

1 The Biological and Grammatical Gender Mismatch

Index 1.1 Introduction. – 1.2 De-Constructing the Notion of Gender. – 1.3 The Classification of Grammatical Gender Systems. – 1.4 Gender Binarism in Italian. – 1.5 The Masculine Form’s Tilted Ambiguity: From Generic to Specific Bias.

1.1 Introduction

Primarily social, but also biological and political reasons have jointly contributed to spurring the debate around inclusive language, a topic treated in this book from a purely linguistic perspective by assessing the interventions that can be implemented at the level of language. Before delving into the linguistic phenomenon under investigation, it is necessary to discuss the complex relationship between biological sex and grammatical gender, and the implications it has had on the sociological dimension for an entire community of speakers. This serves as a premise to illustrate the groupings of languages depending on the gender system they are endowed with, to then focus on Italian, which displays an inherent gender binarism whose peculiarities are described. Some considerations on the double nature

of the masculine – and the resulting specificity and markedness of the feminine form – conclude the chapter by adopting a cross-linguistic approach.

1.2 De-Constructing the Notion of Gender

The term ‘gender’ has yet to find a shared definition. It may be framed as the set of *social* conventions determining the difference between masculinity and femininity (Felluga 2015) – a definition that, despite being far too restrictive, highlights the quintessential social nature of gender. This is so blatant that Judith Butler (1988) goes as far as to argue that gender cannot be conceived as an objective natural thing, it only exists to the extent that it is performed. Once established that “gender reality is performative”, one can exclude that it is (automatically) linked to material bodily facts (Butler 1988, 527). In outlining its artificial, conventional and historical dimension, Butler (1988, 522) insists that

Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.

A major distinction thus enters the scene, i.e., gender *versus* biological sex. Gender and biological sex may be intertwined. In the collective imagination, the latter – to be intended as the *corporeal* facts of our existence (Felluga 2015) – exerts some kind of biological influence on the determination of the former. It is almost as if biological sex naturally tends to mold gender, while however admitting that the construction of one’s own gender identity can disregard one’s biological sex in just as many cases, resulting in the separation of the two. To better grasp the complexity of this potential connection that might be established, the origin and domain to which these two concepts belong must be drawn. As the term suggests, sex has a biological basis, which can be explained as follows: “the human species, as well as other species having sexual reproduction, is divided into two major groups, males and females, with two bodies that differ from each other chromosomally, anatomically, and physiologically” (Ghigi 2019, 15).¹ Having determined that sex is exclusively biological in nature, gender is, instead, “its cultural elaboration, the product of the socialization process through which individuals learn what

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian sources are our own.

is necessary to properly interpret sexually defined roles. Speaking of gender thus refers to the social construction of sex [...]” (Sartori 2009, 16). A further specification is found in the notion of gender identity, corresponding to the “deeply felt, inherent sense of being a girl, woman, or female; a boy, a man, or male; a blend of male or female; or an alternative gender” (APA 2015, 834), which can even change over time (Lev 2004).

The relationship between biological sex and gender is one that is hard to untangle. It can be intended as a relationship of mutual dependence that might lead to a full correspondence between the individual’s gender identity and their biological sex. A mismatch between gender and biological sex is, however, a possibility that is to be equally contemplated. Indeed, the flexible, versatile nature of gender has long been advocated for by different social, gender justice movements, especially in recent years. In this view, gender “is not hard-wired and can be understood and expressed in a far more diverse range of ways” (Hines, Taylor 2018, 6), driving us beyond the boundaries imposed by gender binarism. This malleability of gender is reflected in the several different labels that have been coined to distinguish among this vast array of gender profiles, which serve as key definitions to orient the audience in the public debate: the term “genderfluid” points to the dimension of change over time and across different situations; “genderflux” refers to the level of intensity experienced by the individual; “gender-diverse” touches on the dimension of gender manifestation by addressing aspects such as physicality; “gender-queer” is a synonym for ‘nonbinary’ locating a person in between or outside the traditional categories of masculine and feminine; “agender” indicates absence or neutrality of gender (for a full list see Hines, Taylor 2018, 10-11). The forging of these novel categories made it possible to identify the actors who have enacted this profound change with respect to the perception of gender, affecting the political, social and linguistic sphere.

There is an equally complex interplay between language, society and politics. Language is a tool that acts in the world and contributes to the shaping of society (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023), which in turn modifies language in a relationship of mutual influence (Hojjer 1948). From a sociolinguistic perspective, this dynamic has been described as one in which “linguistic and social change are mutually constitutive” (Deumert 2006, 2138). However, within this process of continuous and reciprocal alteration which requires time, the socio-cultural change is hardly ever produced concurrent with the one discernable at the level of language. Indeed, for a nonspontaneous linguistic innovation to occur - one that is intentional and planned - its stabilization typically requires a prolonged phase of experimentation and negotiation, which hardly ever takes place simultaneously with the cultural or political revolution responsible for it. One can conduct

a revolution by adopting a linguistic practice, which will nevertheless need its own testing time and its temporary trajectory in order to eventually become established.

