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WHICH IS THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL? EVALUATING GENDER-FAIR STRATEGIES IN ITALIAN¹

abstract

Gender-unfair language gives rise to injustice towards both women and non-binary people. Different strategies have been proposed to overcome this injustice, but which is the “best”? In this paper, I will approach this question from a normative perspective, taking into account practical and ethical aspects. I’ll first assess the feasibility and redundancy of the various strategies. Through this lens, no strategy stands out as the best, but each is best suited for specific contexts. I thus argue for a pluralistic approach relying on multiple strategies. I further propose to combine more of them in the same text. This solution is the most efficient, but not the fairest: when considering ethical aspects, most strategies turn out inadequate. Only gender-neutral paraphrases, namely what I call “conservative neutrality”, are truly fair both towards women and non-binary people. I conclude by proposing an adjustment to such a strategy to counterbalance its practical shortcomings. Whether such a proposal will be taken on board by speakers is an empirical question that goes beyond the scope of this paper: my goal here is to provide reasons that could guide speakers’ decisions rather than arguing for which strategies are more likely to spread.

keywords

injustice, gender-fair language, neutrality, visibility, innovative strategies

1 The thesis argued for here was inspired by designing the course “Come evitare il sessismo nella lingua italiana” I taught at the University of Milan from 2021 to 2023 and by the great discussions with my students, to whom I’m deeply thankful. I presented the ideas developed here in 2022 at the “Sessismo e anti-sessismo nel linguaggio: usi e abusi” workshop in Turin, at the San Raffaele University Gender Lunch Seminars, and at the SWIP Italy Conference, whose audiences I’d like to thank. In particular, I wish to thank Michele Lubrano, who, as discussant for my paper in the “Sessismo e anti-sessismo nel linguaggio” workshop, raised interesting points on the issue. I would also like to thank Andrea Iacona for his comments on the paper and a helpful discussion. Furthermore, I thank the editors of this special issue and an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify my approach and improve my paper.

Introduction That of gender-fair language is a lively debated topic (see Gheno 2022, Giusti 2022, and Thornton 2022, among others). Expressing oneself in a gender-fair way is especially difficult in languages like Italian, which is heavily gender-loaded (i.e., it has a great number of gendered terms, including nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and articles) and has a binary grammatical system (i.e., it only has two genders, the masculine and the feminine). While the grammatical gender of terms for inanimate referents is not semantically motivated, when the referent is human, the term's grammatical gender generally corresponds to its referent's gender (see Corbett 1991, especially chapters 2-3; Marcato and Thune 2002; and Thornton 2022).¹ However, this is not always the case. In Rosola (2024), I identified two types of discrepancies, i.e., mismatches between a term's and its referent's gender, that arise in such a language. *Usage discrepancies* are due to the speaker's (mis)use of language and comprise reference to women through masculine words; *structural discrepancies*, instead, depend on the very structure of the language and cover the systematic misgendering of non-binary people via binary words. I argued that such discrepancies give rise to a distinctive type of injustice, rooted in language. In this paper, I will focus on possible ways to overcome this injustice. While usage and structural discrepancies in principle arise for any heavily gender-loaded language with a binary grammatical system, I will not consider all such languages, but I'll focus on Italian as a case study. All the examples, then, will be in Italian. Focusing on a case study is an appropriate methodology for my goal, namely to provide a critical analysis of the different ways in which one could avoid the discrepancies and the injustice they give rise to. To this end, I adopt a philosophical rather than a sociolinguistic approach, and in particular I take a normative perspective on this issue, offering a critical evaluation of the strategies that could help speakers in choosing which strategy to use. To this end, I will evaluate the types of strategies in general with respect to both practical and ethical considerations.

Various strategies have been put forward to thwart linguistic injustices. Traditionally, they have been distinguished between *visibility* and *neutrality* strategies (see European Parliament 2018 and Robustelli 2012, among others). Visibility strategies consist in making gender visible, as in “tutti e tutte” (everyone:M and everyone:F); neutrality ones aim at avoiding expressing

¹ A few personal nouns, though, have a fixed grammatical gender that is independent of their referent's gender: “persona” (person) and “individuo” (individual) are, respectively, feminine and masculine regardless of their referents' gender.

the referent's gender in linguistic elements and rely on words and constructions that do not disclose this information, as “tutte le persone” (every person).² Furthermore, recently speakers have started to substitute gender suffixes on words for novel gender-neutral markers (see Comandini 2021), e.g., substituting “i” in “tutti” (everyone:M) for “ə”, yielding “tuttə” (everyone:INN) (see Gheno 2020 for a complete list).³ But how can we categorize such strategies? Where do they fall in the visibility vs neutrality divide? As González Vázquez et al. (2024) highlighted, it depends on how they are used: if, e.g., “tutt*” is used to refer to a mixed-gender group, gender is neutralized; if “tutt*, tutte, e tutti” (triple splitting) is used, instead, gender is made visible. Drawing on their proposal, I will call the former strategy “innovative visibility” and the latter “innovative neutrality” (see also Rosola et al. 2023).

