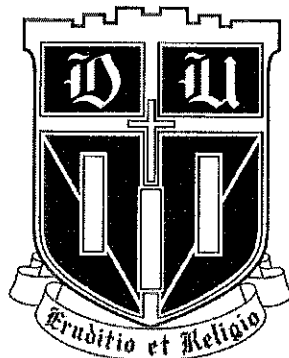


Language and the Gendered Self: Unraveling the Framework of Gender in the Italian Language



by

Daniel L Sutton

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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Luciana Fellin', written over a horizontal line.

Luciana Fellin, Ph.D., Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dominika Baran', written over a horizontal line.

Dominika Baran, Ph.D., Committee Member

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nikki Lane', written over a horizontal line.

Nikki Lane, Ph.D., Committee Member

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## **Abstract**

Increased language and gender research have broadened and extended conversations about gender identities and pronouns. As these conversations make their way into more academic circles it is becoming increasingly important for educators of Romance languages to take into account the ways that their current instructional resources and practices represent gender and reinforce social gender binaries. The Italian language makes this pursuit towards a more inclusive language difficult both grammatically and structurally in tandem with resistance from the L1 speakers themselves. This thesis is a response to such resistance because the dynamic nature of language means that it must be readily applicable to the culture in which it is used. Language education is the first step in addressing these linguistic issues. This research is an examination of works in these fields to discover the best methods for creating a gender inclusive pedagogy in Italian L2 classrooms in the United States. It considers the role of linguistic ideologies and brings together research of Gender-Just pedagogy and Critical Race pedagogy to create a new pedagogical method for creating more welcoming second language learning environments.

L'aumento della ricerca linguistica e di genere ha ampliato ed esteso le conversazioni sulle identità di genere e sui pronomi. Man mano che queste conversazioni si fanno strada in ambienti più accademici, diventa sempre più importante per gli educatori di lingue romanze prendere in considerazione i modi in cui le loro attuali risorse e pratiche didattiche rappresentano il genere e rafforzano i binari sociali di genere. La lingua italiana rende difficile questa ricerca di un linguaggio più inclusivo dal punto di vista grammaticale, strutturale e a causa della resistenza degli stessi parlanti L1. Questa tesi è una risposta a tali resistenze, perché la natura dinamica della lingua significa che deve essere facilmente applicabile alla cultura in cui viene usata. L'educazione linguistica è il primo passo per affrontare questi problemi linguistici. Questa ricerca è un esame dei lavori in questi campi per scoprire i metodi migliori per creare una pedagogia inclusiva di genere nelle classi d'Italiano L2 negli Stati Uniti. Prende in considerazione il ruolo delle ideologie linguistiche e riunisce le ricerche sulle Gender-Just pedagogy e Critical Race pedagogy per creare un nuovo metodo pedagogico e per creare ambienti di apprendimento della seconda lingua più accoglienti.

## **Introduction**

Italian is a beautiful language that I started learning during my time here at Duke. With every new fact I learn about Italian, I discover something new about English. Learning a new language opens you to new ways of thinking, diverse cultures, and different perspectives. Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it this way, “The limit of my language is the limit of my world” (1922, 74). To me, this means that the words we have allow us to express ourselves and describe the world. What would it feel like to not be able to express oneself, to not have the words one needs to appropriately feel represented? As conversations around language and gender grow more common this fear of misrepresentation proves to be a linguistic concern.

Increased language and gender research has created momentum behind conversations about gender identity. These conversations have sparked interest in pronoun usage and the inclusion of non-binary people in academic and social circles. This thesis is an attempt to highlight the ways that gender is represented in Italian L2 language classrooms and to understand how educators can promote social change through linguistic innovation within Italian pedagogical settings.

During my time abroad in Italy, one of the students in my program told us that they were non-binary and used they/them pronouns. This led to a discussion about how they planned to proceed with the Italian language. As I continued to integrate within the local community, I made many Italian friends. Once my Italian friends met this American friend, they would always use the female form when referring to them. This was difficult for the student as they were being misgendered as a woman when they were not one. I would try to go back and forth between “lui” (he) and “lei” (she) as they had requested, using a combination of the masculine and feminine forms when I spoke to and about them. Conversely, one Italian friend could not bring himself to draw this distinction between the binary and the non-binary. When I asked him why he could not use the “lui” pronoun when talking about my friend, he explained that “it came naturally” to use

the female form. This is because of how he was socialized and educated. This experience taught me that representations of gender are the direct result of socialization, and the binary will continue to be the social default if there is not a change of the language and of the ways that students learn to talk about gender. This series of interactions reinforced in me the need to foster awareness and then change the language to offer a more accurate means of description, representation, and self-expression for all speakers.

In this thesis, I am particularly interested in the ways that language is used and taught in the classroom and how specific practices reinforce the gender binary. A given language in itself does not cause sexism or create a binary view of society, but culture and context are paramount in understanding how particular systems come into effect and work to impact society through linguistic practices. Education is an important aspect of socialization to culture (because we are socialized through our surroundings). Because language is a reflection and creation of cultural environments, we learn not only language but also culture through the ways that we are educated. What interests me is how gender is represented in second language instructional settings, specifically for Italian, as it possesses grammatical gender. Grammatical gender is especially interesting to me because of the ways it is socialized as an arbitrary grammatical feature, but it cannot be mere coincidence that gendered grammatical categories (masculine and feminine nouns) and social categories (male and female) share the same name and meaning. This leads to a more profound discussion of the need for linguistic change that evades these binary forms or expands them to include a gender-neutral option that can be clearly separate from social gender. Gender neutral pronouns are important because they provide an outlet of expression that is clearly distinct from the gender binary and also removes the false notion of inclusivity of the generic masculine forms.

Roman Jakobson's assertion that languages do not differ in what they can and cannot do also heavily motivates this research. If any language can say anything, then there should be forms in place for students to describe themselves and imagine themselves in the language outside of the confines of a binary. This is extremely important for the future of language and society and language education because not having the words to describe oneself can create a series of internal conflicts including the questioning and undermining of one's individual identity. Throughout this thesis, I will explain grammatical gender and its association with social gender in an Italian context. Then I will identify the ways that this system confirms the binary and does not afford an inclusive learning experience to all students. Finally, using two academic approaches to pedagogy, I will suggest solutions to make the pedagogy of Italian more student focused and hopefully more inclusive as a result. I will propose the reformulation of linguistic structure and the neutralization of the inherent gender, the idea that gender is an innate aspect of an individual and cannot be changed. Linguistic change with regard to gender can reframe societal perception and behavior around gender and lead to more overall inclusivity in and out of the classroom setting.

## Chapter 1 Understanding Language and Gender

### Background

Language and gender as a field of study is said to have begun with Robin Lakoff's book, *Language and Woman's Place* (Svendsen 2018, 2). In her book, Lakoff addresses the ways that speakers use language to create division between men and women. She calls for use of "linguistic data as 'diagnostic evidence' for broader conditions of inequality" (Lakoff 1975, 279). In other words, Lakoff seeks to understand how inequality can be a linguistic question or as I would like to call it, a social question with a linguistic solution. Lakoff's text is considered to be the first of its kind to bring language and gender to the forefront of linguistic conversation. In this thesis, I am not solely interested in language and gender through the eyes of a linguist; I aim also to focus on the societal reception of gender and how it is represented. Still, it is important to pay tribute to the linguistic research that has shed light on the importance of linguistic inclusivity.

Language in and of itself is not problematic or sexist and cannot silence non-binary identities. It is speakers' use of language that does these things. For example, beginning a conference discussion with the greeting "ladies and gentlemen" is a linguistic choice of the speaker, but the English language does not confine the speaker to such a restriction. The speaker could just as easily say "everyone" to be inclusive and avoid gendered language altogether. The result is a question of social gender which includes "gender expression, which is the way we communicate our gender to others through such things as clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms. It also includes how individuals, communities, and society perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Social gender includes gender roles and expectations and how society uses those to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms" (Prismic 2019). The ways that we talk about social gender,



such as in the example of “ladies and gentlemen” and with which we indicate gender identity through pronoun usage are all examples of the ways that we use language as a tool to navigate systems of inclusion and exclusion through representation and presence.

