

## 2 Bucking the Trend: From Marking to Neutralizing the Difference

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**Index** 2.1 Introduction. – 2.2 *Degendering* and *Regendering* Strategies Available in Italian. – 2.3 *Degendering* and *Regendering* Strategies Across Different Languages.

### 2.1 Introduction

Two opposing trends can be detected within the set of proposed linguistic innovations specifically designed to respect each gender identity: “visibility of each gender vs neutralization of each gender” (Thornton 2022, 35).<sup>1</sup> While some languages seem to maintain the visibility of each gender as the preferred strategy, speakers of several languages are witnessing the transition from visibility to

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**1** Here we adopted the dichotomy proposed by Thornton 2022, which sees the juxtaposition of the terms *visibility* and *neutralization*. Other terms are also used in the literature. Murelli 2024 posits the *equality-inclusion* dichotomy, where visibility coincides with equality (also at a nonlinguistic level) and neutralization with inclusion intended as the omission of any gender specification. Riccio 2024 instead appeals to the *visibility-generalization of gender* dichotomy.

neutralization, as in the case of the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* for Italian, the focus of our study. The suffix *-ə* “went from being adopted to give visibility to nonbinary gender identities to being used to neutralize all gender distinctions, encompassing in a single form women, men and people with nonbinary identities” (Thornton 2022, 35). The output of such a process appears to coincide with the employment of the suffix *-e* in Spanish by a broad community of users (Stetie, Zunino 2022), as we shall see in detail in the following pages.

The increasing overshadowing of minorities hiding in an indistinct “multitude” (Giusti 2022, 16) is however a source of frustration for those who are not prepared to abandon the linguistic visibility that they are obtaining after years of hardships and struggle. This is particularly true for speakers who could experience full recognition at the level of language, as the feminine value is provided for by the language system *per se* (e.g., in Italian and Spanish). Hence, a substantial difference soon emerges between the female group – which is immediately tied back to an existing specific declension class, whose prototypical declensional ending corresponds to *-a* (e.g., in Italian and Spanish) – and the nonbinary minority, which does not yet possess a dedicated linguistic form that is compatible with the language system called upon to accommodate it. If the feminine tends to enjoy a linguistic status, at times compromised as a consequence of deliberately omitting its distinctive forms, the nonbinary is not yet traceable to an unambiguous form that has gained as much credibility. This trend can be observed across the great majority of languages. One notable exception is Swedish, which seems to have found a viable solution by forging the third gender-neutral pronoun *hen* for human referents of unknown, undetectable or nonbinary gender (cf. Section 2.3). A shift in *usage* is thus needed to give equal representation to women, whereas a shift in the *system* is required to ensure equal representation to nonbinary people (Thornton 2022). As explained by Thomason (2007, 45), the linguistic possibility of a deliberate change “is settled as soon as a single speaker produces a single instance of the change at a single time. Whether a deliberate change will become a permanent part of [...] the speech community as a whole is then a matter of social and linguistic probability, not possibility”. Therefore, while a change has been proposed for the Italian language, i.e., the innovative suffix *-ə* designating referents of unknown, unspecified or nonbinary gender, its grip on reality is still in doubt.

Within this framework, the most recent proposals entailing insertion of special characters as suffixes – ranging from punctuation marks to orthographic markers – will be reviewed, along with their major limitations, in a cross-linguistic comparative perspective. Specifically, Section 2.2 focuses on the “degendering strategies” (Pires 2020, 116) as well as those overtly targeting visibility

(i.e., *regendering*) in Italian, whilst Section 2.3 presents virtuous gender-neutral as well as gender-fair examples attested in other languages.

## 2.2 *Degendering and Regendering Strategies Available in Italian*

### 2.2.1 Institutional and Academic Guidelines

Far from obtaining official guidance on the appropriate use of linguistic strategies to refer to others without specifying their gender, we are used to relying on vademecums outlining the strategies that are gaining momentum, which are, for this reason, deemed the most trusted sources to date. A number of prestigious institutions at the national level have taken a stance on the matter, by redacting distinct vademecums which share several points.<sup>2</sup> The world of academia, in particular, has been exhibiting great commitment in the scrupulous selection of linguistic strategies enhancing gender differences, as reflected in the documents (Statutes, Regulations, and Codes) drafted by 91 Italian Universities gathered in the *Corpus Normativo Universitario* (CNU) created by Riccio (2024). The corpus-based analysis conducted by Riccio indeed confirmed the employment of strategies that either emphasize gender visibility or favor the use of gender-neutral formulations,<sup>3</sup> roughly coinciding with those introduced by the very first set of recommendations produced by Alma Sabatini in the volume entitled *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* ‘Sexism in the Italian language’. The aim of the document was to denounce the fact that the Italian language “is based on an androcentric principle” (Sabatini 1987, 24) undermining female representation in language. Sabatini’s work was thus targeting a purely ‘female inclusion’ (De Cesare, Giusti 2024): there was no room for other gender identities or subjectivities to be recognized in their own specificity - making women visible was the only prerogative at the time.

<sup>2</sup> At the national level, see Giorcelli et al. 2015; Regione Emilia-Romagna 2015; MIUR 2018; Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna 2020; Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia 2022. At the international level, the European Parliament issued in 2008 *Gender-Neutral Language in the European Parliament*, which provides a set of directives aimed at promoting gender-neutral language and was translated into all the official languages of the European Union.

<sup>3</sup> The quantitative analysis shows that the masculine forms *studente* ‘student.M.SG’ and *studenti* ‘students.M.PL’ are significantly more frequent than their female counterparts (i.e., *studentessa* ‘student.F.SG’; *studentesse* ‘students.F.PL’), confirming the widespread tendency to resort to an unmarked masculine (Riccio 2024, 36, 51).

In offering practical solutions declined in each context, the so-called *sdoppiamento* ‘doubling’ or ‘splitting’ (De Cesare 2022a) was deemed the most effective as it features the co-presence of a feminine and a masculine term in their extended or contracted forms (e.g., *studentesse e studenti* ‘students.F.PL and students.M.PL’; *cari/e tutti/e* ‘dear.M.PL/F.PL all.M.PL/F.PL’). Sabatini’s work also contributed to bringing into focus specific uses that are to be avoided whenever possible, such as the unmarked masculine (e.g., the generic value of *uomo* ‘man’ in *rapporto uomo-macchina* ‘man-machine relationship’), the inclusive masculine (e.g., *gli studenti* ‘the.M.PL students.M.PL’), and the masculine agreement (e.g., *i bambini e le bambine vengono sempre rimproverati* ‘boys and girls are always being scolded.M.PL’), to name a few.