Among this plethora of possibilities, which should one choose? I adopt a normative approach and critically analyze the different strategies, focusing on two dimensions: practical and ethical. When considering practical aspects, I argue, no strategy stands out as the best overall. My proposal is to adopt a pluralistic approach and use different solutions in different contexts. For instance, conservative strategies are better suited to formal contexts where adherence to standard linguistic norms is especially important, but innovative neutrality is the best fit for length-constrained texts since it is as long as its masculine counterpart. Crucially, the different strategies are not mutually exclusive, and combining them can minimize the cons and maximize the pros of each one. In particular, I argue that using innovative strategies here and there in the text and adopting conservative neutrality elsewhere does not significantly increase the text length nor compromise readability as using them throughout the text would.

If, however, we focus on the ethical facet of the question, and ask what strategy better respects all the groups concerned, this solution reveals defective: neither version of the innovative strategy is fully fair. Innovative visibility is inegalitarian towards non-binary people (see Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 2021), but innovative neutrality gives rise to a usage discrepancy when women are (possible or actual) referents. The fairest solution seems to be conservative neutrality. It may not, however, be effective enough in achieving its goal as it risks going unnoticed (see Giusti 2022). I will conclude by suggesting a precaution to prevent this: using here and there some unnatural expressions, to make the use of a gender-fair strategy evident.

In section 1, I briefly introduce the crucial features of Italian and present the problematic discrepancies, both in use and structure. Section 2 will provide an overview of the gender-fair language strategies in Italian and their characteristics. In section 3, I will lay out my proposal. I will start by raising a few issues each strategy will be confronted with and propose a set of criteria for choosing which strategy to use. I will then propose to combine multiple strategies to maximize the practical advantages of each. When fairness is factored in, though, such a proposal turns out to be unsatisfactory. I will conclude by proposing to use an amended version of conservative neutrality that employs unnatural expressions in order to prevent it from going unnoticed.

Italian is a grammatical gender language (see Stahlberg et al. 2007). Such languages are heavily gender-loaded: they mark gender not only on pronouns but also on nouns, even those with inanimate referents. While, as shown by Corbett (1991), the grammatical gender of nouns with inanimate referents is not semantically motivated, that of personal nouns

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2 When relevant, I indicate grammatical gender following The Leipzig Glossing Rules (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>).

3 I indicate the innovative forms as “INN” in the glosses.

reflects the referent's gender, save for very few exceptions. That is, a noun will be masculine when referring to a man and feminine when referring to a woman: one would say “Il maestro Mauro” (the.M teacher:M Mauro) and “La maestra Lucia” (the.F teacher:F Lucia), where the noun for teacher and the definite article are both masculine in the first case as they refer to a man, Mauro, and feminine in the second, as they refer to a woman, Lucia.

There are a few exceptions to this rule, some linguistically motivated (loan words, catachresis, meaning extension...) and others due to extra-linguistic reasons. In particular, certain job titles are only used in the masculine even when referring to women. This use was already attested by Alma Sabatini in 1987 and recent works (see, e.g., Cignarella et al. 2021) highlight how it is still in place.⁴ Furthermore, generic or unknown individuals, which may be of any gender, are conventionally referred to with masculine terms and the same goes for mixed-gender groups that are partially composed of women (see Sabatini 1987 and Robustelli 2014, among others). Moreover, notwithstanding the increasing visibility of non-binary people in society, no form can reflect their gender given that Italian only has two grammatical genders, namely, the feminine and the masculine. Since non-binary people do not identify as women or men *simpliciter*, neither of the available options corresponds to their gender. Furthermore, given that all nouns are gendered, it's not possible to simply use a gender-neutral noun as one does in English. Hence, no noun referring to non-binary people reflects its referent's gender. The latter type of discrepancy, thus, directly depends on the structural feature of the language (i.e., its heavy gender marking joined with a binary gender system). For this reason, I proposed to call them *structural discrepancies* (Rosola forthcoming). Since the discrepancies arising with respect to women referents depend on the speakers' choices, I label them *usage discrepancies* (Rosola forthcoming).