## **Language and Culture**

Culture is a complex phenomenon for which there are many definitions. Two, in particular, are helpful for this research. American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz defines culture as, “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) [speakers] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973, 89). Cultural geographer Don Mitchell provides a definition of culture that is useful for our discussion such that culture is “a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored” (Mitchell 1995, 102). Culture is taught and learned. Gender is an example of culture and a correlate of culture because, as a social construct, gender performance is taught through media, interaction, and environment (Butler 1990, 174). For example, girls may be socialized into wearing dresses and liking pink from their parents, school, and advertisements for Barbie dolls. At the same time, boys are taught to be rough and hide emotions. These are examples of how gender becomes manifested and socialized through culture. As Butler notes in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), the manifestation of gender as a social construct is the result of repetition and naturalization through a process that she calls performativity. According to Butler, “the repeated performance of the distinction serves (among other things) to impose a norm of sexual desire based on an artificial association between biological sex and gender (the “law of heterosexual coherence”), thereby sustaining a system of ‘compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality’ (the “heterosexual matrix”)” (Duigan 2023). Essentially, Butler notes that the repeated performance of gender is what creates the idea of gender itself. For example, a skirt is not feminine in nature and someone who wears a skirt is not

a girl because of the skirt. The skirt has come to be socialized as a dress of femininity. As more women wear skirts and socialization continues to associate femininity with the skirt, gender is created. Language and culture have a similar relationship. In the pages that follow I discuss the interconnectedness of language and culture.

According to Roman Jakobson, language is the “necessary and substantial foundation of human culture.” (Jakobson 1985, 107). Language is a reflection of culture just as culture is a reflection of language. Gender identity is not a new topic. As conversations of gender identity and pronoun usage have increasingly surfaced, it is becoming more apparent that gender and identity are central parts of American culture. In order to best understand how gender and culture relate to language and connect to contemporary society, it is important to understand the relationship between language and culture. Language is a fundamental aspect of culture because languages and variations of languages shape society. Speakers use language to transmit a variety of thoughts, and perspectives, including cultural norms. Gender is an example of such a cultural norm which is maintained through the use of language. Representations of gender are directly related to culture because each culture views and understands gender in a different way. For this reason, linguistic education is especially important as it informs our perception of gender.

Culture is learned through interaction, and one of the primary places where culture and the perspectives, ideas, values, and beliefs it entails take place is the classroom. As a result, the classroom plays a specific role in our understanding of gender. Education is an agent of socialization and helps us make sense of the world around us. For this reason, educators are inadvertently tasked with assisting students to navigate gender (Pavlenko and Piller 2008, 61). It is important to understand gender expressions as well as gender identity in order facilitate the socialization of gender through education.

Teachers have a special influence, however unintentional it may be, that is especially prevalent in language education because teaching a new language is teaching a new frame through which to view the world. In essence, learning a new language is learning a new culture. One example can be gender. Gender roles look different across cultures and societies, and these differences are acquired when learning a new language. Specifically, when it comes to learning a new language, it is important to consider that the target language may not represent gender in the same way that one's first language does. Gender only possesses meaning in the context of language and its users. This meaning varies across cultures and across languages because representations of gender through language vary across space and time (Gaydarska et al 2023, 7).

### **Language Ideologies**

The way we understand gender is a reflection of the language and gender ideologies of our communities of practice and speech communities. Language ideologies are conceptualizations and representations of language use in society that are “suffused with the political and moral issues pervading the particular sociolinguistic field and are subject to the interest of their bearer's social position.” (Irvine and Gal 2000, 35). As Kathryn Woolard writes, “language-ideological research emphasizes the socially situated nature of *all* representations of language and thus their partiality, in two senses of the word.” (2021, 4). In terms of language and gender ideologies, positionality is important because it explains how the nonbinary subverts gender order and thus disturbs gender hierarchies. All the same, language ideologies are a set of beliefs that Paul Kroskrity defines as “a cluster concept, consisting of a number of converging dimensions with several overlapping but analytically distinguishable layers of significance” (Kroskrity 2004, 501). This cluster concept works to make sense of and provide reason for linguistic and discursive practices. Ingrid Piller provides the following examples of language ideologies: “The best kind of English is spoken by native speakers, particularly those from the United Kingdom

and the United States of America, and everyone else should try to emulate their English.

American English sounds professional and competent, while African American English sounds streetwise and cool and Indian English sounds nerdy and funny.” (Piller 2015, 1). We can deduce reasonably that these are not accurate assumptions of language and are merely representations of language based on how certain language varieties are thought about and characterized.

Ideologies are the result of moral and often political interest and maintained through culture (Hatemi et al 2019, 788). Language ideologies create a connection between thought and behavior because although they are “nothing more than beliefs and feelings and that they are impossible to confirm or refuse” (Piller 2015, 1), they shape the way we see the world and heavily influence speakers.

In his analysis, Kroskrity provides an explanation for why discussions of language ideological practices are important for language and gender research. Kroskrity provides the example of the generic “he .” The generic “he” is an outdated linguistic practice that uses “he” as a gender-neutral pronoun when the gender of the referent is unknown. For a number of political, social, and legal reasons, this practice has gone out of use in United States. The irony of the generic “he” is that it is not generic at all. Although the generic “he” works to serve as a non-gendered pronoun that refers to an unspecified sex, the existence of “he” as a masculine pronoun makes the meaning of masculine difficult to remove. This linguistic principle of the relationship between linguistic form and meaning was put forth by Dwight Bolinger in his essay “The Sign is Not Arbitrary” (1949). Bolinger argues that once a sign is introduced into society, its meaning cannot be removed. He uses the example of asking two kids to draw a picture of a clock. The two children will make similar drawings because the word “clock” cannot be separated from a circle with numbers and two hands. The generic “he” functions in the same way. Although it may be considered generic, it is not, because socialization removes the arbitrary nature of words. In the

case of Kroskirty example, the word in question is the generic pronoun “he.” Even if it is said to be gender-neutral, the fact that “he” refers to the male cannot be ignored.

By choosing “he” when “she” and more recently “they” exist, this seemingly generic pronoun silences multiple identities such as non-binary people and women covering them under a singular male umbrella. To explain this point, Kroskirty (2015, 498) highlights that in American history, the following two sentences would have been repetitive because “he” was not considered as only referring to men:

- 1.) If a student wishes to be considered for financial assistance, he or she must complete an application.
- 2.) If a student wishes to be considered for financial assistance, he must complete an application.

Language practices and the way we reason the expected interpretation -- as illustrated in the two sentences above -- are reflections of culture. As culture and society change, previous linguistic practices are questioned and often problematized. This recognition is known as linguistic awareness. Linguistic awareness refers to speakers’ understanding and reflection of the way that language is manipulated (Masny 1997, 105). Without linguistic awareness, we as speakers, are not able to uncover the ways that we use language to reinforce stereotypes or even to discern any of the problems that can exist within a given language. For second language learners, linguistic awareness is especially crucial because it means understanding the challenges and difficulties that come with learning a specific language. For the same reason it is important that L1 speakers be cognizant and linguistically aware. Linguistic awareness is also important for L2 pedagogy because it allows teachers to help students understand the cultural differences relating to language and gender ideologies that may be found in different languages.

The quest for more linguistic awareness is one of the primary goals of this research. Looking at Romance languages, linguistic awareness of gender imbalances can be more difficult to achieve because gender is a feature of grammar as opposed to a feature of the lexicon -- as is the case for other languages like English. For example, in English gendered words, like woman and boy, only refer to people. Thus, they are not part of the grammar, but they are word choices, whereas in Italian, even common nouns like book and table have gender, thus making it a grammatical feature of the language. Like a fish in water, L1 speakers are often not aware of the features and the indexical power of the grammar of their language because culture is taught and socialized. In this way, learning a new language can be helpful in uncovering details about one's own grammar thus helping L1 speakers to better understand their own language.

