5 Investigating Gender Interpretation Without Images: Evidence from a Follow-Up Study

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5.1 Introduction

This follow-up study employed a *Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task* (TCET), designed to assess participants' interpretation of a gendered neomorpheme without relying on images. The representative images used in the main study to convey gender identity, previously validated by a separate sample as appropriate depictions of male, female, and nonbinary identities, were replaced with simple textual labels: *maschile* 'male', *femminile* 'female', *non-binario* 'nonbinary', and *altro* 'other'. The label *altro* was included to account for cases in which the neomorpheme in the stimuli could plausibly refer to individuals who do not identify within the binary gender system, such as agender or genderfluid individuals, and may not be adequately captured by the term *nonbinary* alone. This design choice was driven by the key considerations in (1)-(3):

1. to avoid reinforcing or invoking stereotypical visual representations, particularly for the nonbinary category,

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which presents a complex and culturally variable challenge, as any visual depiction risks relying on a shared but problematic imaginary;
2. to reduce visual processing load by replacing six face images with four single-word labels, thereby significantly lowering cognitive demands;
3. to mitigate the sense of visual overload caused by the presence of many multimedia elements on the screen.

The task involved reading a short descriptive stimulus about a candidate and responding to a set of evaluation questions. Participants were asked to assess the candidate's academic background, prior experience, and suitability for the role using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'poor', 5 = 'excellent'). A final multiple-choice question required participants to indicate the candidate's perceived gender (labels: *maschile* 'male', *femminile* 'female', *non-binario* 'nonbinary', *altro* 'other'). The order of the labels was fixed across items. The descriptive stimuli are the same used in the singular condition of the main experiment (cf. Section 3.4.2.1).

The first major difference from the main study is the removal of the plural condition: this follow-up focuses on the singular dimension, aiming to test the evaluation of one candidate at a time and, consequently, the singular interpretation of the neomorpheme used in the stimuli.

To implement the intended reduction in visual complexity, the task was also procedurally modified. The two key steps in the task – the reading of the prompt and the response to evaluation questions – were split across two sequential screens: the first displayed the text stimulus alone, while the second presented the evaluation questions. This adjustment allowed for a more organized and cognitively manageable flow of information, reducing participants' processing load.

In addition to the removal of candidate images (already implemented as a simplification), this two-screen structure introduced an additional procedural change: response times were recorded only during the second screen, that is, during the evaluation phase. As a result, it was not possible to replicate the response time analysis (cf. Section 4.2.2.3) or the correlational analysis conducted in the main experiment (cf. Section 4.5).

5.2 Participants

40 native Italian-speaking participants (24 F, 16 M, age range 18–67 years, mean age 28.05 years, SD = 12.65) took part in the experiment. As in the main experiment, age was not a variable of

interest and was therefore not included as a covariate in the analyses. Participants varied in educational background, with most holding either a high school diploma or a university degree. Specifically, the sample included one participant with a PhD, 30% of the participants (n=12) with a Master's degree (*Laurea Magistrale*), and 25% (n=10) with a Bachelor's degree (*Laurea Triennale*). 37.5% of the participants (n=15) had completed a high school diploma (*Diploma di scuola superiore*), while 5% of the participants (n=2) had only completed lower secondary education (*Diploma di scuola media*).

All participants reported Italian as their native language, though most of them also indicated proficiency in at least one foreign language, most commonly English. Several participants declared knowledge of additional languages such as French, Spanish, German, Russian, Portuguese, Modern Greek, Turkish, and Italian Sign Language (LIS).

Participants represented a variety of Italian regions, with the largest group originating from Emilia-Romagna (n=14), followed by Veneto (n=11) and Lombardia (n=6). Smaller numbers of participants came from Campania (n=3), Toscana (n=2), Calabria (n=1), Lazio (n=1), Abruzzo (n=1), and Liguria (n=1).

