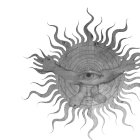


Linguistica e Filologia

44

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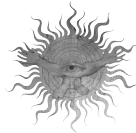
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Linguistica e Filologia

44

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Call me by your name: A corpus-based discourse analysis of the use of Italian gender choice in professional self-denominations on LinkedIn

Abstract

This study examines the impact of undervalued feminine forms in professional titles among Italian female professionals on LinkedIn. A corpus of 643 profiles was collected from profiles of women in law and architecture from Milan, Rome, and Naples. Using corpus analysis tools, the study found a preference for unmarked masculine forms, indicating resistance to adopting feminine forms despite long-standing linguistic recommendations. This reflects ongoing sexism and androcentrism in Italian language and society.

Keywords: gendered language in professional environments; Italian feminine; androcentrism; professional self-identification; LinkedIn profiles corpus analysis; gender bias in professional denominations

1. Introduction

The present study aims to detect whether all the causes behind the possible choice of the masculine for professions performed by women have a real effect on the self-definition of Italian female professionals. To this end, profiles of female professionals in the fields of law and architecture, historically masculinised fields, were observed on LinkedIn, a professional networking platform where individuals create profiles to showcase their work experience, skills and achievements to connect with other professionals and to explore job opportunities in their field. The choice of this particular social network stems from the fact that it is used to offer an idealised portrait of one's professional identity and that, therefore, users' self-definition preferences are not random but respond to a precise strategy with a view to the personal promotion encouraged by the platform (Van Dijck 2013: 211).

This phenomenon is not limited to online profiles but extends to official titles and designations in professional and political spheres, as illustrated

by a directive from Italy's Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni. On 28 October 2022, only a few days after her election, Meloni sent out an official circular to all ministries stating: “per opportuna informazione si comunica che l'appellativo da utilizzare per il presidente del Consiglio dei ministri è: «Il Signor Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri, On. Giorgia Meloni»”¹ (La Repubblica 2022). Later, Meloni's staff corrected the communiqué and asked for the word ‘Signor’ to be removed, but reiterated that “il Presidente del Consiglio, On. Giorgia Meloni, chiede che l'appellativo da utilizzare nelle comunicazioni istituzionali sia «Il presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri»”. The need to inform of the choice of title to be used for the newly elected prime minister emerges from the fact that Meloni is the first woman in Italy to occupy the Prime Minister's Office² and the decision to call herself “il presidente” ‘the_{MASC} president’ in masculine highlights a phenomenon that is still debated in the contemporary Italian language: the declination of the names of offices and professions, especially those of a certain prestige, to the masculine even when the referent is a woman. Given the controversy stirred up by the premier's request, several specialists felt the need to position themselves regarding the correctness or otherwise of the choice of the masculine. The president of the Accademia della Crusca, Claudio Marazzini, stated that women who prefer traditional masculine forms still have the right to do so (Sky 2022). On the other hand, Valeria Della Valle, co-director of the Treccani Dictionary, considers that it cannot be reduced to a personal option because if we want to keep up with the grammar and updating of the Italian language, she says that Giorgia Meloni should be called “la presidente” ‘the_{FEM} president’ with a feminine article (Adnkronos 2022).

The two positions just mentioned give an idea of the lack of clarity surrounding the topic of the gender of professional names in Italy, even though the debate, renewed by Meloni's initiative, is actually quite dated and has its origins in the publication of Alma Sabatini's *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (1987), a research study published at the initiative of the ministerial administration, which aimed to unmask the gender discrimination inherent in certain linguistic usages.

1 For proper information it is hereby announced that the appellation to be used for the President of the Council of Ministers is: ‘The president_{MASC} of the Council of Ministers, Hon. Giorgia Meloni’

2 Previously, Nilde Iotti (1979-1992) and Irene Pivetti (1994-1996) were president of the *Camera dei deputati* and they too asked to be nominated with the masculine ‘il presidente’, while Laura Boldrini, third woman to hold this position (2013-2018), chose the feminine ‘la presidente’ (Villani 2020).

In the introduction to her study, Sabatini (1987: 26) argued that:

[i]l desiderio, non sempre conscio di dar risalto al diverso livello della carica, è forse spesso il motivo che induce molte donne nei gradi più alti a preferire il titolo maschile, il che, d'altra parte, non fa che confermare che il genere maschile, in questo caso strettamente connesso al sesso maschile, è il più autentico detentore di prestigio e potere e che la donna, se vuole salire di grado, ad esso si deve adeguare.³

The reasons Italian female professionals choose a masculine self-denomination may transcend the limits of linguistics. In line with the heirs of Sabatini's thought, this choice is linked to the greater prestige of the masculine in detriment to its feminine counterpart (Robustelli 2014; Formanowicz and Sczesny 2016; Cavagnoli and Dragotto 2020; Giusti 2022). In support of this argument, the use of the masculine does not apply to all professions exercised by women since some feminine word forms show greater flexibility and naturalness in linguistic adaptation, while for other words this adaptation seems to be more problematic. Terms such as *operaia*, *commessa*, *segretaria* (factory worker_{FEM}, sales clerk_{FEM}, secretary_{FEM}), relating to feminised jobs with little economic and social recognition are easily inflected in the feminine, while nouns indicating prestigious professions or institutional roles such as *ministro*, *architetto* or *avvocato* (minister_{MASC}, architect_{MASC} or lawyer_{MASC}) use masculine forms (Sabatini 1987; Robustelli 2010; 2014).

