4 Data Analysis and Results

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the experiment. The results of the sentence-picture matching task (SPMT) are presented in Section 4.2. Section 4.3 focuses on the data collected through the questionnaire *Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian* (SILUI), whereas the data concerning the *Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits* are reported in Section 4.4. Section 4.5 presents a correlational analysis between participants' reading experience and their response times.

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4.2 Results of the Sentence-Picture Matching Task

In this section, we provide the response coding and the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. *Analysis 1* considers accuracy with any all-inclusive, mixed-gender representation of the plural suffix *-ə*. *Analysis 2* considers accuracy only when the representation specifically includes at least one nonbinary individual, thus reflecting a nonbinary-inclusive interpretation of the plural suffix *-ə*. Response times are the object of *Analysis 3*.

4.2.1 Response Coding

We assessed the process of gender assignment via a sentence-picture matching task in which participants were asked to match each verbal stimulus with a picture (depicting the gender of the described referent).

With respect to the singular condition, response correctness was determined by a perfect match between the gender information found in the verbal stimulus and the gender of the subject appearing in the selected picture. For instance, when the verbal stimulus describing a single male referent (e.g., *Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del primo anno* 'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is a.M.SG first-year PhD student.M.SG') was matched with one of the pictures that were previously rated as male (cf. Section 3.3), the response scored one point. Analogously, a verbal stimulus introducing a female candidate must be associated with a picture rated as female in order to be scored as correct. The same procedure applies to the nonbinary condition: the verbal stimulus presenting a nonbinary candidate must find perfect correspondence with one of the two pictures rated as nonbinary. This way, the exclusive use of the innovative suffix *-ə* is being tested. Whenever a mismatch is found (e.g., a picture rated as 'female' is selected to represent the male referent described in the verbal stimulus), the score is zero. In the neutral condition, any picture matched with the verbal stimulus is considered correct and assigned one point, as the stimulus lacking any gender-related information allows for a valid association with any gender.

With regard to the plural, the feminine plural condition is the only one that admits one single correct answer, namely the selection of the female-only group (i.e., FFF). The masculine plural condition can refer to both a male-only group (i.e., MMM), recalling the specific meaning of the masculine form (cf. Section 1.5), and a mixed-gender group which contains a male member (i.e., MMF, FFM, MFNB). This second choice serves as a measure of the generic meaning of the masculine form (cf. Section 1.5). Thus, four possible answers can

score one point in the masculine plural condition (i.e., the selection of the following groups of pictures: MMM; MMF; FFM; MFNB).

Just as many alternatives are available for the nonbinary plural condition: namely, selection of a nonbinary-only group (i.e., NBNBNB), or one that is composed of a nonbinary individual together with a male and female members (i.e., MFNB), or groups that see the presence of male and female members only (i.e., MMF, FFM). In this condition, we used two response coding procedures and we ran two analyses. In *Analysis 1* (cf. Section 4.2.2.1), the selection of groups with only female and male members (i.e., MMF, FFM) for the nonbinary plural condition was scored as correct, while in *Analysis 2* (cf. Section 4.2.2.2), these groups were excluded, thus scored as incorrect. These two groups therefore appear in brackets in Table 11. This criterion enables us to clearly distinguish the activation of an all-encompassing, mixed-gender meaning – which does not necessarily imply the presence of a nonbinary person – from that of a meaning specifically inclusive of nonbinary individuals. As a matter of fact, selection of a group that is deprived of nonbinary members stands for the adoption of the quintessential generic interpretation of plural *-ə*, activated when referring to mixed gender without any direct reference to the nonbinary condition. Although this even broader, more inclusive use of the suffix has not been explicitly addressed in previous literature, we chose to investigate it here, as the suffix can also yield a mixed-gender plural interpretation that excludes reference to nonbinary individuals.

Finally, as with the singular, neutral plural items can be matched with any gender, which means that any image is allowed.

Table 11 provides a more effective visualization of the output of the implemented response coding process.

Table 11 The correct gender composition of the images for each condition

Condition	M.SG	F.SG	NB.SG	neutral.SG	M.PL	F.PL	NB.PL	neutral.PL
Gender (compos.) of the image	M	F	NB	M;F;NB	M,M,M; M,M,F; F,F,M; M,F,NB	F,F,F	NB,NB,NB; (M,M,F); (F,F,M); M,F,NB	M,M,M; F,F,F; NB,NB,NB; M,M,F; F,F,M; M,F,NB

4.2.2 Quantitative Analysis of the Data

To the purpose of answering the research questions in (I) and (II) (cf. Section 3.2), concerning the referents assigned to *-ə* and the actual duration of the assignment process when dealing with such a

morphological innovation, three different analyses were carried out. Response accuracy was tested by means of *Analyses 1* and *2*. The two analyses were performed to check whether there is a difference in response accuracy (scores) that depends on (i) the gender of the item (i.e., masculine, feminine, nonbinary), (ii) the number of the item (i.e., singular, plural), (iii) the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., the singular-condition task preceding the plural-condition task and vice versa). The formulation of a slightly different scoring system with respect to the nonbinary plural condition distinguishes *Analysis 1* from *Analysis 2*. As stated in the previous section, in *Analysis 1*, a response that matches mixed groups consisting of only female and male members (i.e., MMF and FFM groups) with the nonbinary plural condition was scored as correct, in addition to those that contain a nonbinary referent (i.e., MFNB). Conversely, in *Analysis 2* the presence of at least one nonbinary person within groups was thus appointed as the discriminating factor for establishing response correctness. It follows that whenever a MMF or FFM group was selected to represent the nonbinary plural condition, such a response was scored as incorrect. A summary of the two analyses is provided in Table 12.

Table 12 Type of measure and scoring system specificity for Analyses 1 and 2

Scoring	**Analysis 1**	**Analysis 2**
Measure	Accuracy	
Scoring system specificity	MMF-FFM inclusion in NB.PL condition	MMF-FFM exclusion from NB.PL condition

Analysis 3 set out to detect any effect on participants' response times exerted by (i) the gender of the item (i.e., masculine, feminine, nonbinary), (ii) the number of the item (i.e., singular or plural condition), and (iii) the order of administration of the tasks. The underlying assumption is that the conditions with the longest recorded times might have imposed interpretational problems for participants.

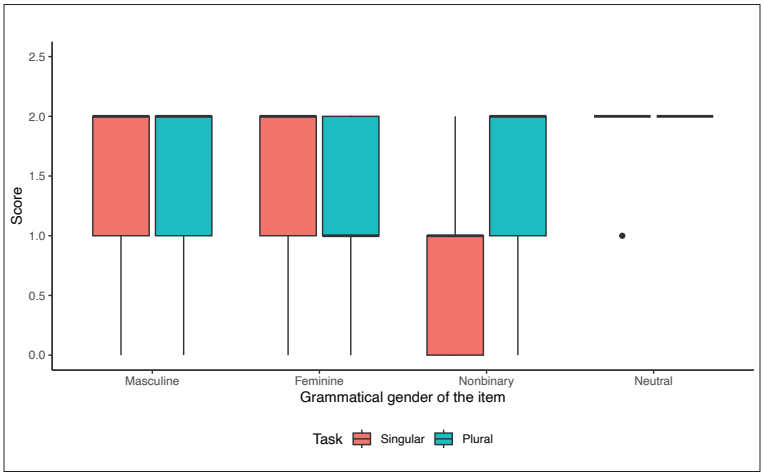
4.2.2.1 *Analysis 1*: Measuring Accuracy with an *All*-Inclusive, Mixed-Gender Representation of the Plural Suffix *-ə*

Considering the two tasks, participants performed differently depending on the gender and number of the item, showing decreasing scores in the nonbinary condition. In Table 13, descriptive statistics for all conditions are shown.