All were recruited through personal networks, received no compensation, and gave informed consent prior to participation, in accordance with ethical research standards. Data collection took place between February and June 2025.

5.3 Results of the Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task

In this section, we provide the response coding and the analyses of the data. The quantitative analysis, which focuses exclusively on response accuracy, is presented in Section 5.3.1 and is introduced by the response coding procedure. The qualitative analysis is discussed in Section 5.3.2.

5.3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Response Accuracy

Response correctness was determined by a perfect match between the gender information grammatically conveyed in the verbal stimulus and the gender label selected by the participant. In the masculine and feminine singular conditions, only one answer was considered correct. For example, if the stimulus described a single male referent (e.g., *Il candidato* 'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG'), the correct response was *male*. Similarly, a stimulus introducing a female referent (e.g., *La candidata* 'The.F.SG candidate.F.SG') required the selection of *female* to be scored as correct.

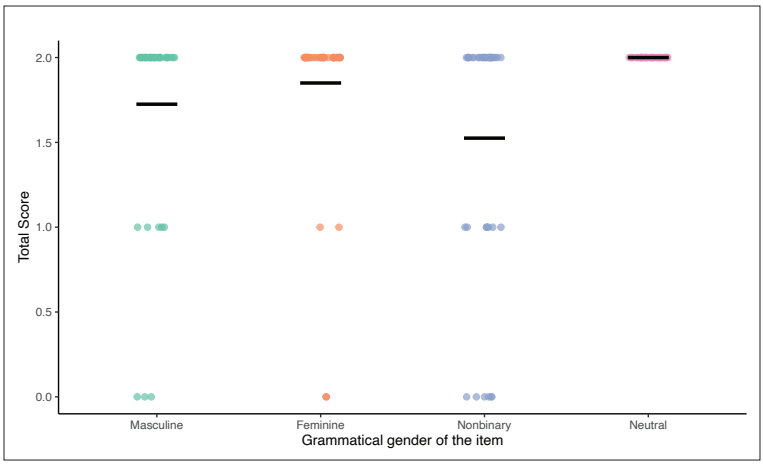
In the nonbinary condition, two answers were considered correct: *nonbinary* and *other*. This reflects the broader and more flexible interpretation space for gender identities. Any mismatch (e.g., selecting *female* for a description of a nonbinary referent) was scored zero.

The neutral condition admitted all four labels (*male, female, nonbinary, other*) as correct, assigning one point regardless of the selected option, since no specific gender marking was present in the stimulus, and any interpretation could be considered valid.

We checked whether there was a difference in response accuracy (scores) depending on the gender of the item. Descriptive statistics for accuracy by item gender are summarized in Table 35, while Graph 13 illustrates individual total scores along with group means for each gender category.

Table 35 Descriptive statistics of accuracy scores by item gender. Mean, median, standard deviation (SD), minimum, maximum, and sample size (*n*) are reported for each grammatical gender category

Item_gender	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum	n
Masculine	1.725	2	0.5986095	0	2	40
Feminine	1.850	2	0.4830459	0	2	40
Nonbinary	1.525	2	0.7506408	0	2	40
Neutral	2.000	2	0.0000000	0	2	40



Graph 13 Dotplot of individual total scores for each grammatical gender category. Black crossbars indicate group means, data points are jittered to reduce overlap, and colors differentiate the grammatical gender of the items

The analysis of total scores by the grammatical gender marking of the item reveals several notable trends. The highest scores were expectedly observed in the neutral (unmarked) condition, given that all responses were scored as correct (cf. Section 4.2.1). Feminine and masculine conditions, which reflect more familiar and conventional gender markers for participants, also showed high accuracy and a consistent distribution of scores. Interestingly, scores were slightly higher in the feminine condition compared to the masculine, which may suggest a greater ease in processing feminine forms, since the feminine offers fewer interpretive alternatives and more explicitly signals the intended referent. In contrast, the masculine might leave more room for ambiguity or competing interpretations, potentially leading to slightly lower accuracy.