Like Meloni's is the position of Beatrice Venezi, the famous orchestral conductor recently chosen as music advisor to the Italian Ministry of Culture, who has often reiterated her choice of masculine: "Per me quello che conta è il talento e la preparazione con cui si svolge un determinato lavoro. Le professioni hanno un nome preciso e nel mio caso è direttore d'orchestra"⁴ (La Repubblica 2021). Her statement assumes, on the one hand, that the gender of nouns does not denominate persons, but the role performed (as also argued by Coletti 2015: 127); and on the other

3 Desire, not always conscious of emphasising the different level of office, is perhaps often the reason that leads many women in the higher ranks to prefer the male title, which, on the other hand, only confirms that the male gender, in this case closely related to the male sex, is the most authentic holder of prestige and power and that the woman, if she wants to rise in rank, must conform to it."

4 For me what matters is the talent and preparation with which one does a particular job. Professions have a specific name, and in my case it is conductor_{MASC}.

hand, that the prestige and respect that a woman must earn in historically masculine spheres goes beyond the question of language. In this case, the choice of the masculine takes place in contexts where equality means women's homologation to the masculine role (Robustelli 2014: 22), highlighting how the feminine is incompatible with high social status in the collective imagery (Formanowicz and Sczesny 2016). There is, in fact, a widespread feeling that self-definition as feminine entails a degree of incompetence or less consideration, especially in highly competitive work environments (Formanowicz and Sczesny 2016; Fondazione Bruno Kessler 2022).

A second reason is the degree of morphophonemic uncertainty associated with the use of feminine professional titles (Thornton 2009; Robustelli 2010). This is especially the case among female speakers with a fragile awareness of the workings of the language, who, for fear of breaking some grammatical rule and consequently being sanctioned by prescriptive language use, opt for the masculine, which is more common and established in Italian and, therefore, felt to be a safer choice (Fusco 2019; 2024; Thornton 2009). Underlying this preference is the belief that a masculine noun is also valid when referring to women (Robustelli 2010; 2013). This originates from the fact that Italian masculine forms can have two distinct usages: sometimes they are used in a marked manner, specifically indicating a male individual, while in other situations, they are used in an unmarked manner to refer to a person without specifying the gender (e.g., because it might be unknown, indeterminate or irrelevant) (Luraghi and Olita 2006; Thornton 2022). However, in Italian, grammatical gender attributed to nouns referring to persons follows a referential criterion based on the biological gender of the person referred to, hence of a semantic nature (Luraghi and Olita 2006; Robustelli 2010; Fusco 2019; 2024). Following the indications recently reiterated by the Accademia della Crusca (2023) to guarantee an inclusive use of language, it is more correct to use the feminine gender for professional titles that refer to women since these names can be derived using normal grammar rules.

There is no shortage of those who, when choosing the masculine, cite reasons relating to the pleasantness or otherwise of the sound of the word: some feminine nouns of professions would have an unpleasant sound (Thornton 2004; 2009; Manera 2021; Fusco 2024) and even former president of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano called *ministra*

‘minister_{FEM}’ a horrible word and *sindaca* ‘major_{FEM}’, abominable (La Repubblica 2016), downplaying the importance that language has in consideration of the presence of women in politics.

Returning to the issue that inspired the introduction of this study, it is interesting to point out how the choice of the feminine in professional titles has undeniable ideological implications in Italy (Marazzini 2017:134), understanding the term *ideological* not as something necessarily negative. As Villani (2020) reports in the political context, the professional feminine has been used as a kind of hate gender, as in the case of Laura Boldrini, who presided over the Chamber of Deputies from 2013 to 2018. Boldrini, who, in a totally opposite way to Meloni’s recent position, expressly asked to be styled “la presidente” ‘the_{FEM} president’ called for gender identities to be respected even in parliamentary acts. For this reason, she was often opposed not only in parliament but also on social media and right-wing newspapers (Cuzzocrea 2017).

It is important to consider that, in 2022, according to data by VOX – Osservatorio Italiano sui Diritti ⁵, women were the main targets of hate speech on the web and this aggravates if women belong to the public sphere and present other characteristics that make them targets of discrimination such as race, as was the case with Minister Cécile Kyenge (Formato 2016: 396). This phenomenon has the same dimension in the European Community, where it turns out that most online hate targets women (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2023: 51). Thus, it is even more likely that the self-designation in the masculine form of certain female professionals is not so much a ‘choice’ but a form of shielding behind a masculine denomination, away from derision, insults and misogynistic discourse (Manera 2021: 25).