### **Lexical Gender and the Notion of Arbitrariness**

An important distinction to draw in this discussion of language and gender is between lexical and grammatical gender. Whereas lexical gender refers to lexical units or words that carry gender specific meaning, morphological gender, or grammatical gender refers to the gender rooted in the meaning generating units of the language. For example, mother is an example of lexical gender. The word means the female parent. The *-a* suffix in Italian, carrying the morpheme for feminine nouns, is an example of morphological gender e.g. *la sedia* (chair) or *la ragazza* (girl). Lexical gender is easy to avoid because entire words can be removed from conversation and alternatives can be used as replacements. With grammatical gender, morphology makes the approach much more challenging because gender is not a semantic choice, but an unavoidable feature found in every nominal unit.

As a Romance language, Italian possesses grammatical gender. This means that its nouns are grouped into noun classes that share their names with that of social gender (masculine nouns and

feminine nouns). In languages with grammatical gender, gender is a mandatory feature of the language. For example, in English I could say the following sentence: *Yesterday, my old friend went to the mall.* In English, the gender of my friend is unknown unless I were to specify saying *my female* friend for instance. In Italian, it would read: *Ieri, il mio vecchio amico è andato al centro commerciale.* There are three distinct aspects of this Italian sentence that reveal immediately to the reader that the friend is male. The adjective (*vecchio*), the noun (*amico*), and the participle (*andato*) all use the masculine form. There is no way to say this sentence without using the gender of the subject.

Although grammatical gender classes and social gender categories may seem to share the same names by coincidence (masculine and feminine), *à la* Dwight Bolinger, the sign is not arbitrary; the grammatical gender is not arbitrary. This non arbitrary meaning comes about through culture and socialization that work to create cultural associations between meanings and linguistic forms. Our minds create associations with gender; just as the generic “he” cannot be truly generic, grammatical gender cannot be truly distinct from social gender, the gendered categories of male and female into which we are socialized (Gygax et al 2019, 4). A distinction is easier to draw with common nouns. For example, *il tavolo* (table) is a singular masculine noun and *la tavola* (table set for a meal) is a singular feminine noun. The meanings show that there is zero connection to social gender categories because both words mean close to the same thing. When the noun in question is not an inanimate object, the notion of arbitrariness is more difficult to give reason to because, while a table cannot possess or perform gender, people can and do. For example, *il ragazzo* (boy) and *la ragazza* (girl) are no longer simply nouns that happen to possess grammatical gender but when they refer to people, and thus not arbitrary but limited to the binary. They reinforce the binary because the grammar offers two gendered categories (male and female) from which to identify.

Bolinger explains that there is no such thing as “language on its own” (Bolinger 1949, 53). That is, there is no such thing as language without culture and out of context. We gain cultural context through media and social discourse. From these media, we understand that gender is central to society. This means that gender must possess some meaning in a cultural context. Such meaning cannot be removed by simply stating that a group of gendered categories are arbitrary. This helps us understand that gender is a part of culture and just as culture is learned, gendered categories are learned. These learned categories create a binary view of gender which limits our language and thus limits our understanding of the world.

### **Gender as Performance**

As a cultural form, gender is performed. Gendered forms cannot be arbitrary because they only possess meaning in the context of speakers and users. This is what Judith Butler calls gender performativity – the notion that gender is a series of socialized behaviors and only possesses meaning through cultural repetition (Butler 1998, 527). As a practical example: There is no such thing as dressing like a woman in essence. However, over the years the skirt has been socialized as a female garment such that anyone that wears a skirt is dressing like a woman or is considered as being “in women’s clothes.” The repetitive association of women and skirts has created a performative illusion of womanhood.

As I discussed previously, the classroom is crucial in the socialization of gender and gender performance. We are taught to perform gender from an early age and learning a new language allows us the opportunity to reexperience this process through a new lens. When teaching a Romance language like Italian, students can only speak choosing the categories that the languages provide; class conversations can only include those that use the masculine and those that use the feminine forms. The female students are taught to use one form and the male



students are taught to use another. This division is immediate from the first day of class and underlined in the grammar lessons because grammatical gender is so central to the structure of the language. Even if a student does not identify with one of these two gender categories, they must box themselves within the binary for the purposes of education. From this point we are socialized to speak a certain way not only of ourselves but of others based on the divisionary binary of gender.

In the next section, I discuss how this plays out in Italian and across many languages with grammatical gender through the generic masculine. Different to the generic “he”, the generic masculine is not merely a lexical choice that is easily avoidable; rather, it is a feature of Italian that says that the masculine plural form serves to describe groups consisting of only men and in mixed groups where at least one member is male. The generic masculine is considered to be an overarching all-inclusive form although similar to the generic “he” it is anything but because it falsely suggests that the general populace can be described by using a singular masculine pronoun. This creates false hierarchies of language and reinforces the idea of male superiority through continued use. Its habitual use works to sustain a problematic and socially damaging cognitive framework that governs unconscious perceptions of the way that we conceptualize the world around us. For example, promoting the use of the generic masculine teaches students that women are subsumed within the context of men. The presence of men overshadows that of women. The feminine plural is only used when only women are present. For example, a student may write to a group of friends *cari amici* (dear friends – masculine plural) If all of the friends are male or if there is even one male in a group of multiple women, the masculine form must be used to show inclusion of the one male. The only instance in which the student would write *care amiche* (with the feminine plural morpheme) would be if each friend in the group were female. The fact that even one male must be represented grammatically in a group of women but one

woman in a group of men is simply masked under the masculine umbrella creates a social imbalance through language. The grammar does not provide equal representation of gender because the masculine form is given priority. The woman is not given voice unless she is amongst other women. This imbalance in representation is the problem and this thesis aims to be the first step in the solution towards more inclusive linguistic practices that not only cease to obscure and silence women but account for the existence of the non-binary when teaching the Italian language.

### **Pronoun Usage**

One of the primary ways that language is used to represent gender in a contemporary context is through the discussion and use of pronouns. In the United States, it has become increasingly more common for people to share their pronouns when first introduced. Many social media platforms have added the capability for users to share their pronouns on their profiles. This is just one example of how gender identity and gender expression have become central parts of our culture.

Many people that identify as non-binary may choose to use the gender-neutral pronoun which in English is the singular “they.” Even in instances where the gender of the referent is unknown, the option for the gender-neutral pronoun is favored because contemporary conversations of language and gender ideologies have started to account for the existence of the non-binary.

Whereas the gender binary refers to the idea that there are two social genders (male and female), non-binary is an umbrella term that refers to individuals that do not identify within the confines of such a male/female binary. This can mean identifying with no gender, more than one gender, or a different gender identity all together. The rigidity of the male/female binary leads to damaging gender roles and prescribes norms of behavior and linguistic rules. In the context of

this thesis, I argue that such a linguistic rule could be changed to expand the options of which grammatical gender category one can use to talk about themselves.