A different pattern emerged in the nonbinary condition, where the overall performance was lower compared to the other conditions and scores displayed greater variability. This suggests that the innovative suffix used to mark nonbinary or unknown gender was not consistently interpreted or correctly associated with the intended referent. This inconsistency likely stems from the novelty of the suffix and participants' limited exposure to such forms.

In summary, the data indicate that conventional gender markers (masculine and feminine) are associated with higher accuracy, whereas the nonbinary condition introduces greater uncertainty and variability, potentially reflecting processing difficulty or limited familiarity with the suffix *-ə*.

To determine whether the grammatical gender of the items is a significant predictor of accuracy, we analyzed the data using a mixed-effects logistic regression model with the R package *lme4* (Bates et al. 2024; R Core Team 2021). The fixed effect in the model was the grammatical gender of the item (*item_gender*), while participants (*id*) and items (*item*) were included as random effects. The model formula was as follows:

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

We found a significant main effect of grammatical gender ($p = 0.0489$). Specifically, the reference level used by R – masculine – was significantly different from the nonbinary level of the gender variable. This result confirms the data distribution displayed in Graph 13, which shows that participants achieved significantly lower accuracy on nonbinary items compared to the other levels of the variable (masculine, feminine, and neutral).

This suggests that participants struggle more with *ə*-marked forms, leading to reduced accuracy compared to items marked as masculine, feminine, or unmarked for gender.

5.3.2 Qualitative Analysis of Interpretation Patterns

This section examines the distribution of gender label selections across conditions, with the goal of identifying interpretive tendencies activated by the gendered neomorpheme in the absence of visual referents. The data for all four experimental conditions are summarized in Table 36.

Table 36 Percentages of participants selecting each of the four gender labels (*male*, *female*, *nonbinary*, *other*) across the four experimental conditions in the singular: masculine (*il candidato*), feminine (*la candidata*), nonbinary (*lə candidatə*), and neutral (*l'aspirante tutor*)

Item	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)	OTHER (%)
Masculine singular 1	**85.00**	12.50	2.50	0.00
Masculine singular 2	**87.50**	10.00	2.50	0.00
Feminine singular 1	5.00	**95.00**	0.00	0.00
Feminine singular 2	5.00	**90.00**	5.00	0.00
Nonbinary singular 1	10.00	25.00	**60.00**	5.00
Nonbinary singular 2	10.00	7.50	**75.00**	7.50
Neutral singular 1	**50.00**	35.00	7.50	7.50
Neutral singular 2	**40.00**	27.50	12.50	20.00

For the masculine condition, the label *male* was selected by a clear majority of participants, confirming a strong tendency to interpret the masculine form as specifically male. These figures support the interpretation that even in the absence of images, the masculine form in singular contexts is largely perceived as referring to a male individual. However, the masculine form is not interpreted exclusively as referring to a male since the *female* label was also selected, and this occurred in higher percentages when compared to the selections of *male* in the feminine condition. The data indeed show a clear predominance of the *female* label (90–95%), with minimal selection of *nonbinary* or *male*, confirming that the feminine singular form is interpreted almost exclusively as referring to a female individual.

Building on the interpretation patterns observed in the main experiment (cf. Section 4.2.3), where the nonbinary singular form *lə candidatə* was more frequently matched with a female referent, the follow-up data reveal a notable shift. The majority of participants selected the label *nonbinary* in both items (60% and 75%, respectively), suggesting that in the absence of images, the neomorpheme *-ə* is more transparently read as indexing a nonbinary referent. Importantly, when aggregating the data, *female* remains the second most selected label. In the first item, it accounts for 25% of the responses, while

in the second item, it drops to 7.5%, just below the stable 10% for *male*. This persistence of the *female* label, albeit reduced, points to a residual interpretive association between the neomorpheme and the female gender, which will be further explored in the discussion. The minimal selection of *other* suggests that participants did not broadly interpret the form as referencing identities beyond those explicitly provided. Overall, these results indicate that removing visual references helps reduce ambiguity and promotes a more consistent and targeted interpretation of the nonbinary morpheme.