The ludicrous intent associated with the use of professional femininities is probably also inherent in another statement made by Prime Minister Meloni in defence of her own choice of masculine: “Io non ho mai considerato che la grandezza della libertà delle donne fosse potersi far chiamare ‘capatrena’⁶” (Il Post 2022). It is obvious that the term chosen by Meloni to exemplify her argument, i.e. ‘capatrena’, was picked

⁵ The data are visible on the web page <http://www.voxdiritti.it/la-nuova-mappa-dellintolleranza-7/>

⁶ I never considered that the greatness of women’s freedom was to be able to call themselves ‘capatrena’ [train conductor].

for sarcastic purposes, as it deliberately violates the rules of feminine formation of compound nouns, but her statement also recalls another argument often used in favour of the use of the unmarked masculine, the so-called ‘benaltrismo’ (Gheno 2019, Sulis and Gheno 2022, Fusco 2024), i.e. the idea that as far as feminine affirmation is concerned “i problemi sono *ben altri*” (‘the problems are quite different’), such as the wage gap, feminicides, etc. This statement apparently defends the priority of the “real problems”, but in reality, ends up sidestepping the issue, completely debasing the importance that language choices assume in achieving equality. The resistance to the use of feminine forms in professional titles is underscored by a quickly withdrawn trial balloon bill proposed by Lega Nord senator Manfredi Potenti, entitled “Dispositions for the Protection of the Italian Language with Respect to Gender Differences”. This legislative proposal aimed, among other objectives, to impose fines of up to 5,000 euros for the use of feminine designations in professional titles within any documents issued by public institutions (Messina 2024).

Language has a clear relationship with visibility and linguistic battles are sometimes an alibi to conceal factual resistance to women’s access to top roles (Villani 2020). In this sense, the choice of the feminine has a clear strategic function as it has the effect of revealing the increasing presence of women in historically male-oriented spheres such as politics (Formato 2016: 373).

2. *State of the Art*

Italian, a grammatically gendered language, mandates the classification of nouns and their modifiers as either masculine or feminine based on phonological and semantic criteria (Thornton 2005). Typically, grammatical gender aligns with the referent’s sex (e.g., “la maestra è arrivata” vs “il maestro è arrivato”⁷). Masculine forms are often overused for mixed groups, abstract functions, or unknown genders (e.g., “tutti i candidati ammessi” “assumeremo un nuovo impiegato”)⁸ (Cignaretta et al., 2022).

7 The teacher_{FEM/MASC} has arrived_{FEM/MASC}

8 All candidates_{MASC} admitted_{MASC} / We will hire a new_{MASC} employee_{MASC}

Nowadays, there are very few studies concerning the preference of female self-defining agents in professional roles, although the existing ones show rather homogeneous results. The survey carried out by the Equal Opportunities Committee of the Rovereto Lawyer's Bar (Bruno Kessler Foundation 2022: 5) on a sample of female members of the Trentino regional professional registry showed that it is often women who do not accept the feminine declination of their professional title, in the belief that adopting masculine terms equates to achieving a status with greater social consideration and avoids association with gender stereotypes. The survey also refers to the results of a 2021 study on the use of gender language in the province of Trento, which evidenced that the use of the title inflected in feminine is minimal among the technical professions (5% in engineering) and in the legal profession (15%), while it is widely used in the health professions. It also shows that, even though 50% of the female lawyers believe that with the term inflected in masculine the average person imagines a man, as many as 85% of them use it to talk about themselves (Fondazione Bruno Kessler 2022: 6).

Formanowicz and Sczesny (2016: 6) in a study regarding the self-definition of women who engage in psychology and psychotherapy in a corpus of Polish-language texts, found that they almost exclusively use masculine titles to refer to themselves. Within the corpus, in fact, only one occurrence of the profession inflected in the feminine and 35 in the masculine, of which 50% had a woman as the referent. It can be deduced that the choice of the masculine for self-definition affected 94.5% of the cases.

Research carried out by Voghera and Vena (2016: 37) on the resumés of female university lecturers in Venice, Rome and Salerno shows that masculine lemmas account for 39%, ambiguous nouns for 37% and feminine nouns for 24%. As far as the geographical dimension is concerned, the authors noted a certain difference since the prevalence of masculine nouns is found above all in the cities of Southern Italy (48%), while the universities of Rome and Venice lean towards ambiguous nouns, which represent 44% and 39% respectively. The University of Venice is the one where the majority of feminine choices are found (32%).