Language is certainly one of the fields where the battle for the advancement of gender rights is played out (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023). We are witnessing a public demand for the linguistic materialization of gender-related transformative instances (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023), one that is pervasive and sits on several modules of language. Advocates are not willing to settle for an expansion of vocabulary, they are rather calling for a collective action that strikes the grammatical gender. In so doing, they are introducing “a structural change in language, in its nerves, its framing” (Wittig 1985, 7), one that is at the root of a political conflict, since acting in the world - be it through language or other media - cannot be separated from doing politics (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023). It is only through a public, political commitment that an agreement can be reached in theory, marking a historic transition (Wittig 1985).

It is this frame that encloses the present research, which, from a psycholinguistic perspective, carries out an investigation aimed at deepening the relationship between gender identity as a social construct and its realization at the level of language, by pointing out the implications on the linguistic system while drawing the boundaries within which this relationship can grow. To this end, an experimental protocol was developed (adapting the one by Bradley et al. 2019) for the evaluation of the accessibility of *-ə* as the suffix representing the nonbinary population in the Italian language.

1.3 The Classification of Grammatical Gender Systems

Languages can be classified into three different types with respect to the grammatical category of gender: (i) no gender system languages, (ii) sex-based gender system languages, (iii) non-sex-based gender system languages (Corbett 2013b).

The linguistic category of gender “permeates the whole body of language” at various degrees depending on the language in question (Wittig 1985, 5). For a language to possess grammatical gender, Dixon (1982) identifies three main requirements that must be satisfied: (i) the grouping of nouns into classes; (ii) the grammatical agreement surfacing between the noun and its dependent functional or lexical words; (iii) a plausible semantic correlation between biological sex and class membership. The third requirement reflects one of the most vigorous considerations Monique Wittig made in her essay “The Mark of Gender” (1985, 5), namely that “gender is the enforcement of sex in language”. This requirement is however not included in the definition later provided by Corbett (1991), as 25% of the languages

in his sample that have gender have an animacy-based rather than a sex-based system.

Grammatical gender performs several functions on both a syntactic and morphological level, contributing, to some extent, to language processing and disambiguation purposes. This applies at different levels of intensity according to the language's gender system.

Grammatical gender triggers agreement, namely, the syntactic process by which the gender of the noun, referred to as 'controller', determines the form of its modifiers, named 'targets' (Corbett 2006, 10-26). To illustrate, consider the Italian sentences *tutti i nostri nuovi allievi sono stati convocati* 'all.M.PL the.M.PL our.M.PL new.M.PL students.M.PL have been.M.PL summoned.M.PL' or *tutte le nostre nuove allieve sono state convocate* 'all.F.PL the.F.PL our.F.PL new.F.PL students.F.PL have been.F.PL summoned.F.PL', which display systematic gender agreement across the noun phrase and the predicate. Furthermore, gender marking facilitates reference tracking, by means of the agreement between antecedents and anaphoric pronouns, as well as helps solving misidentifications of the referent (Dye et al. 2017) (e.g., in Italian *Appena Gianni e Sandra sono arrivati, Maria ha parlato con lui* 'As soon as Gianni and Sandra arrived, Maria spoke to him'). Evidence suggests that "gender incongruence should lead to diminished encoding or recall" (Yorkston, De Mello 2005, 225), that is, it can impair both the encoding of linguistic information and its subsequent recall, by increasing cognitive processing demands and weakening the formation of stable mental representations. At the same time, the absence of gender marking implies the loss of several linguistic cues that play a crucial role in discourse processing, such as anaphora resolution and reference tracking. It is in light of these assumptions that proposals for transformation that go in the direction of 'zero marking' should be carefully evaluated.

Having established that grammatical gender, where present, is marked differently across languages, by assuming, for instance, a different number of grammatical gender values - up to seven in Swahili (Corbett 1991, 47, Table 3.4) - several classifications grouping together similar linguistic systems with respect to gender have been proposed (Hellinger, Bußmann 2001-03; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, Laakso 2012). The recent taxonomic system devised by Gygax and colleagues (2019) profiles five different language groups:

1. Grammatical gender languages (e.g., French, Spanish, Czech, German, Italian);
2. Languages with a combination of grammatical gender and natural gender (e.g., Norwegian, Dutch);
3. Natural gender languages (e.g., English);
4. Genderless languages with a few traces of grammatical gender (e.g., Oriya, Basque);
5. Genderless languages (e.g., Turkish, Finnish).

