

# Designing an Instructor's Guide to Introducing Gender Neutral Grammar in Italian Language Class

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# What to expect

1. Where my research comes from and why it is necessary
2. Phase 1 of my research
3. Phase 2
4. Implications and reflections

# Designing Process: Problem Space

- In Italian there is no gender neutral grammar + the default is the masculine
- Heated debate in Italy, with two approaches
  - Feminist and LGBT+
- Most popular options:  $\text{\textcircled{e}}$  and \*, but no consensus
  - Examples:
    - “Tu sei belle” instead of “Tu sei bello” (masculine) or “Tu sei bella” (feminine)
    - “Ciao a tutt\*” instead of “ciao a tutti” (masc.) or “ciao a tutte” (fem.)

# Designing Process: Problem Space

- Interest from colleagues in creating a gender inclusive/expansive setting in their own Italian classes
- Questions from students:
  - “How do I refer to you/other nonbinary people in my life?”
  - Many questions about gendered things and concepts
    - “Why is the chair a ‘lei’ (*she*)?”
    - “Why are we, as a class, “gli studenti” (*the students, masc.*) even though we are mostly female students?”

## Designing Process: Initial Goals

- Having an answer for my students
- Providing an opportunity for open discussion and respectful debate within the class
- Involving the students in the cultural debate happening in Italy around gendered language
- Creating a tool to help colleagues with similar hopes

## Designing Process: Central Question

How do we teach Italian while providing room for gender neutral grammar, however experimental this grammar might be?

Phase 1: getting to know the students,  
introducing gender

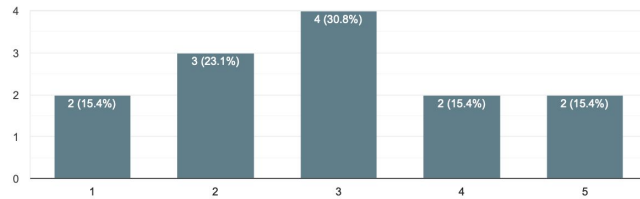
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# Survey at the beginning of the semester

I frequently think about how I'm gendering others when speaking in English.

13 responses

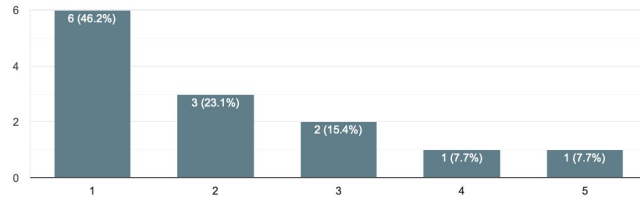
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I frequently think about how I'm gendering myself when speaking in English.

13 responses

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“English is not really centered in gender based wording compared to the romance languages, which is why I don’t really focus too much on gendering. However, I do sometimes think of how the pronouns I use for someone else might make them feel.”

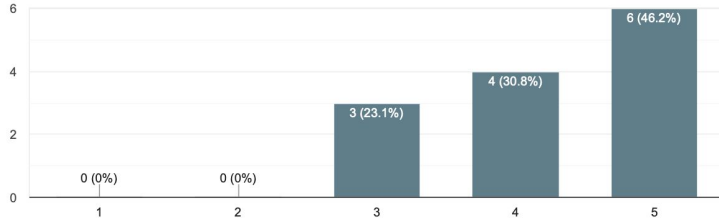
NB: before each question set, a definition of “gendering” was included - “to assign grammatical gender to someone”



I frequently think about how I'm gendering others when speaking in Italian.



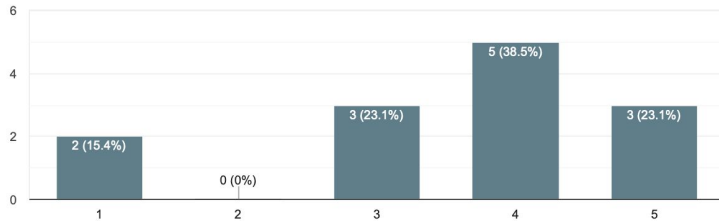
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I frequently think about how I'm gendering myself when speaking in Italian.