A study carried out by Latos (2017: 60) regarding the linguistic choices of native Italian speakers reported that the masculine form prevails over the global choices regarding certain professions exercised by women: for example, 70% choose the masculine form *avvocato* 'lawyer_{MASC}', 23%

the feminine form *avvocata* and 7% the residual form *avvocatessa*, both ‘lawyer_{FEM}’. The percentage of masculine choice is always majority in professions such as general practitioner, engineer, lawyer or lab technician, professions, according to the author, are “typically practised by men” (Latos 2017: 60). However, recently the number of women registered in the different professional orders shows a change: these are 47.7% in law, 44% in architecture and still 17% in engineering (Frabotta and Pauletto 2024: 2).

Finally, Cignaretta et al. (2022) examine the use of feminine forms for professions in Italian, using Twitter data from 2006 to 2021 to analyse the distribution of gender in job titles. Their research focuses on both marked and semi-marked forms, revealing a growing trend in the use of feminine forms over the 15-year period. Despite this increase, there remains a notable disparity between the number of women in certain professions and the use of corresponding feminine job titles.

3. Methodology

We compiled a corpus from LinkedIn as we consider that it provides a representative and up-to-date sample of professional profiles and industry-specific language. We selected two paradigmatic job denominations that can be used instinctively in both masculine and feminine (i.e., *avvocato / avvocatessa* and *architetto / architetta*). Inferential statistical techniques will be applied to the corpus’ demographic metadata (work city and year of graduation) to obtain insights into the profiles that chose masculine or feminine. Additionally, by using corpus techniques, namely keywords and concordances, the study aims to identify characteristic patterns in profile descriptions and provide illustrative examples to enhance understanding.

Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADS) integrates corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, applying quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques (Partington 2004). CADS explores intricate language choices by combining statistical analysis of corpora with detailed discourse examination. This approach helps to understand discourse patterns and underlying meanings.

One major method used in CADS is keyword analysis, which identifies lexical units with unusual frequencies in a focus corpus compared to a reference corpus (Scott, 1997). Software is used to compare word

frequencies between corpora. Resulting keyness values reflect core concepts, attitudes, and conceptualisations of reality within the corpus. This method serves offer as “signposts to objectivity” (Baker, 2018), uncovering embedded discourses in expanded text collections. Discourse, as defined by Foucault (1969), shapes perceptions of reality through language and social practices. However, a systematic interpretation of keywords is crucial to revealing ideological biases, as highlighted by Garofalo (2021).

3.1 Corpus description

The resulting *Corpus delle Professioniste Italiane su LinkedIn* consists of texts from 643 profiles of female lawyers and architects based in Milan, Rome and Naples. Texts were compiled from all results obtained in advanced Google Search after discarding all masculine profiles manually.

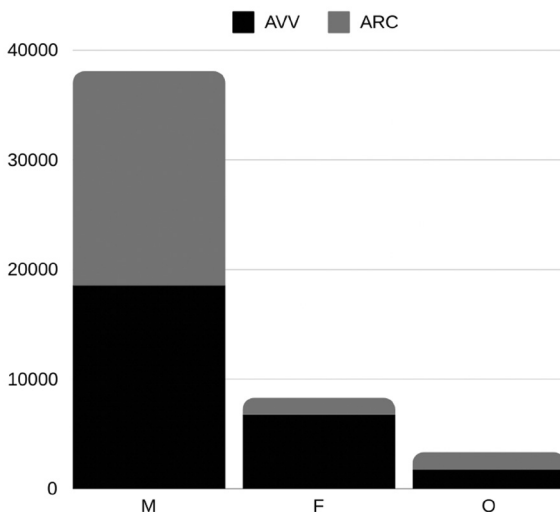
All in all, the corpus comprises 49,762 tokens, encompassing a diverse range of linguistic elements, including words, punctuation, and symbols. Within this corpus, there are 42,088 individual words distributed across 1,614 sentences, collectively forming a representative textual dataset. Studies on representativeness (Gavioli, 2002) have shown that while small corpora may not guarantee adequate representation of general language, they can still effectively capture the nuances of specialised language within specific registers or genres. The sample size chosen for this study was determined to be suitable after taking into account findings from Baker (2017) on personal adverts and insights from Jones (2021) concerning the use of smaller corpora for analysing highly homogeneous texts in social media. Baker’s study demonstrated both theoretically, by referencing Halliday, MacIntosh, and Stevens (1964) in defining restricted language, and empirically that smaller-than-average corpora are appropriate for analysing texts such as social media profiles.

The text for keywords analysis was extracted from the introductory headline (e.g., “Avvocato del Lavoro presso Studio Legale”, i.e. ‘Employment Lawyer_{MASC} at Law Firm’) and the About section of each profile. The latter serves as a concise summary highlighting the professional background, skills, career objectives, and personal interests in order to offer insight into their personality and aspirations to potential connections and employers.

