

Language, Gender and Hate Speech
A Multidisciplinary Approach
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Can Gender-Fair Language Combat Gendered Hate Speech?

Some Reflections on Language, Gender and Hate Speech

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1 Introduction

At first sight, gendered language and hate speech may appear unrelated issues. Hate speech is verbal offence with the aim to diminish and humiliate a single person belonging to a target group (where gender and sex are just two out of many characterizing features of possible target groups). How can it be counteracted by the use of feminine nouns and pronouns to refer to women in contexts in which the masculine is perceived (even by many women) as a means to express empowerment and equal status to men?

A second major difference between the two issues is that while gendered language has been proposed for European languages (in Europe and America) almost half a century ago, since the seminal work by Robin Lakoff *Language and Women's Place* (1973), hate speech has only recently reached the agenda of international organizations for human rights in the defence of disadvantaged minorities.

However, a direct correlation between the lack of gendered language in the cultural discourse and misogynistic speech can be found if we consider that

language creates identity at the individual and societal level and is the major means of transmission of cultural values and stereotypes (Gygax et al. 2008). In this perspective, the massive and constant disappearance of women in the media, especially women in power (as witnessed by the Global Media Monitoring Project, cf. Azzalini in this volume) impedes gender equity all over the World, where women are not a numeric minority but certainly are a disadvantaged group, as witnessed by the annual Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum. Since the typical targets of hate speech are minorities, keeping women as 'minor' in the cultural discourse, is certainly part of the cultural milieu that favours rather than combats hate speech against women.

The LIGHTS conference (*Linguaggio, parità di Genere e parole d'odio / Language, gender and HaTe Speech*) and this volume, which stems from it, wants to be a contribution to unveil the link between these two apparently unrelated issues.

The conference was held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on 18-20 October 2018. It was part of the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of Ca' Foscari. It was granted support by the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies and the University's Equal Opportunities Committee (CUG - Comitato Unico di Garanzia). It was sponsored by the Italian Linguistic Society (SLI) and its Study Group on Language Policies (GSPL), the Venice Accessibility Lab and by national associations for the advancement of women's rights, such as Toponomastica Femminile, Rete per la Parità, Donne in Quota, GiULiA, Osservatorio di Pavia, and by the Council of Europe (office of Venice).

The conference brought together experts in the areas of linguistics, education, sociology, legal and political studies to discuss inclusive communication practices, verbal and linguistic equity and fairness, and verbal violence in an intersectional approach, considering gender and gender-identity in a comparative cross-linguistic and cross-cultural approach. The aim was to establish a link between researchers and stakeholders in the areas of communication, media, language policies and education, to foster new scientific projects on language, gender and inclusion with a strong social impact, providing the forum and opportunity for national stakeholders to come into contact and discuss the most urgent needs with national and international researchers.

The location of the conference is not accidental. In the last decade, Ca' Foscari has taken up a proactive role in building awareness on the impact of language on gender identity in public institutions, education and the media. The issue is particularly timely in Italy, where the use of gendered language is much less common than in other countries of Europe and the Americas and where those who speak up for it are often object of discredit and even hate speech, as is presented in section 2.

The invited speakers were two leading figures in linguistics and two high officials in Italian and European institutions: Deborah Cameron (University of Oxford) and Heather Burnett (CNRS-Université Paris Diderot), Elisabetta Rosi (Italian Supreme Court of Cassation) and Daniele Cangemi, (Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe).

