

A Linguistics Perspective on Feminisation and Gender-Inclusive Language How Partitive Constructions Can Be Used to Uncover Implicit Gender Bias in Italian

Emma Zanoli

IUSS, Istituto Universitario di Studi Superiori di Pavia, Italia

Abstract This article reports the results of a study on the perception of feminisation and gender mismatches in Italian. The study probes the intuition of native Italian speakers through tasks that highlight their linguistic habits. The results point to two separate but interrelated reflections. First, they show that semantic gender can override grammatical gender in partitives. Second, they reveal that the acceptance of feminine profession nouns is not widespread, especially for those nouns that refer to prestigious professions. The work presented here stems from an Italian adaptation of a study originally designed for French and German.

Keywords Partitive constructions. Gender-fair language. Gender agreement. Feminisation. Gender mismatch.

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1 Introduction

The debate around feminisation¹ and gender-inclusive language is not new in Italy, and yet it is still as lively as ever. Every so often, a new sensationalist headline stirs public opinion, as was the case, for example, when an orchestra conductor announced that she wants to be addressed with the masculine form of the noun denoting her profession,² or when a similar request was brought forward by the first female referee in Italy's top soccer league.³ Over the years, a lot has been said on the topic, various problems have been highlighted, and some solutions have been suggested. The aim of this article is to provide a picture of the phenomena under discussion that is informed by notions of linguistics, with the help of data collected through a quantitative study involving native speakers of Italian.

Romance languages make grammatical gender distinctions (namely between masculine or feminine) for both animate and inanimate nouns. This holds true both for Italian, which is the focus language of this study, and French, which we will use as a point of reference. While gender is completely arbitrary for inanimate nouns, animate nouns tend to have a grammatical gender that corresponds to the biological sex of the referent, though not always.

In Italian, there is a lack of an inclusive or neutral gender, and thus the masculine gender is sometimes used ambiguously to refer to both feminine and masculine things: in particular, the masculine plural is considered inclusive of all genders. This is true not only for inanimate nouns, but for animate nouns as well. Additionally, certain profession nouns tend to be used only in their masculine form, even when they refer to female professionals. This gives rise to grammatical anomalies such as *Il ministro è arrivata*⁴ 'the.M minister.M has arrived.F'. Some claim that such forms are 'neutral' or 'inclusive' and there is therefore no need for feminine nouns to describe women in those professions.

On one hand, Cardinaletti and Giusti (2016) show that this "inclusive masculine plural" is not allowed in quantified partitive constructions: e.g. **una dei bambini* 'one.F of the.M children.M'. On the other hand, Sleeman and Ihsane (2016) present the results of empirical research that reveals that superlative partitives are less restric-

1 The formation of feminine forms of occupational nouns.

2 "Sanremo, Beatrice Veneti: 'Direttore, non direttrice'. E i social si spaccano sulla scelta". *La Repubblica*, 6 March 2021. <https://bit.ly/3B6wC2A>.

3 De Santis, M., "Maria Sole Ferrieri Caputi primo arbitro donna in Serie A: 'Ma non chiamatemi arbitra'". *Fanpage.it*, 25 May 2022. <https://bit.ly/3cZcM1e>. Such pieces of news usually spark lively debates on social media, see e.g. the post https://www.instagram.com/p/CeA5DNCs7M_/ and its comments.

4 "Il ministro Boschi testimone di nozze del fratello ad Arezzo". *RAI News*, 29 June 2014. <https://bit.ly/3cZQMDo>.

tive and can sometimes allow mismatches between a feminine determiner and a masculine plural: e.g. *la plus intelligente de mes gentils professeurs* ‘the.F most intelligent.F of my.PL. kind.M.PL. professors. PL.’. The authors report that such mismatches are not always accepted by their informants (native French speakers): to account for the observed differences, they categorise animate nouns into different noun classes, and they use this framework to outline a feature checking analysis of gender agreement. In their conclusions they suggest future research with a larger sample, more test nouns, and possibly more languages. Westveer, Sleeman and Aboh (2021) develop a more elaborate study to take on that challenge.

The work presented here stems from an adaptation into Italian of the study carried out by Westveer, Sleeman and Aboh. The main goal is to probe Italian native speakers’ intuitions in order to find out whether there are any peculiarities in the way they behave when it comes to feminisation and gender-inclusive language. Importantly, we do not simply wish to collect their opinions on the matter; rather, we want to highlight their linguistic habits and uncover any hidden gender bias, if present. To do so, we will take a close look at partitive constructions: since they are not strictly regulated from the point of view of stylistic prescription, they are very suitable for grasping speakers’ competence while abstracting away from normative or ideological attitudes.

This contribution is organised as follows. Section 2 contextualises some key background notions. Section 3 reviews the literature that informed our study. Section 4 presents our research questions, design, and data collection procedures. Section 5 reports the most relevant results, making some points of discussion. Section 6 then concludes this contribution with some final reflections.

2 Background

The aim of this section is to contextualise two key background notions: a) gender agreement in Romance languages and b) the debate around feminisation and inclusive language.

2.1 Gender Agreement in Romance Languages

In Romance languages, there are gender distinctions for both inanimate and animate nouns (the former consisting in those nouns that refer to inanimate objects/entities, the latter consisting in those nouns that refer to people and other living beings). In Italian and French, the two languages that we will be using as an example, the gender distinction is a dichotomy between a feminine and a mascu-

line gender. For inanimate nouns, gender is completely arbitrary: cf. Italian *il fiore* ‘the.M flower’ versus French *la fleur* ‘the.F flower’. Animate nouns, on the other hand, tend to have a grammatical gender that corresponds to the biological sex of the referent, though not always: cf. *Il maestro si chiama Enrico* ‘The.M teacher.M’s name is Henry’ (grammatical gender = biological sex of the referent) vs. *La sentinella si chiama Marco* ‘The.F sentinel.F’s name is Mark’ (grammatical gender ≠ biological sex of the referent). In our work, we will adopt the terminology of ‘semantic gender’ (following Corbett 1991) to refer to the biological sex of the referent.