Several scholars and activists have argued that these discrepancies are problematic (see Mills 2008, Saul and Díaz-León 2016, and Formato 2019, among others). They are, indeed, asymmetric and convey an unfair view of gender roles. For instance, men are never referred to with feminine words, not even when they are only a small minority of a group.⁵ The presence of just one man in a group suffices for the masculine to be used, irrespective of the proportion of members of other genders (Sabatini 1987: 45). Moreover, such asymmetric uses highlight the presence of men at the expense of others and convey a problematic message:

When masculine forms are used to refer to, address, and talk about women, one can argue that (intentionally or not), they have the tendency to conceal the fact that it is a *woman* operating in what is deemed to be, and/or accepted as, a male role, thus diminishing their position and their contribution in the workplace, and reflecting their lesser role in society or, more broadly speaking, their societal roles (Pauwels 1998, 2003; Sunderland 2004). (Formato 2019: 56).

While a vast scholarship concerns the problematicity of these discrepancies (see Saul and Díaz-León 2016 for an overview), in this paper, I will focus instead on the (many) strategies proposed to overcome them. After presenting the different strategies on the market, I'll

⁴ Probably the most striking case is that of “medica” (physician:F), that does not occur at all as a noun in itTenTen20 while its masculine counterpart occurs 52.484 times in the same corpus.

⁵ The only apparent counterexample is constituted by cases in which men are referred to by feminine epicene words such as “la persona” (the.F person:F). These cases, however, do not constitute genuine counterexamples because epicene nouns only have one grammatical gender, that is independent of their referents' gender: it is deeply different from using a masculine job title for a woman in traditionally masculine professions or using a masculine plural for a mixed-gender group when its feminine form would be used for an all-women group.

critically evaluate them, highlighting their pros and cons.

Not all discrepancies can be avoided in the same way nor are equally easy to avert. The discrepancy arising when women are referred to with masculine job titles can be avoided just by using the job title in the feminine form, which can be formed via the standard morphological rules when not already available. Such a solution, though, is not possible for referring to non-binary people given that, as mentioned, Italian lacks a non-binary form. Moreover, avoiding discrepancies with respect to unknown or generic referents and to mixed-gender groups requires a more complex solution. These cases, indeed, feature multiple or indeterminate referents.

Several strategies have been proposed for Italian to deal with such cases. Traditionally, they are grouped into visibility (labeled “visibilità” in Robustelli 2012; “engendering” in Fontanella 2019; “gender specification” in Mills 2008) and neutrality (labeled “oscuramento” in Robustelli 2012; “degendering” in Fontanella 2019; “gender neutralisation” in Mills 2008). Visibility strategies consist, as the word suggests, of making gender visible, highlighting the different genders through linguistic elements. Mainly, this amounts to repeating a term in various gender forms, e.g., “Tutti e tutte hanno risposto” (Everyone.M and everyone.F replied). Neutrality strategies, instead, aim at avoiding semantic gender marking, namely the one expressing the referent’s gender in linguistic elements. For instance, one can rephrase “I Professori votano” (The.M Professors:M vote) as “Il personale docente vota” (The teaching staff votes).

While the solutions surveyed so far rely on the existing resources of Italian, other proposals, such as the use of “-u” or “-ə” instead of gendered suffixes, introduce new gender markers. For instance, this amounts to changing “tutti” (everyone.M) for “tuttu” or “tuttə” (everyone.INN), by substituting the masculine suffix “i” of “tutti” for the new gender markers “-u” and “-ə”, respectively. González Vázquez et al. (2024) propose to group these solutions in a further category, that of *innovative* strategies, so labeled as they involve a change, an innovation, in the linguistic resources of a language. Depending on how they are used, whether together with gendered forms or by themselves, these strategies can either make gender visible or neutralize it. Hence, this category crosscuts the previous ones. The resulting is a fourfold taxonomy that emerges from two intersecting criteria: first, whether the strategy makes semantic gender visible or neutralizes it (*visibility/neutrality*); second, whether the strategy relies on existing linguistic resources or introduces new ones (*conservative/innovative*).

In the next subsections, I will present the main visibility and neutrality strategies and their respective distinctive features. In the following subsection, I will show how innovative strategies can make gender visible or neutralize it. Finally, I will propose a way to combine different strategies, showing how this can make it possible to avoid all the discrepancies and make the most of each strategy’s advantages.