We proceed by comparing groups (1) and (3). In languages belonging to group (1), all nouns have gender. For human nouns, there tends to be an almost exact match between the biological sex of the referent and the assigned grammatical gender (*la ragazza* ‘the.F.SG girl.F.SG’; *il ragazzo* ‘the.M.SG boy.M.SG’). On the contrary, the assignment of gender to inanimate nouns (*la sedia* ‘the.F.SG chair.F.SG’; *il divano* ‘the.M.SG sofa.M.SG’) is “mostly semantically arbitrary” (Gygax et al. 2019, 3). In other words, for human nouns, gender assignment is primarily reality-driven, meaning it closely reflects the biological sex of the referent; in contrast, for inanimate nouns, gender assignment is conventional, based on linguistic and cultural conventions rather than semantic or biological factors.

In languages belonging to group (3), personal pronouns represent the only category marked for gender. In pronouns, gender assignment is dictated by the sex of the referent (e.g., *my professor* - *she*, *your professor* - *he*). Inanimate nouns, as well as the great majority of human nouns, are unspecified for gender (e.g., *accountant*, *doctor*).

In an attempt to draw a general trend in the process of grammatical gender assignment from a cross-linguistic perspective, one could affirm that the grammatical gender distinctions found in human nouns reflect biological sex distinctions, further reinforcing this tight relationship that seems to be exploited by grammar whenever possible. In statistical terms, just above 40% of the languages of the world display grammatical gender distinctions (Corbett 2013a). Out of those, 75% have a correlation between biological sex and grammatical gender (Corbett 2013b).

In the next section, we focus on the gender system of Italian, which belongs to the group of grammatical gender languages.

1.4 Gender Binarism in Italian

Italian is a language with a binary number system (singular and plural) and a binary gender system (masculine and feminine). Gender and number are functional features bundled together in an “abstract fused morpheme” which is expressed through a vocalic ending (Acquaviva 2009, 50), as (1.1) shows.

- (1.1) a. *Ragazz-o* (M.SG) – *Ragazz-i* (M.PL)
 ‘boy’ – ‘boys’
 b. *Ragazz-a* (F.SG) – *Ragazz-e* (F.PL)
 ‘girl’ – ‘girls’

Not only nouns (1.1), but many other categories exhibit gender marking in Italian: the lexical categories adjectives (e.g., *la donna ricca* ‘the.F.SG woman.F.SG rich.F.SG’; *l’uomo ricco* ‘the.M.SG

man.M.SG rich.M.SG') and past participles (e.g., *è ritornato* '[he] is got.back.M.SG'; *è ritornata* '[she] is got.back.F.SG'), and the functional categories articles, demonstratives, third-person accusative (i.e., *lo* 'him/it'; *la* 'her/it'; *li* 'them.M.PL'; *le* 'them.F.PL') and dative clitics (i.e., *gli* 'to.him'; *le* 'to.her'), third-person singular strong pronouns (i.e., *lui* 'he, him'; *lei* 'she, her'), and quantifiers (e.g., *certe finestre sono alte* 'some.F.PL windows.F.PL are tall.F.PL').² Possessive pronouns agree with the gender of the possessee (e.g., in *la sua casa è piccola* 'the.F.SG his/her.F.SG house.F.SG is small.F.SG', *sua* is feminine because the controller *casa* 'house' is feminine, regardless of the gender identity of the possessor).

By adopting a comparative approach with Spanish, the role of the vocalic endings becomes clearer. In Spanish, "stems require a class marker (CM) constituent in order to be morphologically well-formed free-standing words" (Harris 1996, 104), with the notion of 'class' referring to a set of inflectional realizations in morphology (Aronoff 1976). This also holds for Italian, where typically words require an unaccented end-vowel other than /u/ in order to be considered 'canonical' (Acquaviva 2009).³ The stem with specified class is thus "phonologically realized as a form that ends in one of a set of canonical vowels, conditioned by the stem's class and by the features on the abstract agreement" (Acquaviva 2009, 55). It is therefore crucial to emphasize that the requirement for a vocalic ending should not be attributed to the overt realization of the features of gender and number; instead, its primary function is to satisfy a constraint governing the well-formedness of words. Unlike Spanish, however, which possesses a discrete morpheme to convey the number feature separately (cf. the plural -s suffix in (1.2)), Italian opts for the co-expression of the two features of gender and number in a single thematic end-vowel (cf. (1.1)) (Acquaviva 2009).

- (1.2) a. *Caball-o* (M.SG) – *Caball-o-s* (M.PL)
 'horse' – 'horses'
 b. *Maripos-a* (F.SG) – *Maripos-a-s* (F.PL)
 'butterfly' – 'butterflies'

2 Plural *loro*, which is both a strong nominative and accusative pronoun 'they, them' and a weak dative pronoun 'to.them', is not marked for gender and can refer to a male-only group, a female-only group, as well as a mixed-gender group.