An alternative to masculine agreement is found in *closest conjunct agreement*, according to which the coordination of two nouns of a different gender requires that the adjective or past participle referring to both agrees in gender and number with the closest noun (e.g., *i bambini e le bambine vengono sempre rimproverate* ‘boys and girls are always being scolded.F.PL’) (Giusti 2022). In putting the feminine first by trying to alternate the order of appearance in oppositional pairs (e.g., *donne e uomini* ‘women and men’ in place of *uomini e donne* ‘men and women’) (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2015, 12), however, the feminine noun, appearing first, would lose its influence on the mechanism of agreement.

With reference to the inclusive masculine, it is noteworthy that the latter is a defining strategy of the communication style adopted by the national academic environment, with the exception of a few universities (e.g., Università IUAV di Venezia 2023) that have specifically chosen to pursue a gender-fair language policy in defense of all of those who advocate for something that goes beyond gender binarism.<sup>4</sup>

Provided that one cannot always avoid all words that have only clearly masculine suffixes, the majority of female researchers are

<sup>4</sup> In “Linee guida per una comunicazione inclusiva e accessibile” ‘Guidelines for inclusive and accessible communication’ (2023), available at the link [https://www.iuav.it/sites/default/files/2024-04/linee\\_guida\\_comunicazione\\_inclusiva\\_accessibile.pdf](https://www.iuav.it/sites/default/files/2024-04/linee_guida_comunicazione_inclusiva_accessibile.pdf), the committee responsible for the drafting directed their attention not only to female visibility but also to nonbinary visibility, by explicitly mentioning symbols such as the asterisk or -ø. The actual recommended context of use is however in doubt, as two different indications are reported: (i) “If allowed by the context (e.g., non-institutional email, chat), designations such as -ø or asterisk can be used. However, these designations present accessibility problems, so it is recommended to use them carefully. For rules on the use of -ø, in particular, you can consult [www.italianoinclusivo.it](http://www.italianoinclusivo.it)”; (ii) “for a gender-sensitive language you should employ -ø and other symbols as long as you pay attention to the issue of accessibility and readability” (2023, 11, 14). According to this second point, it appears that such use is allowed without being limited to non-institutional contexts.

still inclined to personally choose to be called *ricercatore/ricercatori* ‘researcher.M.SG/PL’ precisely because the masculine labels boast a long-standing, more prestigious tradition and firm steadiness (Giorcelli et al. 2015; Voghera, Vena 2016). In so doing, they act driven by the illusion of obtaining more solid recognition. Giorgia Meloni’s decision to be called *il Presidente del Consiglio* ‘the.M.SG Prime Minister.SG’ – framed as an instance of *occupational prestige* (Crawley 2014) – attracted considerable attention, as identifying with a male referent confirms the well-established preference for using the masculine for high-ranking offices (i.e., *maschile di prestigio*, a term used in e.g., Giusti 2022; De Cesare, Giusti 2024; Giusti 2024). This choice amplified the phenomenon, given Meloni’s extensive media exposure and political power. Intentionally using the masculine further increases its frequency, reinforcing the trend while the feminine becomes increasingly marginalized (Giusti 2024). Not by chance, “discredit is not fought by avoiding the term in the feminine, but rather by using it in contexts of prestige” (Giusti 2024, 104). Using the term in the masculine is a choice that responds to social and cultural dynamics that are deeply rooted in our tradition, which does not however abide by the rules of Italian grammar, as pointed out by Robustelli (2012) in her “Linee guida per l’uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo” ‘Guidelines for the use of gender in administrative language’. Robustelli’s claim is that profession nouns should behave like any other noun, instead of receiving a special treatment, meaning that the grammatical gender of profession nouns should coincide with the biological sex of the referent (i.e., *la ministra* ‘the.F.SG minister.F.SG’ as opposed to *la ministro* ‘the.F.SG minister.M.SG’). There is no “structural reason” to avoid using feminine role nouns, since grammar provides for them just as it does with the masculine (Arcangeli 2024); in fact, “the language naturally produces the feminine form” (Giusti 2024, 104). As Giusti observes, supporting this practice should be dictated by the need to avoid having to deal with “ungrammatical sentences like *Il direttore è stanca* [‘the.M.SG director.M.SG is tired.F.SG’], or difficult to interpret such as *Il direttore è arrivato. ##Era stanca* [‘the.M.SG director.M.SG is arrived.M.SG. ##[She] was tired.F.SG’]” (Giusti 2022, 17). These structures are particularly detrimental to learners in a L2 acquisition context as they “would impair the formation of the linguistic competence relative to the distribution of grammatical gender inflection in Italian” (Giusti 2024, 106).

With respect to the use of the suffix *-essa*, conflicting positions emerge. Owing to its earliest derogatory meaning, the suffix *-essa* (e.g., *sindachessa* ‘mayor.F.SG’; *deputatessa* ‘deputy.F.SG’) should be spared from the process of noun derivation altogether, as argued by Sabatini (1987). Contrary to Sabatini’s (1987) recommendation, Robustelli (2012) urges her readers to keep the long-standing forms

in *-essa*, e.g., *dottor<sup>ess</sup>a* ‘doctor.F.SG’, *professor<sup>ess</sup>a* ‘professor.F.SG’, because of their linguistic tradition and the fact that the negative connotation that had marked them in the past has been removed by now.<sup>5</sup> A virtuous example of how an originally disparaging term has regained its prestige through use is precisely *dottor<sup>ess</sup>a* ‘doctor.F.SG’ (Giusti 2024).

In light of all these observations, Robustelli (2012, 21-2) lists the strategies available to replace the inclusive masculine: (i) the feminine-gender visibility strategy involving symmetrical use of gender, echoing the above-mentioned doubling technique (De Cesare 2022a), whose outcome is known as “binomials” (Pires 2020, 111) (2.1a); (ii) the strategy of obscuring both genders by means of periphrases that include expressions without gender reference (2.1b), (iii) collective nouns (2.1c) or (iv) relative and indefinite pronouns (2.1d).

- (2.1) a. *Tutti i consiglieri e tutte le consigliere prendano posto nell’aula*  
 ‘All councilmen and councilwomen take their seat’  
 b. *Persona, essere umano, individuo, soggetto*  
 ‘Person, human being, individual, subject’  
 c. *Personale dipendente/docente, magistratura, direzione, corpo docente, segreteria*  
 ‘Teaching personnel/staff, judiciary, directorate, teaching body, administrative office’  
 d. *Chiunque arrivi in ritardo...*  
 ‘Whoever gets here late’

At the level of syntax, Robustelli (2012, 22) promotes the passive form (2.2a), which allows for the omission of the agent, as well as the impersonal *si*-form (2.2b).<sup>6</sup>

- (2.2) a. *La domanda deve essere presentata*  
 ‘the application must be submitted’  
 in place of  
*I cittadini e le cittadine devono presentare la domanda*  
 ‘the.M.PL citizens.M.PL and the.F.PL citizens.F.PL must submit the application’  
 b. *Si entra uno alla volta*  
 ‘entrance is allowed one.M.SG at a time’  
 in place of  
*Gli utenti devono entrare uno alla volta*  
 ‘the.M.PL visitors.M.PL must enter one.M.SG at a time’

<sup>5</sup> On the historical use of the suffix *-essa*, also see De Cesare 2021; 2022b.