The submissions coming from many countries, among which Croatia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, the UK, Pakistan, as well as many parts of Italy, went through a double blind selection process run by the 6 members of the scientific committee in collaboration with the 8 members of the selection committee; 16 talks and 8 posters were selected for presentation at the conference. The conference was held partially in English, due to the international attendance, and partially in Italian, in order to be accessible to national stakeholders, in particular teachers and journalists whose participation in the round table was acknowledged as lifelong education approved by the Association of Journalists in the Veneto Region. Not all talks or posters presented at the conference resulted in a contribution to the present volume. The editorial process involved a second round of evaluation, run by the two editors with the collaboration of 10 Italian academics. The result of these two years of work and collaboration is this volume, which we hope to be a starting point in the study of the relation between gendered language and gendered hate speech, offering an international perspective to the Italian public and an Italian perspective to the international public. Section 2 provides a brief presentation of the Italian situation. Section 3 briefly presents the content of the volume. Section 4 draws the conclusions and acknowledges the role played by a great number of colleagues and stakeholders with whom we wish to share the merit of this enterprise.

2 The Italian Context

Since the publication of *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* and the guidelines for a non-sexist use of the Italian language (Sabatini 1986, [1987] 1993), the interest on the relationship between language use and gender equity in Italy's cultural and political discourse has witnessed dramatically polar reactions swinging at different times from fierce and fiery debate to total neglect. This is not the place to provide a history of the fortunes and misfortunes of this issue in the Italian media and cultural discourse (cf. among many, Robustelli 2012; Giusti 2016; Marazzini 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Zarra 2017) but it is a fact that the discussion in the political and academic agenda has received more attention in other countries of Europe and America than it has ever had here in Italy. Limiting our perspective to Western countries whose official languages have nouns and nominal modifi-

ers inflecting for the gender of the referent, as is the case of Italian, we can safely say that linguistic research and political actions have been entertained on German in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, on French in Canada, France, and Switzerland, on Spanish in Spain and most Spanish-speaking South American countries. Every time the issue of the use of the feminine gender on nouns denoting roles and the use of formulations that make the reference to women explicit avoiding the ‘unmarked’ masculine (in the plural or in the generic singular) has been raised, it has found opposers in the name of the preservation of ‘purity’ in the language and the ‘irrelevance’ of language to the actual achievement of equity. Despite the opposition equally raised by women and men in most of these countries, the feminist critical analysis and the academic linguistic and psychological research have led governments to take political actions to enforce gender-fair language in the media, textbooks, job announcements, institutional communication, including the language used in parliaments and in the writing of laws. In French-speaking countries, for example, a long-standing discussion on how to write in an inclusive way has brought to different types of *écriture inclusive* at different times, in different French-speaking countries, by different communities. The debated issue is no more on the need of equally expressing men and women but how to do it (cf. Fagard, Le Tallec, forthcoming; Burnett, Pozniak 2020; Pires in this volume).

After more than three decades since Sabatini’s (1987) study and recommendations, which were officially commissioned and supported by the Italian Government, the discussion in the Italian media is still limited to whether and how individual women should be named with regularly inflected feminine nouns. Although the *Accademia della Crusca*, the most prestigious research institution for the Italian language, has been openly in favour of the use of feminine forms for professional nouns, promoting Robustelli’s (2012) new guidelines, the actions are still limited to weak recommendations and policies are essentially missing or, if present, not enforced at all.

In 2018, the topic made a recent comeback on the political agenda and in the media thanks to Laura Boldrini (former president of the Chamber of Deputies) and Valeria Fedeli (former minister of Education). As soon as she was elected president in the early 2013, Boldrini required to be addressed as *signora presidente* and named *la presidente* in the feminine. Her recommendations to the Deputies to address women with regularly declined feminine nouns and her later request, in 2017, that the tags identifying the staff of the Chamber of Deputies be using feminine nouns were followed by protests of women in the staff as well as leading political figures including the former President of the Italian Republic Napolitano (cf. Villani, forthcoming). In 2018, Fedeli recommended that in selecting textbooks for the following school year, teachers be vigilant on avoiding those containing

sexist stereotypes and sexist language. This was again object of protests by editors, school masters, teachers and, of course, journalists.