3 There are, however, exceptions to this rule, which typically involve nasal and liquid consonants: functional words (e.g., *con* 'with', *per* 'for'), some names (e.g., *Carmen*, *Miriam*), and lexical loans (e.g., *bar* 'café', *lapis* 'pencil'). In addition, there are cases of words ending in accented vowels, such as *città* 'city', *caffè* 'coffee', *perché* 'because/why', *lì* 'there', *però* 'but', and *virtù* 'virtue'.

Word Markers in Italian determine the shape of words, regardless of their category. The list in (1.3), taken from Acquaviva (2009, 55), shows that the same word endings are used for nouns, verbs, and uninflected words:⁴

- (1.3) Italian Word Markers: unaccented *-a*, *-e*, *-i*, *-o* (not *-u*), inflected and uninflected
- nominally inflected: *gatt-o*, *gatt-a*, *verd-i*, *quest-e*, *lett-in-o*, ...
 - verbally inflected: *cant-o*, *veng-a*, *potess-i*, *andar-e*, ...
 - uninflected: *prim-a* ‘before’, *doman-i* ‘tomorrow’, *quand-o* ‘when’,... (nominal, invariable: *lam-a* ‘llama’, *fat-o* ‘photo’,...)

Although not absolute, as there are some exceptions to this rule (e.g., verbal endings requiring stressed end-vowels such as *accadrà* ‘it will happen’, *berrò* ‘I will drink’), this is a general criterion for word formation in Italian (Acquaviva 2009). In the process of noun formation, 70% of nouns are indeed assigned a specific end-vowel that can overtly discriminate between masculine and feminine, i.e., *-o* vs *-a* (Thornton, Iacobini, Burani 1994). These are phonologically transparent nouns as they allow for the immediate recovery of the gender information from the surface form (De Martino, Bracco, Laudanna 2011). The unaccented end-vowel *-o* conveys the masculine singular features (e.g., *parc-o* ‘park’), whereas its plural form is formed with *-i*, as in *parch-i* ‘parks’; feminine forms, on the other hand, carry *-a* as their vocalic ending (e.g., *tort-a* ‘cake’) and opt for *-e* to form the plural form (i.e., *tort-e* ‘cakes’) (De Martino, Bracco, Laudanna 2011). However, not all words fit into these two declensional classes (D’Achille, Thornton 2003; Stark 2007; Acquaviva 2009; Thornton 2009). In addition to the productive Class I and Class II, at least four more classes should be identified, as visualized in Table 1 taken from Acquaviva (2009, 50).

Table 1 Declensional classes in Italian (from Acquaviva 2009, 50)

Class I (all fem.)		Class II (all masc. except one)		Class III (masc. and fem.)	
sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.
-a	-e	-o	-i	-e	-i
<i>donna</i>	<i>donne</i>	<i>libro</i>	<i>libri</i>	<i>fiore</i>	<i>fiori</i>
Class IV (almost all masc.)		Class V (all masc. → fem.)		Class VI (masc. and fem.)	
sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.	sg. and pl.	
-a	-i	-o	-a	[invariable]	
<i>poeta</i>	<i>poeti</i>	<i>uovo</i>	<i>uova</i>	<i>bar, blu, koala,...</i>	

⁴ For uninflected words, Acquaviva does not provide an example like *sempr-e* ‘always’ with the vocalic ending *-e*.

Some masculine nouns happen to take on in their singular form the *-a* suffix generally employed to form feminine nouns. A case in point is the masculine *poet-a* ‘poet.M.SG’, belonging to Class IV. The corresponding plural form instead follows the more traditional rule by adopting the *-i* suffix, hence being fully classified as phonologically transparent (i.e., *poet-i* ‘poets’). This is an instance of irregular inflection for gender, only visible in the singular form. The opposite trend can be observed on the feminine noun *man-o* ‘hand.F.SG’, formed with the *-o* suffix usually designating the masculine form. Here, unlike the previous case, the standard masculine suffix is also maintained in the formation of the plural of the feminine noun, resulting in *man-i* ‘hands.F.PL’. This constitutes the only exception found in Class II [tab. 1].⁵ Note, also, that the plural *braccia* ‘arms’ reveals the traces of the original neuter Latin form in *-a*, in contrast with the regular plural form in *-i*.⁶

Focusing on the masculine-feminine opposition in human nouns, the approach adopted by Gyga and colleagues (2019) views the feminine forms as morphologically derived from the masculine ones via suffixation. The direction of the derivation cannot however always be reconstructed *a posteriori*; there are cases where it is not possible to determine which of the two forms (i.e., masculine or feminine) is actually derived (e.g., *bambin-o* ‘child.M.SG’, *bambin-a* ‘child.F.SG’). For the purpose of our analysis, we follow Gyga and colleagues (2019) in assuming that the feminine form is derived from the masculine form.⁷