## Chapter 2 The Italian Case

### Language Standardization

Because of its linguistic history, the idea of a standard Italian is still a heavily contested issue. At the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, most people in Italy spoke one of several regional varieties (Carlucci 2020, 20) or languages that today would be called *dialetti* better translated as language variety than as dialect because what are called *dialetti* are actually different languages that stem from Latin as opposed to dialects of Italian that are instead best described as vernaculars or regional linguistic varieties of the current national language (de Mauro and Lodi 1979, 19). In my home state of Ohio, the carbonated beverage is referred to as “pop” while in other regions of the United States it is known as “soda”. This is an example of vernacular difference or regional variation of English. The words are different, but they are both still English and one can generally understand someone speaking a different vernacular from their own. *Dialetti*, the different languages stemming from Latin, that kept a lower ‘dialect’ vs language status, instead, have different conjugations, morphology, and phonology, so they cannot be described as mere changes in accent or word choice. *Dialetti* that are distant geographically are also linguistically distant and not mutually intelligible as are dialects. If someone from Sicily and someone from Milan try to communicate with each speaking their own *dialetto*; they will not be able to understand each other, but if someone from Ohio and someone from Texas speak, they will likely understand each other because they are both speaking varieties of English with different inflection rather than autonomously developed languages like Milanese and Sicilian or Portuguese and French, also *dialetti* or vernaculars of Latin. With everyone speaking a different variety, Italy was and is a very linguistically diverse country. What would later become standard Italian was simply a *dialetto* that stood out amongst other varieties due to its economic, and geographic position and cultural prestige with respect to the rest of Italy. When Italy was unified

almost no one spoke what would be considered the modern Italian national language or the so-called “standard Italian.” After unification, the literary Tuscan *dialetto* was chosen as the standard by the newly formed government. This decision was heavily motivated by the position and economic power of Tuscany, specifically Florence and the prestige of the literary and codified Florentine. According to a 2015 study by the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Institute of Statistics), roughly 32% of Italians speak Italian and their regional dialect and less than 14% of Italians only speak their regional dialect whereas at the moment of unification in 1861 roughly 2-7% spoke the national language (de Mauro and Lodi 1979, 28). Along with such a decline in *dialetto* speakers, the national language, the Tuscan-based standard Italian, continues to gain more linguistic, social, and political power. For this reason and others, the notion of standard Italian is complex and problematic. For Italian, a standard is difficult to determine because of the existence of such a plethora of *Italiani regionali* (regional Italians or dialects), in addition to the different Latin-derived varieties- known as *dialetti* or language varieties. Given the dynamic nature of language, there is no one standard, and standards can always change.

Cambridge defines a standard language as “a variety of language that is used by governments, in the media, in schools, and for international communication.” The argument for a standard comes from the idea that a standardized language facilitates the diffusion of thoughts across speech communities and communities of practice and serves as a normalizing reference for speech and writing such that everyone can understand one another. This idea is known as standard language ideology which Rosina Lippi-Green defines as “a bias toward an abstract, idealized homogenous language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions, and which has as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class.” (1997, 65).

Language standardization can be problematic for a number of reasons. It creates a sense of elitism and inferiority which can be damaging to speakers and learners of the language. The power of the standard is in great part a result of a linguistic concept theorized by Pierre Bourdieu, the “linguistic marketplace”. According to Bourdieu (1977, 654), the linguistic marketplace is the place where linguistic exchange takes place. Within the linguistic marketplace, different varieties carry different values, or linguistic capital. Bourdieu holds that language is not only a mode of communication but a mechanism for power. The standard gains power and linguistic value through continued use and distribution (Bourdieu 1991, 41). As a result, standard language silences certain speech communities through linguistic stigmatization. The popular notion of code switching, which for sociologists describes the ways in which minoritized groups modify their language to fit into the dominant, is a product of language standardization. Take the English language for example. Standard English is simply the socially acceptable English spoken by white people. Minoritized groups often have to code switch because of the negative perception placed on their linguistic variants which differ from the standard. For the same reason, I argue that shifting away from standard ideology is important and pedagogical interventions are essential, because, if a standard be necessary, it should match the societal and cultural conditions in which its speakers find themselves. Second language acquisition entails acquisition of ideas as well as language so acquisition and inclusivity can only happen if the language affords the speaker the possibility to express themselves including their gender identity in its various forms or lack thereof. A binary standard does not achieve this goal.

## **Grammatical Gender in Italian**

As a Romance language, Italian possesses grammatical gender meaning that its nouns are grouped into gendered categories. Gender is found throughout the language, but it is most prevalent in nouns with nouns being categorized into two groups: masculine and feminine nouns marked through the morphology of the language. In Italian, we can look at the ending of the words to find the gender morphology. Generally, with a number of exceptions, masculine singular nouns end in -o while feminine singular nouns end in -a. For example, *il libro* (the book) is a masculine noun and *la bottiglia* (the bottle) is a feminine noun. Grammatical gender can also be found in articles, adjectives, and pronouns. Italian articles vary based on gender, number, and definiteness. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on gender. Most masculine nouns that begin with a consonant will take the definite article “il” for singular nouns and “i” for plural nouns or the indefinite article “un” while feminine nouns take the definite article “la” for most singular nouns and “le” for plural nouns with “una” being the indefinite article. Adjectives follow the same morphological rules as the nouns where the number and gender meaning can be found by looking at the end of the word.

Articles in the Italian Language (99 Problemi)						
Definite Articles			Indefinite Articles			
	fem. singular	fem. plural	singular examples	plural examples		
before consonant	la	le	la ragazza la mela la classe	le ragazze le mele le classi le università le occasioni	feminine	
before a vowel	l'		l' università l' occasione		before a consonant	una ragazza una mela una classe
					before a vowel	un' università un' occasione
	masc. singular	masc. plural	singular examples	plural examples		
before consonant	il	i	il ragazzo il libro il problema*	i ragazzi i libri i problemi	masculine	
before s+cons, z, gn, ps, y	lo	gli	lo studente lo gnomo lo zoo	gli studenti gli animali gli gnomi gli zoo	before a consonant or a vowel	un ragazzo un libro un problema* un animale
before a vowel	l'		l' animale l' autobus	gli animali gli autobus	before s+cons, z, gn, ps, y	uno studente uno gnomo uno zoo

The most interesting grammatical feature for this discussion is the Italian personal pronoun. When the third person pronoun is considered, grammatical gender ceases to seem like an arbitrary grouping, and the problematic nature of the binary is made clearer. It is easy to understand that a table cannot have gender if I say that *il tavolo* (table as in furniture) and *la tavola* (table ready for eating) only have semantic differences, but each has the same ontology of being a table. When we start to talk about people, I cannot say: *Maria è contenta* (*Maria is happy*) has nothing to do with Maria's gender. Because gender is an activity performed by humans, we cannot make the same distinction of meaning with people as we can with common inanimate objects like table.



In Italian, personal pronouns include a person, a number and a gender for the third person singular:

Italian Personal Pronouns	
Io singular 1 <sup>st</sup> person	Noi plural 1st person
Tu singular 2 <sup>nd</sup> person	Voi plural 2 <sup>nd</sup> person
Lui singular 3 <sup>rd</sup> person (masculine) lei singular 3rd person (feminine)	Loro 3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural

To put the pronouns into context I provide the following examples:

He is tall. Lui è alto.

She is tall. Lei è alta.

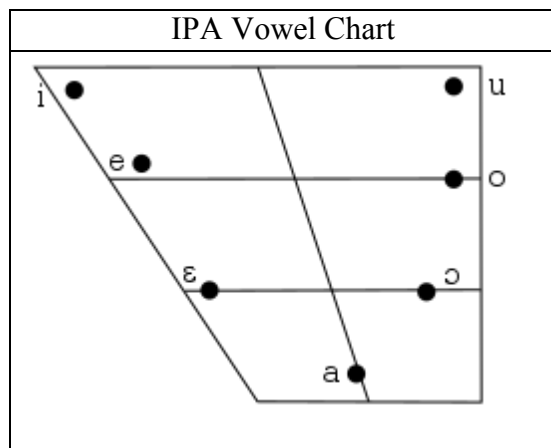
This binary nature of Italian pronouns is what makes finding a more inclusive solution so necessary. Using the pronouns from the table above, if I wanted to say, the gender neutral *They are my friend* in Italian, I would not be able to. The word “friend” would have to be masculine or feminine. The world is not binary, and it is inaccurate to say that humanity is binary, so a solution is necessary to make the learning experience of Italian match the reality of the world.

Here it is important to note that almost all Italian words, specifically the nouns, end in vowels.