The corpus was anonymised to respect users' privacy. The resulting XML documents were categorised based on the following metadata:

- *Profession*: jurisprudence or architecture, coded ARC / AVV.
- *Choice of gender*: Masculine (e.g., *avvocato / architetto*), Feminine (e.g., *avvocata / architetta*), and Other, for miscellaneous cases (Figure 1).
- *City*: the three major cities of Italy (Milan, Rome, Naples), which may be representative of the Northern, Central and Southern regions of Italy.
- *Year of graduation* (range 1976-2024). Given the absence of a specific age field in the platform, we supplemented this information with the year of graduation, which may serve as an indicator of the user's age. The national average ages are approximately 24.4 for jurisprudence⁹ and around 27.4 for architecture¹⁰.

Figure 1. Number of tokens for the feminine and masculine choice by profession

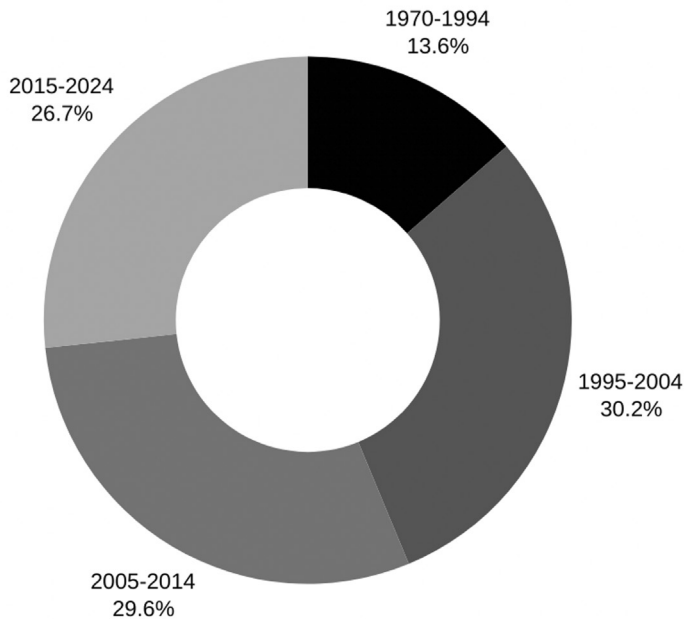


9 Information obtained from: <https://www.unime.it/notizie/rapporto-almalaurea-2023-sul-profilo-e-la-condizione-occupazionale-deilaureati#:~:text=Rimane%20sopra%20la%20media%20nazionale,%2C2%20il%20dato%20nazionale>

10 Information obtained from: <https://www.ingenio-web.it/articoli/architetti-i-dati-del-rapporto-cnappc-sulla-professione/#:~:text=Un%20altro%20elemento%20di%20interesse,per%20quella%20a%20ciclo%20unico>

The token coverage analysis reveals the distribution of tokens¹¹ across different city categories, with Rome (27,343 tokens from 242 texts), followed by Milan (14,067 tokens from 158 texts) and Naples (8,352 tokens from 207 texts). Additionally, the token coverage analysis highlights the prevalence of masculine-coded texts (M) within the corpus, comprising the majority of tokens at 38,085. Feminine-coded texts (F) and ambiguous terms (O) represent smaller proportions of the corpus (8,311 and 3,366 tokens, respectively). Finally, subcorpora were selected, covering graduation year spans (Figure 2), which shows the distribution as follows: 1970-1994 (13.6%), 1995-2004 (30.2%), 2005-2014 (29.6%), and 2015-2024 (26.7%).

Figure 2. Distribution of token counts in the corpus by year of graduation interval



¹¹ In Sketch Engine, a token is the smallest unit that a corpus consists of, including word forms, punctuation, digits, abbreviations, product names, and anything else between spaces; there are two types of tokens: words and nonwords, with corpora containing more tokens than words. Words are tokens which begin with a letter of the alphabet.

3.2 *Instruments*

Data were organised into a Pandas (McKinney, Walt and Millman, 2010) data frame containing information on the profession, city of professional practice and year of graduation. Finally, the Chi-square independence test was performed using the Scipy.stats library Virtanen et al. (2020) in Python, yielding the chi-square contingency analysis to investigate the association between multiple variables (gender choice and city/graduation year).

We used SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014), a powerful corpus analysis tool, to conduct comprehensive analyses through the exploration of keywords and concordances. In the keywords tool, the use of the choice of gender subcorpus as a focus corpus and “the rest of the corpus” as a reference allows researchers to compare texts depending on the focus choice of gender with the general corpus, revealing what are really distinctive features of both groups’ use of professional language. Keywords were set as follows: Words, Minimum frequency=3, Focus subcorpus=masculine/feminine choice, Monitor subcorpus=the rest of the corpus.

4. *Data Analysis*

4.1 *Quantitative Analysis*

Metadata was examined statistically, indicating that 84.45% of the population chose the masculine form (as seen in Table 1) while only 8.24% corresponds to the use of feminine, “Other” was chosen by 7.31% and refers mainly to uses of the term in English for internationalisation (*lawyer* or *architect*). This figure is comparable to findings from previous studies. In earlier studies, the choice of the masculine form ranged between 70% (Latos 2017) and 85% (Bruno Kessler Foundation 2022).