The neutral condition, which lacks overt grammatical gender markers, simply confirms the trends already identified in the main study **[tab. 22]**. The *male* label remains the most frequently selected across both neutral items (50% and 40%), with *female* selections at lower percentages (35% and 27.5%). The *nonbinary* and *other* labels appear less frequently and do not reach comparable levels, with only one exception: *other* surprisingly reaches 20% in the second neutral item. This pattern overall confirms that even without explicit gender cues, participants tend to default to a male interpretation rather than distributing their choices more evenly among other gender categories.

A general observation is that the internal distribution of gender attributions appears clearer in the current experimental design. This structure allows for a clearer differentiation of the degrees of masculinity, femininity, and nonbinariness inherent to each condition, offering a more nuanced understanding of how gender is perceived and processed linguistically. Admittedly, the testing setting, together with the fixed order of label presentation, may have also plausibly played a role. The presence of specific and unambiguous labels naturally facilitates a more precise and immediate categorization, especially when compared with the use of images, which can introduce ambiguity due to variability in interpretation, cultural assumptions, and other contextual factors. At the same time, once participants recognize that a candidate can be female, they may be more inclined to assign *male* labels to other items, and similarly when they realize that a candidate can be nonbinary, potentially accentuating the internal differentiation observed. Thus, while the design highlights genuine tendencies in gender attribution, these methodological factors should be taken into account when interpreting the distribution patterns.

5.4 Results of the SILUI

This section presents the results of the SILUI, focusing on the most frequently selected response options for each item. Table 37 summarizes the modal values across the scale, replicating the format used in Table 29 (cf. Section 4.3). The commentary below is restricted

to scores that deviate from those observed with the previous sample; the differences in scores are highlighted in bold in the table to guide the reader's attention.

Table 37 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 (follow-up study)

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	**1**
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
Item 6	The Italian language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	Agreement	**4**
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.	Strong agreement	**5**
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'.	Neutral	**3**
Item 11	Teachers who require students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	Strong disagreement	**1**
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".	Disagreement	**1/2**
Item 14	Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.	Clear sexism	5

Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
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	**4**
Item 17	The.F.PL elementary school teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.	Sexism	**4**
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

Items 3, 9, 11, and 13 confirm the stance taken by the sample of the main study, with responses aligning on the same end of the scale but shifted further toward the extreme (e.g., where the previous sample selected 2, participants now choose 1). This indicates not a change in overall attitude, but a stronger, more decisive endorsement of the same position. Responses to items 6, 16, and 17, however, change drastically.

In Item 6, the sample expresses a notably more realistic and pragmatic – and somewhat pessimistic – stance compared to the previous group, strongly acknowledging that Italian's deep cultural roots make meaningful linguistic change extremely difficult. This response reflects an understanding that linguistic change, especially at a systemic level, faces significant resistance due to its entanglement with identity, history, and everyday communication. Such recognition highlights the challenges inherent in promoting inclusive language reforms, emphasizing that shifts in language use often require gradual, collective efforts over extended periods rather than rapid or straightforward transformations.

In Item 16, where the previous sample showed divided opinions on the statement's sexist nature, the new sample demonstrates a clear consensus recognizing it as sexist. This shift suggests increased

understanding and awareness, indicating that the follow-up sample is better informed on these issues. Item 17 further confirms this trend, as the new sample clearly recognizes the sexist nature of the statement, reinforcing evidence of increased sensitivity toward such instances of sexist language use.