Table 13 Mean, SD, median, maximum and minimum values for the SPMT, all conditions (*Analysis 1*)

Conditions (gender and number)	Mean	SD	Median	Maximum	Minimum
M.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
F.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
NB.SG	0.7250	0.7626569	1	2	0
neutral.SG	1.9875	0.1118034	2	2	1
M.PL	1.6625	0.5498849	2	2	0
F.PL	1.1750	0.7758213	1	2	0
NB.PL	1.5250	0.6157223	2	2	0
neutral.PL	2.0000	0.0000000	2	2	2

Graph 2 shows the mean distribution of the scores, depending on the grammatical gender and number of the item.



Graph 2 Distributions of the SPMT scores, both tasks, all conditions (*Analysis 1*)

As can be seen in Table 13 and Graph 2, participants obtained the lowest mean score in the nonbinary singular condition (0.72). The scores obtained in the masculine and feminine singular conditions are higher and identical to each other (1.48). Scores for feminine and masculine conditions differ in the plural condition, as masculine plural items still obtained a rather high score (1.66), as opposed to feminine plural items (1.17), whose score is lower than that of the nonbinary plural condition (1.52), as shown in Table 13. Performance with neutral singular and plural items is considered as 'ceiling', as all responses were scored as correct.

In order to establish whether the gender of the item and(/or) the number of the item are significant predictors of accuracy, we analyzed our data with a generalized mixed model with the R package *lme4* (Bates et al. 2024; R Core Team 2021). The fixed effects in the model were the grammatical gender of the item (item_gender) and the number of the item (task), while participants (id) and items (item) were treated as random effects. First, we also considered the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., the singular-condition task preceding the plural-condition task and vice versa) as an additional factor. The order of administration had neither a main effect ($p = 0.868$) nor a significant interaction with the other predictors (i.e., item gender and number), and was therefore excluded from the analysis. The final model was specified as follows:

Formula: score ~ item_gender * task + (1 | id) + (1 | item)

The grammatical gender of the item is a significant predictor of score (p-value < 0.001), whereas the number of the item is not, although very close to significance (p=0.053). A significant interaction between gender and number of the item is found (p-value < 0.05). The main effect of grammatical gender and the interaction between grammatical gender and number of the item are shown in Table 14.

Table 14 Main effect of grammatical gender and interaction with number, all conditions (*Analysis 1*)

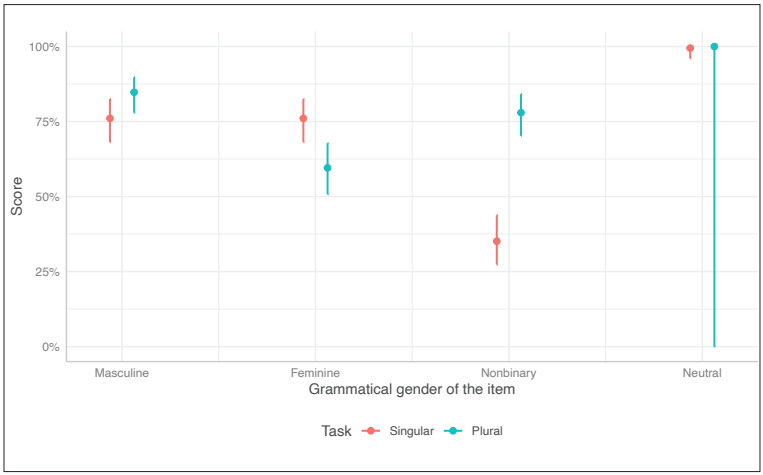
	score		
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	3.18	2.13 – 4.74	**<0.001**
item_gender [femm]	1.00	0.59 – 1.69	1.000
item_gender [nonbin]	0.17	0.10 – 0.29	**<0.001**
item_gender [neutral]	59.81	8.14 – 439.26	**<0.001**
task [plur]	1.75	0.99 – 3.09	0.053
item_gender [femm] x task [plur]	0.26	0.12 – 0.57	**0.001**
item_gender [nonbin] x task [plur]	3.73	1.73 – 8.06	**0.001**
item_gender [neutral] x task [plur]	3368158.88	0.00 – 273518324157 00929081943012635 28284393942829686 83296984420191896 1603754065920.00	0.853

As can be seen in Table 14, the nonbinary condition significantly differs from the masculine one (p-value < 0.001), whereas the feminine condition does not significantly differ from the masculine condition

(p-value = 1.000). The significant difference also reported for the neutral condition is not taken into account, as whichever image gets assigned to neutral items is considered correct. As anticipated, no main effect of number was detected (p=0.053). Hence, excluding the influence exerted by gender, participants' performance did not vary according to changes in number alone.

The generalized mixed model revealed a significant interaction between number and gender conditions (p=0.001). As shown in Graph 2, the scores for feminine items are significantly lower in the plural than in the singular condition. Moreover, the scores for nonbinary items are significantly higher in the plural than in the singular condition (p=0.001). This raise in accuracy is to be traced back to the fact that the nonbinary plural condition was designed to include more correct answers, compared to its singular counterpart **[tab. 11]** – hence the exponential increase.

The effects of the interactions observed reflect the predicted probabilities of score displayed in Graph 3. For the feminine condition, predicted probabilities are lower in the plural than in the singular, indicating that while singular forms are strongly and systematically associated with female referents, plural forms show greater variability. For the nonbinary condition, the pattern is reversed: the singular shows greater variability, while the plural is more compact, resulting in a notable difference between the two figures. By contrast, the masculine condition shows virtually no difference across the number variable. A fuller understanding of these patterns will emerge from the qualitative analysis presented in Section 4.2.3.



Graph 3 Predicted probabilities of SPMT scores, both tasks, all conditions

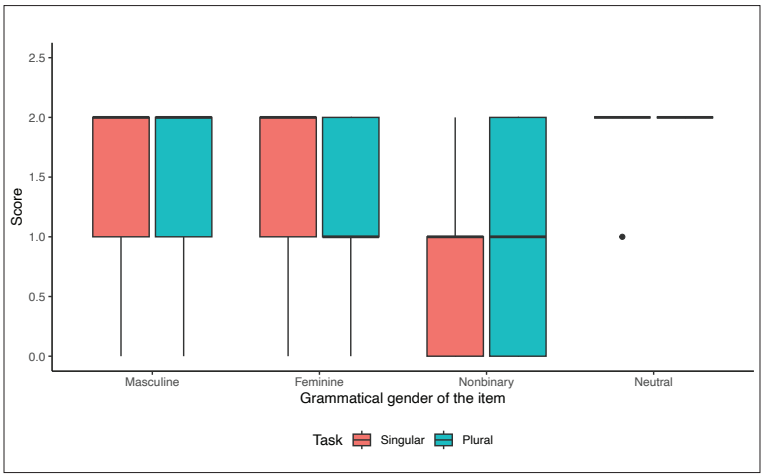
4.2.2.2 *Analysis 2*: Measuring Accuracy with a Nonbinary-Inclusive Representation of the Plural Suffix -ə

Analysis 2 is structured like *Analysis 1*. As a result of the exclusion of two groups (i.e., MMF, FFM), the scores in the nonbinary plural condition drop significantly. In Table 15, descriptive statistics for all conditions are shown. Data for the plural nonbinary condition are highlighted in bold.

Table 15 Mean, SD, median, maximum and minimum values for the SPMT, all conditions (*Analysis 2*)

Conditions (gender and number)	Mean	SD	Median	Maximum	Minimum
M.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
F.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
NB.SG	0.7250	0.7626569	1	2	0
neutral.SG	1.9875	0.1118034	2	2	1
M.PL	1.6625	0.5498849	2	2	0
F.PL	1.1750	0.7758213	1	2	0
NB.PL	**1.0125**	**0.7546271**	**1**	**2**	**0**
neutral.PL	2.0000	0.0000000	2	2	2

Graph 4 shows the distributions of the scores obtained for each condition:



Graph 4 Distributions of the SPMT scores, both tasks, all conditions (*Analysis 2*)

In comparing all the scores obtained by plural conditions, what emerges is that the nonbinary plural condition obtained the lowest score of all, as shown in Table 15 and Graph 4. As for the rest, the remarks passed on the other conditions – including the singular – reported in *Analysis 1* (cf. Section 4.2.2.1) remain unchanged, as a result of maintaining the same scoring procedure.