Another important characteristic of Romance languages is agreement, which involves matching the value of some grammatical category between and within the different constituents of a sentence. Some categories that commonly trigger grammatical agreement are person, number, and gender. In Italian and French, gender is expressed not only on the noun itself, but also on the determiner and on the adjectives, if present: e.g. *Uno splendido sole è sorto questa mattina* ‘A.M splendid.M sun.M has risen.M this morning’.

2.2 The Debate Around Feminisation and Inclusive Language

As we have briefly outlined, modern Romance languages feature a pervasive use of gender specifications, consisting in a dichotomy between feminine and masculine grammatical gender. Since these languages lack an ‘inclusive’ or ‘neutral’ gender, the masculine gender has traditionally been considered the ‘default’ or ‘inclusive’ option, used mainly in two contexts (as shown in the following examples):

- (1) a. *Anna e Marco sono arrivati in ritardo.*
‘Anna and Marco arrived.M.PL. late’
- b. *Un bravo politico dovrebbe dare voce ai cittadini.*
‘A.M good.M politician.M should give citizens a voice’

In (1a) we see an example of the ‘inclusive masculine plural’: when referring to mixed groups, the masculine form is used to include everyone. In (1b) we see an example of the ‘default’ or ‘generic’ masculine: the sentence does not refer to any specific politician but is rather to be intended as a maxim or generic statement.⁵

⁵ To be clear, the ‘inclusive masculine plural’ and the ‘default masculine’ are two separate issues. Indeed, one reviewer suggests that the former seems to be hardcoded in Italian grammar, whereas the latter less so. In truth, debates on inclusive language in Italian tend to problematise both, so we abstain from drawing such a clear distinction between the two.

These two use cases were already declared problematic by some in the 1980s (Sabatini 1987), but it is only in recent years that a lively debate on the topic has reached wider audiences (for a comprehensive review, see Robustelli 2022). Some have suggested that the so-called ‘default’ or ‘neutral’ masculine results in the exclusion of the feminine gender rather than its inclusion (e.g. Cassese 1993)⁶ and several studies support this claim (see i.a. Moulton et al. 1978; Brauer, Landry 2008; Gygax et al. 2012; Gygax et al. 2019). Profession names have received wide coverage as a prototypical example of this exclusionary effect.⁷ This point deserves special attention and will be addressed in the following paragraph.

Following societal changes, professions that were traditionally dominated by men are now open to women, triggering the need for feminine profession nouns. The debate on the topic goes back at least to the 70’s (see i.a. Lakoff 1976 for English; Boel 1976 for French; Trömel-Plötz 1978 for German; Hellinger 1985 for an international perspective; Cardinaletti, Giusti 1991 for Italian) and is still widely discussed today (see i.a. Gabriel, Gygax 2016; Diewald, Steinhauer 2017; Latos 2018; Dister, Moureau 2020). In Italy, the question of how to refer to a female professional is not always met with an easy answer, especially when it comes to prestigious professions (Merkel et al. 2012; Voghera, Vena 2016). Many Italian native speakers, for example, would prefer the use of *ingegnere* ‘engineer.M’ to refer to female engineers, instead of the feminine form *ingegnera* ‘engineer.F’. A similarly built noun that refers to a less prestigious profession, on the other hand, is commonly used: *infermiera* ‘nurse.F’ (Robustelli 2013). While the phenomenon of using masculine profession nouns to refer to both men and women is largely acknowledged in the Italian speaking community, some speakers find it problematic and others do not. The process of ‘feminisation’ (i.e. the formation of feminine forms of occupational nouns) is met with some resistance by Italian native speakers, as highlighted in Latos (2017) and Cignarella et al. (2021) among others. We will see how our study contributes to the discussion on the matter of feminisation by not only asking native speakers about their opinions, but also by having them complete some linguistic tasks that highlight their linguistic habits.

⁶ In Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 1993.

⁷ See e.g. Giusti, G. (2019). “Linguaggio, identità di genere e lingua italiana”. *Eduopen*. https://learn.eduopen.org/eduopen2/course_details.php?courseid=314.

3 Related Work

This section presents the work that informs this research, as well as a note on the terminology we will be using.

3.1 A Note on Terminology

We have already introduced the notion of ‘inclusive masculine plural’ in Italian. Given this, we could reasonably expect that extracting a feminine subset out of a masculine partitive set would not be problematic, since any grammatically masculine set is supposed to include feminine items. Cardinaletti and Giusti (2006), however, show that this is not the case:

- (2) **Conoscevo una dei ragazzi che erano alla festa.*
 [I] had met one.F of-the.M.PL. boys.M.PL. who were at the party.

In (2) we see a quantified partitive construction where the quantifier subset (*una*) must agree in gender with the partitive set (*dei ragazzi*) for the sentence to be acceptable. Suppose, however, that a kindergarten teacher is faced with a heterogeneous group of male and female children, and he wants to single out the youngest kid in the class, a girl named Anna. He may be faced with two choices:

- (3) a. *Il più giovane dei bambini è Anna.*
 The.M.SG. most young.SG. of-the.M.PL. kids.M.PL. is Anna.
 b. *La più giovane dei bambini è Anna.*
 The.F.SG. most young.SG. of-the.M.PL. kids.M.PL. is Anna.

If the teacher went for option (3a), he would not be violating the rules on gender agreement between a set (*dei bambini*) and its subset (*il più giovane*), but he would be using a masculine form to refer to a female. Alternatively, if he went for option (3b), there would be a mismatch between the feminine gender on the subset (*la più giovane*) and the masculine gender of the set (*dei bambini*). Throughout this work we will make the following distinction:

- a. (3a) is a case of grammatical agreement: there is a match in gender between the partitive set and subset, as predicted by their formal grammatical properties.
- b. (3b) is a case of semantic agreement: there is a mismatch in gender between the partitive set and subset because the subset’s gender agrees with the referent’s sex.