The extreme verbally heated reactions across the media and over the web serve to underscore how important and timely it is in Italy to address the crucial role that language plays in creating gender equity in society. They also provide an exemplary case of what Deborah Cameron ([1995] 2012) defines “verbal hygiene”; namely, the natural propensity speakers have to establish norms of language use. As such, these normative speaker judgments are to be viewed as part of metalinguistic competence and are, therefore, also worth being investigated by linguists, social and cognitive scientists.

Paralleling this renewed interest in gender-fair language is the recent attention towards the manifold forms of hate speech at an international level, especially by the Council of Europe. Starting with Resolution 384/2015, the Council of Europe has undertaken a series of actions against hate speech in general and more recently with a focus on gender (cf. Cangemi in this volume). In Italy, this has been matched by increased interest on the topic at the national level. Boldrini nominated the “Joe Cox” Committee on Intolerance, Xenophobia, Racism and Hate Phenomena, at the Italian Chamber of Deputies, which issued a Final Report (Camera dei Deputati 2017) including an inventory of hate words compiled by the late Italian linguist Tullio De Mauro. Qualitative and quantitative research on the expression of hate speech in Italian conducted by Amnesty International Italia in 2019 shows that women are one of the most targeted groups along with religious minorities, migrants and refugees (cf. Amnesty International Italia 2020; Faloppa 2020).

None of these studies addresses the relation between the resistance to gender-fair use and the rate of tolerance of verbal violence in the cultural discourse, which is what the conference aimed at investigating.

3 Overview of the Volume

The design of this volume reproduces the willingness of the conference organizers to set it as a dialogic occasion: i.e. the willingness to relate the notions of gendered language and hate speech, the willingness to bring linguists and jurists into dialogue and to address an audience of researchers and stakeholders together. After the highlight chapter (Deborah Cameron), the issue is structured into two sections, *Corpus-Based and Experimental Studies* and *Juridical Perspectives, Monitoring and Good Practices*. Both sides help to explore the relationship between the two main focus themes of the book, gendered language and hate speech.

Three of the volume's main topics are already covered in the chapter by Cameron which starts from the definitions of the concepts of sexism and misogyny and turns out to consider that misogyny can be expressed through a range of interactional and representational practices, many of which would not amount to hate speech in the legal sense, but are nonetheless far from being innocuous and can be interpreted as witnesses of important political functions in patriarchal societies.

The balance, so to say, between gendered language and hate speech is, of course, uneven throughout the chapters: understandably, the juridical articles are concentrated on hate speech, since gendered language is not a crime and has therefore not yet given rise to a specific jurisprudential consideration.¹ Within this general framework, however, Ferrucci's chapter examines a corpus of negative comments in Facebook regarding women with decisional positions in Europe, in order to clarify their specific hate speech coding modes and distinguish them from impoliteness, lack of cooperation and legitimate critique (which are not legal offences and cannot be sanctioned in the name of the safeguard of freedom of expression). Devoted to the difference between inappropriate behaviour and offence is the chapter by Flick, who notes that the different legal treatment of the 'grey area' consisting in the fuzzy boundaries between the two notions is due to the different policies applied and reveal gaps both in the reporting systems and in the concept of damage itself. Not favouring the recognition of damages has a significant social meaning: it conveys a negative message, namely that abuse against women is acceptable and can be tolerated.

Consequently, a few chapters are devoted to the emerging mixed notion of *sexist hate speech*: Cangemi reports the position of the Council of Europe to enlighten the key elements that should guide all relevant stakeholders (governments, media, civil society etc.) in their contrasting action. A checklist of indicators and actions to eliminate sexist hate speech is also provided.

Rosi presents the uncertain status of sexist hate speech in the Italian legislation, in which the constitutional right of expressing one's thought (article 21 of the Italian Constitution) is not more guaranteed when the verbal act has a material act of crime or instigation to crime as its direct consequence, as is the case of cyberbullying. However, Rosi notes, there have been no incriminating cases of sexist cyberbullying up to date.