As can be seen in Table 16, another difference detectable in this second analysis concerns the influence exerted by the task factor, which turns out to be a significant predictor of score (p=0.048).[1] The main effect of number could be caused by the drop in score that occurs when a slightly more specific interpretation is chosen for the plural variant *-ə*, one that sees the inclusion of a nonbinary individual as a minimum requirement for group formation.

Table 16 Main effect of number and interaction with gender, all conditions (Analysis 2)

	score		
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	3.24	2.17 – 4.85	**<0.001**
item_gender [femm]	1.00	0.59 – 1.68	1.000
item_gender [nonbin]	0.17	0.10 – 0.28	**<0.001**
item_gender [neutral]	60.92	8.29 – 447.96	**<0.001**
task [plur]	1.76	1.00 – 3.09	**0.048**
item_gender [femm] x task [plur]	0.26	0.12 – 0.55	**<0.001**
item_gender [nonbin] x task [plur]	1.09	0.52 – 2.27	0.813
item_gender [neutral] x task [plur]	38150604.28	0.00 – 309061941249 18486397272241788 10986468619864584 53657959628708063 50309359616000.00	0.829

4.2.2.3 *Analysis 3*: Response Times with an *All*-Inclusive, Mixed-Gender Representation of the Plural Suffix *-ə*

Differences in response times depending on the gender and number of the item were detected, showing a rather gradual increase from the

1 As in *Analysis 1*, no main effect of the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., the singular-condition task preceding the plural-condition task and vice versa) was found (p=0.867). For this reason, it was excluded from the analysis.

gender-marked to the unmarked conditions. In Table 17, descriptive statistics for the response times are shown.

Table 17 Mean, SD, median, maximum and minimum values of the response times (ms) recorded for each condition

Conditions (gender and number)	Mean	SD	Median	Maximum	Minimum
M.SG	59787.75	33146.89	54436.0	186398	11661
F.SG	54093.90	26054.74	49311.5	171511	16104
NB.SG	70309.11	39688.70	61966.0	249645	13546
neutral.SG	62251.40	33119.29	52332.5	212141	16483
M.PL	79352.73	62051.33	67727.5	475896	17705
F.PL	76826.52	118528.77	58772.0	1069299	13192
NB.PL	76182.84	64141.88	60459.0	408148	17316
neutral.PL	89990.45	99654.89	66467.5	658778	20777

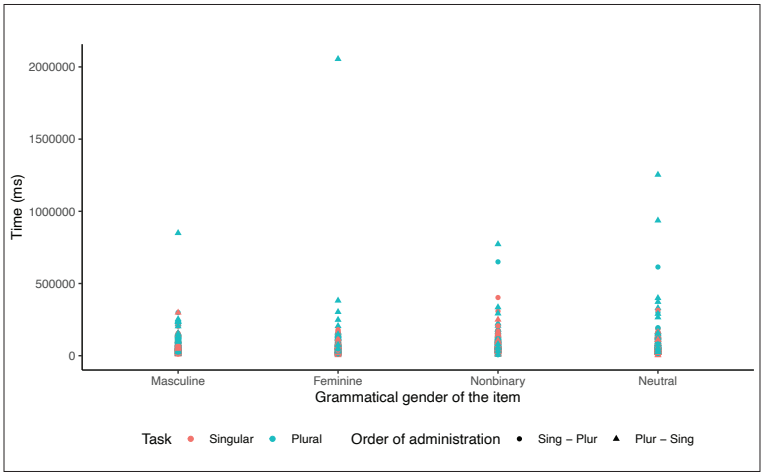
In the singular-condition task, participants' response times vary depending on the gender of the item. The feminine condition is the one in which participants exhibited the fastest mean response time (54093.90ms), followed by the masculine condition (59787.75ms), the neutral condition (62251.40ms), and the nonbinary condition (70309.11ms). In the plural-condition task, participants instead recorded the fastest mean response time in the nonbinary condition (76182.84ms), followed by the feminine condition (76826.52ms), the masculine condition (79352.73ms), and the neutral condition (89990.45ms). In confronting the two tasks, the fastest mean response time was recorded in the feminine condition. Unlike the feminine, the masculine condition presents two very different response times depending on whether it is singular or plural: in the singular, it recorded the second-fastest mean response time of all when introduced in the case of a singular-plural order of administration of the tasks; conversely, a rather slow mean response time was detected in the masculine plural condition. Remaining within the singular-condition task, as we move along the trajectory of gender to approach the lowest level of markedness, we observe a gradual increase in the mean response time reaching the neutral condition. This finding is also confirmed by the plural condition-task, in which the plural neutral condition displays the slowest mean response time. The most irregular pattern is nevertheless to be attributed to the nonbinary condition, registering the slowest mean response time in the singular-condition task, as opposed to the fastest mean response time in the plural-condition task.

In order to establish whether the gender of the item (i.e., item gender) and(/or) the number of the item (i.e., task) and(/or) the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., order) significantly impact on

participants' response times, we analyzed our data with a multiple linear regression run with the R package *stats* (R Core Team 2021). In the model, item gender, task and order of administration were treated as predictors, while participants' response times served as the dependent variable. The final model was specified as follows:

Formula: response_time ~ item_gender * task * order

Graph 5 shows the participants' response times for each condition, depending on the grammatical gender and number of the item, and the order of administration of the tasks.



Graph 5 Distributions of participants' response times across all conditions

A multiple linear regression revealed a significant general effect of the factors involved (i.e., gender and number of the item as well as the order of administration of the tasks) on response times. Moreover, a significant interaction between the order of administration of the tasks and number is found (p=0.0317), particularly concerning the plural-condition task when the latter is administered before the singular-condition task – an interaction responsible for increasing response times across all items. This is especially visible in the neutral condition **[graph 5]**, where gender is neutralized.

4.2.3 Qualitative Analysis of the Data

This section explores the internal distribution of the assigned genders found in each condition, so as to unveil the different percentages of

participants selecting pictures with contrasting-gender referents. The aim is to uncover whether, especially in the case of the most potentially ambiguous conditions, relatively close percentages emerge, for which no gender really stands out among the ones selected.

We begin with the masculine and nonbinary conditions, as both can activate potentially conflicting readings, either inclusive (*generic*) or exclusive (*specific*). We then turn to the neutral condition, which serves to reveal the gender most frequently assigned when no grammatical marker is available. Finally, the feminine condition is considered, so that all four experimental conditions are accounted for and the overall picture is complete.

In the masculine condition, a clear preference for a male referent to be matched with *il candidato* 'the.M.SG candidate.M.SG' strongly emerged, which is visible in Table 18. In the first masculine singular item, 80% of the participants selected a male referent, compared with 68.75% in the second item. The specific meaning of the masculine form in the singular is thus activated.

Table 18 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the masculine singular condition *il candidato* 'the.M.SG candidate.M.SG'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Masculine singular 1	**80.00**	6.25	13.75
Masculine singular 2	**68.75**	12.50	18.75

Also for the plural, the specific meaning of the masculine form seems to be favored over the generic one, hence confirming that the alleged generic masculine displays a bias in favor of an interpretation that sees men as the exclusive referents, answering the research question in (III) (cf. Section 3.2). Looking at the percentages reported in Table 19, for both masculine plural items, the highest percentage of participants chose, as a visual representation of the referents *i candidati* 'the.M.PL candidates.M.PL', the depicted male-only group, showing that the specific interpretation of the masculine form is activated.[2] The male-only group (MMM) is followed by the one composed of two female members and one male member (i.e., the FFM group), which was chosen by 26.25% of the participants in the first item, and 18.75% of the participants in the second item. Note that the preference expressed for a female majority is far from random,

2 It should be noted that one participant's response could not be retrieved for the second item.

as will be illustrated later in the discussion section. In comparing the gender distribution of the two items, a general trend is that groups with at least one male member in the group were chosen more frequently as opposed to groups deprived of the male presence. The lowest percentages indeed occur at the female-only group and the nonbinary-only group.

