of negative other-representation through exaggeration (“ridiculous”, “creepy”, “outrageous”), sarcasm, and expletives.

Discussion

- The videos are apparently neutral, but
 - some of the arguments that support the claims are typically found in discriminatory discourse more broadly (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001)
 - some are recurrent in antifeminist and MRA discourse (see Aiston, 2024)
- **Evidence-based antifeminist** stances are preceded and prepared by **contents about gender-fair language**
- They support standard language ideology (Lippi-Green, 2012) and, consequently, they discredit linguistic change proposals and individuals and social groups who advocate for them

Conclusion

Perceiving advocates of gender-inclusive language as illogical leads to dismissing all their gender-related claims

From the language ideological “**rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use**” (Silverstein 1979: 193) to the ideological rationalization or justification of perceived habits and gender norms

Critical discourse analysis and language ideologies as a way to mediate “the microculture of communicative action” with “macro social constraints” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 72)

Future work

- Analysing more videos, with more diverse content
- Multimodal analysis
- Analysing the comments to the videos in order to:
 - confirm our findings
 - observe how these discursive strategies are received and re-interpreted in the comment section
 - see if commenters engage in more or less overtly antifeminist and misogynistic discourse

Thanks!

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