In keeping with the original design and terminology of the study we reproduce (Westveer 2021), we will only be using the term ‘gen-

der mismatch' to refer to mismatch *within* the partitive, although both technically contain a gender mismatch. In sum:

Table 1 A note on terminology

example	subset	set	referent	agreement type	mismatch
(3a)	M	M	F	grammatical	no mismatch
(3b)	F	M	F	semantic	gender mismatch

We stipulate that a preference for one over the other may reflect one's implicit views on the relationship between grammar and the world.

3.2 Gender Mismatches in Partitive Constructions

Ihsane and Sleeman (2016) distinguish between the different ways in which animate and inanimate nouns behave with regards to their gender feature: inanimate nouns only have grammatical gender, whereas animate nouns have both a grammatical and a semantic gender. These two do not necessarily match, as they show with the example of *sentinelle*: though it has a feminine grammatical gender, it can be used to refer to men.

- (4) *La sentinelle arriva. Elle/*Il avait une longue barbe.*
the.F sentinel arrived. She/*He had a long beard
“The sentinel arrived. She/He had a long beard.”

In (4), although the referent is male, the feminine grammatical gender prevails over the masculine semantic gender. This, however, is not always the case:⁸

- (5) *Mon ancien professeur de français était toujours contente de mon travail.*⁹
my.M former.M professor of French was always satisfied.F of my work.
Elle vient de partir à la retraite.
She just of leave in the retirement.
“My former French teacher was always satisfied with my work. She just retired.”

⁸ The same is true in Italian, see Andorno 2006.

⁹ One reviewer suggests that this sentence may not feel natural for most modern French speakers. The example is taken from Ihsane, Sleeman 2016, where its acceptability is not questioned. We therefore report it as it is, but we acknowledge that its acceptability might have changed in the years that have since passed.

In (5) we see that there is a mismatch between the masculine gender feature that appears on the adjectives accompanying the noun *professeur* (*mon* 'my.M', *ancien* 'former.M') and the feminine gender feature that appears on the verb and the pronoun (*contente* 'satisfied.F', *elle* 'she').

To account for these differences, Ihsane and Sleeman focus on a) the nouns involved and b) the structures/contexts that allow these mismatches.

As for the nouns involved, they propose the following categorisation for animate nouns in French:¹⁰

- a. Class A - *Suppletive forms*: sex differences are expressed with two different forms, e.g. *une fille* 'a girl' (feminine and female) and *un garçon* 'a boy' (masculine and male);
- b. Class B - *Stem change*: sex differences are expressed by related forms, i.e. the same stem with two different suffixes, e.g. *le directeur* 'the director.M' (masculine and male) and *la directrice* 'the director.F' (feminine and female);
- c. Class C - *Fixed forms with article change*: sex differences are expressed by the determiner, while the noun itself is the same for male and female, e.g. *un/une enfant* 'an.M/F infant';
- d. Class D - *Forms with a fixed article*: these are nouns with a fixed grammatical gender used to refer to both males and females, e.g. *la sentinelle* 'the sentinel' is a feminine noun that can refer to both men and women.

As for the structures that allow mismatches like the one in (5), the authors notice that they are allowed outside of the strict determiner phrase (DP).

Later that same year, Sleeman and Ihsane published another article (2016) which partly overlapped with the one we have just reviewed, but which also introduced some key new aspects. Since Ihsane and Sleeman (2016) had previously shown that gender agreement is less strict in the partitive DP, the focus of this article is on partitive constructions, whose structure can be studied to better understand the nature of gender mismatches.

Sleeman and Ihsane (2016) remark that the partitive constructions discussed in the literature are usually introduced by a quantifier, but there are also other types of partitives, like superlative partitives (e.g. 'the best of his books'). They contribute to the discussion on the distinction between different partitive constructions by comparing superlative and quantified partitive constructions: on one hand, building on previous analyses (Zamparelli 1998; Cardinaletti, Gius-

¹⁰ A fifth category, labelled "Class E - *Default masculine forms*" was originally proposed, but it was eliminated in later work.

ti 2006), they argue that “both canonical superlative partitive constructions (in opposition to superlative partitives with an ‘among’-phrase or a preposed ‘of’-phrase) and canonical quantified partitive constructions contain an unpronounced copy of the noun”. On the other hand, they show that “whereas superlative partitive constructions allow internal gender mismatches, canonical quantified partitives do not or only marginally do so”. They reach these conclusions with the help of data from a small-scale empirical study, whose aim was to find out whether native speakers of French accepted gender mismatches in superlative partitive constructions with animate nouns. The participants were shown a few sentences and they were asked to comment on their acceptability. The sample consisted of 10 (Swiss) French informants. Following their noun classification (see above), the authors tested sentences containing a few nouns from classes B and C. Their results showed that gender mismatches in superlative constructions were generally accepted with nouns of class C, whereas there was less homogeneity for nouns of class B: mismatches in this case were considered acceptable only by some informants.

Westveer, Sleeman and Aboh (2021) point out the limitations of the aforementioned research: its small sample of informants and the limited number of nouns it tested. They therefore set out to replicate it in a more systematic way. Their aim was to investigate both quantified and superlative partitive constructions to find out whether grammatical gender could be overridden and, if so, in what cases. They carried out a grammaticality judgment task with a sample of 62 native French speakers. In the analysis of their results, they focus on superlative partitives, reporting that the perceived acceptance of gender mismatches depends on the type of animate noun: mismatches are generally accepted with class C nouns (7) and to a lesser extent also with class B nouns (6), while they are generally not accepted with class D nouns (8).

- (6) Class B: *le chanteur* (M), *la chanteuse* (F)
La plus jeune des chanteurs présents est Françoise Hardy.
 The.F.SG. most young.F.SG. of the.PL. singers.M.PL. present.M.PL. is Françoise Hardy.
- (7) Class C: *le* (M) / *la* (F) *collègue*
La plus gentille de mes vieux collègues s'appelle Isabelle.
 The.F.SG. most nice.F.SG. of my.PL. old.M.PL. colleagues.M.PL. is called Isabelle.
- (8) Class D: *la victime* (F)
Le plus jeune des nombreuses victimes est Monsieur Dupont.
 The.M.SG. most young.M.SG. of the.PL. numerous.F.PL. victims.F.PL. is Mr. Dupont.