Table 19 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the masculine plural condition *i candidati* 'the.M.PL candidates.M.PL'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Masculine plural 1	**28.75**	5.00	10.00	12.50	26.25	17.50
Masculine plural 2	**38.75**	6.25	11.25	11.25	18.75	12.50

In the nonbinary singular condition, the preference for a female referent is visible in both items. The data reported in Table 20 indeed show that a female referent indicated as *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG' was selected by 52.5% of the participants in the first item, and by 42.5% in the second; as opposed to 38.75% and 32.5% of the participants choosing nonbinary referents instead in the first and second item, respectively. Overall, there was a fairly restrained selection of male referents.

Table 20 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the nonbinary singular condition *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Nonbinary singular 1	8.75	**52.50**	38.75
Nonbinary singular 2	23.75	**42.50**	32.50

As to the nonbinary plural condition, the nonbinary-only group was the most frequently selected by the participants **[tab. 21]**. Crucially, mixed-gender groups (i.e., MMF, FFM, MFNB) generally occurred at lower percentages. Notably, the gender-mixed group *par excellence* (i.e., MFNB) turned out to be the least selected in both nonbinary plural items, recording the lowest percentage of occurrence (i.e., 7.5%). However, it is worth highlighting that in the second nonbinary plural item, the FFM group reached the second-highest selection percentage (21.25%), suggesting a slightly greater variability in how plural nonbinary items were interpreted. Overall, these results point to the predominant use of the innovative suffix *-ə* to refer specifically to nonbinary groups.

Table 21 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the nonbinary plural condition *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Nonbinary plural 1	8.75	18.75	**42.50**	11.25	11.25	7.50
Nonbinary plural 2	8.75	11.25	**43.75**	7.50	21.25	7.50

In the absence of grammatical gender cues, it becomes difficult to predict which gender is to be picked by participants. Neutral items were included in the study precisely to investigate which gender is favored in a condition that is deprived of any gender markers. Looking at the data reported in Table 22, it appears that the highest percentage of the participants selected a nonbinary referent for the first neutral item (40%) and a male referent for the second neutral item (50%). However, the frequency of occurrence of the male and nonbinary gender in the first neutral item nearly coincides (i.e., 40% *vs* 38.75%). Although nonbinary and female referents found a rather fair representation within the neutral condition, it is safe to conclude that in the absence of any possible indicators of grammatical gender, participants tended to resort to the default value, i.e., male.

Table 22 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the neutral singular condition *l'aspirante tutor* 'the aspiring mentor'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Neutral singular 1	38.75	20.00	**40.00**
Neutral singular 2	**50.00**	32.50	17.50

The process of gender assignment through selection of the depicted referent seems to follow two different trajectories with neutral plural items as well. Pure maleness prevails in the first neutral item, selected by 25% of the participants, whereas a mixed-gender group with a majority of female members (i.e., the FFM group) was picked by 31.25% of the participants in the second neutral item, as reported in Table 23. The responses obtained in the first neutral item thus seem to confirm the tendency to interpret as male referents candidates described without mentioning any gender information. Such an interpretation mirrors the one triggered by the neutral singular condition. In general, images depicting at least one male referent are selected much more frequently than those without any male individual. For instance, in the singular condition, female referents are chosen only 20% or 32.5% of the time, depending on

the neutral item, while male referents clearly dominate. Similarly, when combining gender-homogeneous and nonbinary-only groups (FFF + NBNBNB), responses in the second neutral plural item just exceed the expected ~16.6% for an unbiased distribution, reaching around 20%. Although slightly above chance, this imbalance suggests a consistent interpretive bias rather than random variation, even without formal statistical testing. Overall, unmarked forms tend to be associated with male or male-inclusive groups in both neutral singular and plural conditions.

Table 23 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the neutral plural condition *i membri del gruppo di ricerca* 'members of the research team'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Neutral plural 1	**25.00**	18.75	13.75	7.50	16.25	18.75
Neutral plural 2	11.25	7.50	12.50	25.00	**31.25**	12.50

In the feminine condition, a robust association with female referents is evident, as shown in Table 24. In the singular items, 66.25% and 82.5% of the participants selected a female referent, with nonbinary referents as a secondary choice and male referents rarely selected (5% and 0%).[3]

Table 24 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the feminine singular condition *la candidata* 'the.F.SG candidate.F.SG'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Feminine singular 1	5.00	**66.25**	27.50
Feminine singular 2	0.00	**82.50**	17.50

Similarly, in the plural items, the data reported in Table 25 reveal a preference for groups composed solely of female members (i.e., the FFF group), chosen by 55% and 62.5% of the participants and followed by nonbinary-only groups (30% and 27.5%). Male-only and mixed-gender groups were rarely selected. Overall, the feminine form most often elicits a mapping onto female referents, though slightly weaker when compared with the singular. At the same time, a noteworthy secondary association with nonbinary referents emerges, indicating

3 It should be noted that one participant's response could not be retrieved for the first item.

that while the plural feminine form is predominantly interpreted as referring to exclusively female groups, it is not perceived as exclusively female by all the participants, with male referents almost entirely disregarded.

Table 25 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the feminine plural condition *le candidate* 'the.F.PL candidates.F.PL'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Feminine plural 1	1.25	**55.00**	30.00	3.75	5.00	5.00
Feminine plural 2	1.25	**62.50**	27.50	2.50	3.75	2.50

4.3 Results of the Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian (SILUI)

For every item composing the first section of the SILUI (cf. Section 3.5), only the response selected by the majority of participants – coinciding with their expressed assent/dissent – will be commented on. Given the presence of two adjoining indicators (e.g., 'strongly agree', 'agree' as well as 'strongly disagree', 'disagree') in the 5-point Likert scale used to provide the answers, the overall percentage indicating assent was obtained by adding up the percentage of participants who claimed to 'agree' with the statement reported in the item together with the percentage of those who 'strongly agreed' with it. The same procedure was adopted to establish dissent.[4] All percentages are available in Table 26, which provides a precise division of the sample based on the level of agreement with the item expressed.

4 This serves as a methodological note to go through the analysis in that choosing to look at the aggregated data instead of the disaggregated data can sometimes lead to opposite conclusions (e.g., Items 4 and 10).

Table 26 Percentages of participants expressing their assent/dissent to each statement, divided by the level of agreement indicated

Item	Corresponding statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Item 1	Giorgia Meloni goes by "Mr President". That is to be considered a sexist choice.	17.50	13.75	26.25	30.00	12.50
Item 2	We should not change the way the Italian language has traditionally been written and spoken.	22.50	28.75	17.50	21.25	10.00
Item 3	Inclusive language is a trivial matter.	45.00	31.25	11.25	6.25	6.25
Item 4	The masculine plural is not really inclusive, still we should continue to use it to refer to mixed groups of people (e.g., males, females, and nonbinary people) because it is more immediate.	7.50	28.75	21.25	27.50	15.00
Item 5	When a person does not identify with the binary distinction of gender, it is only fair that we refer to that person with *ə*: e.g., *studentə* 'student.NB.SG'.	12.50	11.25	13.75	32.50	30.00
Item 6	The Italian language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	20.00	31.25	20.00	23.75	5.00
Item 7	The elimination of the sexist use of the Italian language is an important goal.	6.25	15.00	16.25	27.50	35.00
Item 8	Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid the sexist use of language.	8.75	16.25	15.00	23.75	36.25
Item 9	The sexist use of the Italian language is related to sexist treatment of people in the Italian society.	21.25	5.00	5.00	37.50	31.25
Item 10	If there are males, females, and nonbinary people in a group of people, it is appropriate to refer to them with *ə*: e.g., not *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL' but *lə studentə* 'the.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.	16.25	26.25	15.00	22.50	20.00

Item	Corresponding statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Item 11	Teachers who require students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	25.00	36.25	18.75	17.50	2.50
Item 12	Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language.	5.00	10.00	18.75	27.50	38.75
Item 13	It is only fair that "mother" and "father" remain on children's ID cards blowing up the neutral qualifiers "parent 1" and "parent 2".	32.50	21.25	23.75	12.50	10.00

A total of 42.5% of the participants agreed with Item 1. The choice of having the common-gender term preceded by a masculine determiner responsible for a gender disambiguation (*il signor presidente* 'Mr President') is seen as a sexist behavior.

