1 Introduction to the Element

This Element aims to explore the workings of gender-inclusive language, examining a corpus of tweets in Italian using linguistic strategies that overcome the binary grammatical and social system. The novelty lies in providing a systematic investigation into Italian and, more specifically, the schwa as a gender inclusive strategy; this is seen within the ever-growing literature on inclusivity and underlying reasons why language has a paramount role in societal changes with regard to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, I offer methodological and theoretical reflections by reading the results of the corpus investigation through a triangulation between Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2007) and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) (Partington, Duguit, and Taylor, 2013).

1.1 Language, Gender, and Inclusivity

In my previous work *Gender, Discourse and Ideology in Italian* (Formato, 2019: 73), I argue that 'Italian counts 5 vowels (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u*) and *–u* would be the only one that could be introduced as neutral', while also discussing other strategies (e.g., *). At the time, I was not aware that (a) the *–u* was/is used in the attempt to resolve the binarism of the Italian language and (b) neutrality does not always equal inclusivity. In this Element, I aim to expand on (my) previous work as well as contribute to the emerging field of language inclusivity (in Italian and other languages). The long feminist tradition, started in the 1970s, that challenged the generic masculine(s) is not covered here due to space constraints. However, it is recognised as fundamental in the theoretical, methodological, and investigative apparatuses of this study (in Formato, 2019, I review key notions such as androcentrism, sexism, markedness, and feminism through seminal work, e.g., Cameron, 1995 and Mills, 2008).

In focusing on inclusive strategies beyond the binary, I believe it is important to briefly discuss the term 'inclusivity', conceived to cover many aspects – for example, teaching and learning, race, language diversity (including dialects), disability, and language testing. Here, I consider it in relation to gender and sexuality as conveyed through linguistic strategies. In this Element, I see inclusivity through the lens of morphological gender, which is typical of grammatical gender languages, including Romance ones (e.g., Italian, French, and Spanish). In addition, most languages will have options for considering and achieving inclusivity in relation to gender and sexuality through novel lexical items or syntactic strategies. To this, scholars have been paying attention, and the Gender in Language Project (collecting several languages, among others,

Catalan, Irish, and Tagalog) is only one example.[1] Morphological gender, in brief, refers to morphemes (meaningful units attached to a root) and how they are used to indicate gender (in Italian, morphemes also indicate singular and plural). Morphemes move from the unique grammatical function and become vectors of social gender (ideas, beliefs, attitudes), as explained in the comprehensive literature on language and gender. Traditionally, the morphemes were feminine, masculine, or comprehensive of both grammatical gender (epicenes); in some contexts (e.g., imbalanced workplaces), these morphemes were used in sexist ways – for example, generic masculines (see Formato, 2016, 2019 for Italian). On this topic, Sczesny, Moser, and Wood (2015: 944) argue that exclusive language, precisely generic masculines, 'has far-reaching consequences in restricting the degree of female visibility'.

Visibility has been a core aspect with respect to language and its expressions of social gender. In the search for visibility for women, those who worked on gender and language had as their primary goal to find solutions to *escape* the generic masculines, considering neutrality as one of the good options through words/expressions that would represent groups (e.g., *il corpo docente*/teaching body replacing *professori*/teachers or *professori e professoresse*/male and female teachers) or syntactic changes (e.g., *chi lavora con l'insegnamento*/those who work in teaching). However, as research in this field evolved, as well as the awareness of speakers' selves, neutrality seems to dismiss (i) identity work in self-representation and representation of others; (ii) the expression of beliefs, ideas, and attitudes towards personal and social understandings of binary and non-binary gender. Therefore, neutrality and inclusivity are related, but they cannot be interchangeable in my view, specifically in the notion of motivation (Abbou, 2011), which are the *whys* we engage in some linguistic choices rather than others (I discussed this through concepts such as 'availability' and 'use' in Formato, 2019). Abbou (2011: 60) contemplates two options – that is, a language used to 'refer to human beings without distinguishing between what is clearly linked to the social gender of particular people and what is not' and 'using both the feminine or masculine forms when the reality being referred to includes both men and women', yet the terms 'inclusive/inclusivity' are never mentioned. Returning to the notion of motivation, we must acknowledge that it would be challenging to measure the motivations of the speakers because these can be different from context to context and from interaction to interaction. However, we can reflect on why speakers (might) choose neutrality (e.g., *chi lavora*, those who work) or/over inclusivity (through morphological strategies) and vice versa. Clarity on terminology is thus needed,