The authors note, however, that the results show variation among different nouns of the same class and among different participants.

4 Research Questions and Design

The work presented here follows from a study initially developed for French, which we adapted into Italian. Although our research questions differ slightly, we did not alter the original research design. This section will present both in turn.

4.1 Research Questions

Our study wishes to address the following research questions:

- Do speakers of Italian accept gender mismatches in partitive constructions? Is this in line with previous findings?
- Do participants accept feminisation? What factors influence their judgments?

While the first question pertains to notions of (morpho)syntax, the second may reveal interesting correlations to the socio-cultural factors that influence language use.

4.2 Research Design

To probe the intuitions of native speakers, Westveer (2021) designed a questionnaire divided into three parts:

1. Grammaticality judgment task on gender mismatches in partitive constructions
2. Gap filling task on the feminisation of profession nouns
3. Background information

Adapting the questionnaire posed several grammatical and cultural challenges; a few changes were necessary for the tasks to correctly probe the intuition of Italian speakers. The adaptation was done in collaboration with Westveer and Sleeman. A full description of the adaptation process lies beyond the scope of this contribution: in the following, we only present the Italian questionnaire.

Part 1 The grammaticality judgment task featured 80 sentences containing a partitive construction, whose acceptability was to be judged on a 5-point scale. The sentences contained 13 different nouns, representing the classes established by Sleeman and Ihsane (2016). For each noun there was a sentence pair (one with, one without gender mismatch) for both superlative and quantified partitives. Some nouns

also featured control sentences where no gender mismatch was present (because of a full match, either in the masculine or in the feminine) – 28 sentences were constructed this way.

Table 2 Test nouns for the Italian grammaticality judgment task; by noun class type¹¹

Class B	Class C	Class D
		il genio
l'attore / l'attrice	il/la vigile	il personaggio
l'infermiere / l'infermiera	l'/la assistente	la persona
il poliziotto / la poliziotta	il/la giudice	la sentinella
il rettore / la rettrice	l'/la insegnante	la vittima

It is important to note that classes B and C each included one noun that indicates a prestigious profession: *rettore* 'rector.M'¹² and *giudice* 'judge.M', respectively.

For clarity, let the noun *attore/attrice* ('actor.M/F') exemplify the different configurations being tested:¹³

- (9) Quantified partitives
- a. *Uno degli attori presenti è Elisabetta Tucci.* (grammatical agreement)
One.M.SG. of the.M.PL. present.M.PL. actors.M.PL. is Elizabeth Tucci.
 - b. *Una degli attori presenti è Elisabetta Tucci.* (semantic agreement)
One.F.SG. of the.M.PL. present.M.PL. actors.M.PL. is Elizabeth Tucci.
- (10) Superlative partitives
- a. *Il più giovane degli attori presenti è Elisabetta Tucci.* (grammatical agreement)
The.M.SG. youngest of the present.M.PL. actors.M.PL. is Elizabeth Tucci.
 - b. *La più giovane degli attori presenti è Elisabetta Tucci.* (semantic agreement)
The.F.SG. youngest of the present.M.PL. actors.M.PL. is Elizabeth Tucci.
- (11) Quantified partitives – control sentences
- a. *Uno degli attori presenti è Alfonso Perri.* (masculine control sentence)
One.M.SG. of the.M.PL. present.PL. actors.M.PL. is Alfonso Perri.
 - b. *Una delle attrici presenti è Elisabetta Tucci.* (feminine control sentence)
One.F.SG. of the.F.PL. present.PL. actresses.F.PL. is Elizabeth Tucci.

¹¹ Class A nouns are not included because they never give rise to gender mismatches.

¹² The term does not translate well. It represents the highest-ranking official of an academic institution, who is sometimes known as 'president' (US) or 'chancellor' (UK) in the English-speaking world.

¹³ To identify the sex of the referents we leveraged names that would explicitly appear gendered to a general audience of Italian speakers, i.e. typically female vs. male names.

- (12) Superlative partitives – control sentences
- Il più giovane degli attori presenti è Alfonso Perri.* (masculine control sentence)
The.M.SG. youngest of the present.M.PL. actors.M.PL. is Alfonso Perri.
 - La più giovane delle attrici presenti è Elisabetta Tucci.* (feminine control sentence)
The.F.SG. youngest of the present.F.PL. actresses.F.PL. is Elizabeth Tucci.

Part 2 The gap filling task tested the feminisation of profession nouns. For each of the 15 nouns being tested, participants had to complete a sentence that was lacking a profession noun in a predicative position. One example with a possible response is provided in (13):

- (13) a. Carla Piazza è competente. (professore)
Carla Piazza is competent. (professor)
- Carla Piazza è *una professoressa* competente.
Carla Piazza is a.F. professor.F competent.

This was meant to highlight the linguistic habits of participants, who were given the chance to use the term they most found fitting for the given contexts. The test nouns were *attore, direttore, guida, ingegnere, marinaio, medico, ministro, poliziotto, pompiere, professore, rettore, scrittore, sentinella, testimone, vittima*.

Part 3 The third part was meant to collect background information, featuring questions about personal details (i.a. sex, age, geographical origin) and opinions on language-related issues (i.a. “What is your opinion on the feminisation of profession names and on inclusive language?”).

The common thread that ties the different parts of this questionnaire together is the issue of how speakers behave in the face of possible incongruities between grammar and the world. This is addressed from different angles:

- Part 1: Do participants favour a match between grammatical gender and biological sex of the referent (i.e. semantic agreement)?
- Part 2: Do participants use masculine profession nouns to refer to women?
- Part 3: What opinions do participants express on the matter?

4.3 Data Collection

Our study was administered through a Google Forms questionnaire. We circulated it via social media and direct messages, inviting people to fill it out online. The data was collected anonymously, and the participants provided informed consent about the use of their data for research purposes.

We collected data over a period of one month between April and May 2019. We recorded 298 contributions, but we eliminated the contributions of those who did not give their consent and of those who declared not to be native speakers of Italian, leaving us with a sample of 285 participants.