A slightly different pattern emerges in Item 10, which addresses the practical implementation of the use of *-ə* to inclusively refer to mixed-gender groups. Here, the follow-up sample adopts a neutral stance, selecting the midpoint of the scale. This response mirrors the previous sample's internal division between agreement and disagreement, suggesting that while participants may endorse inclusive language in principle, they remain cautious or uncertain when it comes to its concrete application in daily linguistic practice.

In summary, while several items reveal consistent attitudes with stronger conviction, the notable shifts observed in Items 6, 16, and 17 underscore a growing realism and heightened awareness regarding linguistic change and sexism. These changes may suggest that the follow-up sample approaches issues of inclusive language with greater critical engagement and sensitivity, reflecting how the topic has become increasingly central in public discourse over the roughly eighteen months separating the first data collection (November-December 2023) from the follow-up (February-June 2025) – an ongoing evolution that may influence future language use and reform efforts.

5.5 Results of the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits

This section explores participants' reading habits as well as their exposure to the inclusive use of the Italian language. It is important to note from the outset that due to technical issues, responses from two participants could not be collected; these are therefore marked as NA in the tables that follow.

In response to Item 1, 21% of the participants reported that they read exclusively for study or work-related purposes, while an equal percentage (21%) stated that they read solely for leisure, during their free time. The majority (58%) indicated that they engage in reading for both academic or professional needs and personal enjoyment.

Readers' familiarity with various text genres was assessed through Item 2, with response frequencies reported in Table 38. Overall, the most frequently read category is online information, with 75% of the participants stating they read it often or very often. Fiction also shows high engagement, with 57.5% reporting frequent reading. In contrast, nonfiction is read rarely or never by over half the participants (52.5%), while technical documentation shows a similar trend, with 57.5% of the respondents indicating limited exposure (i.e., rarely

or never). Scientific literature is read often or very often by 25%, while 47.5% engage with it only occasionally or not at all. Periodical press follows a similar pattern, with 62.5% of the participants reading it rarely or never. School and university textbooks remain relatively familiar, as 50% of the participants read them often or very often. These findings suggest that participants' general familiarity with technical documentation is limited, making it unlikely that the text genre used in the *Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task* (i.e., technical documentation) facilitated comprehension to the extent of overshadowing the introduced morphological innovation.

Table 38 Percentages of participants stating their reading frequency of different text genres, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) (follow-up study)

Text genre	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)	NA (%)
School/university textbooks	5.00	17.50	22.50	20.00	30.00	5.00
Scientific literature	12.50	35.00	22.50	15.00	10.00	5.00
Technical documentation	17.50	40.00	27.50	7.50	2.50	5.00
Fiction	7.50	7.50	22.50	27.50	30.00	5.00
Nonfiction	32.50	20.00	17.50	12.50	12.50	5.00
Periodical press	32.50	30.00	12.50	15.00	5.00	5.00
Online information	0.00	5.00	15.00	32.50	42.50	5.00

The approximate amount of time participants reported spending on daily reading was gathered through Item 3. Most participants (42.5%) reported reading between 1 and 2 hours per day, followed by 22.5% who read 2 to 3 hours. A smaller group (20%) read less than one hour daily, while only 2.5% reported reading 3 to 4 hours, and 7.5% read more than 4 hours per day. Considering that reading time may contribute to participants' ability to process linguistic innovations through varied strategies, these findings point to a generally moderate level of reading engagement, in line with the trends observed in the main study.

The number of books read for leisure over the past year, assessed through Item 4, offers further insight into participants' reading habits and overall expertise. The largest portion (37.5%) reported reading fewer than five books, followed by 27.5% who read between five and ten. As the number of books increases, the percentage of readers decreases: 12.5% read 11-15 books, 15% read 16-20, and only 2.5% reported reading more than 20 books. These figures suggest a generally moderate engagement with extended reading, consistent with the pattern observed in the main study.

