

Introduction to LaGendA 2024*

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Abstract

This section provides an overview of the collection of selected papers from the LaGendA Conference, held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on October 3–4, 2024. The papers cover four areas of research i) guidelines, communication strategies, and adaptations; ii) cultural stereotypes and grammatical gender in specific languages; iii) interpreting and translating into languages with grammatical gender; iv) gender issues in Artificial Intelligence, Large Language Models, and Chatbots. The volume provides tools for the interaction of linguists, translators and interpreters, social scientists, computationalists, and content makers.

1 Introduction

Over the past decades, gender-related language policies have been widely adopted in European countries at various institutional levels, with varying speeds and levels of acceptance and effectiveness. This impactful phenomenon in social linguistic habits offers numerous insights into the interplay between language and society, on the one hand, and communication policies and speakers' attitudes, on the other. For this reason, it is particularly relevant to both comparative linguistics and social studies.

The multilingual perspective and the cultural and political relations across European countries naturally raise the issue of how texts that have (or lack) inclusive gender features are translated, especially across cognate languages spoken in countries that manifest different communication policies and generally display different speakers' attitudes towards gender-inclusive language, as well as different cultural attitudes towards sex and gender. In this regard, the translation or interpretation of any text type meets the challenge of rendering both the meaning and the communicative intentions of the original text as well as adapting the text to the communicative policies enforced in the target language.

The new frontiers of Artificial Intelligence raise further questions about how human translation, machine translation, and AI-generated texts score in terms of inclusiveness. AI results are expected to mirror the biases represented in the corpus of data on which they are trained. In this

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respect, controlling the training data and creating mitigating tools requires strict collaboration between linguists and computer scientists, as well as decision makers and institutions.

The conference “Gender-inclusive language in a multilingual Europe. Institutional policies, their applications and AI-related developments” (LaGendA) took place at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice on October 3–4, 2024 aiming to bring together experts in linguistics, sociolinguistics, translation studies and computational linguistics to discuss recent developments in language policies, especially as regards the academic institutions and supranational bodies, as well as the new frontiers of machine translation and the recent developments in AI. The goal of the conference was to promote interdisciplinary dialogue and provide insights into the understanding of gender-inclusive language dynamics while encouraging collaboration among researchers and practitioners engaged in this socially relevant domain from different methodological and disciplinary perspectives.

The conference was organised by members and affiliates of the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and the Centre of Studies on Multilingualism (CSML): Giuliana Giusti, Monia Azzalini, Anna Cardinaletti, Gianluca Lebani, Laura Nadal Sancis, Maria Eugenia Sainz Gonzalez, Giuseppe Sofo, and Alice Suozzi.

The scientific board included leading figures in the study of language and gender, general linguists, sociolinguists, and computational scientists: Michele Cortelazzo (University of Padua), Gabriele Diewald (Leibniz University Hannover), Catalina Fuentes Rodriguez (University of Seville), Viviana Patti (University of Turin) Falco Pfalzgraf (Queen Mary University of London), Alan Ramponi (Fondazione Bruno Kessler), María Amparo Soler Bonafon (Complutense University of Madrid), and Anna Maria Thornton (University of L’Aquila). The organisers and the scientific board collaborated with a pool of reviewers to select 13 oral presentations and 12 posters out of the 36 proposals received in response to the call for papers.

The programme was structured around three invited speakers: Giuliana Vitiello (University of Salerno), Daniel Elmiger (University of Geneva), and Anna-Maria De Cesare (Dresden University of Technology). The contributions were representative of different languages and approaches, as well as transnational and transdisciplinary research, presenting the result of collaborative work by 65 authors affiliated to 23 academic and research institutions across 8 countries (Italy, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, the UK, Ireland, and the Netherlands). Many contributions presented ongoing projects funded by national and international schemes.

This volume is a collection of selected contributions to the conference. The editors of the special issue (Giuliana Giusti, Daniel Elmiger, Federica Marengi, Viviana Patti, and Gabriela Mariel Zunino) have run a double-blind review process, such that each contribution has been commented and approved by two anonymous reviewers and one editor. Federica Marengi has managed the review process to make sure that the double-blind procedure was followed at all steps.

The contributions covering four areas of interdisciplinary investigation are presented in the rest of this chapter.¹

2 Guidelines, communication strategies, and adaptations

The first five contributions introduce the reader to different linguistic contexts, institutional settings, and communicative domains and examine the motivations, methodologies, and challenges involved in promoting language that more accurately and equitably represents all individuals.