Our sample is made up of those who willingly took the time to complete the task; for this reason, some statistical factors could not be controlled, especially pertaining to the participants' gender: 70% women vs. 30% men.¹⁴

5 Results and Discussion

This section will present the results of our questionnaire, discussing the key findings that emerged from each of its parts.

5.1 Analysis and Discussion of Data - Part 1 of the Questionnaire

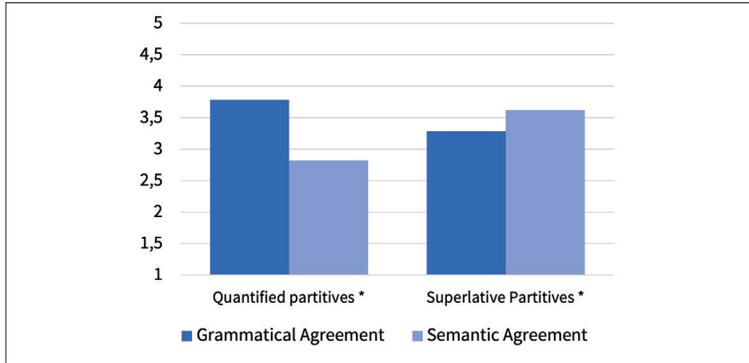
Part 1 of the questionnaire consisted of a grammaticality judgment task. Because of the great number of sentences that were tested and of variables that were kept in check, the results could be presented in various ways. This section will display a select number of tables and figures, the purpose of which is to provide answers to our research questions.

One of our goals was to find out how native speakers feel about gender mismatches, more specifically whether there was a preference for grammatical agreement or semantic agreement in partitives. This was experimentally investigated in the following way. Prior to this analysis, we made the informed assumption (based on previous findings, see section 3 "Related Work") that the results would show some differences between quantified and superlative partitives, so we checked the two independently. Firstly, two different cumulative scores were obtained by adding all the responses for grammatical agreement in quantified partitives (dark blue in the figure) and all the responses for semantic agreement in quantified partitives (light

¹⁴ A third option was provided, labelled 'other', but no one picked it.

blue in the figure) in each participant. Secondly, mean values for the whole sample were compared and are presented in the graph, reported in a 1 to 5 scale to facilitate interpretation. The same process was repeated for superlative partitives. Figure 1 shows the results of this analysis.

Figura 1 Grammatical vs. Semantic Agreement. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples was used. * indicates statistical significance, $p < 0.005$.



The data revealed statistically significant differences. As we can see, grammatical agreement was preferred for quantified partitives, whereas semantic agreement was preferred for superlative partitives. In other words, gender mismatches seem to be acceptable in superlative partitive constructions. This is in line with what was already reported by Sleeman and Ihsane (2016) and Westveer (2021).

We then checked whether, within each type of partitive, the specific noun class made a difference in the acceptability of grammatical vs. semantic agreement. To investigate this statistically, 6 different cumulative scores were obtained by adding (separately for Class B, C and D nouns) all the responses for grammatical agreement in quantified partitives (dark blue) and all the responses for semantic agreement in quantified partitives (light blue) in each participant. Mean values for the whole sample were then compared and are presented in the graph, reported in a 1 to 5 scale to facilitate interpretation. The same process was repeated for superlative partitives. Results of this analysis are shown in figure 2 and in figure 3 respectively.

Figure 2 Quantified partitives. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples was used. * indicates statistical significance. Class B: $p < 0.005$. Class C: $p < 0.005$. Class D: $p < 0.197$

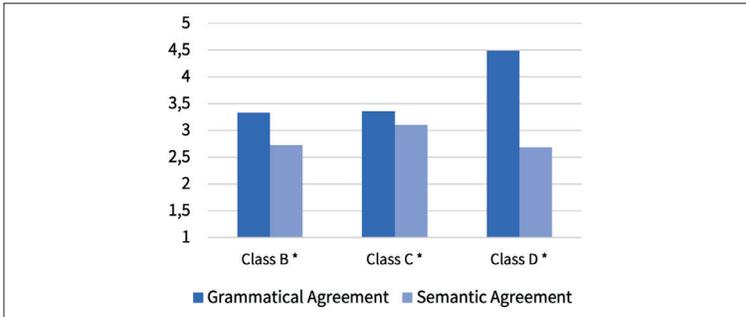
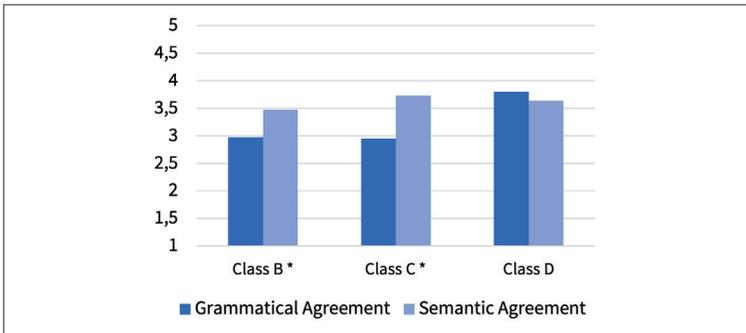


Figure 3 Superlative partitives. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples was used. * indicates statistical significance. Class B: $p < 0.005$. Class C: $p < 0.021$. Class D: $p < 0.005$



All differences shown above were statistically significant, except for Class D nouns in superlative partitives, which showed no statistically significant difference between semantic and grammatical agreement.¹⁵

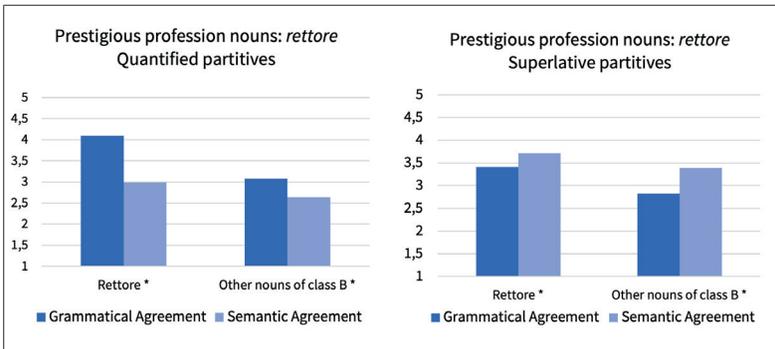
As we can see, class B and class C nouns behaved somewhat similarly, whereas class D nouns displayed different patterns. However, upon further investigation, we found out that there were differences within the same noun class as well. It was interesting to note that the noun which showed the greatest difference, when compared to the others, was *rettore*, the one we specifically picked out as a prestigious noun.