Items 5 and 6 explore participants' media habits by examining both the frequency of use across print and digital platforms (see Table 39) and individual media preferences. Print media remains a widely used format, with 70% of the participants stating they read from print either often or very often. The smartphone also emerged as a commonly used medium, with 57.5% reading from it frequently. Computers are used often or very often by 47.5% of the participants. In contrast, tablets and e-readers are used far less: 57.5% never read from a tablet, and 75% never read from an e-reader. When asked to indicate their preferred medium, a strong majority (80%) expressed a preference for print, while only one participant (2.5%) favored digital media. These results largely confirm the predominance of print media in participants' reading habits – already attested with the previous sample – in contrast with the digital format used during the experiment.

Table 39 Percentages of participants stating their frequency of use of different media, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) (follow-up study)

Medium	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)	NA (%)
Print media	0.00	5.00	20.00	30.00	40.00	5.00
Smartphone	5.00	17.50	15.00	20.00	37.50	5.00
Computer	12.50	17.50	17.50	27.50	20.00	5.00
Tablet	57.50	7.50	15.00	2.50	12.50	5.00
E-reader	75.00	7.50	0.00	2.50	10.00	5.00

The follow-up study confirms a broadly positive view of reading (see Table 40), in line with the sample of the main study **[tab. 32]**. A strong majority (87.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that reading is important, remaining substantial, but not as high as the earlier 98.75%. Enjoyment levels also remained high, with 82.5% finding reading enjoyable – slightly more participants strongly agreed this time.

Perceptions of reading as boring further declined: 90% disagreed with this statement, and no one agreed, improving on the previous 83.75%. The main divergence concerns reading as a demanding activity: 20% of the participants agreed it is hard, and 32.5% remained neutral, suggesting more varied perceptions of reading effort compared to the main sample.

Overall, participants continue to value and enjoy reading, though views on its difficulty appear more divided in this second group.

Table 40 Percentages of participants expressing their assent/dissent to each statement, divided by the level of agreement indicated (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) (follow-up study)

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	NA (%)
Reading is an enjoyable activity	0.00	2.50	10.00	30.00	52.50	5.00
Reading is a boring activity	40.00	50.00	2.50	2.50	0.00	5.00
Reading is important	0.00	0.00	7.50	10.00	77.50	5.00
Reading is hard	25.00	17.50	32.50	20.00	0.00	5.00

Based on the self-assessment in Item 8, participants were classified according to their perceived reading competence. The majority identified as experienced readers (57.5%), followed by regular readers (25%). These results suggest a slightly stronger overall confidence in reading ability compared to the previous sample **[graph 10]**. The current group presents a slightly higher concentration of participants who identify as experienced readers, while the proportion of those at either end of the self-assessed competence scale (i.e., naïve or very experienced readers) remains limited.

The second part of the questionnaire begins with Item 9, which distinguishes between participants who were already familiar with inclusive language prior to the experiment and those who had no prior exposure to the concept. This time, only one participant reported never having come across inclusive language, further corroborating earlier observations that exposure to this phenomenon, fostered by public debate, is steadily increasing.

The follow-up study confirms and further strengthens the rationale behind focusing our experimental analysis on the innovative suffix *-ə* as a potentially inclusive linguistic strategy. Among all the orthographic markers, *-ə* once again emerged as the most widely recognized through Item 10. In fact, 22.5% of the participants reported encountering it very often, a figure slightly lower than the 23.75% observed in the main sample **[tab. 33]**. Additionally, 20% stated they had seen it *often* and 25% *sometimes*, indicating a consistent and relatively high degree of exposure. Surprisingly, the proportion of respondents who had never encountered the neomorpheme *-ə* remained consistent across both studies, at 17.5%, indicating nonetheless a stable level of baseline familiarity with the form over time.

In contrast, alternative strategies such as the asterisk (*), while still relatively common, experienced a decline in the *very often* category (from 22.5% to 15%), and the 'at' sign (@) showed a stark decrease in frequent recognition: no participant in the follow-up reported seeing it *very often*, unlike the 7.5% in the original sample. Similarly, the underscore (_) and other less conventional markers

like *x* and *u* remained the least familiar, with 80% and 57.5% of the respondents respectively indicating they had *never* encountered them – figures that are either stable or slightly worse compared to the first round of data.