<sup>6</sup> In (2.2b), the masculine form *uno* ‘one.M.SG’ is still marked for gender. Using the epicene *persona* ‘person’ instead would yield a fully unmarked alternative, as in *Si entra una persona alla volta* ‘entrance is allowed one person at a time’.

Equally common strategies typically found in forms to fill out are the “abbreviated double form” employing “separation signs” (Elmiger 2008, 130-1), also known as the above-mentioned ‘splitting’ (2.3a), often accused of “producing redundancy and complexity in discourse” (Giusti 2022, 10), and epicenes as well as common-gender nouns (2.3b) (Giorcelli et al. 2015).

- (2.3) a. *Il/La sottoscritto/a* ‘the.M/F.SG undersigned.M/F.SG’  
b. *La persona coinvolta* ‘the.F.SG person.F.SG involved.F.SG’,  
*La vittima accusata di...* ‘the.F.SG victim.F.SG charged.F.SG with...’,  
*Gentile collega* ‘dear.SG colleague.SG’, *Firma docente* ‘lecturer.SG’s signature’

Although not all scholars distinguish between epicenes and common-gender nouns, as explained by Thornton (2022), the former have a single form and are accompanied by a single, fixed article, although they can refer to individuals of any gender (e.g., *la persona* ‘the.F.SG person.F.SG’; *la vittima* ‘the.F.SG victim.F.SG’); the latter also have a single form, yet they are accompanied by the article indicating the gender of the referent (e.g., *il collega / la collega* ‘the.M.SG / the.F.SG colleague.SG’; *il docente / la docente* ‘the.M.SG / the.F.SG lecturer.SG’). Moreover, the dative clitic *gli* (cf. Section 1.4) has expanded its contexts of use by replacing, even in less formal writing, the feminine counterpart *le* and the plural *loro*, as the result of losing the specification for the features of gender and number (Cardinaletti 2004; Ballarè 2020; D’Achille 2021). Feminine singular *le* and plural dative *loro* are now confined to formal contexts.

## 2.2.2 Bottom-Up Innovations

Turning now to the proposals made in non-institutional contexts, the most common procedure seems to be “the adoption or resemanticization of individual characters” (Pires 2020, 115). This practice is far from new, boasting, indeed, a rather long tradition. Particular characters were in fact suggested by some men of letters in an effort to *update* the language and shorten the distance between the graphic form and the corresponding pronunciation (Antonelli 2021). Various attempts at graphic innovation over the centuries include the introduction by Leon Battista Alberti of the Latin *-æ* to signal the open *-e* [ɛ] as well as *-ao* to indicate the open *-o* [ɔ]; the use of the Greek letters epsilon (*-ε*) and omega (*-ω*) to distinguish open from closed vowels was instead proposed by Gian Giorgio Trissino (see Antonelli 2021 for a review). Looking at the proposals accumulated over the centuries, there is a tendency to use symbols originating in other domains and assign them a new linguistic function. A similar intervention, yet moved by different intentions,

has suggested a comparable contemporary trend that is gaining momentum. Special characters are indeed being selected to substitute a word's final vowel representing the morpheme that conveys gender and number features precisely to manipulate such values (Murelli 2024). By having the vowel replaced with special characters, the information concerning the gender and number of a given element is either lost (Murelli 2024) – and with it any immediate automatic assumption as to the referent's gender – or takes on new guises, more representative ones. An account of today's most widely implemented characters acquiring a gender-driven additional meaning is provided by Comandini's (2021) "Corpus of Gender Neutralization Strategies in Italian" (CoGeNSI), a collection of informal communications published on Facebook pages covering LGBTQIA+ topics. This is a platform hosting a rather favorable environment for the multiplication of spontaneous writings lacking any editorial filter, thus encouraging socially oriented linguistic experimentation, while also contributing to making spelling standards increasingly vague as a side effect (Antonelli 2021).

A total of 320 instances of gender neutralization/visibility strategies were identified in the corpus. Table 2 (adapted from Comandini 2021, 51) shows that the asterisk (2.4a) and the suffix *-ə* (2.4b) exhibit the highest frequency of occurrence, appearing 133 times (42%) and 129 times (40%), respectively. Much less frequent are the *-u* suffix (2.4c), with 34 occurrences (11%), the *-x* suffix (2.4d), with 18 occurrences (5%), and the 'at' sign (@) (2.4e), with only 6 occurrences (2%). The underscore ( ) (2.4f) was not detected; nor were the following: *-+* (2.4g), *-y* (2.4h), *-æ* (2.4i), together with the omission of the final vowel (2.4j), listed by Gheno (2020b) as other possible options. This wide range of graphic solutions can be explained in terms of natural sociolinguistic variability, which provides for a plurality of options available, and not just one single rule (Sgroi 2020).

**Table 2** Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the listed gender neutralization strategies (adapted from Comandini 2021, 51)

Strategy	'**'	'ə'	'u'	'x'	'@'	Tot.
Number of occurrences	133	129	34	18	6	320
%	42%	40%	11%	5%	2%	100%

In (2.4), sentences taken from the CoGeNSI corpus (Comandini 2021, 55) are reported and adapted to provide an example for each of the gender neutralization strategies mentioned so far:

- (2.4) a. *Mi\* figli\* è un\* liber\* soggettività*  
 b. *Miə figliə è unə liberə soggettività*

- c. *Miu figliu è unu liberu soggettività*
  - d. *Mix figlix è unx liberx soggettività*
  - e. *Mi@ figli@ è un@ liber@ soggettività*
  - f. *Mi\_ figli\_ è un\_ liber\_ soggettività*
  - g. *Mi+ figli+ è un+ liber+ soggettività*
  - h. *Miy figliy è uny libery soggettività*
  - i. *Miæ figliæ è unæ liberæ soggettività*
  - j. *Mi- figli- è un- liber- soggettività*
- 'My child is a free subjectivity'

In addition to the most common 'egalitarian asterisk' replacing the standard grammatical ending (as in (2.4a)), the asterisk can also be inserted far more creatively "in the closing of words that cumulate the masculine and feminine endings" (e.g., *lavoratorici\**, 'workers. MF\*') or "repeated within the same word, where it substitutes a series of graphemes that make up the masculine plural suffix *-tori* and the feminine plural *-trici*" (e.g., *lavorat\*\*i*) (De Cesare 2024, 38).