13 responses

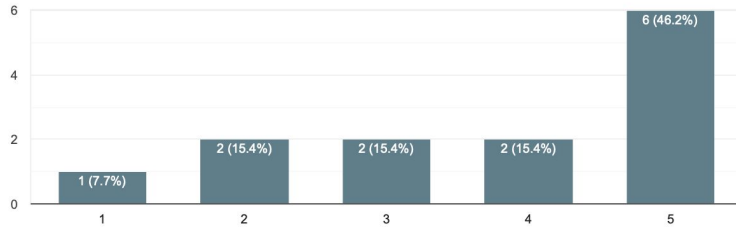


“I try to think about it, but it is easy to forget in Italian because some words end with a or o because of conjugation and some because of gender, which can be confusing.”

In the languages I speak, I am aware of gender neutral options.

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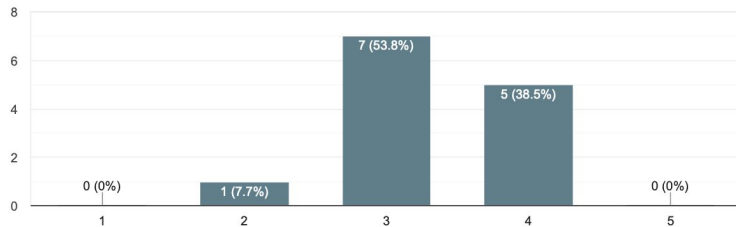
13 responses



I try to avoid gendered language when I speak.

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13 responses



“I’m not sure of all the gender-neutral options in Italian but I’m willing to learn.”

“I know of gender neutral options in Spanish and English, but not in Italian.”

**Can you think of an example in the language(s) that you speak where there is gendering? How has it impacted you? How have you reacted to it? Feel free to share any thoughts or specific experiences you might have in regards to this.**

- In Italian, I feel like there is gendering as we learned last semester if there is one boy and multiple women, you would address the group in the masculine plural because there is one male. I thought that was interesting, as it is clearly something that comes from different times when men and women were seen differently.
- I honestly can not think of a time where gendered speaking has impacted me, but I try to be respectful as best I can.

Phase 2: teaching the curriculum, furthering  
discussion

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# Gay.it Article



**GAY. IT!**  
make it as you like

NEWS

LIFESTYLE

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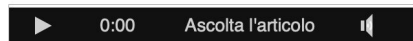
PRIDE 2023, SCOPRI TUTTE LE DATE E LE CITTÀ D'ITALIA

Historical sentence at the Court of Rome: a person with non-binary gender identity is recognized – interview

Gay.it interviewed Giovanni Guercio, lawyer of Alex, a non-binary person who had their gender identity legally recognized for the first time in Italy.

## Sentenza storica al Tribunale di Roma: riconosciuta una persona con identità di genere non binaria – intervista

Gay.it ha intervistato Giovanni Guercio, avvocato di Alex, persona non binaria che per la prima volta in Italia ha visto riconosciuta legalmente la sua identità di genere.



Alex Ruma

21.03.2022 - 13:58



🕒 3 min. di lettura



È una gioia constatare i passi avanti fatti in riconoscimento delle persone con **identità non binaria**.

In questi anni stiamo assistendo a passi da gigante per il riconoscimento di persone con identità

# Pre-reading exercise

Scrivete le definizioni del vostro gruppo IN ITALIANO (Write your own definition of your group's assigned words in Italian)

- TRANSGENDER (*transgender*)
  - l'identità di genere di una persona che non corrisponde alla stessa registrata alla nascita
  - maschile/femminile
- NONBINARIO (*nonbinary*)
  - Adj. Una persona che non si identifica come un maschio o una femmina
  - Maschile
  - Femminile: nonbinaria
- OBBLIGATORIO (*obligatory*)
  - Una cosa che devi fare
  - Maschile
  - Femminile: obbligatoria
- IDENTITÀ (*identity*)
  - Chi sei; descrizione di una persona
  - Femminile
- INTERVENTO CHIRURGICO (*surgery*)
  - una operazione medica sul corpo
  - Maschile