2.1 Visibility

The main visibility strategy is double splitting, that is, repeating the same noun in both feminine and masculine forms (see Robustelli 2012: 21). Importantly, due to the characteristics of Italian, namely that (almost) every noun, article, and adjective is gendered, repeating both forms means doubling most elements of a sentence. Hence, “Gli alunni sono bravi” (The.M pupils:M are good.M) becomes “Gli alunni e le alunne sono bravi e brave” (The.M pupils:M and the.F pupils:F are good.M and good.F) or “Le alunne e gli alunni sono brave e bravi” (The.F pupils:F and the.M pupils:M are good.F and good.M), depending on what gendered form one starts with.

The result is definitely wordier and longer than the version with the masculine only. This makes it particularly difficult to use in contexts where brevity is crucial, such as titles, slogans, advertising, and any text subject to a word limit. Some variants of double splitting are more

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concise and, thus, less problematic for length-constrained texts. One quite common solution, for instance, is to only split determiners and suffixes: “Gli/le alunni/e sono bravi/e” (The.M/the.F pupils:M/F are good.M/F) or “Le/gli alunne/i sono brave/i” (The.F/the.M pupils:F/M are good.F/M). However, this type of splitting is difficult to pronounce, making it a bad option for speech writing. Moreover, given that this form is not provided by standard writing rules, is not advisable for formal writing.

All the variants of splitting, moreover, pose a new problem, namely what order should the forms come in. At first, the only possibilities seem to be either to put the feminine or the masculine first. As Gygax et al. (2021, chapter 3) highlight, though, both are problematic: on the one hand, using the masculine first could reflect a (possibly unconscious) tendency to consider men more important given that, typically, we mention the most important entities first (see Hegarty et al. 2016). On the other hand, preposing the feminine could be a form of chivalry, a benevolent form of sexism (see Glick and Fiske 2001). One way out, I argue, could be to choose what form to start with not based on its gender but on alphabetical order, as Treccani vocabulary did for headwords with both gender forms in its 2022 edition. This would mean that in some cases it’s the feminine to come first, as in “ragazze e ragazzi” (girls and boys), and vice versa in others, as in “i ragazzi e le ragazze” (the.M boys and the.F girls). Crucially, neither option would be motivated by (benevolent or hostile) ideology as they are due to an independent criterion, namely alphabetical order. So, there seems to be a solution to the order problem.

However, a further, more severe, issue arises for double splitting: far from overcoming structural discrepancies and correctly referring to non-binary people, it reinforces binarism as it repeats both feminine and masculine forms as if they exhaust all the possibilities. Unlike the previous limitations, this one does not merely concern the practical application of this strategy but rather an ethical aspect as it worsens, instead of avoiding, a problematic representation of gender: it contributes to the invisibilization of non-binary people by depicting gender as solely binary.

A different visibility strategy that does not reinforce binarism is the universal feminine, namely the use of feminine forms for mixed-gender groups and unknown or generic referents as in the examples below:

- 1)
 - a) Una Professoressa insegna. (A.F Professor:F teaches)
 - b) Qualcuna ha vinto? (Did anyone.F win?)
 - c) Non so chi è stata. (I don’t know who did.F it)
 - d) Tutte le alunne sono state promosse. (All.F the pupils:F passed.F)

Despite not reinforcing binarism, though, this strategy doesn’t overcome structural discrepancies. More generally, the universal feminine does not overcome the discrepancies: it merely changes the cases in which they arise, namely, with respect to individuals or group members of non-binary or *masculine*, rather than feminine, gender. While discrepancies with respect to men are arguably less problematic than those with respect to women because they do not add up to discrimination at the societal level, the worry that the universal feminine doesn’t provide a solution for talking about non-binary people stands.

Neutrality strategies, instead, do offer a way to avoid structural discrepancies too. I’ll turn to these strategies in the next subsection.

2.2 Neutrality

As mentioned above, neutrality consists in avoiding semantic gender marking altogether.

Given its heavy gender-loading, neutrality is really difficult to achieve in Italian. While difficult, though, it is not impossible: there are some ways to bypass semantically gendered expressions.

The first way to do that is to use nouns that are *invariable for gender*, such as “insegnante” (teacher), or invariable for gender only in the singular, such as “artista” (artist) whose plurals are “artiste”, in the feminine, and “artisti”, in the masculine. Since these nouns have only one form for both the masculine and the feminine (only in the singular, for the second group), their grammatical gender is only visible in agreement targets such as articles and adjectives. Moreover, some agreement targets are not overtly marked for gender (e.g., numerals greater than one and II class adjectives, namely those ending in “-e” in the singular, like “felice”) and others, in certain contexts, are optional (e.g., articles in conjunctions) or indistinguishable (e.g., definite articles before vowels). So, a sentence with invariable nouns and such agreement targets lacks overt gender marking.