A slight majority of the participants (51.25%) disagreed with Item 2, thus advocating for a change at the level of language, irrespective of how rooted some of the practices might be.

A great majority of the participants (76.25%) disagreed with considering inclusive language a trivial matter as stated in Item 3. This item thus gives us an approximate size of the sample that recognizes full dignity to the topic at hand.

According to the responses, 42.5% of the participants agreed with Item 4 in accepting the use of the masculine plural to refer to mixed-gender groups, for the sake of an ease and instantaneousness that would guarantee a rather effective communication, hence justifying its use. Although acknowledging that it is not inclusive *per se*, the majority of participants are nevertheless in favor of such an employment.

More than half of the participants (62.5%) agreed that it is only fair to refer to a person who does not identify with the binary distinction of gender with *-ə* (e.g., *studentə*), as posited in Item 5. Therefore, the majority of participants seem to welcome the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* serving as the singular exclusive representation of the nonbinary population.

A slight majority of participants (51.25%) disagreed with Item 6, once again promoting change, regardless of cultural conservatism.

In line with the content of Item 3, Item 7 stresses the importance of achieving the elimination of the sexist use of Italian by framing it as an important goal, according to 62.5% of the participants.

By approving the proposal put forward by Item 8, 60% of the participants agreed with the necessity that the phenomenon of the sexist use of language must be controlled for in drafting specific editorial guidelines.

In agreeing with Item 9, 68.75% of the participants are also aware of a strong interdependence existing between the way people are treated in Italian society and the sexist use of the Italian language.

Based on the responses collected for Item 10, the inclusive plural ending *-ə* was neither rejected nor approved by our sample of participants. As a matter of fact, in adding up the percentages of participants who expressed their dissent (i.e., 'strongly disagree', 'disagree') and comparing it with the sum of the percentages of participants expressing their assent (i.e., 'strongly agree', 'agree'), we reach the same exact percentage, amounting to 42.5%. Therefore, this time it is not possible to determine a disparity.

According to 61.25% of the participants disagreeing with Item 11, the idea that teachers demanding students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly exercising some sort of political power over students is simply wrong. Hence, the majority of participants believe that in the educational context, banning sexism in language is not the same as imposing a political view.

By agreeing with Item 12, 66.25% of the participants once again confirmed the need to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language and highlighted the urgency of action to implement change, no matter the difficulties.

To conclude, 53.75% of the participants disagreed with Item 13 rejecting the neutral qualifiers 'parent 1' and 'parent 2' as potential replacements for the labels 'mother' and 'father'. The fact that so many agree with this rather innovative – to some even controversial – proposal is quite impressive. Those in favor of replacing the traditional, long-established roles with these novel, neutral qualifiers are indeed the clear majority.

The second section of the SILUI (cf. Section 3.5) draws from four "designation errors" (APA 1983) that are brought to the attention of participants who are instructed to pass their judgments by expressing the degree of sexism found in each error. Percentages are listed in Table 27.

Table 27 Percentages of participants assessing sexism in each statement, divided by the level of sexism found (not at all sexist, not sexist, undecided, sexist, clearly sexist)

Item	Corresponding full statement	Not at all sexist (%)	Not sexist (%)	Undecided (%)	Sexist (%)	Clearly sexist (%)
Item 14	Marta è una donna transgender. È nat**o** nel 1986. 'Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.'	6.25	12.50	13.75	21.25	46.25
Item 15	Lucia non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere. Lucia è cresciut**a** a Modena. 'Lucia does not identify with the binary distinction of gender. Lucia was raised.F.SG in Modena.'	21.25	12.50	10.00	28.75	27.50
Item 16	Serena ha superato con successo l'abilitazione all'avvocatura. Adesso Serena è un avvocat**o**. 'Serena passed the bar exam. Serena is now an.M.SG attorney.M.SG.'	26.25	17.50	12.50	30.00	13.75
Item 17	**Le** maestr**e** delle scuole elementari tendono a dare tanto spazio alle attività ludiche. The.F.PL elementary school 'teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.'	30.00	12.50	18.75	28.75	10.00

As with the previous section, the aggregated data are taken into account.

A majority of the participants (67.5%) were able to identify the incorrect gender selection in Item 14 by declaring that this instance is sexist. Item 15 involved the assignment of a binary gender marker – apparently motivated by the presence of a feminine given name (i.e., *Lucia*) – to a person who had explicitly stated that they do not identify with the binary distinction of gender; this item was judged sexist by 56.25% of the participants. The totality of participants who considered Item 16 'sexist' equals the totality of those who claimed that it is 'not sexist' (43.75%). No clear preference emerges from the sample's responses. The percentage of participants assessing Item 17 as 'not sexist' amounts to 42.5%. It is safe to assume that, because female primary school teachers outnumber male teachers in Italy, this is understood by participants as a harmless generalization that does not suggest the overshadowing of a male minority. Our exposure

to "the feminine generic" (Pires 2020, 119) is rather rare, so much so that we do not even notice it.

The third section of the SILUI (cf. Section 3.5) measures the participants' intention to accommodate three different uses of the innovative suffix *-ə*. A clear-cut disparity can be traced in all three items, as can be grasped by the high percentages reported in Table 28.

Table 28 Percentages of participants expressing their willingness/unwillingness to welcome the usage described in each statement, divided by the level of willingness indicated

Item	Corresponding full statement	Very unwilling (%)	Unwilling (%)	Undecided (%)	Willing (%)	Very willing (%)
Item 18	How willing are you to start an email with *cari studenti* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL', *care studentesse* 'dear.F.PL students.F.PL' and *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	11.25	12.50	11.25	26.25	38.75
Item 19	How willing are you to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	10.00	15.00	12.50	18.75	43.75
Item 20	How willing are you to use the term *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG' instead of *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' when the referent does not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	10.00	7.50	13.75	25.00	43.75

As above, the highest percentage emerging from the aggregated data is looked at.

With Item 18, 65% of the participants claimed to be willing to adopt the *-ə* suffix to represent an exclusive-nonbinary plurality in a sequence that makes sure to overtly mention all three gender categories, as in the case of the opening of an email with *cari studenti, care studentesse e carə studentə* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL, dear.F.PL students.F.PL and dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.

Once having established that the plural exclusive nonbinary ending seems to have been approved, the predisposition to eventually introduce a single, short form to represent a male, female and nonbinary composition was subsequently tested with Item 19. A total of 62.5% of the participants stated that they are willing to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender. This proves that a plural inclusive usage of the *-ə* suffix is expected to be equally welcomed.

Along the same lines, with Item 20, 68.75% of the participants expressed their willingness to use the singular exclusive nonbinary ending to refer to a person who does not identity with the binary distinction of gender by replacing the term *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' with *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG'.

Table 29 summarizes the modal values obtained across items, indicating the most frequently selected response options and thus offering insight into participants' prevailing attitudes toward inclusive language, according to the scoring system adopted from Parks and Roberton (2000).[5] For clarity, the reverse-scored items are listed again here: 2 (3.1), 3 (3.2), 4 (3.10), 6 (3.3), 11 (3.7), and 13 (3.13). These are in bold in the table.

Table 29 Summary of modal responses for each item of the SILUI questionnaire, along with the corresponding level of agreement, perceived sexism, or willingness to adopt inclusive language

Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
Item 1	Giorgia Meloni goes by "Mr President". That is to be considered a sexist choice.	Agreement	4
Item 2	We should not change the way the Italian language has traditionally been written and spoken.	Disagreement	2
Item 3	Inclusive language is a trivial matter.	Disagreement	2
Item 4	The masculine plural is not really inclusive, still we should continue to use it to refer to mixed groups of people (e.g., males, females, and nonbinary people) because it is more immediate.	Agreement	4
Item 5	When a person does not identify with the binary distinction of gender, it is only fair that we refer to that person with *ə*: e.g., *studentə* 'student.NB.SG'.	Agreement	4

5 As anticipated in Section 3.5, all items "were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale. High scores (4-5) indicated a positive attitude toward inclusive language; low scores (1-2) indicated a negative attitude toward inclusive language. A score of 3 indicated neutrality or uncertainty" (Parks, Roberton 2000, 423).