Secondly, in Table 2 we explore the use of gender representation in three major Italian cities: Milan, Rome and Naples. Our analysis of the dataset reveals distinct patterns across these cities. In Rome and Milan, the predominant usage of the masculine form is observed, constituting approximately 79.17% and 82.88% of the respective populations, while the feminine use stands at 11.31% and 12.28%. Conversely, Naples

exhibits a significant skew towards the masculine form, comprising 90.74% of our population, with only 2.42% represented as feminine. The calculated Pearson's chi-square statistic is 17.25 with 2 degrees of freedom, indicating a significant departure from independence between the variables City and Choice of gender. Additionally, the associated $p < 0.0001$ indicates that the probability of observing these results under the null hypothesis of independence is extremely low. Our results can be contrasted with those of Voghera and Vena (2016) who observed a prominence of masculine language in Southern Italy (48%) while in the North the majority of choices were feminine (32%). Our findings, likewise, indicate a predominance of masculine denominations across all cities, with Naples showing the highest prominence.

Table 1. Totals for the choice of gender for the professionals of law and architecture

<i>Choice of gender</i>	<i>ARC</i>		<i>AVV</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Feminine</i>	24	6.05%	29	11.79%	53	8.24%
<i>Masculine</i>	326	82.12%	217	88.21%	543	84.45%
<i>Other</i>	47	11.84%	-	-	47	7.31%
<i>Total</i>	397	100.00%	246	100.00%	643	100.00%

Table 2. Choice of gender used based on the city

<i>Choice of gender</i>	<i>Milan</i>		<i>Rome</i>		<i>Naples</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Feminine</i>	19	11,31%	29	11,28%	5	2,29%	53	8,24%
<i>Masculine</i>	133	79,17%	213	82,88%	197	90,37%	543	84,45%
<i>Other</i>	16	9,52%	15	5,84%	16	7,34%	47	7,31%
<i>Total</i>	168	100,00%	257	100,00%	218	100,00%	643	100,00%

Table 3. Distribution of profiles by year of graduation, gender used

Choice of gender	no date		1976-1994		1994-2004	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Feminine</i>			15	13.39%	13	11.50%
<i>Masculine</i>	59	88.06%	88	78.57%	92	81.42%
<i>Other</i>	8	11.94%	9	8.04%	8	7.08%
<i>Total</i>	67	100.00%	112	100.00%	113	100.00%

Choice of gender	2004-2014		2014-2024		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Feminine</i>	15	9.09%	10	5.38%	53	8.24%
<i>Masculine</i>	144	87.27%	160	86.02%	543	84.45%
<i>Other</i>	6	3.64%	16	8.60%	47	7.31%
<i>Total</i>	165	100.00%	186	100.00%	643	100.00%

In Table 3, we explore the use of feminine and masculine grammatical gender in describing professions across various graduation years. There has been an increase in the use of professions linguistically coded as masculine from 2004 onwards, particularly among individuals aged 45 and younger. However, the results of the Pearson's chi-squared test (3.37 with 3 degrees of freedom, resulting in a p-value of 0.09) indicate a lack of significant association between the use of masculine and feminine gender in professional texts on LinkedIn.

The data show a noticeable temporal variation in gender representation. Specifically, the proportion of participants associated with the choice of feminine for professional denominations diminishes over time, while there is a growing tendency for individuals to be linked with the choice of masculine. This shift suggests a deliberate alignment with linguistic norms that are perceived as more professional. Although the statistical analysis does not confirm a significant association, the observed trend implies that younger professionals (who graduated between 2004 and

2024) may be strategically choosing masculine-coded professions to enhance their professional image. These findings highlight the complexity of gender representation in professional settings and suggest the need for further research to better understand the factors driving these trends.

4.2 Keywords

After processing, Table 4 summarises all keywords within each gender choice. Results are further organised into Figure 3, grouping them into semantic families for easier observation. In the masculine gender choice, prominent semantic families include professional roles and activities, legal and administrative terms. In contrast, the feminine group exhibits different sensibilities, focusing on semantic families related to social justice and advocacy, social and community engagement, among others.