These results not only validate our decision to center the study around the *-ə* suffix, but also suggest a broader trend toward its gradual normalization within the inclusive linguistic landscape, marking it as the most prominent and recognizable among the emerging orthographic strategies.

Table 41 Percentages of participants stating the frequency with which they had previously encountered the strategies of inclusive language listed, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) (follow-up study)

Strategy of inclusive language	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)	NA (%)
Coordination of feminine and masculine terms	5.00	0.00	17.50	30.00	42.50	5.00
Collective nouns	2.50	12.50	32.50	20.00	27.50	5.00
"*****" as the word ending	20.00	12.50	22.50	25.00	15.00	5.00
"**@**" as the word ending	45.00	27.50	12.50	10.00	0.00	5.00
"**_**" as the word ending	80.00	10.00	2.50	2.50	0.00	5.00
"***x***" as the word ending	57.50	25.00	5.00	7.50	0.00	5.00
"***u***" as the word ending	50.00	17.50	22.50	2.50	2.50	5.00
"**ə**" as the word ending	17.50	10.00	25.00	20.00	22.50	5.00

In addition to the inclusive language strategies formally included in the previous table, several alternative practices emerged from participants' open-ended responses to Item 11. Among these, some reported the use of 'y' as a neutral plural suffix, and others cited the slash (e.g., *salve a tutt/*) or direct vowel truncation (e.g., *ciao a tutt*) as gender-neutral solutions. A few participants also mentioned the use of '3' as a final character (e.g., *ciao a tutt3*), mimicking phonetic or visual neutrality. Interestingly, one respondent referenced the intentional overextension of the feminine form, less as a grammatical device and more as a political statement. Another pointed to the existence of carefully selected inclusive expressions embedded in certain dialects. However, no specific examples were provided, and the respondent noted that such dialectal forms may be unsuitable in academic or professional contexts due to their informal or localized nature. These observations highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of inclusive language practices, revealing creative grassroots strategies that often fall outside institutionalized norms.

Item 12 aimed to identify the most common text genres in which the *-ə* ending appears. The vast majority of participants (90%)

indicated social media as the primary space for encountering this form, followed by online information sources more broadly (67.5%). Periodical press was selected by 15% of the respondents, while all other options registered minimal percentages. These results align closely with those of the main sample **[graph 11]**, confirming the strong association between the innovative suffix and digital communication environments.

The final section of the questionnaire explored participants' perceptions of the innovative suffix *-ə*, focusing first on its potential to hinder reading (Item 13) and then on its performativity and intelligibility (Item 14). Compared to the previous sample, results indicate a greater tolerance toward the use of *-ə* **[tab. 34]**. A clear majority (62.5% of the participants) did not consider it an obstacle to reading, selecting either level 2 on the Likert scale (37.5%) or explicitly stating that it was not an obstacle at all (25%). Only 15% viewed it as a real hindrance, while 17.5% expressed uncertainty.

As for phonetic production and interpretation, the findings confirm that pronunciation remains the main difficulty, while interpretation is generally unproblematic. The majority of participants (27 out of 40) found the suffix difficult to pronounce but easy to understand, while only 4 reported difficulties on both fronts. 6 participants indicated ease in both pronunciation and comprehension, and none found it easy to pronounce but hard to understand.[1] These results reinforce the idea that despite phonetic challenges, the meaning of the suffix *-ə* is becoming increasingly accessible, suggesting a growing familiarity with its function in inclusive language. These findings broadly mirror those of the main sample **[graph 12]**, reinforcing the persistent challenge of pronunciation while highlighting a consistent ease in semantic interpretation across both studies.

1 One participant selected two contradictory responses instead of a single answer and was excluded from the analysis.