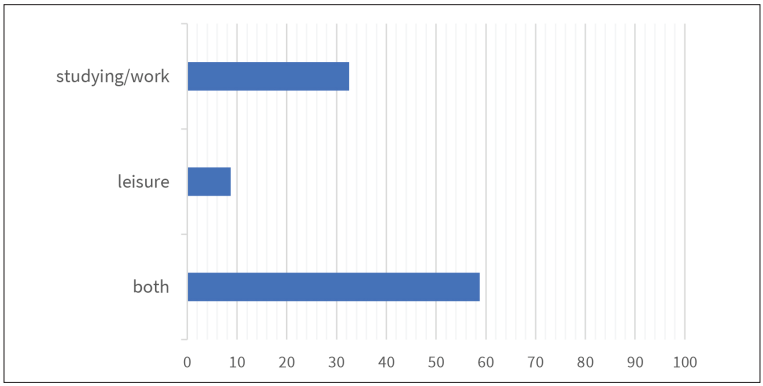
Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
Item 6	The Italian language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	Disagreement	2
Item 7	The elimination of the sexist use of the Italian language is an important goal.	Strong agreement	5
Item 8	Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid the sexist use of language.	Strong agreement	5
Item 9	The sexist use of the Italian language is related to sexist treatment of people in the Italian society.	Agreement	4
Item 10	If there are males, females, and nonbinary people in a group of people, it is appropriate to refer to them with *ə*: e.g., not *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL' but *lə studentə* 'the.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.	Agreement/ Disagreement	4/2
Item 11	Teachers who require students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	Disagreement	2
Item 12	Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language.	Strong agreement	5
Item 13	It is only fair that "mother" and "father" remain on children's ID cards blowing up the neutral qualifiers "parent 1" and "parent 2".	Strong disagreement	1
Item 14	Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.	Clear sexism	5
Item 15	Lucia does not identify with the binary distinction of gender. Lucia was raised.F.SG in Modena.	Sexism	4
Item 16	Serena passed the bar exam. Serena is now an.M.SG attorney.M.SG.	Sexism/No sexism	4/2
Item 17	The.F.PL elementary school teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.	No sexism at all	1
Item 18	How willing are you to start an email with *cari studenti* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL', *care studentesse* 'dear.F.PL students.F.PL' and *carə studentə* 'dear. NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5
Item 19	How willing are you to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5
Item 20	How willing are you to use the term *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG' instead of *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' when the referent does not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5

Overall, the predominance of high scores (4-5), together with the six items that are reverse-scored for which very low scores are indeed reported, makes us conclude that we are dealing with a sample of participants who have a positive attitude toward inclusive language. The only two responses that actually countertrend the positive attitude are the ones recorded at Item 4 and Item 17.[6] The former seems to appeal to a 'practical' reason, that is, to invoke the immediacy, and the convenience of using the masculine plural to ensure an effective performance, while acknowledging its inner limits (cf. Section 1.5). The latter could be explained by our reduced exposure to the phenomenon of the generic feminine, as previously posited. We are so not used to the generic feminine that we do not even notice it; and it seems so harmless that we cannot trace it back to a discriminatory use. Going in the opposite direction, Item 13 is a virtuous example of the unexpected level of progress our sample strives for. The fact that our sample would go along with such a strong intervention says a lot about the readiness of a community of speakers prepared to embrace a linguistic change of this magnitude. In Items 10 and 16 a tie is established, which makes it impossible to determine what position prevails.

4.4 Results of the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits

The first part of the questionnaire – as anticipated in Section 3.6 – explores reading habits by opening precisely with the question regarding the reasons for reading. The participants' response rates for Item 1 are visually displayed in Graph 6. It was found that 32.5% of the participants only read for studying and working purposes, whereas only 8.75% of the participants declared to read for leisure, in their free time. Both options were selected by 58.75% of the participants.

6 It should be noted that the responses obtained for Item 4 lead to a different conclusion depending on whether one only considers the 'agree' answer or also the 'strongly agree' answer (i.e., disaggregated *vs* aggregated data) **[tab. 26]**.



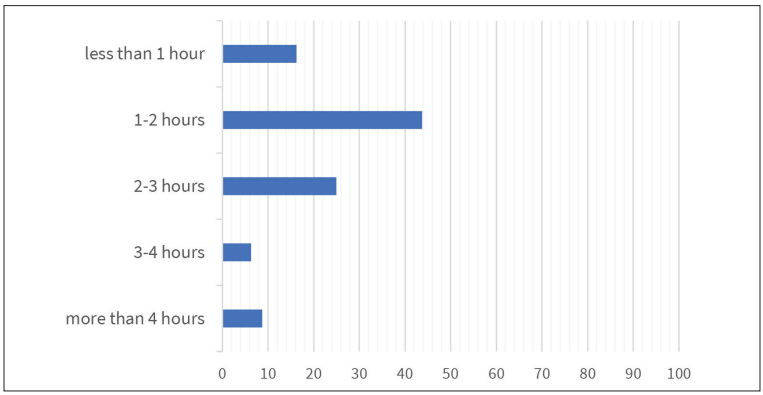
Graph 6 *Why do you read?* Distribution of participants according to their reasons for reading (response rates)

Readers' familiarity with different text genres was measured by means of reading frequency in Item 2, with all percentages listed in Table 30. Looking at the aggregated data, it emerges that 86.25% of the participants often read online information. Fiction is read often by 52.5% of the participants, as opposed to nonfiction, which is never read by 31.25% of the participants or only rarely by 20% of the participants. School and university textbooks are read often by 50% of the participants. When it comes to periodical press, our sample of participants is fairly distributed: 30% claimed to read periodical press only sometimes, another 30% declared to read it often, 26.25% only rarely, with 13.75% never reading periodical press. With technical documentation, another tie is established: both participants who read it often as well as those who only rarely read it amount to 31.25%. 20% of the participants never read it and 17.5% of the participants read it sometimes. A similar pattern is found with scientific literature: 18.75% of the participants read it sometimes, 40% read it often, 41.25% read it either rarely or not at all. Therefore, it can be ruled out that familiarity with the format identified for the sentence-picture matching task (i.e., technical documentation) facilitated the processing of the text by partly obscuring the morphological innovation introduced. It is also specified that among the additional textual types reported by a few participants are collections of poems – with the specification of 'often' as an indication of its reading frequency –, comics (very often), travel guides and books for work.

Table 30 Percentages of participants stating their reading frequency of different text genres, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

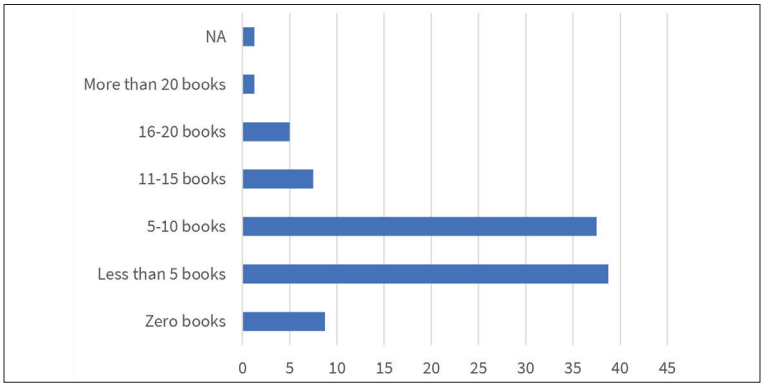
Text genre	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
School/university textbooks	17.50	15.00	17.50	16.25	33.75
Scientific literature	16.25	25.00	18.75	18.75	21.25
Technical documentation	20.00	31.25	17.50	12.50	18.75
Fiction	17.50	13.75	16.25	35.00	17.50
Nonfiction	31.25	20.00	18.75	18.75	11.25
Periodical press	13.75	26.25	30.00	22.50	7.50
Online information	0.00	5.00	8.75	31.25	55.00

The approximate number of hours spent reading on average each day (including reading for study, work and pleasure) is the information obtained with Item 3. As Graph 7 shows, 43.75% of the participants read 1-2 hours per day, followed by 25% of the participants reading from 2-3 hours per day. Only 6.25% of the participants read 3-4 hours per day. Moving to the two poles, 16.25% of the participants stated they read less than one hour per day, whereas 8.75% of the participants reported reading more than 4 hours. As the level of expertise – determined by a range of factors including the time spent reading – might modulate, to some extent, the processing of linguistic innovations by enabling participants to put in place diversified strategies to handle the new form, the data collected here do not suggest a surprisingly high number of hours spent reading.