This is because the morphology of the language is found in the vowels. Not only can a noun have gender, but it can be plural or singular. In the same way that vowels are used to mark gender, they are used to mark number. A masculine plural word generally ends in an -i such as *i libri* and a feminine plural word ends in -e such as *le bottiglie*. With some exceptions, this describes the standard morphology of the language. The gender and number meanings are rooted in the vowels of the language of which there are only 5 that are written: a, e, i, o, u. These five vowels are used to produce 7 distinct vowel sounds as the /o/ and /e/ can be open or closed but have no distinct

phonological function, rather regional variation. As a result, Italian possess the following phonological vowels (note the chart below for placement of these vowels):

Phonetic Vowels in Italian		
a	/a/	Papa [papa]
e	/e/ - closed /ɛ/ - open	Chaotic [kei'ɔtik] Bet [bet]
i	/i/	See [si]
o	/o/ - closed /ɔ/ - open	Dog [dog] Open [ɔwpən]
u	/u/	Soon [sun]



Note that four out of five vowels are already used, leaving -u as the only unused vowel in Italian morphology, so the only way to maintain similar structure would be to create additional phonemes and assign them morphemic markings. Take a language like Spanish for example, where the morphemic markings for gender are found in the vowel –o (masculine) and –a (feminine) and the plural is marked with the –s. This has made the introduction of the –e for gender inclusion common in Spanish. In Spanish, the masculine plural “*latinos*” as an “unmarked” form has been replaced with “*latines*”. This fits squarely within the existing structure of language being what is called a “linguistic gap.” Linguistic gaps are essentially what sociologists interested in gender-inclusive pedagogies are looking for – words that fit the grammatical structure of the language despite not being words officially (Crystal 2008, 205).

*Latine* can easily be made plural, and the -e can be added to any noun or adjective in the Spanish language and the grammar will still function similarly. Italian depends heavily on vowels which are limited in Indo-European languages graphically, meaning that there are a limited number of written vowel letters, so a solution must be able to fit the Italian structure of a vowel in the final position of the word which leaves -u as a promising possibility.

### **Italiano Inclusivo**

In the pursuit of a more inclusive way of teaching Italian, *Italiano Inclusivo* has become increasingly popular. *Italiano Inclusivo* refers to an initiative proposed by Luca Boschetto in 2015 (Boschetto 2022) for an epicene pronoun using the schwa. An epicene pronoun means one that avoids gender such as “they” in English given that it does not specifically refer to a man or a woman and could describe someone of any gender.

In the quest for a more inclusive Italian, many alternatives have been proposed including the asterisk, the @, and the -u (D’Achille 2021). As I stated previously, the -u seems like a promising option at first glance given that it is the only vowel that is not already used in Italian morphology to denote the masculine, feminine, singular or plural. However, the -u does not function as a linguistic gap for two main reasons according to the authors of *Italiano Inclusivo* (Italiano Inclusivo 2020). Firstly, it does not allow the user to distinguish the singular from the plural which is a key characteristic of Italian morphology for example *il ragazzo* (boy) is singular and “*i ragazzi*” is plural. For nouns and adjectives this distinction is necessary in order to match them in gender and in number. Using the example above, in order to say *tall boy*, I would write *il ragazzo alto* in order to match the masculine singular form from the noun to the adjective. If the -u were to be introduced, it would be unclear if *ragazzu* referred to one person or several. Additionally, the -u is phonetically too similar to the -o which is counterproductive in

the search for a languaging system that distances itself from the masculine centric or binary view of the world. Looking at the IPA vowel chart (pg. 25), we see that –u and –o are both relatively high back vowels meaning that they are produced in similar places in the speaker's mouth so that distinguishing the two can be challenging.

*Italiano Inclusivo* (Italiano Inclusivo 2021) proposes the schwa /ə/ as the existence of the long schwa /ɜ/ and normal schwa /ə/ allows for a writable, pronounceable alternative that is consistent with the existing rules of the language. For English speakers, the schwa is not a foreign phoneme. We find it as the first syllable in “about” [ə'baʊt] used when writing in IPA symbols and may even be the resting or thinking sound for many dialects and speech communities. In English, when we pause or are looking for a sentence filler, we may say “um”. This um sound is a schwa. In Italian, the schwa is less popular and generally only comes up in certain southern *dialetti* such as the Neapolitan and Apulian *dialetti* (Hann 2020).

As linguistic development is concerned, Roman Jakobson highlights an important point. The span in which lexemes and phonology change across the languages of the world are drastically different. Phonology is much more difficult to change and takes much more time. This is why the notion of the linguistic gap is so important. It is essential to find ways to modify and adjust a given language within the parameters of said language. Using the Spanish example of *latine* one can see that such an alternative is easier to put in circulation because it did not require any new sounds. The –e was already used in Spanish but had no morphological value. Whereas I understand that this Italian proposal is not just as simple because words must end in vowels, singular and plural must be denoted, and 4 of the 5 vowels in circulation are already used to denote gender and number. The deep-rooted idea of a national standard is also limiting as it distances phonemes like the schwa from the Italian language with the rationale that it is not found in the “standard Italian.” Teaching against such a standard is an important step in the

pursuit of inclusive language because inclusion must be across the board i.e. race, gender, sexual orientation to be properly executed. Regardless of the necessity for change, there is great resistance from a variety of academics and politicians that use academic, political, and social rationales to justify their opposition.

## **Resistance**

Since the idea of the schwa was first proposed, and *Italiano Inclusivo* entered linguistic conversations in Italy, there has been resistance to the schwa itself and to the idea of change itself. Because of the power of standard modern Italian, it is much more difficult for new variations and new linguistic forms to enter the language. I concur with the notion of the University of Michigan in their Standard Language Statement in which they assert, “Language ideologies and policies that place a standard language variety at the top of other varieties reinforce false linguistic hierarchies and can perpetuate the oppression of users of purported non-standard varieties.” Resistance is the result of the school of thought that standards are static. In the pages that follow, I explain how the governing body of the Italian language and other academics have come to oppose the introduction of the *Italiano Inclusivo* due to fear of distancing from a standard.

Above all, it is important to note that phonetic change happens much more slowly than lexical change. Silke Hamman describes phonetic change as “a gradual shift along a phonetic dimension without any consequences for the phonology” (2015, 272). The most important word from this definition is “gradual” because phonetic change happens over time. Phonetic change is often not noticed due to this gradual shift so an immediate suggestion that changes the phonology is likely to be met with much resistance.

## **Resistance to Change: Accademia della Crusca**

In recent news, there has been much public resistance to the idea of Italiano inclusivo from *L'Accademia della Crusca*, the governing body of the Italian language (D'Achille 2021). The inclusive proposal received pushback in many academic circles (Boni 2021; Casadei 2018; Imperi 2020) including L'Accademia that maintains:

...nell'italiano standard il maschile al plurale è da considerare come genere grammaticale non marcato, per esempio nel caso di participi o aggettivi in frasi come “Maria e Pietro sono stanchi” o “mamma e papà sono usciti.” In oltre, se dico “stasera verranno da me alcuni amici” non significa affatto che la compagnia sarà di soli maschi (invece se dicessi “alcune amiche”, si tratterebbe soltanto di donne). Se qualcuno dichiara di avere “tre figli” sappiamo con certezza solo tra loro c'è un maschio. Se in passato poteva capitare che a un alunno indisciplinato si richiedesse di tornare a scuola il giorno dopo “accompagnato da uno dei genitori”, poteva essere sia il papà sia la mamma a farlo.

In standard Italian, the masculine plural is considered unmarked. For example, in the case of the participles or adjectives in phrases like “Maria e Pietro sono stanchi” or “Mamma e papà sono usciti.” Also, if I say “stasera verranno da me alcuni amici” it does not mean that each member of the group be all men (instead if I said “alcune amiche” it would be only women). If someone claims to have “tre figli” we only know with certainty that there is at least one male among them, unless “maschi” is added. If, in the past, an unruly student were required to return to school the next day “accompagnato da uno dei genitori” it could be either the dad or the mom who did so.