[1] www.genderinlanguage.com/about.

whether about work done in the past to make women visible or the new efforts in a broader understanding of social gender and language. Concerning the former, the term 'gendered language' (as also discussed in Formato and Somma, 2023) has been used to describe the working of symmetrical uses of feminine and masculine forms, stemming from the *traditional* views of sexist language. Normativity, with respect to the binary (linguistically and socially), is central to this debate. Kolek (2022: 267) argues that the gender binary still occupies a major role and is regularly and steadily 'constructed, reproduced, naturalised and institutionalised'. Similarly, Leap (2003: 403) argues that 'gender is closely tied to assumptions of normativity that assign value to all forms of subject position within the social setting', urging ways to dismantle this normativity. Allen and Mendez (2018: 70) explain that 'heteronormativity has fundamentally, primarily, and historically privileged cisgender men and women, heterosexuality, and nuclear families', arguably portraying values meaningful across several cultures.

Efforts to disassemble and undo normativities, globally and glocally, are at the centre of inclusive language. To understand how inclusivity in language is being dealt with, I here provide an overview of the terminology discussed in the current literature; I then explain why 'gender inclusive language' is the term I chose for the study presented in Section 2. This term is not novel, as many other scholars have framed their work as gender inclusive language (in French, see Kosnick, 2019; in Spanish, see Bonnin and Coronel, 2021; Slemp, 2021; Slemp, Black, and Cortiana, 2020; in Slovene, see Popič and Gorjanc, 2018).

Gender inclusive language has also been used for languages categorised as *having* natural gender, such as English.[2] For instance, in the work by Pauwels and Winter (2006), the focus is on generic pronouns; similarly, the study of pronouns is also referred to as non-binary pronouns (Hekanaho, 2022; Konnelly, Bjorkman, and Airton, 2022) or epicene pronouns. Before the topic of inclusive language captured the full attention of some scholars, it was not unusual to see the labels 'anti-sexist' language (Lomotey, 2018), 'non-sexist' language (as suggested by Kolek, 2022), 'gender fluid' language (Lange, 2022), and 'gender-fair/er' language (Formato, 2019; Renström et al., 2022; in German *geschelechtegerecht*, Lange, 2022; in Swedish *könsmässigt spark* as reported by Bonnin and Coronel, 2021).

Écriture inclusif (EI, inclusive writing, Kosnick, 2019; Burnett and Pozniak, 2021) is used for French, where the focus is on the register in which it appears. The reference to writing seems paramount as one of the criticisms some

[2] The term 'natural' as in natural gender languages has been contested in more recent literature (Kinsley and Russell, 2024: 49) because it suggests that gender and sex are 'aprioristically construed as natural'.