With regard to the functioning of the derivational processes, there are several paths that can be taken, resulting in more or less symmetrical masculine/feminine pairs. The forging of “structurally symmetric pairs” constitutes a viable building option creating two forms that are equally complex from a morphological point of view, by employing different suffixes (e.g., *postino* ‘postman’ – *postina* ‘postwoman’) (Gyga et al. 2019, Supplementary Material). Other regular suffixes are *-tore.M*, *-trice.F* as in *minatore* – *minatrice* ‘miner’. The same applies to female names (e.g., *Paolo* – *Paola*). There are however, as reported in the Supplementary Material by Gyga and colleagues (2019), “competing feminine derivations” for the

⁵ Other feminine nouns ending in *-o* (cf. D’Achille, Thornton 2008) are invariable, e.g., *la moto / le moto* ‘the.F.SG motorbike’ / ‘the.F.PL motorbike’.

⁶ Latin distinguished between masculine, feminine and neuter. Neuter nouns typically displayed syncretism between nominative and accusative forms and formed their plural in *-a* (e.g., *brachium* ‘arm’ → *braccia* ‘arms’), a pattern that survives residually in some Italian plurals.

⁷ See D’Achille and Thornton 2003 for the hypothesis that nouns like *bambino* ‘child.M.SG’ and *bambina* ‘child.F.SG’ belong to two different word classes, and there is no derivation of the feminine from the masculine.

same masculine noun, some of which can be negatively connotated (e.g., *avvocatessa* 'lawyer.F' as opposed to *avvocata* 'lawyer.F', which presents the same morphological structure as *avvocato* 'lawyer.M'). Complete morphological asymmetry is found instead in the so-called fixed-gender nouns: masculine/feminine pairs whose components do not share any common roots (e.g., *fratello* 'brother' - *sorella* 'sister'; *marito* 'husband' - *moglie* 'wife'; *toro* 'bull' - *mucca* 'cow').

Some derivational suffixes - alternatively identified as neoclassical combining elements - that are unmarked for gender in the singular form are also present in Italian (e.g., *-ista* as in *attivista* 'activist'; *-cida* as in *omicida* 'murderer'; *-iatra* as in *pediatra* 'pediatrician'; *-nauta* as in *astronauta* 'astronaut'). Nouns formed with these suffixes are referred to as common-gender nouns, defined as "phonologically opaque" (De Martino, Bracco, Laudanna 2011, 749), and can only be disambiguated by means of the determiner (e.g., *il/la pediatra* 'the.M/F.SG pediatrician'). Finally, for some animal-denoting nouns, only one form is lexically specified; the opposite sex is expressed by means of a lexical gender modifier (e.g., *il tasso femmina* 'female badger' and *la tigre maschio* 'male tiger', Gheno 2020a). An analogous strategy is also attested with human referents, as in *l'architetto donna* 'the architect.M.SG woman' or *la donna architetto* 'the.F.SG woman architect.M.SG'. Note that these cases are controversial, as an alternative is available and preferred in Italian: *l'architetta* 'the.F.SG architect.F.SG'.

It can be argued that in the vast majority of cases, except for those suffixes unspecified for gender, it is the singular form that dictates the gender of the noun (Corbett 1991). Gender distinctions are then maintained in the plural forms (Gygax et al. 2019), accounting for a steady relationship between the two features (i.e., gender and number).

As anticipated, the morphological derivation system generally follows a specific trajectory: from masculine to feminine. Only in rare cases does the opposite occur, as in Italian *vedovo* 'widower' derived from *vedova* 'widow' (Corbett 1991; Maiden, Robustelli 2000) or *modello* 'runway model.M.SG' derived from *modella* 'runway model.F.SG', as suggested by an anonymous reviewer. This pattern (masculine-to-feminine derivation) is also observable in other languages, including French (e.g., *acteur* → *actrice*) (Riegel, Pellat, Rioul 2009).

The predominance of masculine-to-feminine derivation contributes to the perception of the masculine form's primacy and dominance over the feminine. Even before analyzing derivational mechanisms, this asymmetry is evident in the masculine form's capacity to supposedly trigger a double interpretation (universal/generic vs specific), which the feminine form does not evoke - a phenomenon further discussed in the next section.