Graph 7 *How much time do you spend reading each day?* Proportions of the percentages of participants based on the approximate number of hours devoted to reading each day (response rates)

The size of participants' reading pile is also an indication of their level of expertise. Responses collected with Item 4 are visually illustrated in Graph 8. Only 8.75% of the participants reported that they did not read any books for leisure in their spare time, 38.75% of the participants read less than five books, as opposed to 37.5% who read up to ten books. As the number of books goes up, percentages go down: 7.5% of the participants read 11 to 15 books, with only 5% indicating 20 as the maximum number. In only one case, the participant claimed to have read around 60 books. Shown as NA are responses for which it was not possible to infer, even approximately, the number of books read.



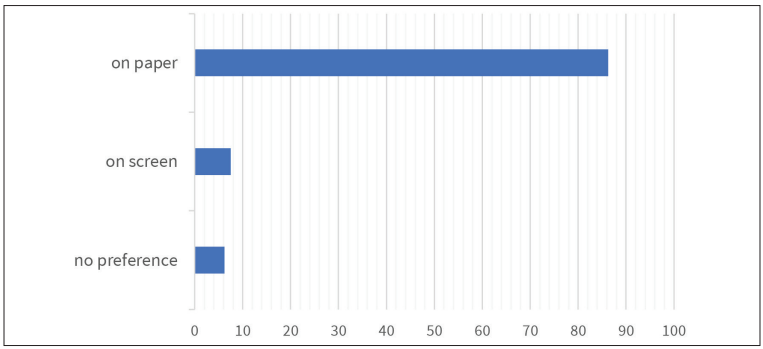
Graph 8 *How many books have you read this year (in your spare time)?* Distribution of participants according to the number of books read in the current year (response rates)

Items 5 and 6 are closely interrelated, in that they both explore the print *vs* digital opposition by looking at the frequency of use of different media **[tab. 31]** as well as participants' preferred medium **[graph 9]**. The smartphone turned out to be the most widely used by 76.25% of the participants. Print media were also rated rather highly: 72.5% of the participants reported reading from print media often. A total of 62.5% of the participants affirmed to often use their computer to read. Conversely, the great majority of participants never (or only rarely) opts for using a tablet or an e-reader to read from. In fact, 63.75% of the participants declared that they never read from a tablet; comparably, 77.5% of the participants admitted that they never read from an e-reader.

Table 31 Percentages of participants stating their frequency of use of different media, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

Medium	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
Print media	1.25	11.25	15.00	13.75	58.75
Smartphone	3.75	11.25	8.75	27.50	48.75
Computer	11.25	12.5	13.75	28.75	33.75
Tablet	63.75	7.50	16.25	3.75	8.75
E-reader	77.50	7.50	5.00	6.25	3.75

As displayed in Graph 9, with reference to Item 6, when faced with the choice between reading on paper or on screen, 86.25% of the participants expressed their preference for reading on paper. Only 7.5% of the participants would rather read on screen, while 6.25% of the participants reported no preference whatsoever. For the purposes of this study, these data might indirectly suggest that only the 7.5% of the participants who preferred onscreen reading could have experienced a positive effect on their performance in the sentence-picture matching task carried out online, whereas no such effect is expected for the majority who preferred reading on paper.



Graph 9 *Would you rather read on paper or on screen?* Distribution of participants according to their preference for the medium to read from (response rates)

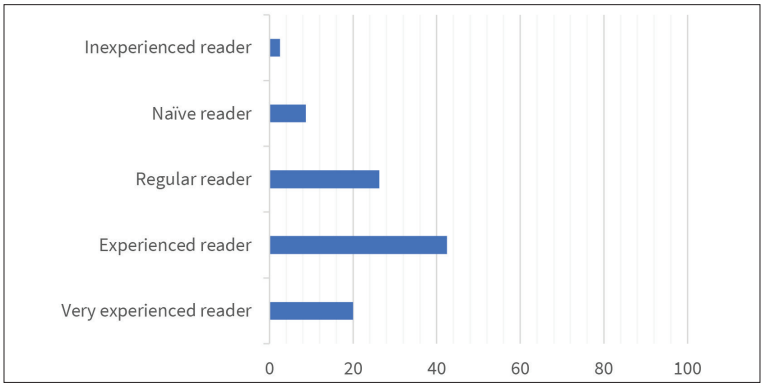
The beneficial power of reading seems to be fully recognized by our experimental sample in its entirety. The four statements that make up Item 7 indeed allowed us to reconstruct how reading is viewed in terms of enjoyability, purpose and effort by referring to Table 32. Almost the entirety of our sample (98.75%) agreed with the statement on the importance of reading. Only one participant did not recognize its importance. Reading is considered an enjoyable activity by 80% of the participants, with only two participants stating the opposite, and 17.5% of the participants not taking a position. In line with these

results, 83.75% of the participants disagreed with reading being a boring activity. As to the effort to be put in reading, opinions here are more diversified: 31.25% of the participants declared being neutral on this matter, 27.5% of the participants disagreed with the statement according to which reading is hard, whereas 25% of the participants recognized that the activity of reading is indeed hard. Looking at the aggregated data, a sharp split is observed: 36.25% of the participants overall found themselves in disagreement with this statement, as opposed to 32.5% of the participants being in agreement.

Table 32 Percentages of participants expressing their assent/dissent to each statement, divided by the level of agreement indicated

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Reading is an enjoyable activity	1.25	1.25	17.5	21.25	58.75
Reading is a boring activity	50.00	33.75	12.50	2.50	1.25
Reading is important	1.25	0.00	0.00	8.75	90.00
Reading is hard	8.75	27.50	31.25	25.00	7.50

Through the brief self-assessment procedure obtained with Item 8, participants were profiled according to their competence. Graph 10 shows that our sample is divided as follows: 42.5% of the participants claimed to be experienced readers and only 2.5% of the participants consider themselves inexperienced readers. Turning now to the intermediate levels, 8.75% of the participants believe they are naïve readers; 26.25% of the participants are regular readers; and 20% of the participants are confident they are very experienced readers.



Graph 10 *What kind of reader do you consider yourself to be?* Proportions of the percentages of participants based on their self-assessment as experienced/inexperienced readers (response rates)

Item 9 opens the section of the questionnaire specifically devoted to measuring participants' exposure to the inclusive use of the Italian language. A major distinction was first drawn between participants who had heard of inclusive language prior to the experiment – who turned out to be the vast majority of participants (88.75%) – and those who had never heard of inclusive language before (11.25%). Once established that almost 90% of the participants were already familiar with the concept of inclusive language, an attempt was made to dig deeper into the degree of familiarity by looking at the exposure to the most common strategies at play by means of Item 10. Starting with the long-standing, less invasive ones that do not involve the inclusion of external linguistic materials, the strategy of coordinating feminine and masculine terms is by far the most frequently used according to 65% of the participants, who claimed to have come across this technique often in their previous readings. Only 7.5% of the participants reported that they had never encountered coordination of feminine and masculine terms. Collective nouns are also quite popular according to participants' responses. The highest percentages are indeed found among participants who said they had seen this strategy in use at least 'sometimes' (73.75%). 15% of the participants did not detect any collective nouns in their previous readings.