For most of the strategies in (2.4), it was not possible to trace their first appearance in the public sphere and thus identify their proponents. Certain social movements have however publicly endorsed a particular strategy, either encouraging its adoption or sparking debate around it. That is the case with the 'at' sign (@), whose use has been publicly claimed by the transfeminist movement *Non Una di Meno* (NUDM) 'Not One Less', founded in Italy in 2016. On November 25, 2017, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the transfeminist movement presented the document "Abbiamo un piano. Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere" 'We Have a Plan: A Feminist Plan Against Male Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence', in which, in addition to their political reflections, tools for action also affecting language were identified. The opening page reads as follows:

In questo Piano abbiamo scelto di svelare la non neutralità del maschile utilizzando non solo il femminile, ma anche la @ per segnalare l'irriducibilità e la molteplicità delle nostre differenze. Consapevoli che le lingue mutano e si evolvono, proviamo a rendere il nostro linguaggio inclusivo per avere nuove parole per raccontarci e per modificare i nostri immaginari. (Non Una di Meno 2017)

'For this Plan we have chosen to unveil the non-neutrality of the masculine by using not only the feminine, but also the @ to signal the irreducibility and multiplicity of our differences. We are well aware that languages change and evolve, and we seek to make our language inclusive so to have new words to tell our stories with and to modify our imaginaries.'

From these lines, the will to adopt a suffix that is representative of a real diversity - which by its very nature could not be ascribed to a single form - emerges forcefully. It is thus seen as a maximally open word-ending.

Among the proposed special characters, some (e.g., the asterisk and the 'at' sign) are purely graphic grammatical morphemes referring to a cumulative grammatical meaning (i.e., indicating simultaneously masculine/feminine/nonbinary/other and singular/plural) and deemed the equivalent of a logograph, the design of which gives no indication of pronunciation (SgROI 2020). The graphic signifiers 'u' and 'x', on the other hand, are not purely graphic, as they refer to their phonological values, given the homography with the letters <u> and <x> of the alphabet (SgROI 2020). This opens up to a number of non-negligible considerations, including the fact that "changing the phonological as well as morphological function to a vowel" - in this particular case <u> - is a very "radical" and invasive linguistic change involving "the attribution of a new morphological value (of gender and number) that can be interpreted semantically" (Giusti 2022, 14-15). Its function is to "replace the binary gendered morphological inflections" in written language, in an attempt to refrain from making the gender of the referent explicit (Formato, Somma 2023, 28). Acting on the body of words to conceal the gender information cannot, however, be framed as a mere intervention on spelling alone, unlike the proposals from the past aimed to shorten the distance between the graphic form and the corresponding pronunciation (cf. Antonelli 2021). It deeply affects the morphology of a language, also unraveling its syntax - with direct implications on the rule of agreement - and textuality, responsible for guaranteeing the agreement of words at a distance, thus contributing to cohesion in discourse (De Santis 2022). After all, the priority function of grammatical gender is that of morpho-syntactic cohesion (SgROI 2021). Introducing a grammatical innovation of this magnitude would have a very different impact when compared to the introduction of a neologism, precisely because it invests the structural level of the language (Arcangeli 2024).

Having established that the use of the strategies presented in Table 2 is mostly confined to the written communication of online queer communities to refer to both themselves and others (Comandini 2021), only the suffix -ə seems to contradict such generalization by invading the publishing field in a consistent manner. In 2020, the Florence-based publishing house *effequ* for the first time adopted the innovative suffix -ə to designate people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender in the translation of the Portuguese book written by Marcia Tiburi *Feminismo em comum. Para todas, todes e todos*. Faced with the translation problem posed by the use of the -e suffix in Portuguese as representative of a different gender

value, the same end-vowel could not be used in Italian as it is too overtly characterized as feminine (cf. Section 1.4). Therefore, it was necessary to identify a different suffix that could serve such function, without being compromised by an inherent feminine connotation. The choice fell on the symbol  $-\text{ə}$  initially proposed by Luca Boschetto – creator of the project *Italiano Inclusivo. Una lingua che non discrimina per genere* ‘Inclusive Italian. A Language that Does Not Discriminate by Gender’ –<sup>7</sup> and quickly taken up by Gheno (2019), which sparked off an intense debate. No distinction was made between the singular and the plural, unlike what was stipulated by the model developed by Boschetto, which involves the introduction of a distinct form for the plural, i.e.,  $-\text{ɜ}$  (Giusti 2022; De Cesare 2024). It follows that the suffix  $-\text{ə}$  can thus be categorized as a polyfunctional sign in that it can encode both singular and plural, with the number value being obfuscated as an inevitable consequence (D’Achille 2021).

Despite initially favoring a one-sign system (i.e., only  $-\text{ə}$ ) in line with the guidelines adopted by the publishing house *effequ*, a considerable shift to a two-sign system – with  $-\text{ə}$  for singular and  $-\text{ɜ}$  for plural – was later recorded, marking an increase in the productivity of both forms, as attested in the analysis carried out by De Cesare (2024) on the texts published between 2018 and 2024 on the *GlobalProject* platform. Part of the increase in productivity was certainly due to an extralinguistic factor, namely its appearance in the keyboards of different devices among the alternatives to the letter  $\langle e \rangle$  as of September 2021 (Arcangeli 2024; De Cesare 2024).<sup>8</sup> As may seem obvious, its absence from smartphone and tablet-mediated communication had hindered its very existence at least at first (Antonelli 2021).

In comparing the two solutions adopted for Italian and Portuguese, a substantial difference emerges: the major advantage brought about by the use of  $-\text{e}$  in Portuguese lies in the fact that it can be easily pronounced as it belongs to the vowel inventory of Portuguese and can therefore be read by any reading software, thus ensuring accessibility to written texts to visually-impaired people (Thornton 2022). The same advantage cannot be found in Italian, as  $-\text{ə}$  is not part of the phonemic inventory of Italian nor is it easily produced by text-to-speech readers.<sup>9</sup> It is indeed a symbol of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) representing the central vowel, produced when the lips, tongue and jaw are completely relaxed and found in unstressed

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://italianoinclusivo.it>.

<sup>8</sup> “Apple made the  $-\text{ə}$  symbol available with the fifteenth update of the iOS operating system for iPhone and iPod touch, released on September 20, 2021” (Arcangeli 2024, 27).

<sup>9</sup> This remark on readability applies to all the other punctuation marks and orthographic markers as well.

syllables in a variety of languages, among which is English. Yet, even when it appears within the phonological system of a language, it is still not used as a grapheme, thereby it is hard to be realized in cursive writing and is deprived of a well-established corresponding capital letter (D'Achille 2021). Some speakers of Italian could be more familiar with its pronunciation, as [ə] is included in the vowel systems of southern Italo-Romance dialects, e.g., Neapolitan, in which all vowels in final position are realized as [ə], as shown in the example “bello/-a/-e [b'bellə]” ‘beautiful.M.SG/F.SG/PL’ (Ledgeway 2016, 251). Nonetheless, Giusti (2022, 14) raises the question of “articulatory proximity” whereby [ə] and [ɜ] risk being perceived as [e]. De Santis (2022) also stresses the point that producing such an indistinct sound would result in progressively leading to the truncation of the words we pronounce, making them increasingly unrecognizable. Ultimately, “there is no adequate evidence showing communicative effectiveness in daily practice” (Robustelli 2021, 14).