1.5 The Masculine Form's Tilted Ambiguity: From Generic to Specific Bias

When reading a text, the encounter with a masculine form may give rise to conflicting interpretations. Depending on whether it is a singular or a plural form, the situation may change drastically. After all, the plural denotes many subjectivities, with their various characteristics (e.g., different gender identities). The singular conversely entails one subjectivity (i.e., one single gender identity), hence supposedly raising less doubts as to the actual characteristics of the person. As to say, there seems to be less room for ambiguity with the singular. Yet, its linguistic context and accompanying elements could still cause confusion and interfere in the process of inferring gender – an example of this will be reported and commented shortly in (1.5b).

Ambiguity arises at the level of meaning activation, as two possible interpretations become available to the individual, who is eventually called to disambiguate between a specific/exclusive and a generic/inclusive meaning (Gygax et al. 2021).⁸ The specific meaning of the masculine form is activated when an exclusive correspondence with men is assumed, i.e., the referent is conceived as either a man or a group of men. The generic meaning implies non-male participants as well. In other words, the masculine form is used ‘generically’ when the gender of the referent is unknown, nonbinary or the group composition we are referring to is of a mixed nature with respect to gender, hence turning into a multifunctional versatile masculine (Formato 2018; Formato, Somma 2023), eventually even designating women. The fact remains that both interpretations (specific vs generic) are “connected through their common inclusion of the male gender” (Gygax et al. 2021, 5).

The study conducted by Gygax and colleagues (2021) precisely sets out to explore the general implications arising from the semantic ambiguity of the masculine form when referring to humans, by looking at a multitude of languages (cf. Giusti 2024). As a matter of fact, this intrinsic duality has been attested across different languages, regardless of their gender systems. Sentence (1.4) in French, from Gygax et al. (2021, 6), presupposes the selection of the generic meaning, since the conveyed intention of the female subject of the sentence is that of talking to someone working in the surgical staff,

⁸ The terms ‘specific’ and ‘generic’ may give rise to terminological ambiguity, as they are widely used to contrast reference to a particular individual (e.g., *I am looking for Mary*) with non-specific reference (e.g., *I am looking for a surgeon*). Here, however, the terms are understood differently in combination with ‘exclusive/inclusive’, to capture whether masculine forms are interpreted as referring specifically/exclusively to men or generically to mixed-gender groups, hence inclusively.

and whether that person is a female, nonbinary or a male surgeon is absolutely irrelevant.

- (1.4) *Elle voulait discuter avec un chirurgien.*
'She wanted to talk to a surgeon.'

It is safe to say that the gender information retrieved from *chirurgien* 'male surgeon' does not represent a crucial characteristic for the purpose of identifying the person sought by the subject. In fact, it may very well be ignored since its use is meant to include, in this specific instance, potentially different gender identities, as none is meant to prevail over the other. The use of the masculine form is therefore intended to be generic, as to say inclusive, in that it does not necessarily refer exclusively to a male surgeon; a female or nonbinary surgeon are equally contemplated here. Note that the same word (i.e., *surgeon*) in (1.5) (from Gyga et al. 2021, 1, 3) in a natural gender language (i.e., English) where – as described in Section 1.3 – the great majority of human nouns is unspecified for gender, still raises the question of this double interpretation, despite the word lacking an overt manifestation of the gender information. It follows that the source of this uncertainty must be located outside the linguistic context.

- (1.5) a. The surgeons passed their exams.
b. The surgeon passed the exam and cried.

In comparing (1.5a) and (1.5b), we realize how much we were actually taking for granted the male gender assignment to the word *surgeons*, hence picturing a team of exclusively male surgeons. Even though the noun is unmarked for gender, and cannot be formally recognized as a masculine form, it seems to activate a referent with a specific, male gender. As in the case of French (1.4), however, the noun in (1.5a) is intentionally employed to refer to the collectivity of surgeons, regardless of their gender. Yet, the awareness of an automatic male-gender attribution comes to us the moment we are confronted with sentence (1.5b), which attributes to the subject of the sentence (i.e., *surgeon*) – in all likelihood assumed to be a man – a typically 'feminine' action (i.e., crying) – or at least long-depicted as such by the collective narrative.⁹ This juxtaposition can trigger a mild sense

⁹ We would like to emphasize that we, as authors, by no means intend to confine the action of weeping to the female category alone. In illustrating this reasoning, we are simply appealing to a tendency detectable in the collective imagination that has been much discussed, which misses no opportunity to attribute weeping to a female agent, even though men are equally capable and absolutely entitled to weep. Think of the outdated 'don't cry like a sissy' when scolding a male child.

of disorientation in the reader, who is now suddenly forced to consider the option of looking at a female referent, as the information provided by the verb *crying* clashes with that of the presumably male subject. One possibility to find our way around sentence (1.5b) is for us to abandon the specific interpretation that sees the exclusive activation of the male gender, and assume its generic function of possibly including a female surgeon. If, on the contrary, the presumably male surgeon's performance of crying did not raise any doubts whatsoever (i.e., in picturing a crying male surgeon), the specific interpretation is more likely to stay active (Gygax et al. 2021), thus decreeing the selection of the specific meaning, i.e., male surgeon.