inclusive linguistic devices receive is their unsuitability to be pronounced in spoken discourse (Formato and Somma, 2023). Phenomena in French and Spanish are also labelled *non-binaire* (Kosnick, 2019) and *non-binario*, respectively. Kolek (2022) also employs the term 'nonbinary Czech' (or, in the original language, *nebinární čeština*). These terms, in turn, focus on a more direct suggestion as to what linguistic devices can achieve: breaking the normative binary and moving to a (grammatical) non-binary system. It might also suggest that the devices are useful for some people, those who identify as non-binary, possibly foregrounding their self-representation. In further exploring the literature, I also came across the term 'pangender' (Sheydaei, 2021), yet exclusively referring to the third person singular pronouns, and Zimman (2017) uses the label 'trans affirmative language', focusing on how language can be part of an individual's transition. Kolek (2022) traces the steps of some other terms, such as 'nonheteronormative language', also used by Motschenbacher (2014) and 'gender-neutral language' (as in the case of Slovak). The former, 'nonheteronormative language', functions similarly to non-binary, as heteronormative is the gate that kept gendered identities (other than the cis women and men) outside, while the term 'neutral', in my opinion, seems to somewhat disregard social gender, as the term 'neutral/neutrality' might not reflect the nuances of a gender-loaded debate. Cordoba (2022) uses 'gender-neutral language' to justify his research on non-binary identities through interviews and corpus linguistics analyses. In other words, neutrality seems to refer to the linguistic work that some strategies do in removing and substituting the traditional grammatical morphological units (masculine and feminine). This interrogates us on the grammatical binary (masculine/feminine), constructed as the exclusive *carrier* of gender, therefore, suggesting that strategies such as the schwa in Italian (*–x/–e* in Spanish and Portuguese, or *point médian* in French) are neutralising gender in its entirety rather than portraying a different understanding of it (grammatically and socially). While theoretically valid, and an established term in the literature, the criticisms towards neutrality expressed here are exclusively aimed at rethinking how we can identify the connections of the language phenomenon mirroring the social contexts within the understanding of grammatical and social gender. I cannot exclude that 'gender-neutral' and 'gender-inclusive' might be perceived differently by the audience, yet I believe the word 'neutral' might miss some core points. Through this argument, I see 'non-gendered language' (Bonnin and Coronel 2021) as a similarly problematic term. Bogetić (2022a, 2022b) uses 'gender-sensitive language' in her work on Serbian, which I recognise as a valuable and viable alternative to 'gender-inclusive language'. It seems it could work even when translated into Italian, *linguaggio sensibile al genere*.

For reasons stemming from these reflections, I decided to use 'gender inclusive' language in this Element, as inclusivity is, in my opinion, an aspect of the deliberate efforts of the speaker in including people for long and, in many capacities, excluded.

I am aware that, in the Italian debate, the term 'inclusivity' has been approached with caution. Acanfora (2022), an author who writes on disability, autism, and neurodivergence, explains that

> il concetto di inclusione è discriminatorio in quanto suppone che il gruppo che include sia più potente o migliore di quello che viene incluso. È un atto che viene concesso e quindi può anche essere interrotto o revocato, sottolineando che il potere di accogliere le minoranze (e le condizioni a cui vengono eventualmente accolte) è nelle mani di chi include' (the notion of inclusion is discriminatory in that it suggests that the groups that includes is the more powerful or the best of those who are included. It is something that this group gives (to the less powerful group) that can be interrupted or revoked, highlighting that the power to welcome minorities (and the conditions to which these people are welcome) is in the hands of those who include). (my translation)[3]

While this is an important point, I think we can look at this narrative from a different point of view. Those who use language to include are more likely aware of the(ir) privileges, moving away from them, also by factoring in those who have been discriminated against in society; I wish to suggest that speakers choosing gender inclusive language have solid intentions. Furthermore, everyone can use and claim to use *linguaggio inclusivo*: people who are allying with the *cause*, people who do not recognise themselves in the binary, and those who, for many reasons, do not wish to associate themselves with binarism in grammatical gender. In some circumstances, those who work with the Spanish language have also proposed the term *incluyente* (one that includes) rather than *inclusivo* (inclusive), yet sometimes used only to refer to the inclusion of feminine nouns (or more generally, a language fairer to women).[4] In Italian, I have recently observed the use of *linguaggio ampio* (broad language) by Italian linguists and activists.[5] However, I argue that this does not embody the political relevance of what it means for the speakers and those who/what the speakers are foregrounding – that is, a world that is moving away from the binary as well as from its legacy (heterosexism and heteronormativity). While I believe that this discussion deserves more space, I here suggest that the

[3] www.fabrizioacanfora.eu/la-convivenza-delle-differenze.