To our knowledge, the only experimental attempt to assess the feasibility of using the suffix -ə in an oral context is the study conducted by Facchini (2024), yet limited to a particularly restricted context, namely conference interpreting, on a rather small sample (i.e., 12 participants). The research question underlying the study was the following: “is a nonbinary translation strategy such as the -ə suffix a viable solution in orality?” (Facchini 2024, 135). Twelve interpreters were instructed to use the -ə ending to refer to people when orally translating a speech from English to Italian. The quantitative analysis of the Italian texts shows that the *triggers*<sup>10</sup> translated with -ə amount to 20% overall, compared to 16% of the unmarked masculine, hence pointing to a use that is far from being systematic and loosely productive, despite the explicit instruction to employ the -ə suffix. Among the formal inconsistencies recorded are recurring words only occasionally declined with the -ə suffix, or chains of agreement in which determiners and adjectives are inflected for the masculine (Facchini 2024, 152) (an example might be *C'è un bambinə molto bravo nella mia classe* ‘There is a.M.SG child. NB.SG very good.M.SG in.the my class’). Unsurprisingly, the most common strategy has to do with the omission of triggers, followed by the adoption of neutral circumlocutions, including epicene and collective terms, relative or indefinite pronouns, to name a few. As to the cognitive overload connected to the suffix, it should be noted that such use did not prevent, in most cases, correct translations; the disfluencies caused (i.e., interruptions in speech flow, such as silent

**10** *Trigger* refers to “an English word or locution with an unexpressed grammatical and semantic gender whose closest translation to the original term is a noun, adjective, past participle, determiner or pronoun to which a marked grammatical and semantic gender must necessarily be assigned in Italian” (Facchini 2024, 136).

and filled pauses, syllabic lengthening, truncated or mispronounced words, repeats, self-corrections, and false starts) were not excessively detrimental to the fluency of discourse (Facchini 2024). The disfluencies observed did not compromise the intelligibility or coherence of the interpreted output, nor did they substantially hinder communicative effectiveness. Therefore, there is reason to believe, at least according to the author of the study, that with greater familiarity, also determined by *ad hoc* training, even more acceptable results can be achieved.

Before delving into more technical criticalities arising from adopting this form, it should be pointed out that a change in *effequ* editorial guidelines in 2021 marked a shift in the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* with respect to its referential function. Originally conceived to give visibility to people of a nonbinary identity, as was the case with Tiburi (2018), *-ə* now tends to be employed as a substitute for the unmarked masculine specifically to “neutralize whichever gender identity within a ‘multitude’” of referents (Thornton 2022, 33). In other words, the change in use led to refer to groups including any possible gender identity (i.e., generic mixed group), not just people with nonbinary identities (De Cesare 2024). A similar shift in meaning can be observed in other proposals within the realm of inclusive language, as the degree of referential specificity triggered by any given strategy varies. This variability adds complexity – and can even pose a challenge – to the broader debate on inclusive language, whose uses often lack a single, clear interpretation (De Cesare, Giusti 2024).

As for strictly theoretical observations, the words produced with the suffix *-ə* may vary in their internal structure depending on who is implementing them. There are in fact variants that are freely chosen for lack of an appropriate standard, since it is a linguistic phenomenon that has not been stabilized yet. Particularly, a minor variation has been observed in the formation of determiners. *Effequ* editorial guidelines mention definite articles by prescribing the use of *lə* ‘the.NB.SG’ for the singular, perceived as closer to *la* ‘the.F.SG’ and *lo* ‘the.M.SG’, and *ə* for the plural, closer to *i* ‘the.M.PL’ (Thornton 2022, 36). The guidelines also take articulated prepositions into account, providing examples such as *dellə maestrə* ‘of+the.NB.SG teacher.NB.SG’ and *dellə scienziatə* ‘of+the.NB.SG scientist.NB.SG’ for the singular, and *deə maestrə* ‘of+the.NB.PL teachers.NB.PL’ and *deə scienziatə* ‘of+the.NB.PL scientists.NB.PL’ for the plural. As for the indefinite article, in drawing from the recommendations published by *Italiano Inclusivo*, Giusti (2022) reports *unə bambinə* ‘a.NB.SG child.NB.SG’, which recalls the feminine form to some extent. It can be distinguished from the feminine form by replacing the apostrophe (*un’artista* ‘an.F.SG artist.SG’) with an asterisk when *unə* precedes a vowel, i.e., *un\*artistə* ‘an.NB.SG artist.NB.SG’ (Giusti 2022, 16). Furthermore, no regular correspondence has been established

between the orthography and phonology of words containing velar and palatal consonants followed by *-ə* (Thornton 2022; Murelli 2024). A case in point is *unə astrofiscə* ‘an.NB.SG astrophysics. NB.SG’ – read as *astrofisi/kə/* with /k/ as in its singular feminine and masculine counterparts – as opposed to the plural *autisticə* ‘autistic.NB.PL’, which can either be read as *autisti/kə/* with /k/ or *autisti/tʃə/* with /tʃ/, exhibiting a tighter association with either the feminine or masculine, respectively (Acanfora 2021; Thornton 2022). In Thornton’s (2022) view, the failure to disambiguate between the two possible readings of the plural form is a proof of the fact that priority is given to the written language over the spoken language, for which the rules that are laid out obey, first and foremost, the needs of writing, as if the issue of sound articulation was somehow of subordinate importance. Equally problematic are the morphemes *-torə/-tors* in deverbal nominals, which show a clear similarity to the masculine morpheme from which they are derived (Giusti 2022), as opposed to the forms *-tricə/-trics* built on the feminine. The aspects examined so far partly unveil the feminine or masculine form from which the resulting innovative elements were originally derived, thus exposing, albeit accidentally, an inherent binarism, as if they were contaminated by the femininity or masculinity value of the base form. These and other unresolved issues are extensively discussed by many authors (cf. Thornton 2022; Giusti 2022; Murelli 2024) who are questioning the soundness of the proposal. Since it was not built around a common standard, it inevitably ends up favoring the coexistence of different, even conflicting, variants.