1 A promising preparatory work on this has been carried out by Stefania Cavagnoli (2013), which is the result of the linguistic research in collaboration with the National Forensic Council, further extended to many local equal opportunity committees of the bar association, in the form of lifelong education and lectures.

Azzalini analyses ‘subtle gender stereotypes’, not evident and usually not associated with violence against women in the Italian media, claiming that they play a role in tolerating gender-based violence (and, henceforth, sexist hate speech) by constantly reinforcing these stereotypes. The essay by Busso, Combei, Tordini focuses on the narrative of gender violence: grounded on a self-constructed corpus of journalistic speech and the analysis of a television series, the chapter compares the representations of physical and psychological violence against women.

The remaining chapters are more focused on gendered language, even if suggestions on its connection with hate speech emerge in the contribution from Binder, Ueberwasser, Stark. They analyse a corpus of Swiss WhatsApp (multilingual) messages, with a focus on 14 gender-specific swear words. It appears that gender-specific swear words only refer to non-participants of the discourse when they are used offensively, while lexical items directly addressed to the interlocutor are characterized by irony and semantic word-alterations. Moreover, gendered hate speech seems not to be a matter of mutual discrimination by the two sexes: Swiss WhatsApp users also refer to people of their own sex using gender-specific swear words.

Analysing French forms, Pires raises the problem of written lexical forms known as ‘inclusive’, which incorporate both genders, like *travailleur-se*, ‘worker’; *celleux*, ‘these ones’ or even Italian *content**, ‘happy’. The drawbacks to their use are linked, among other reasons, to their excessive length, their unusual graphic form and the difficulty of transposing many of the forms into spoken language. For all these reasons, Pires pledges, instead, for the use of real feminine forms.

Other contributions deal more specifically with socio-morphologic aspects of feminine noun and adjective forms. Castenetto and Ondelli report the results of a field research on the acceptability of gender-inclusive linguistic structures in Italian, showing a welcomed decreasing trend in the expected dislike for the feminine forms of nouns describing titles and professions. Pagliaro focuses on politeness formulas containing items with single or multiple repetitions of a word, extracted from corpora of spoken Italian: men tend to produce these formulas more than women, which could mean that men are more exposed to linguistic variation and innovation, while women would rather be more conservative as regards to routine formulas. Last but not least, Bevilacqua offers a vision of the feminization of titles, office and profession names of Algerian French, arguing that the French-speaking press can play an important role in combating gender stereotypes in the Maghreb.

4 Conclusions and Acknowledgements

To give an idea of the themes and discussions that took place in the conference, it is necessary to also mention those contributions that for different reasons are not included in the volume. Heather Burnett presented an invited talk with the title “Language Change, Social Change and Grammatical Gender. Perspectives from France and Canada”, where she presented and further developed her joint work with Olivier Bonami (Burnett, Bonami 2019). She also presented with Célia Richy a research on stereotyped examples in papers on French syntax (Richy, Burnett 2020). Lubna Akhlaq Khan gave an insight on feminist critique applied to a non-Western Culture in the talk “Discursive Construction of Patriarchy. A Feminist Critique of Punjabi Proverbs”, which developed into Akhlaq Khan, Saifeer Awan, Hussain (2019) and in the poster “It’s not just a Joke. A Feminist Critique of Jokes about Marriage and Matrimonial Identities”, which developed into Akhlaq Khan, Iqra, Hussain (2018). Sofia Lampropoulou talked about “Sexist Language in a Corpus of Greek Public Documents and Attempts at Language Reform”, reporting and developing Lampropoulou and Georgalidou (2017). Sara Tonelli presented research on “Analysing Misogyny in Online Conversations”, which is part of Menini et al. (2019). Roswitha Kersten Pejanić presented some of the results of her dissertation in “Production, Perception and Deconstruction of False Generics in Croatian” (cf. Kersten Pejanić 2016, 2019, 2020).