There are however reasons to believe that the juxtaposition of the word *surgeon* with the verb *crying* could be perceived as some sort of misplacement, giving evidence of two, relatively unrelated aspects: (i) "gender as a spontaneous inference" (Gygax et al. 2021, 1); (ii) the steady relationship between a specific gender and a role noun – a concept known as 'gender stereotypicality', indicating the likelihood of human nouns to refer to women or men, which will be further explored later on. With reference to (i), (1.5) is an instance that proves that readers naturally tend to process the gender of the subject of the sentence (i.e., the surgeon's gender) "and include it as part of their mental representation of the text" even when there is no gender cue available at the surface of the word and, most importantly, is not needed to achieve "a coherent representation of the sentence" (Gygax et al. 2021, 1-2). In the case of the singular (1.5b), the confusion arising from the activation of the gender information is produced by the presence of the surrounding words, in particular the verb *crying* combined with the supposedly male *surgeon*. It was assumed that the latter, in the collective imagination, cannot fail to be a man, and his weeping can be harder to imagine.

When gender is visible, as shown in (1.4) for French and (1.6) below for Italian, the visual hook provided by the noun appearing in the masculine form and its dependent functional words – also inflected for the masculine – only reinforces the preference for the exclusive masculine interpretation, with no distinction as to number features. The choice of a male referent is favored over a mixed one, even when, in the intentions of the writer or speaker, other subjectivities should be included.

- (1.6) a. *I medici dovranno prendere parte a un corso di aggiornamento nel fine settimana.*
'Doctors must attend a refresher course on the weekend'
b. *La terapia individuata dal medico ha portato alla guarigione del paziente.*
'The treatment advised by the doctor led to the patient's recovery.'

As a matter of fact, *i medici* 'the.M.PL doctors.M.PL' in (1.6a) should be understood as referring to a composite of women, men and nonbinary

people, meaning everyone who is working as a physician. Yet the reader could be tempted to picture only male doctors. In a similar way, it is not known whether the physician in (1.6b) is of female, nonbinary or male gender; nonetheless, the reader is expected to be more prone to once again trace the action of the suggested treatment back to a male doctor. This interpretative possibility could also be framed as the product of ‘gender stereotypicality’ (ii), representing a nonlinguistic factor defined as “the generalized beliefs or expectations about whether a specific (social or occupational) role is more likely to be held by one gender or the other” (Misersky et al. 2014, 842). Extensive research in social psychology (e.g., Banaji, Hardin 1996) and psycholinguistics (e.g., Oakhill, Garnham, Reynolds 2005) has been conducted on the topic, revealing that readers automatically rely on stereotypes upon encountering role nouns (Misersky et al. 2014). Both grammatical gender and gender stereotypes have indeed been found to influence the process of ascribing gender to denote persons (Irmen, Roßberg 2004), both contributing to the molding of the corresponding mental representation. Note that *chirurgien* ‘surgeon.M.SG’ (1.4) and *medico* ‘doctor.M.SG’ (1.6) are stereotypically male nouns – just like *surgeon* (1.5) – which also exhibit inherent masculine gender inflection, hence providing access to a distinctive gender cue. An interaction between linguistic (i.e., grammatical gender) and nonlinguistic (i.e., gender stereotype) factors thus originates. The processing of this interaction induces with even greater force the prevalence of a male-biased mental representation in correspondence of gender-marked stereotypical nouns (Irmen, Roßberg 2004). The absence of gender markers in English (1.5) makes the stereotypicality of the role noun the only bias responsible for strongly influencing speakers’ mental representations (Gygax et al. 2021).

Having identified a margin of preference in terms of meaning activation for grammatical gender languages, this does not however negate that the generic masculine could still be activated; for instance, in cases where the presence of a verb inherently associated with the female world points to the generic interpretation, preventing an unambiguous identification with the male gender to take place (e.g., *Il chirurgo piange per aver passato l’esame* ‘the.M.SG surgeon.M.SG cries over passing the exam’; cf. (1.5b)). It is thus safe to say that the masculine form may have an ambiguous referent that needs to be decoded by the reader’s cognitive system (Irmen, Kurovskaja 2010). Evidence shows that the activation of the opposition *specific vs generic meaning* brought about by the masculine form triggers greater cognitive effort in the solving of the semantic ambiguity (Gygax et al. 2021). Disambiguation must indeed occur in order to reach a coherent mental representation, required for each of the conveyed information we read (van den Broek et al. 1999; Graesser,

Singer, Trabasso 1994). Among the two possible alternatives (i.e., specific/exclusive or generic/inclusive reference), as can be easily guessed from the reasoning provided above, recent studies demonstrate that the male-specific interpretation is the dominant one: “the specific meaning dictates readers’ interpretation of the masculine form” (Gygax et al. 2021, 5).