Here, L'Accademia responds to two points that I mention earlier in this thesis – standardization and the masculine plural. These are two driving themes that motivate resistance against an inclusive Italian. L'Accademia argues that inclusive Italian challenges the standard which

denotes that the plural masculine is not solely masculine but serves as an unmarked term that shares form with the masculine plural by coincidence. Proponents of this perspective argue that this “politically correct” approach endangers the Italian language because it challenges the standard. There is a fear that the language will decay if the schwa is introduced. This fear can in large part be attributed to the opponents of the inclusive language who put forth a petition against inclusive Italian and the introduction of the schwa. Where supporters of Inclusive Italian consider the addition of the schwa an example of linguistic advancement, academics such as the president of L’Accademia, argue that these attempts are “abolishing centuries and centuries of linguistic and cultural evolution” (Squires 2022). In other words, what is considered advancement for some is considered a step backwards for others (Cacciari 2022, Arcangeli 2022, Blanquer 2021, Jolivet 2021).

A similar conversation took place in France with the addition of a gender-neutral pronoun “iel” to the dictionary. Likewise, this was met with contention and resistance by leading French academics. One MP, Jean Michel Blanquer, states that such linguistic changes would “destroy French values” (Xu and Ruleman 2021). Comments like that of Blanquer offer a frightening perspective that works to silence the identity of an entire community of speakers and learners. Regardless of personal reservation, this is not a matter of preference of opinion. Nonbinary people exist and not only that, but they are speakers and will be learners of the languages of the world. To deny them the opportunity or even the possibility to be described, represented, and expressive in these languages is unjust.

Such resistance is masked under a linguistic lens but much of it is socially and politically motivated due to language and gender ideologies that bolster the standard. By mere association to the LGBTQ+ movement, the approach of inclusive Italian is met with extreme opposition. Upon being elected Italy’s new premier in 2022, Giorgia Meloni boldly declared that she will

oppose and denounce “gender ideology” and “the LGBT lobby” (NBC News 2022). Once the question of inclusive language becomes one of gender ideology it ceases to solely be a linguistic issue, but it becomes a political issue as well. My discussion of politics here is consistent with a conclusion drawn by Robin Lakoff in “Language, Gender, and Politics” such that “...conventional language practices of the institutions are channeled into new forms, or new functions, in an attempt to dispel that threat or render it innocuous” (Lakoff 2003, 176). New forms are considered a threat to the institution and to standard language. Resistance is the reaction to such changes.

### **Linguists Response**

In addition to the Italian government and L’Accademia della Crusca, linguists have also responded to the resistance to the schwa by linguistic traditionalists. Gigliola Sulis and Vera Gheno are two leading scholars on the debate of language and gender in Italy. This is a debate that has continued over the past 40 years focusing on questions of visibility to the inclusive language that I discuss later in this thesis. In the early stages of the debate, there were many proposals made by Alma Sabatini for more inclusive language practices. Sabatini argues that we talk about men and women differently in terms of positions of power (Sulis and Gheno 2022, 161) For example, a male president would be *il presidente* while a female president may be called *la presidentessa* but this is rejected claiming that it is the same word used to refer to the wife of the president and not the president themselves. This is one example of the ways that language use works to reinforce stereotypes and reinforce false hierarchies.

Continuing the conversation, as it relates to inclusive grammatical practices, the schwa was not the first attempt to create a gender-neutral word ending in Italian. Many attempts were made, including the use of asterisk and the @, for written Italian to create a more inclusive language,



but the discussion continued to circle back to spoken language. If people cannot use the proposal in their daily interactions, it will not work. What was once a question of female visibility has now expanded to become an issue of the visibility of non-binary identities. The structure of the language favors the male voice and in doing so the binary is not only fortified but supported by societal and academic institutions such as l'Accademia della Crusca. As the generic masculine continues to gain support it becomes more and more difficult to convince speakers of the need for change. But since dominant forms have more political power, the strength of the language form and the strength of the hierarchy is maintained.

In 1984, Alma Sabatini wrote a commentary on language and gender in Italian language and society. In *Il sessimo nella lingua italiana (Sexism in the Italian language)*, Sabatini responded to the many ways that structure of the Italian language unintentionally creates an environment of sexism and hierarchy. Her analysis is readily applicable to the non-binary discourse in a modern context because the same linguistic tools used to go against female visibility continue to be used to oppose inclusive language practices. This is in great part due to a fear of change that Sabatini puts thusly:

La lingua è una struttura dinamica che cambia in continuazione. Ciononostante la maggior parte della gente è conservatrice e mostra diffidenza – se non paura – nei confronti dei cambiamenti linguistici, che la offendono perché disturbano le sue abitudini o sembrano una violenza “contro natura”. Toccare la lingua è come toccare la persona stessa. (Sabatini 1987, 97).

Language is a dynamic structure that continues to change. The majority of people are conservative and exhibit distrust – if not fear – towards linguistic change. It offends them because it disturbs their habits and seems like a violence “against nature.” To touch the language is to touch the person.

I concur that language is dynamic, and that language is in constant evolution. Language is one of the central parts of our life because we use language to navigate society. To disrupt that kind of foundation requires attention. It is for this reason that lexical change is often the first attempt before introducing new phonemes into the language. This is precisely what Sabatini proposes. During her discussion, the schwa was not considered, but she proposes new language uses. One of the first proposals she makes is to avoid using the word *uomo* (man) in a universal sense. If the female form is marked, then the male form should be marked as well. If there is no default, then one must signal the gender regardless. She suggests using words like *persona* (person) when in search of a general term but *uomo* should only be used when the subject is in fact a man and not a genderless being to whom one assigns the label *uomo* in an “unmarked way.”

Her second proposal is to avoid using only the “generic masculine” when referring to groups, populations, and categories. For example, in Italian, I could say “*i romani*” in order to refer to the citizens of Rome regardless of their gender. She says that adding a noun to these structures, such as “*il popolo Romano*” (the Roman population) removes the notion of a generic masculine and renders it more accurate and inclusive.

Thirdly, Sabatini proposes to stop placing the masculine form first when referring to men and women. In English, it is common to say, “Ladies and gentlemen,” although also this structure has gone out of use due to its binary nature, but in Italian the masculine form is almost always put first such as in “*fratelli e sorelle*” or “*ragazzi e ragazze*.” However unintentional this may be, it creates a false hierarchy between men and women. By the placing the female form first, the hierarchy is disrupted.

Here I provide only three of Sabatini’s over 20 proposals, but even they were met with skepticism and resistance with Pietro Citati, writer for *Corriere delle Sera* (a daily newspaper

analogous in prestige to the NYT and Washington Post) calling her recommendations “one of the most comedic masterpieces in all of Italian literature” (Sulis and Gheno 2022, 159). Citati’s article entitled, “La lingua perduta delle donne” addresses Inclusive Italian and responds directly to Sabatini’s work. Comments like this are just one example of how inclusive language is considered by many Italians. By being facetious and thus belittling the arguments proposed by trying to make them appear ridiculous and thus dismissible, opponents do not take the need for inclusive language seriously. This thesis is one of many attempts to articulate the serious necessity for human visibility through language.

Sulis and Gheno (2022, 160) also explain that much of the resistance to Inclusive Italian is the result of distrust due to the aggressive linguistic policies set in place by Mussolini in the 1920s. Now there is a fear that linguistic change can result in a new overtaking of the Italian language. During the Fascist era, Mussolini imposed a number of linguistic changes such as the abolition of “Lei”, the formal register of the Italian language. “Lei” came into use because the words for powerful and prominent figures such as *eccellenza* (excellence) and *maestà* (majesty) are grammatically feminine, so the feminine pronoun was adopted as the formal register for addressing elders and people in respected positions. Mussolini replaced the “Lei” in favor of “voi” (formal register) and “tu” (informal register) in an effort to defend the Italian language. The “Lei” form was considered too feminine and not truly Italian by Mussolini because it was modeled after the Spanish language. Mussolini also imposed the censorship of loan words, and, unfortunately, there is a public fear that inclusive Italian is an attempt to impose similar social restrictions on Italian society.