We therefore set out to investigate whether prestigious profession nouns displayed patterns which were significantly different from the

¹⁵ The general expectation would have been for class D nouns to clearly favour grammatical agreement across all conditions, since they have a fixed grammatical gender. A potential explanation may be found in Falco, Zamparelli 2019, who suggest that Italian might be more permissive towards semantic agreement with class D nouns like *sentinella* or *genio*.

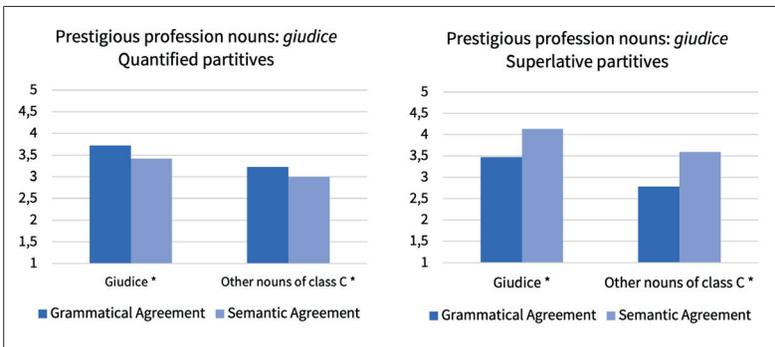
other nouns of the same classes. We did this in the following way. Values of the response for the noun *rettore* were compared with the cumulative mean score obtained from all the responses in the other Class B nouns: this was done separately for grammatical agreement in quantified partitives (dark blue) and for semantic agreement in quantified partitives (light blue) in each participant. Mean values for the whole sample are presented in the graph, reported in a 1 to 5 scale to facilitate interpretation. The same process was repeated for superlative partitives. Results are shown in figure 4.

Figure 4 *Rettore* vs. Class B nouns – quantitative and superlative partitives. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples was used. * indicates statistical significance, $p < 0.05$



We repeated the same analysis for *giudice* compared to other class C nouns, as shown in figure 5.

Figure 5 *Giudice* vs. Class C nouns – Quantified and superlative partitives. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples was used. * indicates statistical significance, $p < 0.05$



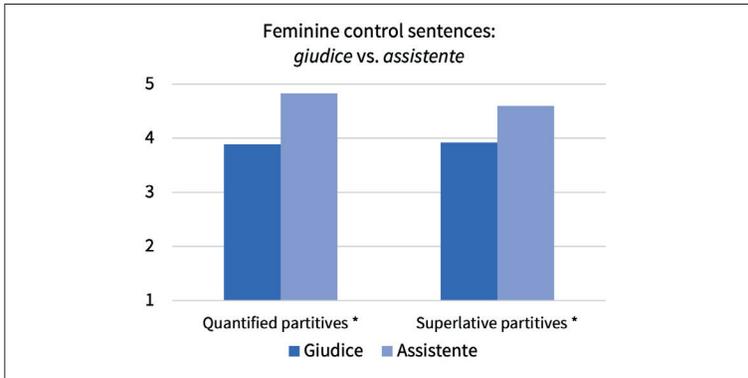
These analyses confirmed that the observed differences between prestigious nouns and other nouns of the same class are statistically significant.

Another factor that further proves this point is observed in the results of the control sentences. By definition and design, those sentences are meant to be unproblematic and receive high scores across all conditions. That was indeed the case (they all received a score of at least 4.6 out of 5), with only one exception: the feminine control sentences for the prestigious noun *giudice*.¹⁶ We report them in (14) and we compare their ratings with those of another class C noun [fig. 6].

- (14) a. *giudice* - feminine control sentence (quantified partitives)
Una delle nuove giudici è Giulia Guarini.
 One.F of-the.PL.F new.PL.F judges.PL is Giulia Guarini.
- b. *giudice* - feminine control sentence (superlative partitives)
La più intelligente delle nuove giudici è Giulia Guarini.
 The.F most intelligent.F of-the.PL.F new.PL.F judges.PL is Giulia Guarini.

Figure 6 Control sentence for *giudice* vs. control sentence for *assistente*. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples was used.

* indicates statistical significance, $p < 0.005$



Let us remark once more that these control sentences contained no gender mismatch. To account for the observed drop in perceived acceptability, we can only conclude that a significant number of participants did not find *la giudice* 'the.F judge.F' to be acceptable.¹⁷

¹⁶ Unfortunately, our test did not include control sentences for the other prestigious noun (*rettore*) because they were not present in the original French experimental design.

¹⁷ For a broader discussion see Zarra, G. "La giudice o il giudice? Una lettrice scrive, Treccani risponde". *Treccani. L'Enciclopedia italiana*, 30 June 2022. https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/scritto_e_parlato/Giudice.html.

A quick additional analysis revealed that the acceptance of the *giudice* superlative partitive control sentence was slightly higher in female participants [fig. 7].