For some groups, moreover, *collective nouns* are available, which don’t reflect the gender of the group members: unlike “i cittadini” (the.M citizens:M) or “i lavoratori” (the.M workers:M), which are in the masculine for all-men and mixed-gender groups but in the feminine for all-women groups, “cittadinanza” (citizenry) and “personale” (staff) have only one form that can refer to any single-gender and mixed-gender group alike.

Furthermore, nouns have a *fixed grammatical gender*, that is not semantic as it is independent of their referent’s gender. For instance, “persona” (person) is feminine, and “individuo” (individual) is masculine, and they can both refer to people of any gender. These nouns can be coupled with others to construct *gender-neutral periphrases*: “a tutte le persone presenti” (to all present people) can refer to anyone and does not give information on the referents’ gender, unlike “a tutti i presenti” (to all.M the.M presents:M) which doesn’t include “persone” (people) and employs the masculine, giving rise to discrepancies.

Another way to create gender-neutral periphrases is by using *ungendered pronouns* such as “qualunque” (any), “chi” (who), or “coloro” (those who). For instance, one can avoid the generic masculine “il lettore” (the.M reader:M) by using the gender-neutral expression “chi legge” (the one who reads).

Finally, one can modify a sentence to *avoid personal reference altogether*, for instance turning a personal sentence (e.g., 2a) into an impersonal one (e.g., 2b):

- 2)
 - a) Siete tenuti ad aspettare fuori. (You are required.M to wait outside)
 - b) È necessario aspettare fuori. (It is required to wait outside)

Hence, using these nouns and periphrases allows one to avoid reference to the referent’s gender. In this way, no discrepancy arises with respect to individuals of any gender. However, neutralization is frequently wordy, which constitutes a problem for length-constrained contexts.

More importantly, not all of these devices can be employed in each specific case. For one, there aren’t collective nouns for all groups: “i condomini” (the.M residents:M) and “i nuotatori” (the.M swimmers:M), for instance, don’t have a corresponding collective noun. Moreover, paraphrases with epicene nouns, that turn the original noun into an adjective of the epicene, come out as unnatural when the original noun is not a nominalized adjective or participle: rephrasing “i poveri” (the.M poor:M) as “le persone povere” (the poor people) yields a natural phrase, but the analogous paraphrase of “i professori” (the.M professors:M) as “le persone ricercatrici” (the researcher people) sounds odd because “ricercatrici” is a noun rather than a nominalized adjective like “poveri”.

More recently, some speakers have started using further strategies (see, e.g., Comandini 2021) that are more straightforward to apply insofar as they don't require changing word choice or sentence structure. Instead, these strategies consist of substituting the gendered suffixes of words that would give rise to discrepancies. Given that such strategies require the introduction of new resources in the language (i.e., gender-neutral markers), they have been labeled *innovative* (González Vázquez et al. 2024). In what follows, I'll present them.

2.3 Innovative strategies

Several symbols and sounds are used as novel gender-neutral markers in Italian (see Gheno 2020 for a complete list). The main aim of these strategies is to fill in the gap in the Italian grammatical gender system. The exact function of such gender markers depends on their actual implementation: they are sometimes conceived and used primarily to refer to non-binary people and sometimes to mixed-gender groups, with or without non-binary members, and generic or unknown individuals. The advantages and limitations depend on whether they are used in one way or the other. For instance, some people save innovative forms for non-binary people and use them in a triple splitting, the main form of *innovative visibility* (Rosola et al. 2023), in combination with feminine and masculine forms as in “tutt*, tutte e tutti” (everyone.INN, everyone.F, and everyone.M). This result is clearly wordy. On the contrary, using innovative forms on their own, as in “tutt*” (everyone.INN), is the most concise of gender-fair strategies.

Furthermore, innovative strategies greatly differ from one another and so do their strengths and weaknesses, which are highly strategy-specific (see González Vázquez et al. 2024 for an overview). For instance, the asterisk is a symbol with no corresponding sound and, thus, is inadequate for speech; the *u*, instead, is suitable for oral communication, but its use as a gender-neutral marker conflicts with its current value in some Italian dialects, where it is a masculine suffix (see, e.g., Graffi and Scalise 2002: 234, 237 for the use of “*u*” as a masculine suffix in Sicilian dialect).