Additionally, one must consider the implications carried by the introduction of *-ə* on a larger scale, which according to Thornton (2022) can be summarized into the following: the introduction of (i) a new phoneme and (ii) a new gender value. As Thornton (2022) observes, the new gender value requires defining its specific semantic core. A precise characterization is needed, one that clearly distinguishes between referring only to human beings who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender (*specific interpretation*) or all human beings, without mentioning any gender information, be it unknown or deliberately omitted (*generic interpretation*). Corpus analyses conducted on Italian attest that with *-ə*, the generic interpretation prevails, contrasting with what happens with the masculine (cf. Section 1.5). Namely, *-ə* often refers to “an individual without specifying their gender identity or to mixed groups of people of all identities” (Thornton 2022, 42). Therefore, it is not a matter of introducing a third gender value or a neutral, but rather a gender-free form (Gheno 2022). Through this form, supporters of this morphological innovation are attempting to undo the grammatical expression of an opposition between the masculine and feminine values by referring to humans without making use of

the grammatical category of gender altogether (Thornton 2022). The problem is however that such a proposal does not extend to inanimate referents. In other words, the opposition between the two gender values would remain in place at least with referents found in the lower degrees of the animacy hierarchy (Comrie 1983), thus giving rise to an anomalous system in which animate referents do not possess a characterization by gender, while abstract nouns do (Thornton 2022).

In light of the observations made up to here, Pires (2020, 116) identifies three major problems common to all the morphological innovations listed above, which could also concern the innovative suffix *-ə*: (i) “graphocentrism”; (ii) “inappropriateness for learners”; and (iii) “general complexity”, all pointing to heavy processing costs, not to mention that distinct devices “do not form an overall system for neutralizing gender in texts”. The author further stresses the “variable treatment of speech and writing” instantiated by such “unusual graphical features” by sustaining that they specifically “resist oralization”, as “texts containing such elements cannot even be read aloud” (Pires 2020, 111, 115).

In the face of these obstacles, the solution put forward by Pires (2020) lies in the use of a systematic feminine for mixed reference (i.e., *feminine generic*), which guarantees perfect correspondence between written and spoken language by relying on the already available linguistic resources. Defined by Giusti (2024, 102) as a “non-aggressive means”, the use of the feminine as the unmarked gender would “entail a simple semantic shift from a formal point of view” going against “the androcentric perspective that permeates the representation of the ‘typical’ and ‘dominant’ human being”. The failure to embrace the feminine generic is thus to be traced to a purely cultural reason (Giusti 2024). As a confirmation of this, it is not surprising that the mixed-reference feminine for “activities in which females have historically had a prominent role” (e.g., female cashiers, primary-school teachers and nurses) is indeed generally recognized by speakers of French, German and Italian (Pires 2020, 119). The choice of the feminine generic can be justified not only by the need to reclaim visibility of women in language, but also by the practice of “number genericity”, according to which the generic is molded on the basis of the numerically dominant group (Pires 2020, 121). Aside from the feminine resolution in itself, number genericity establishes a rather impartial criterion for gender selection, one that depends entirely on the perceived majority of the group members. This does not however erase the problem of being able to linguistically recognize the presence of those who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender, should they prove to be a majority in a given situation, thus leaving open the search for a solution that is truly viable.

Having established that there is a constant exchange characterizing the mutual relationship between language and society, the nudges coming from society do not prevent the language system from resisting those changes that deeply affect its functioning or its formal structure. If the nature of the proposed innovation is admitted by the language system, and some sort of consistency can be detected with it, no resistance will be exerted, as in the case of the use of the feminine forms to indicate professions, whose failure to flourish only stems from a habitual absence of such forms in the discourse (Robustelli 2021). Replacing the masculine and feminine endings with the neutral/nonbinary suffix *-ə*, however, is quite another matter, deemed unacceptable by Robustelli (2021, 5), given that it “modifies to such an extent the morphological structure of the language as to compromise its communicative function”. Arcangeli (2022) speaks precisely of the *deconstructing nature of the innovation*, describing *-ə* as a foreign object that violates the orthographic and phono-morphological rules of the language. That is to say, the concealment of gendered morphological inflections jeopardizes the language system, and not just to the detriment of those who do not have full command of the code (such as non-native speakers, for instance) or have limited access to the written or spoken variety of the language (due to some forms of neurodiversity); not to mention the implications it would have on the process of learning to read, which is based on phonetic training, which in turn builds on the correspondence between letters and sounds (Dehaene 2018; De Santis 2022). Preserving the graphic consistency of words is a necessary condition to guarantee the attainment of reading skills, as well as fluency in adult reading, in that it relies on immediate word recognition by means of the initial and final letter (De Santis 2022). Furthermore, the resulting forms often seem to recall the masculine, evoking a veiled referentiality that is precisely intrinsically masculine, thus giving rise to a problem of application that maintains, albeit concealed, the issue of binary oppositions (Robustelli 2021).

### 2.3 ***Degendering and Regendering Strategies Across Different Languages***

Many of the strategies presented for Italian can be found in other languages as well, albeit exhibiting characteristic traits. In fact, despite being all encoded as *grammatical gender languages* (Gygax et al. 2019), French, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Italian resort to different strategies in an attempt to become gender-fair languages (De Cesare, Giusti 2024). French resembles Italian in the use of “separation signs” to put “graphical emphasis on the morphological boundary” in the abbreviated double form, with the only difference

that there is much more variation in the signs to be used: *enseignant(e)*, *enseignant.e*, *einsegnant-e*, *enseignant·e*, *enseignantE* ‘teacher.SG’ (Elmiger 2008, 130-1; Pires 2020, 114). Among the alternatives, the so-called *point médian* ‘midpoint’ (e.g., *enseignant·e*) seems to be dominating the scene (De Cesare, Giusti 2024). Unlike French and Italian, German has, for a long time, adopted the capitalization technique, namely it “has internal capitals (*Binnengrossschreibung*) to mark off the beginning of the suffix: [*Lehrer* ‘teacher.M.SG’, *Lehrerin* ‘teacher.F.SG’] *LehrerIn*” ‘teacher.M/F.SG’ (Pires 2020, 114-15). Murelli (2024) refers to this strategy as *Binnenmajuskel* – the first to appear in the context of *feministische Linguistik* (cf. Hellinger, Bierbach 1993) – however defining it as non-conforming to the current spelling rules of German, which specifically require the insertion of a hyphen before the suffix. In addition, for this strategy to be implemented, the feminine form has to be longer than its masculine counterpart. In this sequence, the feminine is inevitably perceived as an extension of the masculine, emphasizing the dominance of the segment on the left of the boundary (Pires 2020). Previously encountered solutions that incorporate special characters – such as the asterisk (*Gendersternchen*) (e.g., *Lehrer\*in*, *Lehrer\*innen* ‘teacher.M/F.SG, teacher.M/F.PL’), the underscore (e.g., *Lehrer\_in*), or the colon (e.g., *Lehrer:in*) – are therefore preferred. These forms are particularly valued because they represent the diversity and inclusivity of all gender identities, inviting the reader to understand the referent as potentially belonging to any gender (Zifonun 2018; Günthner 2022; Murelli 2024).<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, as Murelli (2024) points out, lexemes with special characters in German do preserve the original masculine and feminine forms of which they are composed, still recognizable in the resulting new lexemes. In Italian, instead, the use of novel word-final elements gives rise to lexemes that erase not only gender information but also number, with greater implications on the overall morpho-syntactic structure of the sentence, as well as a higher decoding effort.