The special issue opens with “Guidelines for inclusive language: who is to be included?” by Daniel Elmiger. This foundational article defines and examines the genre of texts known as guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language, tracing their development since the 1970s. Elmiger highlights how the notion of “inclusion” has broadened significantly beyond gender to encompass various groups of people and aspects of communication, such as non-verbal forms and accessibility. The article details common strategies promoted in guidelines, including visibility (e. g., full or abbreviated double forms, neographies like asterisks or colons), neutralisation (e. g., epicene forms, collective nouns, substantivised adjectives), and the avoidance of gendered forms through reformulation. It emphasises the dynamic nature of the guidelines as they adapt to changing social, political, and linguistic contexts.

Following this broad overview, Sabrina Link’s “Writing by principles: German-speaking newspaper guidelines and the use of non-binary gender-fair language” delves into a specific and often controversial domain: namely, the media. The author investigates the relationship between official language guidelines issued by German-speaking newspapers and the actual frequency of gender-fair language (GFL) usage, with a particular focus on non-binary forms, such as the asterisk and colon. The paper highlights the ongoing *Kulturkampf* (‘cultural battle’) surrounding GFL in the German-speaking world and traces the evolution of strategies from pair forms (*Dozenten und Dozentinnen*) and the capital I (*DozentInnen*) to more recent non-binary markers. Link’s findings suggest that although newspapers with official guidelines supporting non-binary forms tend to use them more frequently, the connection between guidelines and GFL usage is complex and not straightforward, with guidelines sometimes serving to shape public perception rather than directly causing increased usage. The study notes that the colon has become the most frequently used non-binary form in German-speaking newspapers since 2021/2022.

The study by Valentina Crestani, Giulia Pedrini, Ramona Pellegrino and Caterina Saracco, “Gender-inclusive language in University communication: a contrastive analysis of gender-inclusive guidelines in German, Italian, and English”, offers a comparative perspective across different European university systems. The authors analyse guidelines adopted by institutions in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and the UK, identifying and quantifying their recommended specification and neutralisation strategies. A key finding is that the choice of inclusive

¹ A first draft of sections 2–4 presenting the papers in the volume has been produced by Giuliana Giusti using Google NotebookLM, accessed via the institutional licence provided by Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. She then double-checked the relevance and correctness of the information and modified the style. All in all, this first experience of hers with AI for generating a scientific report has proven more time-consuming than expected.

strategies varies significantly based on the structural properties of the languages, local legal contexts (such as the recognition of a non-binary civil status in Germany and Austria), and institutional ideologies. All analysed guidelines condemn the generic masculine. However, German-speaking institutions tend to favour gender-marked neographies and pair forms (with variations by country); Italian guidelines largely privilege binary splitting and feminine derivation, often banning neographies; English guidelines overwhelmingly promote lexical and pronominal neutralisation, including singular *they* and neopronouns, and entirely avoid gender specification.

The challenges of implementing gender-inclusive language in specific professional contexts are further explored by Anita Perra in “Gender fair strategies in job advertisements in Italy: a first update on the current situation”. Perra’s research examines the current use of gender-fair language in Italian job advertisements, comparing it to historical data from Alma Sabatini’s (1987) study. The findings reveal the continued predominance of neutralising strategies and masculine forms, although there is a slight increase in the use of split forms and the emergence, albeit rare, of non-binary language such as neomorphemes, such as *, @, or the more common “scevà” ə. The article highlights significant linguistic uncertainties and cultural resistance to feminised job titles in Italy, particularly for high-level positions, which stem from a perception of masculinity as more authoritative. Perra highlights the ongoing linguistic asymmetries and advocates for the mandatory implementation of gender-fair language strategies in job advertisements to address linguistic inequality.

Finally, Elena Chiocchetti and Isabella Stanizzi’s “Inclusive definitions of legal concepts in Italian: possibilities, limits and a case study” delves into the highly specialised domain of legal language. This contribution investigates the possibilities and limitations of creating inclusive definitions for legal agentives in Italian, given the traditional use of the generic masculine. Chiocchetti and Stanizzi identify crucial challenges, including the need to balance inclusion with the preservation of correct legal meaning, clarity, and legal certainty. They discuss how the abstract nature of legal agentives, which can refer to both natural persons and legal entities, complicates gender marking. Importantly, the article explains why certain inclusive strategies, such as symbols and neomorphemes, are generally avoided in the Italian legal context due to concerns about comprehensibility and official acceptance. The study emphasises that while inclusive definitions are possible and desirable, achieving them often requires in-depth legal knowledge to ensure accuracy and to navigate challenges like altering long-established legal terms, such as *buon padre di famiglia*, literally ‘good family man’, to indicate responsible and reprehensible behaviour.

3 Cultural stereotypes and grammatical gender in specific languages

The second group of papers focus on the interaction between cultural stereotypes and grammatical gender in specific languages. It comprises two psycholinguistic studies that examine the intricate relationships among language, gender stereotypes, and grammatical gender in Romance languages, specifically Italian and Spanish.