Contributions in Italian included Irene Biemmi’s talk “Il Polite vent’anni dopo. Un viaggio nei libri di testo della scuola primaria, tra stereotipi di genere e linguaggio sessista”, presenting the results of her monograph Biemmi (2017). Stefania Cavagnoli’s talk “Linguaggio, parità di genere e lingua ostile nei testi giuridici. Quali strumenti per contrastare una comunicazione offensiva?” gave an overview on Italian and European juridical texts (also cf. Cavagnoli 2013; Cavagnoli, Mori 2019). Francesca Dragotto, Domenica Fioredistella Iezzi and Sonia Melchiorre presented “Ponti d’odio. La vicenda di Asia Argento come caso di studio dell’odio (on line) di genere”, which developed into Dragotto, Giomi, Melchiorre (2020). Marzia Caria presented “Hate Words e linguaggio giovanile. Primi risultati di una ricerca in corso”, which has developed into Bertini Malgarini and Caria (forthcoming).

Posters in Italian included Giovanna Covi’s “Invitare a un uso della lingua rispettoso delle identità di genere. Quali le sfide in un contesto multilingue?” now available as Covi (2020) and Manuela Manera’s “Narrazioni Tossiche. Le parole per raccontare l’ideologia del gender?”. Rosanna Oliva de Conciliis, Daniela Monaco, Susanna Schivo and Manuela de Oliveira Magalhães presented the actions entertained by Rete per la parità for the transmission of the maternal family name: “Uso corretto della lingua per la costruzione dell’identità

di genere. La violenza nella mancata attribuzione per legge del cognome materno”.²

The round table “Lingua, genere e parole d’odio”, chaired by Martina Zambon (representative of the Veneto Union of journalists), involved an expert in gender and media, Monia Azzalini (Osservatorio di Pavia; Ca’ Foscari), and many journalists who are on the front line in this topic: Lina Appiano (president of Donne in Rete); Marina Cosi (president of GiULiA, an association of Italian women journalists); Antonella Scambia (member of the Equal Opportunity committee of the Veneto Union of Journalists) and Maria Teresa Celotti (member of the Equal Opportunity committee of the Lombardy Union of journalists). The round table was accredited as lifelong learning action for journalists attracting journalists from the whole Veneto region.

In this brief introduction, we have suggested that there is an important but still underestimated link between the negative attitude towards gender-fair language and the threshold of tolerance of sexist hate speech in the name of freedom of speech. We have claimed that uncovering this link can promote the use of gender-fair language, which is especially urgent in Italy, where there are still many opponents even among women in the professions and in the progressive parties. We hope that the conference and this volume will be of inspiration to decision makers, educators, communicators, editors and publishers, as well as scholars in different fields and that it will contribute to a more considered use of apparently innocuous but in fact powerful means of the expression or concealment of empowered women in the cultural discourse, such as little inflectional morphemes expressing gender.

We conclude, thanking the many colleagues who have had a crucial role in the process. First of all we thank the components of the Scientific Board, chaired by Giuliana Giusti (Ca’ Foscari) and including Giulia Bencini (Ca’ Foscari), Federica Formato, University of Brighton, Gabriele Iannàccaro, Università Milano Bicocca, president of the Study Group for Linguistic Policies (GSPL), Anna M. Thornton, Università dell’Aquila, president of the Italian Linguistic Society (SLI), and Beatrice Spallaccia, Università di Bologna. The Scientific Board was supported by a Board of Reviewers including Raffaella Baccolini, Università di Bologna, Paola Catenaccio, Università di Milano, Maria Assunta Ciardullo, Università della Calabria, Silvia Dal Negro, Libera Università di Bolzano, Francesca Maria Dovetto, Università Federico II di Napoli, Franca Orletti, Università Roma Tre, Luciano Romito, Università della Calabria, and Francesca Santulli, IULM Milano.

2 A follow-up on the actions of the associations and the Italian legislation can be found in <http://www.reteperlaparita.it/cognome-della-madre>.

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