Returning to the issue of the generic feminine, the University of Leipzig resorts to the feminine exclusively to refer to all genders, by inserting a footnote precisely to make clear that all genders are included (Todeskino 2013). Alongside feminized forms, nominalization of verbs is another accessible strategy in German to coin gender neutral nouns (e.g., “Lecturers are advised to address their students

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**11** After completion of this section, we realized that on August 3, 2025, according to the online edition of the German newspaper *DIE ZEIT*, the German Federal Chancellery banned the use of gender-fair language in all official documents, instructing its 470 employees in Berlin and Bonn to avoid gender asterisks and similar markers, arguing that such practices are divisive and not representative of the majority’s speech.

not as *Studenten* but *Studierenden* – ‘those that study’ –, thus sidestepping the gender question altogether” (Oltermann 2014).<sup>12</sup>

In Spanish, the *o/a* alternation can be substituted by the ‘at’ sign (@) (2.5a); -x also appears potentially in place of any letter (2.5b), whereas in French, the *a/e* alternation (as in the definite articles *la* ‘the.F.SG’ and *le* ‘the.M.SG’) can be substituted by -æ (2.5c) (Pires 2020, 115):

- (2.5) a. *MIS ALUMN@S NON SON NÚMEROS*  
 ‘My students are not numbers’  
 b. *TODXS A LA HUELGA*  
 ‘Everybody is taking part in the strike’  
 c. *C’EST TOI LÆ MÉCANO*  
 ‘You are the machinist’

Even more popular as a nonbinary gender marker is the use of -e in Spanish (2.6), “which allows the projection to the spoken language and generates stronger restrictions on concordance” (Stetie, Zunino 2022, 7). Since -e is phonologically realizable and functions as a regular vocalic ending, it must be consistently propagated across agreement targets (e.g., determiners, adjectives, and other modifiers), thereby imposing stricter morphosyntactic constraints than purely graphic solutions such as @ or x.

- (2.6) a. *Elle es une niñe inteligentísime*  
 ‘3.NB.SG is a.NB.SG very smart.NB.SG child.NB.SG’

Well-established in many Spanish-speaking communities in America, the use of -e has also been attested in Iberian Spanish (Cardelli 2018; Bonnin, Coronel 2021). In Argentina, such a strategy has been deliberately fostered by many cultural and educational institutions responsible for drafting official documentation on the topic (Stetie, Zunino 2022). In the “Guía para incorporar un uso inclusivo del lenguaje” ‘Guide to incorporate an inclusive use of language’ (2021) compiled by the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, it is possible to draw a sharp distinction in the use of -e as opposed to -x and -@. That is, as illustrated in the excerpts below, forms adopting the -e as a suffix stand for the generic, as they presuppose a multitude of genders, whereas forms with -x and -@ are nonbinary-specific in that they do not appear in isolation, but rather are juxtaposed to the feminine and masculine counterparts:

<sup>12</sup> *Studenten* is marked for the masculine (cf. feminine *Studentinnen*), whereas *Studierenden* is a gerund unmarked for gender.

Desde hace un tiempo viene predominando el uso de la *e* ya que es morfológicamente claro y no afecta la economía del lenguaje. Su uso se ha popularizado [...] también en lo cotidiano de la comunidad universitaria. La ventaja de este recurso es que, a diferencia de los anteriores, incluye otros géneros más allá del femenino y el masculino. La desventaja es que en algunos grupos puede generar rechazo al punto de no lograr los fines comunicativos. Por eso, es necesario siempre tener en cuenta a qué público nos dirigimos y con qué fines. (Universidad Nacional de San Martín 2021, 10)

‘For some time now, the use of *e* has been predominant, since it is morphologically clear and does not affect the economy of language. Its use has become popular [...] also in the daily life of the university community. The advantage of this resource is that, unlike the previous ones, it includes other genders beyond the feminine and masculine. The disadvantage is that in some groups it can generate rejection to the point of not achieving the communicative purposes. For this reason, it is always necessary to keep in mind which audience we are addressing and for what purposes.’

En algunas comunicaciones nos encontramos con la @ y la x. Mediante estos recursos la intención es visibilizar la presencia de otras identidades de género más allá de las masculinas o femeninas. Ejemplo: en lugar de utilizar “delegados” se refiere de manera escrita de la siguiente manera: delegadas, delegados, delegadxs. (Universidad Nacional de San Martín 2021, 11)

‘In some communications we find the @ and x. By means of these resources, the intention is to make visible the presence of other gender identities beyond the masculine or feminine ones. For example, instead of using delegates.M.PL, the following is referred to in writing: delegates.F.PL, delegates.M.PL, delegatxs.NB.PL.’

As we observed for Italian above, emphasis is placed on the lack of phonetic realization attributed to such graphic devices, which poses non-negligible limitations that effectively hinder the accessibility of these proposals. The following excerpt further develops this crucial point.

Las dificultades en el uso de la @ y la x radican en que estas formas no son accesibles para personas con discapacidad visual, intelectual, psicosocial, entre otras, dado que dificultan o impiden la comunicación y la comprensión (no pueden reconocerse mediante lectores de pantalla, no tienen pronunciación oral). Es decir, su uso implica barreras para las personas que utilizan lectores de texto, lenguaje sencillo y otras formas alternativas de comunicación que

no reconocen dichos caracteres. (Universidad Nacional de San Martín 2021, 11)

‘The difficulties in the use of @ and x lie in the fact that these forms are not accessible to people with visual, intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, among others, since they hinder or prevent communication and understanding (they cannot be recognized by screen readers, they do not have oral pronunciation). In other words, their use implies barriers for people who use text readers, simple language and other alternative forms of communication that do not recognize these characters.’

Particularly, the implementation of such forms could cause major problems for people with Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) (Riccio 2024; cf. Arcangeli 2024). While some reports posit that optical readers and speech synthesizers may not consistently support innovative forms, including the suffix -ə for Italian, to date no systematic testing has been conducted to confirm this. Therefore, the potential accessibility challenges should be considered a plausible concern rather than an established fact.

The type of interventions analyzed so far can be explained in terms of substituting or recombining linguistic materials, something that can be achieved through various techniques. What follows, instead, considers the process involved in the creation of brand-new pronouns.