Some challenges, though, are shared by all innovative strategies. The first issue concerns the feasibility of such strategies given that they all involve a modification at least at the morphological level, which is quite deep and difficult to change. A second problem regards their exact application: innovative strategies are designed to substitute one-vowel gendered suffixes, which are the majority but not the totality of Italian gendered word endings. Some Italian nouns, instead, end with multiple letter suffixes, such as “-tore”/“-trice” (masculine and feminine singular, respectively). Hence, it is not clear how the gender-neutral form of nouns like “attore”/“attrice” (actor:M/actor:F) should look like: the two forms differ for more than the last vowel, which is actually identical in both, and if one only substitutes the last letter, they should decide what form to use as a basis, the masculine “attor-” or the feminine “attric-”? A similar issue arises for articles and pronouns, which are not distinguished by one final vowel only. For instance, the plural definite article is “i” or “gli” for the masculine and “le” for the feminine: which one should the gender-neutral form be construed from? That is, should, for instance, the asterisk plural article be “*”, “gl*”, or “l*”? This indeterminacy is reflected in the difference both among various guidelines (for instance, Boschetto 2019 proposes “l3” as the schwa plural definite article, while effequ 2020 proposes “ə”) and in the use of such strategies, as highlighted by Comandini (2021, especially pages 57-58).

On top of these practical issues, an ethical problem arises for innovative strategies: by substituting word endings, these strategies make it difficult for people with dyslexia and for text-to-speech systems, used by people with visual impairments, to recognize the words in reading (see Iacopini 2021). While text-to-speech systems can be programmed so as to

correctly read innovative forms (see Giovine in preparation), a solution for people with dyslexia is much harder to find. This is especially problematic as it is not merely a practical problem, but an ethical one as the resulting gender-fair texts risk being unfair with respect to people with dyslexia and, thus, ableists.⁶

As this overview highlights, each strategy has advantages and limitations, and none stands out as *the best* overall. Which strategy should we adopt, then? While this question presupposes a single answer, I will argue for a more multifaceted solution that takes into account various considerations.

Making a text gender-fair in a language like Italian is, as it should be clear by now, not an easy task. It's not easy either to choose among the available strategies what to adopt, especially given that each has its own, serious limitations. I want to highlight, though, that different strategies work best in different contexts. For instance, some strategies are especially ill-suited for speech as they employ symbols that lack a corresponding sound, e.g., the asterisk. Hence, if one has to pick a strategy to use orally, these strategies may not be the best choice. Analogously, if one has a limited space, they should prefer concise strategies and avoid double and triple splitting.

A relevant feature of context to take into account is its level of (in)formality: innovative strategies are inappropriate for formal environments, where conservative strategies, and especially conservative neutrality, are more indicated. Conservative neutrality, indeed, combines, if properly applied, gender-fair aims with strict adherence to standard linguistic conventions, especially important in the register that characterizes formal contexts. While double splitting is oftentimes recommended for formal texts such as administrative documents (see, e.g., European Parliament 2018 and Robustelli 2012), I counter-suggest it for ethical reasons: as noticed above, double splitting reinforces binarism. Thus, in contexts where innovative strategies are not welcome, I take conservative neutrality to be preferable over double splitting as it does not overlook non-binary people.

However, conservative visibility and innovative strategies are better choices if one does not just aim at avoiding discrepancies, but also at countering the unfair view of gender in our society. Neutrality, indeed, does not seem to be able to achieve such a broader goal, partly because it risks going unnoticed. Based on psycholinguistic evidence, such as Gabriel et al. (2008) and Misersky et al.'s (2014) crosslinguistic studies, Giusti observes:

[Neutrality] can work when [women's] visibility is not brought into question by stereotypes [...]. It is not functional, however, to fight gender stereotypes [...]. We know, indeed, that naturally epicene languages such as English are not exempt from a masculine interpretation of all plurals, especially of those of prestigious or stereotypically masculine role names. Neutrality, thus, would favor a biased interpretation of gender stereotypes. (Giusti 2022: 11, my translation)

In light of this, one might want to employ conservative visibility or innovative strategies, at least in not-so-formal contexts. However, space considerations run counter visibility strategies and especially triple splitting. Innovative strategies, moreover, constitute an obstacle, in written texts, for people with dyslexia or visual impairments (see Iacopini 2021). They further risk jeopardizing the intelligibility of both written and oral communication due to the uncertainties characterizing them at the moment, as those concerning core linguistic

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⁶ See, however, Gheno (2022) and Giovine (in preparation) for a critical discussion of this point.

elements like articles (cfr. with the evidence in Comandini 2021 and Thornton 2022).