Figure 7 Giudice control sentence * sex. Mann-Whitney U Test was used. The difference is statistically significant, $p < 0.028$



5.2 Analysis and Discussion of Data – Part 2 of the Questionnaire

Part 2 tested 15 nouns in total. The results showed the following patterns:

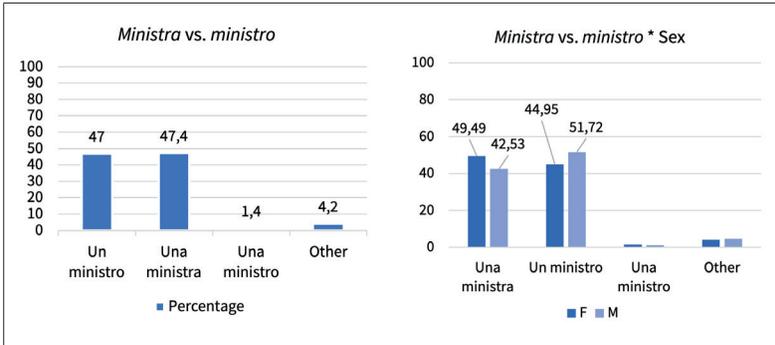
- Great preference for the feminine form: *testimone*, *vittima*, *sentinella*, *guida*, *scrittrice*, *professoressa*, *attrice*, *infermiera*, *diruttrice*, *poliziotta*.
- Great preference for the masculine form: *medico*.
- Balanced results between the choice of the feminine and masculine forms: *ministra/ministro*, *marinaia/marinaio*, *rettrice/retto*.

The noun *ingegnera/ingegnere* showed peculiarities. A slight majority of people preferred the masculine form, about 25% of the participants used the feminine form, but there were also many people who decided to use the masculine form with a feminine determiner (a choice that, though attested, wasn't as frequent with the other nouns).¹⁸

We checked whether there was any correlation between participants' answers in this part of the questionnaire and their personal details. We focused on the prestigious nouns that received a split acceptability rating between those who preferred the feminine and the masculine form (*ministra* vs. *ministro*, *rettrice* vs. *retto*). Two interesting trends emerged: one related to the participants' sex and one to their age.

¹⁸ It must be noted, however, that *un ingegnere* 'an.M engineer.M' and *un'ingegnere* 'an.F engineer.M' are quite similar, and some participants might have used the wrong determiner by accident. If that were the case, then the masculine form was preferred by the vast majority, as for *medico*.

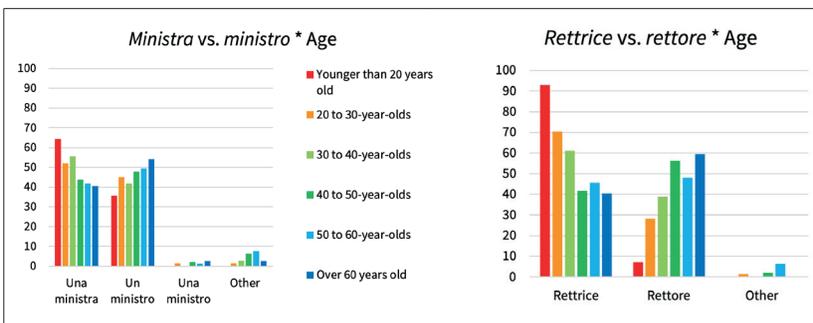
Figure 8 (a) *Ministra* vs. *ministro* and (b) *ministra* vs. *ministro* * Sex. For 8b Chi Squared Test was used. The observable differences are not statistically significant



In figure 8b we see that the feminine version *ministra* was favoured by a slightly higher percentage of female participants, whereas *ministro* was the preferred choice of a higher percentage of male participants. The difference, however, is not statistically significant. A similar analysis for *rettrice* revealed an even slimmer difference (55.6% F vs. 52.9% M) and this, too, is not statistically significant.

As for age, we can observe that the younger the participants were, the more likely they were to use the feminine *ministra* and *rettrice* as opposed to the masculine *ministro* and *rettorre* (as shown in figure 9a and 9b, respectively), although this trend is not statistically significant.

Figure 9 (a) *ministra* vs. *ministro* * Age and (b) *rettrice* vs. *rettorre* * Age. Chi Squared Test was used. The observable differences are not statistically significant

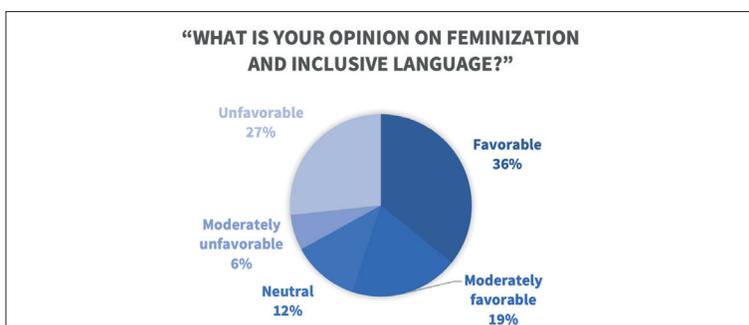


5.3 Analysis and Discussion of Data - Part 3 of the Questionnaire

Part 3 of the questionnaire was meant to collect some background information. Most interestingly, participants answered the following question: “What is your opinion on the feminisation of profession nouns and on inclusive language?”.

Each answer was unique and different. Nonetheless, we tried to categorise them based on a more or less favourable answer. The results of such simplifications are shown in figure 10. For the most part, participants were in favour of feminisation and inclusive language.

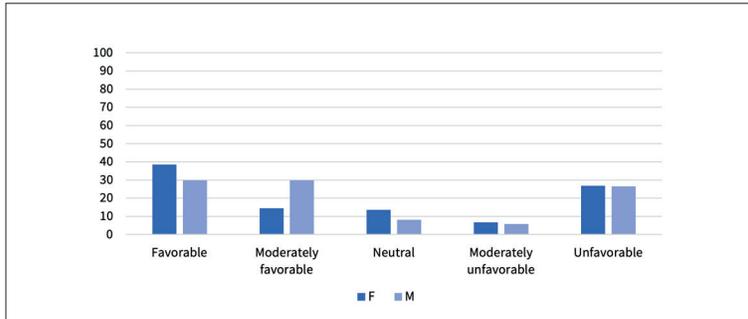
Figure 10 Opinions on feminisation and inclusive language



We checked whether there was any correlation between the opinions participants expressed in this section and their preference for semantic agreement in partitives. This analysis revealed a statistically significant correlation, suggesting that both tasks were useful proxies of speakers' underlying intuitions about the relationship between grammar and the world.