Table 4. Keywords for the masculine vs. feminine choice subcorpora

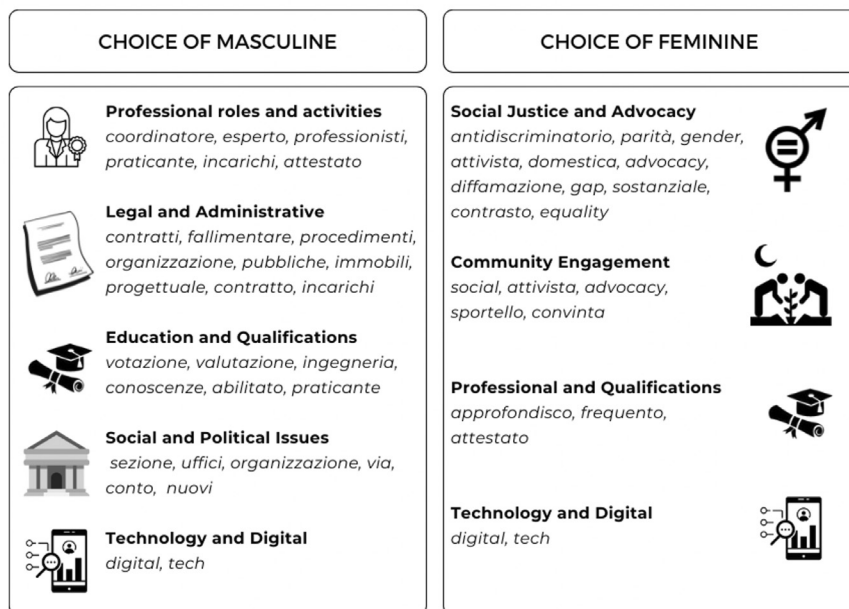
	<i>Keywords masculine choice</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Keywords feminine choice</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	<i>coordinatore</i>	39	1,025.00	<i>antidiscriminatorio</i>	11	1,324.50
2	<i>contratti</i>	36	946.3	<i>parità</i>	8	963.6
3	<i>fallimentare</i>	24	631.2	<i>gender</i>	6	722.9
4	<i>votazione</i>	21	552.4	<i>social</i>	6	722.9
5	<i>valutazione</i>	19	499.9	<i>digital</i>	5	602.6
6	<i>esperto</i>	19	499.9	<i>attivista</i>	5	602.6
7	<i>procedimenti</i>	18	473.6	<i>migranti</i>	5	602.6
8	<i>sezione</i>	18	473.6	<i>approfondisco</i>	4	482.3
9	<i>uffici</i>	17	447.4	<i>domestica</i>	4	482.3
10	<i>ingegneria</i>	17	447.4	<i>veneto</i>	4	482.3
11	<i>organizzazione</i>	17	447.4	<i>frequento</i>	4	482.3
12	<i>pubbliche</i>	16	421.1	<i>diffamazione</i>	4	482.3
13	<i>professionisti</i>	16	421.1	<i>presunta</i>	4	482.3
14	<i>via</i>	16	421.1	<i>magistrati</i>	4	482.3
15	<i>conoscenze</i>	15	394.9	<i>tech</i>	3	362

Table 4. Keywords for the masculine vs. feminine choice subcorpora

16	<i>prevalentemente</i>	15	394.9	<i>gap</i>	3	362
17	<i>conto</i>	15	394.9	<i>advocacy</i>	3	362
18	<i>praticante</i>	15	394.9	<i>governo</i>	3	362
19	<i>incarichi</i>	14	368.6	<i>attestato</i>	3	362
20	<i>abilitato</i>	14	368.6	<i>sostanziale</i>	3	362
21	<i>nuovi</i>	14	368.6	<i>contrasto</i>	3	362
22	<i>immobili</i>	14	368.6	<i>marchi</i>	3	362
23	<i>progettuale</i>	14	368.6	<i>sportello</i>	3	362
24	<i>casa</i>	14	368.6	<i>convinta</i>	3	362
25	<i>contratto</i>	14	368.6	<i>equality</i>	3	362

Figure 3. Clusters of semantic keywords for masculine and feminine gender choice

Semantic Families of Keywords



In profiles with a masculine self-definition, certain keywords emerged as particularly prominent, highlighting prevailing themes. For example, the masculine *coordinatore* ‘coordinator_{MASC}’ (F=39, score=1,025.00) is used instead of the feminine *coordinatrice*. This indicates that masculine forms are strongly linked with positions of professional prestige.

1. Direttore scientifico e *coordinatore* del Dipartimento delle riviste giuridiche ...e ... presso il COA di Roma.¹²
2. È abilitata, ai sensi del D.Lgs. 81/2008, come *Coordinatore* per la Sicurezza nei cantieri edili.¹³

An intriguing linguistic phenomenon emerges after observing the concordances of the participle *abilitato* ‘qualified_{MASC}’ (F=14, score=368.6) in the masculine-choice subcorpus, when used in the same phrase as professional denominations, *abilitato* in (3) aligns with the masculine form, as seen in fixed multi-word terms like *architetto abilitato* ‘qualified_{MASC} architect_{MASC}’ or *avvocato abilitato* ‘qualified_{MASC} lawyer_{MASC}’. However, in the absence of a professional title, the participle consistently favours the feminine gender. Interestingly, in 4 out of 14 cases (28%), the same sentence transitions from masculine to feminine forms. For example, in (4), *architetto abilitato* is followed by the feminine *formata* ‘trained_{FEM}’ and *specializzata* ‘specialised_{FEM}’ in another instance (5), in a relative clause, the writer uses the feminine *si è approcciata* ‘has approached_{FEM}’.