The first paper, “Female truck drivers and male babysitters? Interactions between gender stereotypes and grammatical gender in Spanish and Italian: a psycholinguistic proposal”, by Gabriela Mariel Zunino, Gloria Gagliardi, Noelia Ayelén Stetie, and Emanuele Miola, is set in the MultiLingualGender Project, a broad research initiative focusing on language and gender in Romance languages. It investigates how stereotypical mental representations interact with morphological gender marking to bias interpretation, based on the results of two studies. Study 1 aimed to verify the association between role names (professions) and gender stereotypes without explicitly involving the lexical form. Study 2 collected acceptability judgments and analysed the degree of acceptability of noun phrases that explicitly contained the lexical form of role names. The findings reveal crucial differences and common aspects. On the one hand, Italy showed a greater tendency towards neutralisation in gender judgments as compared to Argentina, particularly for roles typically associated with women. However, roles traditionally associated with men continued to receive predominantly masculine judgments, indicating stronger and more consistent masculine gender stereotypes. On the other hand, in both languages, the acceptability and possibility of representing men in roles typically associated with women is greater than representing women in roles typically associated with men. Likewise, in both languages, incongruence between a masculine stereotype and feminine grammatical gender, as in *las camioneras* (‘female truck drivers’), is often more disruptive than the inverse, as in *los enfermeros* (‘male nurses’). The masculine form, even as a social stereotype, appears to function as the cultural and linguistic default, leading to more consistent associations.

The second paper, “Gender Bias and the Foreign Language Effect: Exploring the Impact of Linguistic Similarity” by Greta Mazzaggio, focuses on gender bias in adjective evaluations among Italian native speakers, examining how the so-called Foreign Language Effect (FLE) is reflected in Italian L1 speakers when processing information in Spanish L2. According to the FLE, using a foreign language should reduce implicit biases by increasing cognitive effort and emotional detachment. Mazzaggio’s study replicated prior findings that adjectives related to Power and Coldness are predominantly associated with masculinity, while Weakness and Warmth adjectives are linked to femininity. Female participants tended to assign stronger gender-stereotyped scores for Weakness and Warmth adjectives compared to male participants. However, no significant differences were found between evaluations in Italian (L1) and Spanish (L2). This suggests that the high structural and lexical similarity between these two Romance languages, particularly their shared grammatical gender systems, might have weakened or neutralised the FLE.

4 Interpreting and translating into languages with grammatical gender

Three papers address the challenges of interpreting and translating into a language with grammatical gender either such as Spanish, Italian, French, and German, when translating from languages that are gender-neutral or have different gender marking systems, as is the case with Basque or English.

In “Gender-fair language in simultaneous interpreting: How EU interpreters cope with language guidelines and innovations”, Igor Facchini examines how EU interpreters, working from English into languages with grammatical gender, such as Italian and French, apply existing guidelines and recent innovations in non-binary language use. The study, based on an experimental

task and in-depth interviews, reveals a gap between the interpreters' positive attitudes towards gender-fair language and their moderate use of gender-fair strategies. Key factors contributing to this discrepancy include the high cognitive load of simultaneous interpreting, the reliance on automatism, the prioritisation of linguistic economy and fluency, and ethical dilemmas related to balancing fidelity to the speaker's communicative intentions with the reception by the audience and institutional norms. The study also notes a greater tendency towards gender-neutral strategies in French interpreters than in their Italian colleagues.

The study by Thom Westveer "From gender star to schwa: Inclusive language use in a German novel and its French translation" investigates the use of non-binary inclusive language in literary texts, analysing the prize-winning German novel *Blutbuch* by Kim de l'Horizon (2022) and its prize-winning French translation *Hêtre pourpre* by Rose Labourie (2023). The study details the linguistic elements affected by inclusive language in German and French, such as nouns, nominal modifiers, and pronouns, and notes that while German primarily uses forms like the gender star, French exhibits more widespread inclusive forms, affecting adjectives, determiners, and a wider range of pronouns. The qualitative analysis of the translated text highlights the deliberate choices made by the translator to transfer the novel's militant inclusive language, including the adoption of new morphemes (-ə and -æ) and neopronouns like *ille/illes*, which are not yet widely attested in French but aim to preserve the communicative intentions of the original text. The research highlights that inclusive forms are often more visible in the French translation, which involves more agreement contexts, than in the German original.