3.1 *Mix and match*

To recap, conservative neutrality is not effective enough to counter gender stereotypes. The alternative strategies, though, are either unstable and ableist or excessively wordy. It seems that we're at a dead end. A way out, I propose, is to use different strategies in the same communication. Generally, when discussing what gender-fair strategy to adopt, it is assumed that strategies are mutually exclusive. However, there's no reason why it should be so. On the contrary, I argue, combining multiple strategies enables one to get the best of each one.

In particular, I propose to combine conservative neutrality with an innovative strategy: I here exclude double splitting as it cuts out non-binary people. Such a combination simply amounts to using the innovative form, whether on its own (innovative neutrality) or in conjunction with the masculine and the feminine (innovative visibility), here and there in the text, while neutralizing the rest in a conservative fashion, relying on the resources already available in Italian (e.g., epicene nouns, periphrases, collective nouns...). My hypothesis is that this would ensure that the gender-fair intent doesn't slip unnoticed, without giving up on clarity and brevity. The occurrence of innovative forms aims at making the gender-fair reformulation visible, signaling the speaker's action and raising awareness in the audience. The use of conservative neutrality secures accessibility. Furthermore, it yields a much shorter text with respect to the use of innovative visibility throughout the text.

Given the previous considerations on context, this proposal is only intended for informal circumstances, such as social media posts or personal emails. At least until innovative strategies get accepted also in more formal contexts, such as official documents. Moreover, the choice of the innovative form too has to take into account the intended use, especially the pronounceability of the candidate gender-neutral marker in oral communications. While taking into account the context is crucial, it is only the first step to tailoring a gender-fair text and other aspects have to be attended too. As I will show in the next subsection, indeed, ethical considerations point towards a partially different approach.

3.2 *That's not fair!*

In the previous section, I evaluated gender-fair strategies with respect to features of context. The primary goal of such strategies, though, is overcoming the discrepancies and, above all, their problematicity (discussed in section 1). Crucially, gender-fair strategies greatly differ as to their effectiveness towards this goal. In particular, conservative visibility does not completely eliminate discrepancies: they offer no solution for concordant reference to non-binary people. Neutrality strategies solve this issue through the use of gender-neutral words and constructions (conservative neutrality) or novel forms (innovative neutrality). Innovative visibility, instead, devotes the novel form to non-binary people, thus making it reflect these identities.

Nevertheless, innovative strategies are not fully fair either. Typically, innovative forms get proposed as *additions* to the existing gendered repertoire and used on their own (innovative neutrality) or alongside the feminine and masculine forms (innovative visibility). This suggests that they are non-binary forms which, in the case of innovative neutrality, have a further generic use. If, instead, they were *gender-neutral* forms, then one would expect them to merely *replace* existing gendered forms rather than supplement them. However, this implies that innovative neutrality reproduces discrepancies with respect to men and women referents: in such a strategy, the very same form gets used for both specific non-binary individuals and generic or mixed-gender uses, on a par with how the masculine gets now used both specifically and generically. Using the non-binary form as a wildcard is arguably very different than doing

so with the masculine: the latter adds up to the extra-linguistic dominance of men, while the former might at most counterbalance the social marginalization of non-binary identities.

Yet, one may still want to avoid the discrepancies albeit less problematic. One way out is to use different innovative forms for non-binary specific referents and for generic or unknown individuals or mixed-gender groups. However, this proposal is especially hard to implement as it requires two innovative forms when finding even a suitable one is challenging and even more so that it gets taken on by speakers. An advantage of such a use, though, is that it would make women visible as some call for (see, e.g., Giusti 2022) even when used to neutralize. Innovative visibility, instead, naturally ensures the visibility of women since it always employs the feminine form too.

However, any solution adding an innovative form to the actual gendered ones is inegalitarian, as emerges by drawing on Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) argument. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that using a gender-neutral English pronoun alongside feminine and masculine ones is inegalitarian as those identifying with the masculine or feminine gender would then have a dedicated linguistic form, while all non-binary identities would be lumped together. Analogously, their view reveals the problematicity of innovative strategies in languages like Italian: whether one conjoins the three forms (as in innovative visibility) or uses a single one for generic reference, feminine and masculine identities would have a privileged status in a three (or four if one adopts different innovative forms for specific and generic reference) forms system. To ensure equal treatment of all identities, either each non-binary identity gets a dedicated form, a hypothesis Dembroff and Wodak discarded as unfeasible even for the lightly gender-loaded English, or the same form gets used to refer to anyone regardless of their gender, men and women included. In this use, the novel form would be gender-neutral. Crucially, this would also prevent discrepancies towards men and women without the need to introduce two innovative forms: being the form gender-neutral, no mismatch arises between it and its referent's gender.