As to the more recent strategies entailing the "adoption or resemanticization of individual characters" (Pires 2020, 115) – a practice investing both punctuation marks and orthographic markers – the employment of *-ə* as the word ending (e.g., *Salve a tuttə* 'hello everyonə') turned out to be the most frequently recognized by the participants, in line with predictions, hence confirming the reasons behind the choice to focus our research on this particular

strategy. Similar percentages were found for the asterisk (*) occupying the position of the suffix, while the other strategies were much less common. All percentages are reported in Table 33.

Table 33 Percentages of participants stating the frequency with which they had previously encountered the strategies of inclusive language available for Italian that are reported in the table, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

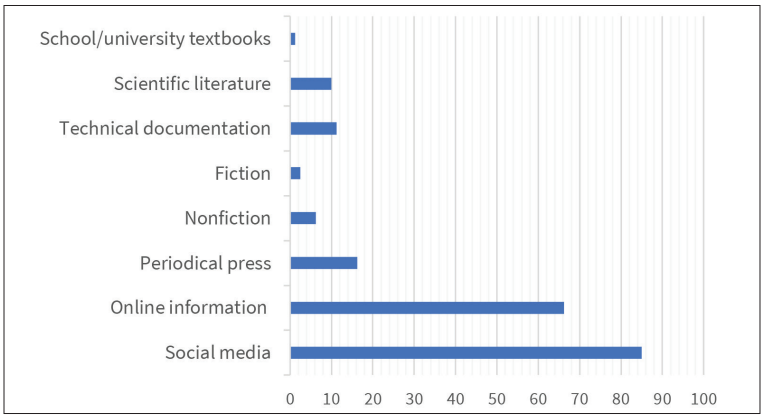
Strategy of inclusive language	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
Coordination of feminine and masculine terms	7.50	8.75	18.75	25.00	40.00
Collective nouns	15.00	11.25	25.00	28.75	20.00
"***" as the word ending	17.50	10.00	28.75	21.25	22.50
"**@**" as the word ending	52.50	15.00	13.75	11.25	7.50
"_" as the word ending	82.50	11.25	6.25	0.00	0.00
"***x***" as the word ending	72.50	11.25	10.00	3.75	2.50
"***u***" as the word ending	75.00	7.50	8.75	6.25	2.50
"**ə**" as the word ending	17.50	11.25	25.00	22.50	23.75

The responses collected with Item 11 were necessary to supplement the list provided in the previous question. Participants were indeed instructed to provide any other strategies attributable to inclusive language, potentially drawing on their multilingual competence. Their responses concerned different languages. In sticking with Italian first, the orthographic marker 'æ' used as a suffix was pointed out (cf. Section 2.2.2), as well as *3* (e.g., *ciao a tutt3* 'hello everybod3'). The slash separating the masculine and feminine determiners to provide both alternatives was also reported (e.g., *il/la…* 'the.M.SG/the.F.SG') (cf. Section 2.2.1), along with suggesting the omission of whichever word containing gender markers. According to one participant, borrowings from English deprived of gender markers as well as opting for the use of the feminine as the default value (cf. Section 2.2.2) are two common strategies used within the Lgbtqia+ community. It is generally considered to be a good practice to always ask the person you are addressing what are the correct pronouns to use. Other suggestions came from German: the so-called *BinnenI* as in *StudentInnen* consisting in capitalizing the 'i' of the *-innen* suffix indicating the feminine of nouns precisely to signal that both genders are included; the use of gerunds (e.g., *Studierenden*) to express category (cf. Section 2.3). The employment of the midpoint in French is also reported, as in *épuisé·e* (cf. Section 2.3).

In shifting the focus on the innovative suffix *-ə*, the purpose of Item 12 was to identify the text genre that most frequently hosts this symbol. More than one option could be selected. As shown in Graph

11, 85% of the participants located the use of *-ə* as a word ending in social media, in the form of captions or *ad hoc* created content. In line with this result, 66.25% of the participants selected online information covering various topics such as current affairs, cooking, sports, culture, travel, fashion and so on, not necessarily retrieved via social media. These percentages lead to think that digital news are where these linguistic transformations are catching on.

Among the lower percentages we find scientific literature (10%), fiction (2.5%) and nonfiction (6.25%). Only one participant reported that they had encountered the *-ə* suffix in textbooks (1.25%). Technical documentation, which is the text genre deployed in the experimental procedure, was selected by a higher percentage of participants (11.25%), yet corresponding to nine participants only.



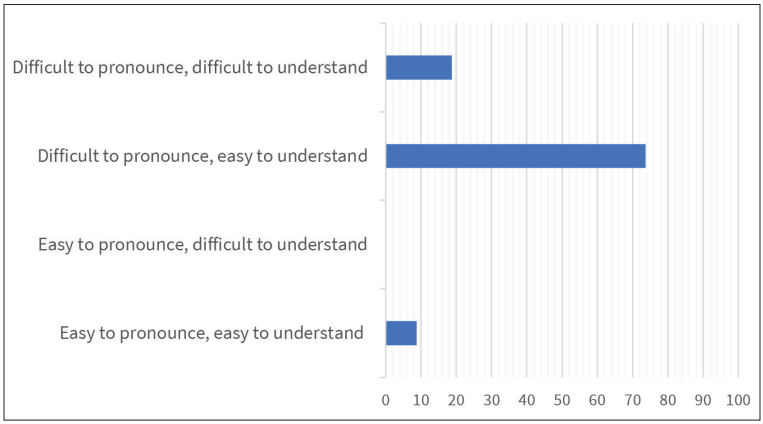
Graph 11 Percentages of participants selecting the text genre in which they had previously encountered the 'ə' symbol (response rates)

The last two questions address the participants' overall perception of the innovative suffix *-ə* by testing whether the *-ə* ending is perceived as an obstacle to the reading of the word, and by investigating the performativity and meaning related to it. When asked to determine the level of interference of the 'ə' symbol in the process of reading on a 5-point Likert scale, the majority of participants expressed their uncertainty (25%), as shown in Table 34. The response rates are relatively close, meaning that the sample is quite divided on the issue. The general trend is however that most participants lean toward not considering it an obstacle to reading.

Table 34 Distribution of participants based on their perception of the 'ə' symbol

Not an obstacle	1	22.50%
	2	18.75%
	3	25.00%
	4	21.25%
Definitely an obstacle	5	12.50%

As to its phonetic production and interpretation, the situation changes drastically: a rather larger disproportion emerges from Graph 12. Almost all participants (about 91%) agreed that this new suffix is difficult to pronounce. Despite this difficulty, a very high percentage of participants (72.5%) established that it is easy to understand what the *-ə* suffix stands for. 18.75% of the participants found it difficult not only to pronounce but also to understand what *-ə* refers to.[7]



Graph 12 Proportions of the percentages of participants according to their evaluation of the 'ə' symbol (response rates)

Although these judgments are the result of a mediated, conscious evaluation, and therefore do not constitute a direct and spontaneous measurement, they are valuable indications suggesting how the participants feel about embracing this linguistic innovation, by shedding light on the actual limitations. To date, based on the responses from the sample tested, the greatest difficulty seems to

7 Note that one participant was excluded from the analysis for this specific question, as they selected two mutually contradictory options – reporting both *difficult to pronounce, easy to understand* and *easy to pronounce, easy to understand*.

be found at the level of pronunciation. Understanding its meaning, on the other hand, appears to be easily accessible.

4.5 Reading Experience and Response Times: A Correlational Analysis

To explore the relationship between reading experience and response times (RTs), we employed the non-parametric Kendall's Tau test, suited for small sample sizes. As a more objective measure of reading experience and skills, we used the number of books read in a year, instead of the participants' self-assessed reading ability scores.

The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between the two variables (tau = -0.05651255, $p = 0.04$). Specifically, the data suggest that as the number of books read annually increases, response times tend to decrease slightly. This finding supports the underlying assumption that frequent readers, especially those accustomed to digital reading, tend to develop more efficient reading processes, which may in turn result in faster response times during reading tasks.

The results are consistent with the idea that regular reading practice can positively affect the speed at which textual information is processed, although the observed effect remains relatively modest.