Example of  
student work

# Simultaneous exercise

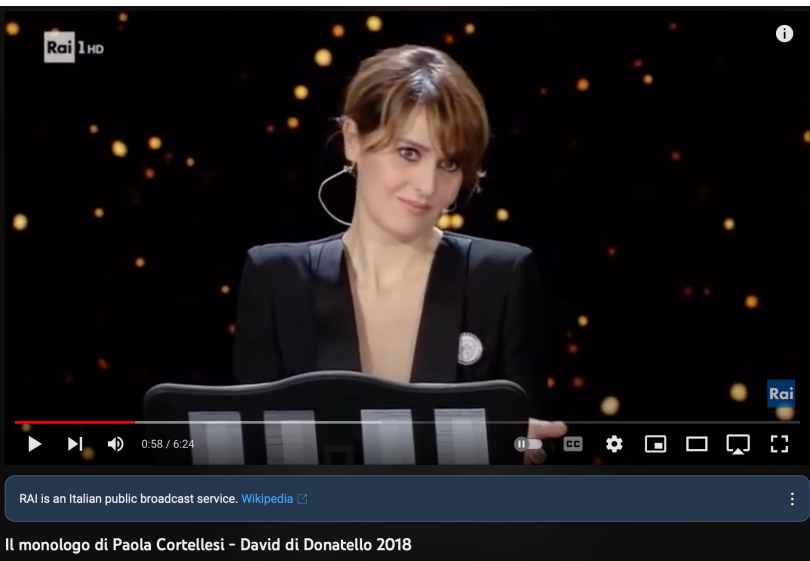
As we read [this article](#), please note in the columns below any grammatical marker of gender. These can be nouns, articles, adverbs, verbs, adjectives, etc.

For example, for the *giudice* column, one could write down “la,” an articolo determinativo that informs us of the judge’s gender.

| ALEX  | GIUDICE                             | AVVOCATO               |
|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Il protagonista è Alex                      | La - femminile                      | l'avvocato             |
| non binaria                                 | “ <b>La Giudice ha</b> ”- femminile | secondo lei?           |
| ‘la necessità di Alex di essere sottoposte’ |                                     | Quando gliel’ho        |
| ‘gliel’ho’                                  |                                     | “La <u>dottorosa</u> ” |
| “La sua identità”                           |                                     | Sono lieto             |
| “il suo benessere psicologico”              |                                     |                        |
| Persona non binaria                         |                                     |                        |

Example of student work

# Paola Cortellesi's 2018 monologue



|                              | maschile  | femminile  |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| cortigiano                   | Un uomo che vive a corte                        | Prostitute                                       |
| massaggiatore                | Massage therapist                               | prostitute                                       |
| uomo di strada               | Uomo del popolo ; fa parte della vita di strada | prostitute                                       |
| uomo disponibile             | Un uomo gentile e generoso                      | prostitute                                       |
| passeggiatore                | Uomo che cammina                                | prostitute                                       |
| uomo con un passato          | A man with a past; vale la pena conoscerlo      | prostitute                                       |
| squillo                      | Il suono del telefono                           | prostitute                                       |
| uomo di mondo                | Un gran signore                                 | prostitute                                       |
| uno che batte                | Un giocatore di tennis                          | Prostitute --<br>Una persona che si prostituisce |
| Un uomo che ha un protettore | Someone who has a protector                     | A woman who has a pimp                           |
| buon uomo                    | A good man                                      | prostitute                                       |
| uomo allegro                 | A happy man                                     | prostitute                                       |
| gatto morto                  | Felino deceduto; a dead cat                     | prostitute                                       |
| zoccolo                      | Una calzatura di campagna                       | prostitute                                       |



# Survey, take 2

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## Differences and similarities from the start of the semester

- Generally, slight move towards more awareness of gender neutral options
- Positive feedback about gay.it article and Paola Cortellesi video
- Students noted clearer understanding of LGBTQ+ issues in Italy and stated being “curious to learn more about [it].”
- “For those who use masculine, learning Italian is much simpler, due to the fact that the default in Italian is masculine. It is an interesting concept, but definitely a problematic one.”

# Can you think of an example in the language(s) that you speak where there is gendering? How has it impacted you? How have you reacted to it?

- If I don't know someone's gender identity in Italian it is awkward
- I don't think English is gendered, so I don't frequently dwell on it. However, when I speak Farsi, I actively think about whether there is gendering, but Farsi is not a "gendered" language. On the other hand, when I was learning Spanish, gendering was constantly drilled in our practice, so I am cognizant of "gendering" when I speak a highly gendered language like Italian and/or Spanish.

## Next steps & takeaways

- Developing a proper guide for instructors, including example exercises and assignments
- Discussing social gendering appears useful from a grammatical gendering point of view too
- There are challenges:
  - “Risky”
  - Italian curricula are very packed, so additional work needs to take a backseat

# What to consider moving forward

How to encourage students to reflect on grammatical/social gender in English?

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