## **Chapter 3 Unraveling the Framework**

### **Inclusive Pedagogy**

Inclusive pedagogy is the necessary and substantial next step in achieving not only an inclusive language but an inclusive society. By changing the way we teach, we can achieve more inclusive linguistic practices that extend from the classroom into social and academic circles that will lead to long term change. There are many examples of inclusive pedagogy, and by bringing together two primary examples of language education, Gender-Just pedagogy and Critical Race pedagogy, I advocate for a more welcoming learning environment for all students of Italian. Because language is not independent of culture, it is the responsibility of educators to account for the societal systems in place that may inhibit the inclusion and accessibility of second language education to all.

Inclusive pedagogy refers to a student-centered approach to teaching that takes into account the various identities, backgrounds, and learning styles that can affect student learning. In the case of this thesis, the background in question is a student's gender identity when learning the Italian language. In this section, I contextualize inclusive practices by pulling from two inclusive pedagogies by two key researchers – Gender-Just pedagogy (Knisely 2022) and Critical Race pedagogy (Anya 2021). Critical Race pedagogy, proposed by Uju Anya, and Gender-Just pedagogy, proposed by Kris Knisely, are two fundamental examples of inclusive teaching approaches that will be beneficial in contextualizing Italian and Italian pedagogy in its current form. Gender-Just pedagogy is an open resource for creating new language and navigating the process. Critical Race pedagogy provides a model for reading one's current teaching practices and teaching materials used and the model serves as a framework or playbook for moving forward. Like any other text, teaching resources are meant to be read in a variety of ways

through a variety of lenses. These paradigms, Gender-Just pedagogy and Critical Race pedagogy, are simply additional lenses through which we can understand how tensions between language and gender in the classroom occur. By tensions, I refer to the struggle of avoiding gender or being gender conscious when teaching a language that either does not afford just inclusivity or does not make it easy for students who may identify outside of the binary conventions of Italian.

### **Gender-Just pedagogy – changing the language**

Gender-just pedagogy is a language education project in which Kris Knisely proposes the benefits and value of a holistic pedagogical approach that focuses on the expansive gender identities and proactive plans for gender justice. Unlike gender-based pedagogy which creates a further divide between male and female students by modifying the instructional approaches based on the different needs of males and females (Chapin and Warne 2020, 1), Gender-Just pedagogy recognizes that “when pedagogies take into account the fullness of our identities, as more than just teachers and learners, we see that students tend to reach higher levels of proficiency” (Knisely 2022, 4). Knisely notes that socially focused and identity engaged pedagogies are important because gender is a social construct that only gains meaning in context. It is the job of educators to ensure that this context is inclusive and affords an accessible learning environment to all students wishing to develop linguistic proficiency. When a student can see themselves in the language, they are more likely to be engaged with the process and thus perform better.

More precisely, Gender-Just pedagogy proposes an approach to teaching that engages with trans knowledges and non-binary language in order to affirm to trans, non-binary and other non-cis people (Knisely 2022, 2). Knisely also proposes a series of strategies for planning to teach inclusive language to a diverse array of students. He accounts for resistance to inclusive

language practices and provides educators with open resources for responding to such resistance. Because the Gender-Just project is meant to be an open resource for World Language Education, Knisely does not propose specific linguistic suggestions for languages other than French and English (Knisely 2022, 2). Knisely offers the reader “an infographic about the benefits of teaching INCL (non-language specific), a starting guide to proactively planning for resistance to teaching INCL (non language specific), and infographics on INCL forms and communication strategies in French” (Knisely 2022, 2). In the case of Italian this translates as the introduction of the schwa into not only the spoken language but also into the curriculum.

Knisely offers a series of benefits to Gender-Just pedagogy. First and foremost, Gender-Just pedagogy is ethical. Regardless of personal convictions, education is an equal opportunity enterprise or at least should be for all students. Within language education, all students need the opportunity to be heard, seen, and understood when they choose to learn a foreign language. To an extent, the United States has adopted an equal opportunity for education policy. Just as anyone is offered an education regardless of background, anyone should be able to learn Italian regardless of their gender identity. Not only that, but the Italian language should afford all students the possibility to be their true selves in Italian just as they should be able to in other languages. Additionally, Gender-Just pedagogy is inclusive of all learners and provides a foundation for contemporary literacy. The current binary and heteronormative linguistic practices used in the classroom are destructive and work to silence a plethora of identities. Just as there are non-binary people in Italy, it is important to provide similar visibility to students wishing to one day visit Italy and communicate with Italians. They should not only be able to describe themselves, but they should have the tools to explain their self-expression to others. Finally, Gender-Just pedagogy provides students with a more robust and more accurate understanding of the language. According to Knisely, “a gender-just approach to language

teaching and learning entails recognizing that there are always multiple ways of doing language, that ways of languaging are contextually specific, and that all ways of language change over time to meet the needs of those how are using language” (Knisely 2022, 7). Language is dynamic and for this reason, it is inaccurate to teach a language that suggests a false static nature to language.

For Italian, I conclude that the most reasonable way to apply the tools from Gender-Just pedagogy would be to use the schwa. However, I do not argue that the schwa become the mandatory default term for Italian learners, but I argue that the lack of option and the rigidity of the binary is problematic and inaccurate to the lived experience of speakers. In order to gain linguistic power to be used by second language learners, it is important that the forms have linguistic power amongst Italians in Italy as well.

### **Critical Race pedagogy** – changing the methods and materials

Critical Race Pedagogy put forth by Uju Anya (2021) is another inclusive pedagogical approach that focuses on the visibility of African American students learning languages. Critical Race Pedagogy is a collection of analyses that demonstrates the continued exclusion of African American students in language programs extending it to all minoritized students. Anya provides a three-step model for reading pedagogical resources to analyze their representational range, positionality, and power proposing changes to make them more inclusive. I use this model to read some of the resources used by the Italian Language Program at Duke University.

Using Critical Race Theory as a framework through which to read problematic language learning practices, Anya argues that “racism is deeply woven into all our educational institutions, practices, and interactions. Racism manifests in language education, for example through raciolinguistic ideologies that lionize the bilingualism of White elite WL [World Language]

learners and problematize that of poor and racially minoritized English learners.” (Anya 2021, 1055). In other words, racism is so engrained into the fabric of our society that we do not recognize at first glance how problematic these language practices are. White learners are praised for being bilingual while English learners are criticized although they possess the same or richer linguistic abilities. It is important to bring these issues to the forefront by fortifying linguistic awareness. By understanding that the system is racist, one can unmask the problems, bring them to the surface, and address them head on. Similarly, it is necessary to understand that Romance languages have binary grammars that create binary conversations leading to binary ideologies which can be active tools in silencing the identity of non-binary learners.

Linguistic racism and linguistic sexism are prevalent because race and gender are socially constructed. Using language to target marginalized communities makes it easier to oppress and discriminate against marginalized groups of people. Anya provides a model for how to analyze language resources using Critical Race pedagogy. The model involves a three-step process in which educators take a deep dive into their own materials to conduct internal critiques:

### *Step 1 Conduct Inquiry*

In the first step of the CRP model, educators conduct an internal analysis of the existing resources and materials connected to the language teaching. This can include textbooks, syllabi, websites, and more. By looking at these resources, educators are able to clearly see and highlight the points of concern in their current practices. One may notice that there are no black students pictured or that all of the vocabulary words can only be related to by upper middle class white families. Anya poses the question “to what extent they [the resources and practices] promote Black student’ meaningful, equitable participation and success in WL [World Language Education]” (Anya 2022, 1065).



### *Step 2 Careful Examination of Power and Inequity*

In the second step, the educator must be self-aware of their own social positioning. In my first year at Duke, there was a controversial Chronicle article about a white female professor teaching a course on Black Feminism. After speaking with students from the class years later, I learned that the issue was not the professor's whiteness but the professor never addressing their whiteness. The same point is pertinent here. Teachers must understand where they relate and where they do not relate. By avoiding the elephant in the room, the exclusive practices may persist. Educators must self-reflect on who they are in order to more adequately connect with students.

### *Step 3 Ideas for Change*

Finally, Anya argues that the most important step is to create tangible change. She explains this change as two-fold – short term and long term. When she came to visit the Romance Studies Department at Duke University, the various representatives of languages were tasked with creating one immediate change and one change that required more time to execute. This step is important because it makes the quest for advocacy and inclusion no longer a point of lip service, but it leads to action.