Such a solution, though, doesn't dispel Giusti-like worries that gender-neutral expressions are interpreted as masculine because it's a neutrality strategy. However, that Gabriel et al. (2008) and Misersky et al.'s (2014), cited by Giusti, found biased interpretations with conservative gender-neutral expressions doesn't mean that the same would happen with *innovative* ones: as González Vázquez et al. (2024: 340) argue,

while gender-neutral strategies that rely on existing linguistic resources may sometimes go unnoticed or, as argued earlier, be misunderstood by the audience, innovative strategies are extremely visible and clearly signal the speaker's intention to refer to people of any gender, beyond the binary.

Innovative neutrality, thus, might actually challenge gender stereotypes, thanks to its unconventionality. However, getting rid of the gender system entirely in a heavily gender-loaded language like Italian seems hardly feasible.

The remaining strategy is conservative neutrality. However, Giusti's criticism holds for such a strategy too, which cannot be rescued by unconventionality like its innovative counterpart. So, it seems we're back at square one. No strategy seems apt: conservative visibility cuts out non-binary people; innovative visibility is intrinsically inegalitarian in Dembroff and Wodak's sense; innovative neutrality reproduces discrepancies towards binary referents unless different forms are used for generic and specific reference, is inegalitarian in Dembroff and Wodak's sense, unless the innovative form(s) supplant the gendered ones altogether, and is probably unfeasible; conservative neutrality doesn't challenge gender stereotypes and risks getting overlooked, resulting ineffective.

It seems, thus, we're at a double (or best, quadruple) bind. However, I contend that an amendment to conservative neutrality can improve its effectiveness and make it the fairest strategy. I'll present such an amendment in the next subsection.

3.3 Amending conservative neutrality

While the limitations of the other strategies seem ineliminable, those of conservative neutrality can be overcome. The main issues with this strategy are that it might go unnoticed, losing part of its effectiveness, and that it is not always applicable. My take is that we can rely on the latter to mitigate the former. The idea is the following: employing conservative neutrality even when it's not straightforwardly applicable by using unnatural expressions will draw attention to the fact that the strategy is being used, preventing it from slipping unnoticed.

Take again "le persone ricercatrici" (the researcher people) discussed above. My proposal is to take advantage of its oddity to signal that one is using a gender-fair strategy. Just as innovative neutrality might not go unnoticed thanks to its unconventionality, we can force conservative neutrality to make it stand out. This should prevent the strategy from being overlooked and this, in turn, should improve its effectiveness: the main worry concerning neutrality strategies is that they don't yield the desired result because the audience doesn't notice them. In the previous subsection, I argued that this worry is less warranted for innovative neutrality due to its unconventionality. The idea here is to introduce an element of unconventionality in conservative neutrality too, by forcing it in contexts where it is not straightforwardly applicable. I contend that an application of conservative neutrality where such unnatural phrases are intentionally placed here and there will be able to challenge gender stereotypes by nudging the audience to reflect on why such a strange expression is being used. As González Vázquez et al. (2024: 340) put it,

Some people, indeed, argue that we ought to use the options that cause the most disruption in order to trigger a thought process about the reasons behind it (e.g., see Cameron 1992: 125-126 on feminine generics, or hornscheidt 2012: 293– 321 on speech interventions).

4. Conclusions

In this paper, I presented the main gender-fair strategies in Italian and I highlighted their advantages and limitations, from both a practical and ethical point of view. Since no strategy comes out as the best *tout court*, I first proposed to combine, in informal contexts, conservative neutrality with innovative strategies. This way enables to produce clear texts, thanks to conservative neutrality, without risking the use of gender-fair strategies to go unnoticed, thanks to the salience of innovative strategies. However, innovative strategies present undefeatable faults: innovative visibility is intrinsically inegalitarian towards non-binary people and the same holds for innovative neutrality unless implemented to supplant the Italian gender system entirely, a likely unfeasible option. To avoid such issues, I revised my proposal and argued for an amended version of conservative neutrality that intentionally includes odd expressions to highlight the gender-fair effort. Such anomalies make it clear that the speaker is not merely thinking of men only and at the same time prevents the audience from inadvertently imagining just men.

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