Finally, "Gender bias in MT from Basque into Spanish: the case of gender stereotypical adjectives and occupations" by Klara Ceberio, Aitziber Elejalde, Elizabete Manterola, Eneko Sagarzazu, Zuriñe Sanz, and Naroa Zubillaga, investigates gender bias in machine translation (MT), from Basque (a language with no explicit grammatical gender) into Spanish (a language with morphological gender). The study utilises samples from literature, science, and journalism to examine how an MT system (Elia) translates stereotypical masculine and feminine adjectives and occupations. The findings reveal a prevalent tendency for the MT system to default to the masculine option in Spanish when no explicit gender is provided in the Basque source text. Despite this bias, the research notes instances where the MT tool employs gender-neutral or gender-inclusive strategies, such as split-gender results or collective nouns, indicating its potential to mitigate bias. The study also highlights the challenge of proper noun identification and the importance of considering broader context beyond the sentence level, while MT tools typically operate at the sentence level.

5 Artificial Intelligence, NLP, and Chatbots

The fourth group of papers explore the critical intersection of Artificial Intelligence, NLP, and Chatbots showing that technological advancements alone are insufficient to mitigate biases, particularly those related to gender and marginalised communities.

The first contribution, "Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence for Gender-Inclusive Language Evolution" by Daniela Vellutino, Mafalda Ingenito, and Giuliana Vitiello offers a critical synthesis of AI techniques for addressing gender bias in language, focusing on the intersection of linguistic theory and computational practice. It advocates for the Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence (HCAI) paradigm, which places human well-being at the core of technological

development. The paper identifies various AI techniques for detecting gender bias in texts, such as the Word Embedding Association Test (WEAT), Co-occurrence Analysis, and Contextual Models. It also outlines debiasing strategies, such as neutralisation and equalisation, fine-tuning on balanced data, and sequence-to-sequence debiasing.

The same three authors contribute the second paper entitled “Enhancing University Communication: An Artificial Intelligence-Based Tool for Gender-Inclusive Language”, presenting the HCAI4GEND project, which aims to develop an AI-based tool for detecting, interpreting, and generating gender-inclusive linguistic solutions in institutional texts across Italian, English, and German. This tool is designed with features such as a text editor with real-time highlighting, interactive suggestions (including lexical substitution and parallel expressions), and a continuous learning mechanism. The research emphasises the use of high-quality linguistic resources and a hybrid approach that integrates typological and variationist analyses.

In “Cis-heteronormative couples in Google Images. A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis”, C. Serena Santonocito examines how AI-based search engines reinforce dominant ideologies by naturalising cis-heteronormative coupledness through visual and verbal representations in Google Images. The study based on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis finds that queries for ‘couples’ in British and Italian digital landscapes predominantly reproduce neoliberal imaginaries of idyllic relational success and aestheticised desirability, marginalising alternative couple forms. Santonocito observes that Google Images’ algorithmic processes may shape public perceptions of relational success by simultaneously reinforcing and silencing specific relationship norms.

The contribution by Andrea Marra, Chiara Ferrando, Lia Draetta, Bianca Cepollaro, and Viviana Patti “How is the reclamation of slurs perceived in Italian? A sociolinguistic survey to inform future NLP studies” defines reclamation as repurposing derogatory terms into expressions of identity and solidarity. The study highlights that AI moderation systems often fail to adequately consider context, leading to the erroneous classification of reclaimed slurs as abusive and potentially censoring marginalised voices. This is evident in comparison to their sociolinguistic survey, which revealed that LGBT+ individuals and younger participants are more familiar with and accepting of reclaimed language, emphasising the importance of context, intention, and positionality for developing sensitive NLP tools.

The volume ends with “Gender biases in GPT-4 short biographies. A corpus study on Italian and French anthroponyms”, in which Anna-Maria De Cesare conducts an empirical case study on gender-indexing bias in GPT-4-generated short biographies in Italian and French. De Cesare investigates how men are predominantly referred to by their surname (gender-neutral), while women are more often referenced by their full name or first name alone (gender-marking), reflecting a familiar and paternalistic form. The key findings of the study reveal that GPT-4 not only mirrors existing gender biases in human-authored texts (as in Wikipedia entries) but, in some cases, even amplifies them, consistently failing to generate biographies for notable women in STEM fields.

Our journey through the contributions of this issue has taken us from the most voluntary human action (norming the use of a language with guidelines) through human cognition (how gendered forms and mismatches are interpreted by native speakers) to human interpretation and translation (that depend on both language forms and attitudes), and machine translation to artificial intelligence systems that produce images and texts that can reinforce stereotypes precisely because they are not immediately recognizable as technological products.

Gender, an issue that has been so high on the agenda in recent decades, is a crucial topic in itself for the construction of more equal and inclusive societies. And precisely because it is currently of interest to many stakeholders in institutions and the media, it can serve as a testing ground for studying the interaction between language, languages, and society, which can be extended to other issues of inclusion.

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