### **Analysis and Proposal**

Despite Gender-Just pedagogy and Critical Race Pedagogy being two seemingly different approaches to language education they are closely interconnected where the former advocates for changes to the language itself and the latter calls for changes to the methods and materials currently used to educate students in language programs. Knisely focused on French and Anya used Spanish in her analysis, but both are useful in my proposal to create a holistically inclusive Italian pedagogy. Using Knisely for explaining the importance of introducing the schwa to the

Italian language and Anya to conduct a meaningful analysis of the Italian Language Program at Duke, I make my own suggestions for a more inclusive Italian pedagogy.

An inclusive Italian as I understand goes beyond simply adding the schwa to the language rather it requires a deep analysis of the resources shared with students. Due to the lack of sufficient vowels and proximity of the –u and –o in pronunciation across language varieties, I find the schwa to be the most reasonable of the proposals for a more inclusive Italian. For second language speakers coming from the United States, this would not be a difficult addition because the schwa is not a phoneme that is foreign to English. Understanding that this thesis and the proposals within focus on L2 speakers of Italian in the United States, the students will be familiar with the sound and would be able to replicate it. Because the agreement with gender and number is so important in Italian, it is still important to have a plural option graphically. This is why *Italiano Inclusivo* proposes the schwa ə, as a singular ending and the long schwa /ɜ/ for plurals. In spoken language, the context is sufficient in deciphering if the referent is singular or plural as in with the indirect object pronoun *gli* that can refer to a group (a loro piace la pizza >> gli piace la pizza) or a singular person (Ho chiesto a Marco >> Gli ho chiesto). For example, *Lo ragazzə mangia la pizza* would mean one person eats pizza while *L3 raggaz3 mangiano la pizza* would refer to a group of several people also evidenced by the verb in the third person plural form.

The Duke University Italian 101 syllabus opens with *Benvenute e benvenuti* using Sabatini's suggestion of not always leading with the masculine form, but this remains a binary structure. Additionally, it already includes a statement on gender inclusivity, point 27 of its syllabus:

**“27. Exploring Re-gendered and Non-Binary Italian:** Italian, like the other Romance languages, is grammatically gendered. Every noun possesses gender (masculine or

feminine) and every adjective ending, article, past participle, etc. reflects the gender of the noun or pronoun that it is referencing. However, there have been efforts in Italian to offer linguistic solutions to problems of gender hierarchy and binarism. Below are a few of them.”

The statement is written to raise awareness of the binary tradition in Italian and the mismatch between current language practices and non-binary reality. It proposes a range of options so that both professors and students will try to accommodate and find solutions around the binary to help all students feel more comfortable:

- In written Italian, you can replace the ending (of a noun or adjective) with an \* or @. For example, signori (the word for “ladies and gentlemen” - which privileges the masculine plural ending - becomes signor\*. Sono andato (containing the masculine ending for the past participle of the verb) becomes Sono andat\*. The obvious limitation of this method is that it works in written Italian only.
- In spoken Italian, you can use the method of including both masculine and feminine versions of each noun: e.g. signori e signore.
- This method does not challenge the binary, but it is more inclusive and does not privilege one gender over the other.
- Another solution is simply dropping the ending: sono andat-, un ragazz-, molto simpatic-
- There has been some movement towards using the pronoun loro, analogous to the English “they” in place of lui (he) and lei (she).

However, the curriculum itself does not offer options for students to put into practice should they wish. There is no mention of the schwa which has gained much momentum in Italy since its introduction. It is clear from the statement that there is an effort to account for the non-binary in

these classrooms, but I find that the syllabus only notices the problem but does not actively try to fix it within its curriculum.

The program currently uses the *Sentieri* textbook of which I have selected a section to analyze. Given that my interests are in grammatical gender, I analyze the Lesson 1A on Nouns and Articles because it is the textbook's introduction to grammatical gender in the Italian language. I wanted to see how the grammatical gender was introduced to the students and how the binary was framed. In order to do so, I looked at this section from three editions of *Sentieri*. Across the three editions, I found the same language for *Punto di partenza* (Starting Point):

All Italian nouns have gender, even those that refer to objects; they are either masculine or feminine. (Sentieri 2011, 10; Sentieri 2016, 10; Sentieri 2020, 10).

Nouns that refer to males are usually masculine, and those that refer to females are usually feminine. One exception is *persona* (person), a feminine noun that can refer to a man or a woman. (Sentieri 2011, 10; Sentieri 2016, 10; Sentieri 2020, 10).

Immediately from the first mention of grammatical gender in Italian, the student is met with a binary explanation. The masculine and feminine are continuously grouped together and there is no notion or idea that another category could exist. This binary framing is reinforced even more in the second quote that I provide where the authors no longer discuss masculine and feminine in a binary only in terms of the grammar, but they refer to social gender categories or male and female once again in a binary way.

*Sentieri* also confirms the use of generic masculine for students. I found that the first and second editions share the same language whereas, it is updated in the third edition:

When referring to an **all-male group** or a mixed group of males and females, use the masculine plural form. (Sentieri 2011, 11; Sentieri 2016, 11)

When referring to a mixed group of males and females, use the masculine plural.  
(Sentieri 2020, 10).

All three editions put forth the same concept and confirm the binary through the use of the generic masculine. They each choose to define a mixed group as a combination of males and females which creates false binaries. Where the third edition differs is in the exclusion of “all-male group.” This seems like an attempt to slightly move away from the idea that mixed groups and all male groups are discussed in the same way, but the inclusion of binary language confirms the binary regardless so the attempt is still not as inclusive as it should be.

After analyzing the syllabus and the textbook, I propose the following for making the Italian pedagogy used at Duke more inclusive:

1. Increased awareness. L'Accademia says that grammatical gender and natural gender do not coincide (D'Achille 2021). Without explicit language opposing this opinion, it is possible for students to think that this arbitrariness is true. But it is not. Gender as a cultural element carries meaning because of how we are socialized. The syllabus should make students aware of the fact that grammatical gender is problematic by clearly stating that the existence of natural gender categories makes conceptualizing grammatical gender challenging and alienating especially for non-binary speakers.
2. The schwa should be introduced as a valid grapheme for students to use in their coursework. I would suggest adding it as a form already in circulation in the re-gendered and non-binary Italian section of syllabus. This makes students understand the validity of the schwa and provides comfort that they will be heard and understood should they decide to use it.

3. Instructors should provide exercises that include the schwa so that all students learn to recognize it and use it even if they do not identify as non-binary. This makes the classroom an inclusive environment for all students and does not alienate students based on gender identity.
4. Similar to the note in the syllabus, the textbook should include a blurb about the relationship between grammatical gender and social gender in order to adequately communicate the current linguistic situation of the language. This note should be found at the beginning of the textbook when grammatical gender is introduced.
5. The textbook should include mention of the schwa as users in Italy have begun to use it in written language to demonstrate its positionality amongst native speakers as well. Many textbooks have small cultural lessons throughout the textbook and this thesis demonstrates that gender is a cultural element. Teaching students how these conversations of language and gender are unfolding in Italy is important for providing them a holistic representation of the culture and the language.

## **Conclusion**

Gender-inclusive language is more than simply adding gender-neutral forms to the language. I advocate for an approach that aims to change the way that people think about gender. This thesis is an attempt to not only give voice to non-binary people, but in it I hope to communicate why a binary understanding of the world is inaccurate and not functional. Nothing is binary, and language is not fixed. Everything changes, and language is dynamic. Language educators have the responsibility to teach language as it is used and to facilitate a diffusion of thought that expounds upon an array of backgrounds and identities. Not having words to describe oneself is only one roadblock in language education. So many other damaging effects can come from the heteronormative and cisnormative approaches that are currently in place in language education. This linguistic change with regard to gender can reshape the way we understand gender. When we change the way we talk, we change the way we think.

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