One of the reasons underlying the unequal distribution across its possible interpretations is to be found in meaning frequency (Gygax et al. 2021). In polysemic words, meaning frequency correlates with predictability and corresponds to the rate at which one meaning is activated over time. The acquisitional factor is assumed to have contributed to regulating this process of activation. As a matter of fact, there is extensive literature showing that children acquire the Italian gender system and its two gender values at a very early stage (Velnić 2020), thus unconsciously gaining access first to the specific meaning of the masculine form in a non-mediated way. In the study conducted by Velnić (2020), the youngest child to display mastery of this two-way gender system is indeed 2;6 years old, confirming indirectly that the masculine form is supposedly used only to refer to boys/men and the feminine form only to girls/women, hence enforcing, at least initially, an exclusive and fixed binary correspondence. Only later along the developmental trajectory are children supposedly introduced to the possibility of the generic masculine. The generic use indeed enters the scene with much delay and must soon come to terms with the fact that the specific/exclusive use has long been established, hence extensively implemented. In addition, longer exposure to the specific use (i.e., temporal precedence) can in turn contribute to boosting its meaning frequency. Therefore, meaning frequency and temporal precedence combined are deemed responsible for causing the more salient meaning to correspond to the specific meaning. Typological studies support the validity of this argument by reporting that the specific-generic learning sequence has been observed in many – if not all – different languages that provide both meanings (Gygax et al. 2009).

A cross-linguistic comparative perspective has further led to the identification of an “*asymmetrical treatment of women and men*” across different languages (Pauwels 2003, 553). Having clarified that the masculine form has the alleged ability to incorporate other genders (e.g., the female gender) by claiming their, albeit covert, representation through the selection of the generic meaning, the masculine is thus openly recognized as more general as opposed to the feminine. One needs only consider that the mere presence of a single man among a group of women imposes the selection of the masculine form (Gygax et al. 2021). It is well known that the masculine form has long taken the shape of the default value. Everything that deviates from the masculine, such as the feminine, becomes

particular, in a way ‘marked’. This awareness leads to the emergence of a more complex opposition, one that sees the masculine embodying the universal in contrast to the particular embedded in the feminine. The same polarity is addressed by Wittig in positing that “the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves [...] and gender by enforcing upon women a particular category represents a measure of domination” (Wittig 1985, 5-6). The same hierarchical relationship is deconstructed by Pauwels (2003, 553) in the following passage by piecing together elements from male generics, morphological derivation and the lexical category of role nouns:

The practice of considering the man/the male as the prototype for human representation reduces the woman/female to the status of the “subsumed,” the “invisible,” or the “marked” one: women are invisible in language when they are subsumed in generic expressions using masculine forms. Generic reference in many languages occurs via the use of forms which are identical with the representation of maleness (e.g. *he* as generic and masculine pronoun, generic nouns coinciding with nouns referring to males). When women are made visible in language, they are “marked”: their linguistic construction is often as a derivative of man/male through various grammatical (morphological) processes. This asymmetry also affects the lexical make-up of many languages. The structure of the lexicon often reflects the “male as norm” principle through the phenomenon of lexical gaps, that is, the absence of words to denote women in a variety of roles, professions, and occupations (e.g. Baron 1986; Hellinger 1990; Sabatini 1985; Yaguello 1978).

The disadvantaged position in which women have always found themselves - compared to the one attained by men - is thus still detectable at multiple levels of the language (e.g., morpho-syntactic, lexical...). Over the last decades, feminist battles have allowed for the improvement of women’s linguistic recognition in granting them, in most cases, an identifiable autonomous presence in language. The underlying processes that led to this result are however still questionable, and even more so the idea that female recognition in language comes from an operation of abstraction that nonetheless moves from the centrality of men.

Furthermore, all these reflections about the secondary nature of the feminine form in no way take into account those minorities who lie outside gender binarism. Such minorities are in fact seeking to be represented in the language system by suggesting new forms of gender marking: either an independent ‘third form’, specifically designating that class, or a single, unifying, common form. The

latter case would mark not only the disappearance of the dominant masculine category, but also that of the longed-for feminine one.

Chapter 2 is precisely devoted to this topic, namely an overview of all the strategies designed to claim visibility at the level of language. Whether they go in the direction of adding new suffixes or reducing to a single word-ending, the side-effects are easily predictable: on the one hand, encapsulating a multitude of minorities under a single suffix can be perceived as a limitation, which does not ensure adequate representation; on the other hand, the risk of a proliferation of forms is that none ends up being adopted because there are too many possible alternatives, causing much fuss.