[4] C. Guichard Bello (2015). *Manual de comunicación no sexista: Hacia un lenguaje incluyente*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres. http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos_download/101265.pdf.

[5] https://rewriters.it/linguaggio-ampio-sette-spunti-piu-uno-per-allargare-il-campo.

differences and similarities of terms cannot be detached from the differences in how each language is grammatically organised, what context is under investigation, and what speakers are being examined. Similarly, Kinsley and Russell (2024) explain that terms may vary based on the project being carried out or on the researchers' positionalities and stances.

I also reflected on whether the hyphen or the lack of it could be considered meaningful; in other words, whether a choice between 'gender-inclusive' language or 'gender inclusive' had to be made, with the hyphen seen as creating a relationship between the two terms. Starting from what was discussed for Italian, 'gender-inclusive' language could signal that inclusivity is connected to gender in a more fine-grained way than, perhaps, non-hyphened 'gender inclusive' language. To conclude, I decided to use 'gender inclusive' language and 'gender-inclusive' language interchangeably and as comprehensive options for this study, where the schwa is mainly used as a generic strategy rather than one exclusively employed for self-representation (for which, possibly, 'non-binary language' would be more suitable). In addition to this, it also encapsulates the speaker's motivation (inclusivity). In the following subsection, I trace some core elements of the relation among inclusivity, language, and society.

1.2 The Relevance of Gender Inclusive Language

In this subsection, I aim to explore the theoretical underpinnings of gender-inclusive language, as these will be paramount to unravelling the investigation of its use in Section 2. I draw on the topic from a worldwide perspective, emphasising the common traits scholars have considered central in their work. This topic is gaining increasing attention: the Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference 28, held at the University of Catania (Italy) in 2022, offered two parallel sessions and some other talks; at Lavender 29 in 2023, hosted at the University of Idaho (US), at least eight talks were discussing inclusive language (under different terminology) in several contexts (German, Danish, Spanish). In addition to this, the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* (volume 11, issue 2, 2022) published eight articles on non-binary language or (epicene) pronouns, and more recently, six chapters on pronouns and gender have been included in a handbook focusing on pronouns (Paterson, 2023). Moreover, the *Journal of Gender and Language* published an issue on gender inclusivity in language in Central and Eastern Europe (volume 16, issue 3, 2022).

In approaching the literature, one aspect comes to the fore: the many languages and contexts dealt with. More work is happening outside the anglophone academia, with many countries debating this topic in national circles and languages other than English (as is the case for Italian; see Section 2.3).

In a similar fashion, as it was/is for gendered language, visibility is central to the debate on gender inclusive language. With respect to this, there are two positions on visibility, one opposing the other: an extended visibility that opens to LGBTQIA+ communities and, for some, a visibility that excludes women. Most researchers, including myself, believe that extended visibility is an important step in granting legitimisation to people who are discriminated against on the basis of gender, sexuality, and gender identity.

Pershai (2017: 56) adds that, in making everyone visible, gender inclusive language is respectful and adequate; specifically, this new language 'gives a space' to people to recognise themselves. Similarly, Kolek (2022) suggests that inclusive language (referred to as nonbinary Czech) *creates* (the) space, adding an interesting layer to the debate, as *giving* could be seen as a concession of the most powerful groups (as debated earlier in this Element). The work by Pershai (2017) is mostly centred around language for transgender people and raises an important question: *Is inclusive language a solution?* I question whether having a yes/no answer would be useful, disregarding the complexity of societal forces, cultural nuances, and how language interacts and/or disrupts these.