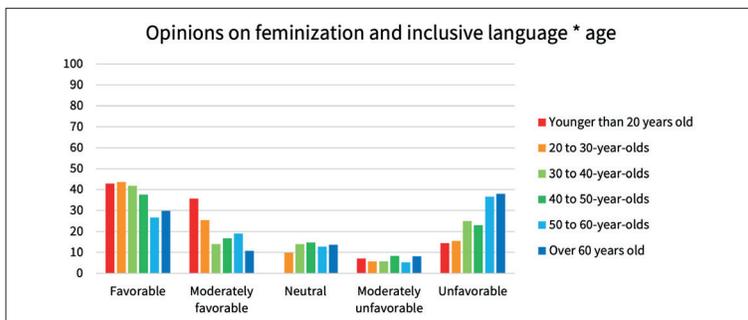
We also checked whether the sex, age or birthplace of the participants had any correlation with the opinions they expressed. Only one statistically significant trend emerged from these analyses, related to the sex of the participants [fig. 11].

Figure 11 Opinions on feminisation and inclusive language * sex
Chi Squared Test was used. The differences are statistically significant, $p < 0.038$



As for the participants' age, although a general trend can be spotted, the differences are not statistically significant [fig. 12].

Figure 12 Opinions on feminisation and inclusive language * age
Chi Squared Test was used. The observable differences are not statistically significant



In keeping with what we showed in figure 9, one could spot a general trend (the younger the participants, the more favourable their opinion on feminisation and inclusive language), but the correlation is not perfectly linear.

As a final note, let us point out that a full comparison between the French and Italian results is beyond the scope of this contribution; the interested reader may refer to Westveer et al. 2022 and Giusti, Zanoli 2022, where both sets of results are reported and analysed.

6 Conclusions

Now that we have presented and discussed our results, we want to make some final remarks that pertain to two separate but interrelated reflections.

The first point to note pertains to gender agreement in partitives: grammatical agreement is preferred in quantified partitives (due to linguistic constraints on agreement within the strict DP), whereas semantic gender can override grammatical gender in superlative partitives. In other words, when permitted by the grammar, Italian speakers prefer a match between grammatical gender and biological sex of the referent. This also implies that speakers generally do not consider the masculine forms (of the quantifier or the superlative) to be gender neutral, which is coherent with the male bias in referent perception reported by psycholinguistic and cognitive studies (Brauer, Landry 2008; Gabriel et al. 2008; Sato et al. 2013; Alvanoudi 2014). Our results are in line with previous findings (Sleeman, Ihsane 2016; Westveer, Sleeman, Aboh 2021). In addition to partitive type, the perceived acceptability of gender mismatches in partitive constructions shows significant variation also depending on noun class and the noun itself. However, arguably the greatest difference seems to be made by those nouns that were specifically picked as nouns denoting prestigious professions. We speculate that this might be due to cultural and societal influences on language, which leads to a second, broader reflection.

The broader implication of our results is that native speakers of Italian show some resistance in accepting the feminine form of certain nouns denoting prestigious professions. As shown in the literature (see for example Cardinaletti, Giusti 1991; Giusti, Regazzoni 2011, 84 ff.), in Italian there is an asymmetric use of (some) prestigious profession names, i.e. the masculine form of the noun is used to refer to both male and female referents. Some claim that this usage is 'neutral' or 'inclusive', but our findings suggest otherwise. This choice is culturally connoted: even though the Italian language has the means to express feminine gender specifications (Burr 1995), native speakers seem to oppose the use of feminised nouns for prestigious professions.¹⁹ This view is also held by several women in those professions, who report that they'd rather be addressed with a masculine form (cf. opening paragraph). We believe that this attitude is bringing about a linguistic mutation that creates new noun classes: as our data has shown, prestigious profession names behave differently compared to other nouns of the same class.

¹⁹ The small size of our sample calls for some caution: the opinions of our 285 participants cannot possibly provide an extensive account of the views held by more than 67 million native speakers of Italian. However, given the general linguistic orientation of the mailing lists and groups in which our plea for participation circulated, we suspect that, compared to the general population, our sample may have been skewed in favour of feminisation, if anything. We are also not the first to point this out, see i.a. Giusti, Azzalini 2020; Cignarelli et al. 2021. All things considered, we believe these claims to be warranted at the time of writing.

We want to point out one limitation of this study: we tested gender mismatches in terms of a binary opposition between masculine and feminine forms. As such, our study can be said to properly investigate feminisation, but not inclusive language. One could argue, and this author agrees, that truly inclusive language would look beyond this dichotomy to include all gender identities. It follows that some of the assumptions and design choices of this study could be questioned. Instead, we propose to see them as aspects that future work could expand and improve upon.

Acknowledgments

This contribution builds upon earlier works. Thom Westveer is to be credited for the original experimental design, which he developed for his PhD research project under the supervision of Prof. Enoch Aboh and Prof. Petra Sleeman (Westveer 2021). All researchers generously agreed to share the resources necessary to adapt the original French questionnaire into Italian; this adaptation constituted the basis for the research this author carried out for her bachelor's thesis, under the supervision of Prof. Giuliana Giusti.²⁰ The French and Italian results were presented on two occasions in 2019: separately in Paris (Symposium *Entre Masculin et Féminin*) and jointly in Leiden (Conference *Going Romance*). The Italian results were first published, in Italian, as part of the Symposium's proceedings (Giusti, Zanoli 2022). This publication constitutes the first time the results are published in English. Additionally, compared to Giusti and Zanoli (2022), the following key differences are to be highlighted: the background and related work are presented in a substantially different manner; the statistical analysis of the results has been expanded; the overall argumentative structure has been adapted to the goals of this publication. My gratitude goes out to Giuliana Giusti for her continued support and her significant contribution to this study, and to Thom Westveer and Petra Sleeman for the collaboration that made this research possible. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on an earlier version of this contribution. Any remaining errors are my own.

20 Zanoli, E. (2019). *How Society Shapes Language: A Study of Gender Mismatches in Partitive Constructions in Italian* [unpublished BA Thesis]. Venice: Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

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