Particularly significant is the Swedish experience with the third-gender neutral pronoun *hen* as a complement to the two already existing gendered pronouns, whose use, albeit initially rejected, has now been welcomed and adopted by the majority of language users (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015). It even received official recognition when in 2015 the “Svenska Akademien formalised the entry of the personal pronoun *hen* into Swedish by including it among the neologisms of that year’s edition of the dictionary of the national language, updated from decade to decade” (Arcangeli 2024, 23). Originally introduced in the 1960s to be later employed by LGBT-communities in the early 21st century, it appeared for the first time in 2012 in a children’s book to denote its main character, so that young readers could “visualize and develop their stories much more freely” without being influenced by gender categories (Hord 2016; Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015, 2). Adapted from the genderless Finnish third person singular pronoun *hän* ‘he/she’, Swedish *hen* is used with human referents of unknown or undetectable gender as well as nonbinary people (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, Laakso 2012; Thornton 2022). It can therefore be “used both generically, when gender is unknown or irrelevant, and as a transgender pronoun for people who categorize themselves outside the gender dichotomy” (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015,

1). As shown in Table 3, the novel pronoun “very nicely fits into the Swedish system of pronouns, as being literally very close to, as well as alphabetically positioned between *han* (‘he’) and *hon* (‘she’)” (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015, 10).<sup>13</sup>

**Table 3** Swedish system of pronouns

<i>han</i>	<i>hen</i>	<i>hon</i>	<i>den</i>	<i>det</i>
Male human referent ( <i>he</i> )	1. Nonbinary human referent (“transgender pronoun”) 2. Human referent of unknown or undetectable gender (generic pronoun)	Female human referent ( <i>she</i> )	1. Inanimate referent with common gender 2. Single plural form unmarked for gender	Inanimate referent with neutral gender

The study carried out by Gustafsson Sendén and colleagues (2015) is proof of the overturning of an initial resistance to an initiative of gender-fair language into an accepted and viable solution. No matter how hostile reactions can be at the outset, “attitudes can normalize rather quickly” (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015, 1).

The quest for establishing a standard pronoun lacking any gender reference in English goes as far back as the eighteenth century, with at least eighty neopronouns being attested (Baron 1986). Amongst the novel gender-neutral pronouns emerging in the scene are singular *ze* and plural *hir* – or the less productive pair *ze/zir* (Šincek 2020) – promoted by the University of Vermont (Scelfo 2015), whose use is however still confined to small numbers. Like other proposals that go in the same direction, they “tend to fade in and out of collective social consciousness rather quickly” (Hord 2016, 23). The pseudo-generic use of *he* has also been progressively abandoned (Hord 2016). In fact, there appears to be a better candidate, boasting a longer tradition (Balhorn 2004), whose favorability has been empirically demonstrated by studies on formal student writing assignments with speakers of American English (Mitchell 1994) and Australian English (Strahan 2008), that is, singular *they*. One cannot however ignore that at least from a prescriptive grammatical perspective, the claim that *they* can only be plural has been a source of criticism against this usage (Bodine 1975). The above-mentioned studies nevertheless suggest that “younger generations are inherently more used to using

**13** Table 3 was built on the basis of the information gathered from Renström, Lindqvist, Gustafsson Sendén 2022 and Giusti 2022.

singular *they* as a generic pronoun, which makes them more inclined to accept its use with a singular referent” (Hord 2016, 10). This is in line with Baron’s predictions championing singular *they* as the one doomed to dominate English gender neutral pronoun use, as it “is widely used in speech and writing and, despite the stigma of ungrammaticality that has become attached to it since the eighteenth century, the construction shows no signs of dying out” (1986, 193).

Further experimental confirmation comes from Bradley and colleagues’ (2019, 1) research, whose “results suggest that ‘they’ is interpreted as gender-neutral, including nonbinary/gender-nonconforming referents”, whereas “‘ze’ does not appear to be recognized by enough English speakers to determine a definitive interpretation”. It follows that unlike neopronouns, which have hardly caught on, singular *they* has the potential to achieve widespread use (Hord 2016). Giusti (2022, 13) calls it a fully accepted alternative, describing it as the outcome of “a minimal variation of the referential property of *they*, which previously referred to generic human beings or whose gender was not to be specified (perhaps to maintain their anonymity) and now can refer to specific human beings manifesting their fluid identity”. Under this interpretation, singular *they* undergoes a functional shift from a purely gender-neutral pronoun to a gender-specific one, employed to signal nonbinariness or, more generally, identities that fall outside the traditional gender binarism. It is no coincidence that in 2015, singular *they* was also selected as “word of the year” by the voting members of the American Dialect Society precisely to refer to a person’s choice to reject traditional gender binary pronouns *he* and *she* (Hord 2016, 8). Alternatives include *s/he* as a singular pronoun, alternation of *he* and *she*, avoidance of pronouns, pluralization of referents, the gender-neutral title *Mx*, among others (Mitchell 1994; Bahadur 2013).

German and French exhibit broadly comparable dynamics in the introduction, adoption, and negotiation of gender-neutral pronouns. While it is accurate to say that German lacks a fully standardized gender-neutral pronoun comparable to English singular *they* or Swedish *hen*, this does not imply the absence of proposed or attested alternatives. On the contrary, a range of newly developed forms is acknowledged in institutional contexts, including *sier* and *xier* – conceived as fusions of the binary pronouns *sie* ‘she’ and *er* ‘he’ (e.g., *sier/sies/siem/sien*; *xier/xies/xiem/xien*) – as well as *dey* (the Germanized version of English *they*), *hen* (borrowed from Swedish) and *en* (modeled on existing German pronouns following an ‘e+consonant’ pattern while resembling the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen*) (FAU, Office of Equality and Diversity; University of Osnabrück, Equal Opportunity Office). Nevertheless, they remain non-standard, variable in form and declension, and largely confined

to specific social or institutional domains, thus falling short of full grammatical stabilization within the German pronominal system.

In French, Hord (2016, 7) reports only one “isolated occurrence” of a gender-neutral pronoun, namely *ile*, located in between *il* ‘he’ and *elle* ‘she’ and used by an intersex individual in official documents to express their gender identity. Since then, the landscape has changed: the neopronoun *iel* (a blend of *il* and *elle*) has become widely known and was included in the *Le Petit Robert* dictionary in 2021 (Rey-Debove, Rey 2021), reflecting its growing attestation in real usage and community practice. *Iel* and its plural form *iels* are increasingly discussed and documented in sociolinguistic research (Knisely 2020). Despite these advances, *iel* remains non-standard from a normative grammatical standpoint, with ongoing variation in forms and agreement strategies across contexts.

Our discussion so far is not meant to be an exhaustive list. As a matter of fact, attempts at experimenting with novel strategies appear to be steadily increasing across languages. It is therefore difficult to grasp all the nuances of meaning and possible developments. Dwelling on the virtuous examples that have led to some kind of recognition thus seemed to be the best way to proceed, in an attempt to find commonalities with the language under study, i.e., Italian. The experiment designed to test the most widespread strategy toward an inclusive use of the Italian language, i.e., the innovative suffix *-ø*, is thoroughly described in the next chapter.

