

Introduction

Numerous morphological innovations have been advanced to expand the boundaries of gender binarism in Italian. Among the proposals, the suffix -ə seems to be leading the way towards finding feasible solutions. Since it appears to be more accessible than other graphic strategies (e.g., -*; -@), as it can be pronounced and read, the suffix -ə has become more widespread and in need of systematization. Before even attempting at proposing a possible standard, we need to test the interpretation of this suffix. To this purpose, we designed an experimental study adapting the sentence-picture matching task used by Bradley et al. (2019) for English. The focus of our analysis is three-fold. The first objective is to establish whether the adoption of the suffix -ə triggers immediate activation of a nonbinary-gender referent or group (henceforth glossed as NB) or a mixed-gender group. The second objective is to assess whether the comprehension of short texts containing sentences like *Lə candidatə risulta regolarmente iscrittə all'anno accademico in corso* 'The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is duly enrolled.NB.SG in the current academic year' requires higher processing costs responsible for slowing down the reading and matching task, by looking at participants' response times. The third objective is to determine whether the masculine form, which encodes

either a specific or a generic meaning (e.g., *La ricetta preparata dal medico* ‘the prescription written by the.M.SG doctor.M.SG’; *I medici parteciperanno a un convegno nel fine settimana* ‘The.M.PL doctors.M.PL will attend a conference over the weekend’), activates the specific interpretation more frequently, thus decreeing the potential inability of the masculine form to serve as representative of a multitude encompassing different genders.

In addition to the sentence-picture matching task, two questionnaires were administered to the participants. Data on their reading habits and their attitudes with respect to the suffix *-ø* were also collected, to determine whether our sample already came across this new suffix and to what extent they are willing to embrace such innovations and embark on the journey towards reaching gender-respectful linguistic results.

In a follow-up experiment, the same structure as in the main experiment was used, but the task required choosing linguistic labels rather than images. This allowed us to test whether the results of the main experiment were somehow affected by the complexities of the visual materials.

The book is organised as follows. Chapter 1 includes a review of the literature on the topics from which the study evolved. After outlining the sociological context and the features of “sex-based grammatical gender systems” (Corbett 2013b as formulated in Gygax et al. 2019, 2) as opposed to neutral ones, the focus is shifted to the structure of the Italian declension system, by shedding light on the mechanisms underlying derivational processes, which lead back to the generic meaning of the masculine form. Chapter 2 presents an overview of gender-fair morphological innovations - including both degendering and regendering strategies - in the context of Italian and across different languages. Chapter 3 provides a thorough description of the experimental design. The sentence-picture matching task experiment is preceded by the Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey, conceived as a crucial step in the fine-tuning of the visual materials. The chapter continues with the presentation of two questionnaires measuring attitudes toward the use of nonsexist language as well as reading practices. Data analysis and discussion are reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the follow-up experiment. The general discussion is undertaken in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 draws the conclusions.