In recognising that language can be *twisted*, even when meant to be inclusive, I convincingly argue that having options to make people visible is a step towards welcoming spaces for groups who have suffered, and still do, fierce discrimination at personal, family-related, and institutional levels. Similarly, Kolek (2022) sees the relation between language and society as paramount, arguing that a language that moves away from the binary does challenge traditional social perceptions of groups of people. Kinsley and Russell (2024: 35) define the links between the use of language and society as 'linguacultural' to mean context, but also specific ones (Italy, in my case).

It is worth mentioning that social forces, perceptions, and contexts cannot be exempted from politics and its ideologies. Bogetić (2022b: 5) explains how the debate around gender (and language) must be seen through the ideological currency (as in political terms) and the symbolic role, acknowledging that a sharp polarisation exists between those who embrace the notion of gender and those who fight against it. It is not surprising that more conservative political parties and those that are explicitly and implicitly far-right construct gender as 'a threat to the national fabric' (Bogetić, 2022b: 5). This is also defined by Borba, Hall, and Miramoto (2020) as the 'politics of enmity', borrowing the term and the underpinnings from Mbembe. Far-right groups and political parties *offer* to be 'self-identified guardians of good morals' (Borba et al., 2020: 3) in the fight against the enemy, the so-called gender ideology/gender theory. Similarly, Borba (2019), in investigating the use of the inclusive *–x* (*alunx*) in a Brazilian school,

convincingly explains how (far-right aligned) opponents manipulate the use of this linguistic device to amplify discourses around threats to the status quo and *a* fear of difference. In unleashing such discourses, inclusive language is used, transnationally, by far-right populist groups to construct 'a moral panic' (Borba, 2019: 435) – that is, 'when some social phenomenon or problem is suddenly foregrounded in public discourse and discussed in an obsessive, moralistic and alarmist manner, as if it betokened some imminent catastrophe' (Cameron, 1995: 83).

Recently, the Conservative Party in the UK published an appeal to ban gender-neutral language as part of its campaign to attack transgender people and, in February 2024, the president of Argentina, Milei, banned gender inclusive language from official governmental documents.[6] Some Italian far-right activists are suggesting that Italy should consider similar actions, contributing to fuel anti-trans rhetoric (e.g., bathroom discourse). From a different political perspective, the liberal president of France, Macron, has explained the unnecessity of gender inclusive language. Concerning this transnational dimension, I find the term 'repatriarchalisation' (Bogetić, 2022a, 2022b) very useful; it suggests that newer ways to attack those who do not form part of the dominant group, or dominant policies, are developed to re-establish an order that still perceives masculinity as the main value. In Borba (2022), it can be seen how the narratives against a revaluation of gendered fixed roles flourish; it is indeed interesting that the terminology used to attack the revaluation is drawing on terms of their opposed communities as in the case of 'gender ideology' (called grafting; Bogetić, 2022b; Borba, 2022). Borba (2022: 60) explains this eloquently: '"Anti-genderists" creative semantic engineering appends their meanings onto well-established rights and anti-discrimination repertoires.'

Borba offers a comprehensive account of terminology and considers the terms anti-genderists use as a register, described as a 'conventionalised aggregate of co-occurring expressive forms and enactable person-types' (60). Institutions (such as the church), political parties, and mainstream media use this register.[7] The threat to the heteropatriarchal family is at the core of the attacks, specifically in countries such as Italy (as explained in Section 2). Biology-based claims are made to reaffirm the traditionally gendered status quo through 'the defense of an essentialist view of identity, sexuality and desire' (Borba, 2022: 67).

[6] www.boletinoficial.gob.ar/detalleAviso/primera/304017/20240226?busqueda=2.

[7] In March 2024, Pope Francis suggested that the most awful danger nowadays is gender ideology. www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2024/03/01/video/papa_francesco_lideologia_gender_e_il_pericolo_piu_brutto_del_nostro_tempo-14112293.