3. *Avvocato abilitato* al patrocinio innanzi alla Corte di Cassazione e alle altre Giurisdizioni Superiori [...]¹⁴
4. *Architetto abilitato, formata* in Architettura e ingegneria edile-architettura e specializzata nella progettazione e riqualificazione di strutture residenziali e commerciali [...]¹⁵
5. Sono un *avvocato* praticante abilitato che subito dopo la laurea si è *approcciata* sia allo studio del diritto civile [...]¹⁶

12 Scientific Director_{MASC} and Coordinator_{MASC} of the Department of Law Journals ...and ... at the COA of Rome.

13 Is qualified, pursuant to Legislative Decree 81/2008, as Safety Coordinator_{MASC} on construction sites.

14 Lawyer_{MASC} qualified_{MASC} to practice before the Court of Cassation and other Superior Jurisdictions [...]

15 Licensed_{MASC} architect_{MASC}, trained_{FEM} in architecture and building-architecture engineering and specialising in the design and redevelopment of residential and commercial structures [...]

16 I am a licensed_{MASC} practicing lawyer_{MASC} who immediately after graduation approached both the study of civil law [...]

Academic excellence is a frequent topic for profiles selecting the masculine. Despite career advancement, they consistently include academic performance indicators like *votazione*, *valutazione* ‘grades’ across graduation years. Writers in (6, 7) tend to enhance their CVs by elaborating on their scholarly accomplishments and contributions.

6. Laureata In Giurisprudenza con la *votazione* di 110 L/110 presso l’Università LIUC Carlo Cattaneo, tesi in Diritto Penale dal titolo “...”¹⁷
7. Laureata nel gennaio 2020 in Giurisprudenza presso la Sapienza Università di Roma; con *valutazione* di 110/110 cum laude.¹⁸

In the feminine gender choice, notable keywords include *antidiscriminatorio* ‘anti-discrimination’ (8) (F=11, score=1,324.50), highlighting a strong engagement with inclusion initiatives, and *parità* ‘parity’ (9) (F=8, score=963.6), or *equality* (F=3, score=362) indicating discussions on gender equality.

8. Mi occupo in particolare di diritto sostanziale e processuale civile, diritto di famiglia e diritto minorile, diritto *antidiscriminatorio* e lavoro.¹⁹
9. La mia passione e dedizione per la giustizia sociale mi hanno portato a specializzarmi in progetti di Diversity & Inclusion per le aziende, oltre allo sviluppo di consulenze su una vasta gamma di questioni legate alla *parità* di trattamento, certificazione sulla *parità* di genere, reputazione, ESG, responsabilità sociale d’impresa e trattamento dei dati personali.²⁰

The battle against gender violence is pivotal for professionals choosing the feminine, with three key terms. Firstly, *gender* (10) (F=6, score=722.9), a borrowing from English, relates to a commitment to challenging gender-based discrimination and advocating for equal rights.

17 Graduated_{FEM} in Law with the grade of 110 L/110 from LIUC Carlo Cattaneo University, thesis in Criminal Law entitled “...”

18 Graduated_{FEM} in January 2020 in Law from Sapienza University of Rome; with a grade of 110/110 cum laude.

19 I focus on substantive and procedural civil law, family and juvenile law, anti-discrimination law, and labor law.

20 My passion and dedication to social justice has led me to specialise in Diversity & Inclusion projects for companies, as well as developing consultancy on a wide range of issues related to equal treatment, gender equality certification, reputation, ESG, corporate social responsibility, and personal data processing.

Secondly, *domestica* 'domestic' (11) (F=4, score=482.3) highlights the focus on justice for domestic violence victims, emphasising the need to address systemic issues and provide support to victims. Lastly, proactive efforts for gender equality involve legislative and advocacy initiatives aimed at closing the *gender gap* (12) and enacting laws for women's rights and protection, fostering a more equitable society.

10. Avvocata e Legal Advisor su *Gender Equality*- Advocacy gender equality²¹
11. Mi specializzo nel contrasto al gioco d'azzardo e contro la violenza sulle donne e *domestica*²²
12. Ha collaborato alla redazione di progetti di legge presso la Commissione Giustizia della Camera dei Deputati riguardanti norme a favore delle donne vittime di violenza e norme finalizzate all'eliminazione del c.d. "gender gap"²³

The keywords in the feminine choice subcorpus indicate strong advocacy for migrant and marginalised communities' rights (13-16) (*advocacy*, F=3, score=362). Individuals in this group show significant interest in migrant support (*migranti* 'migrant' F=5, score=602.6). Their commitment often extends beyond professional roles to include volunteer and activist efforts with organisations like Amnesty International (*attivista* 'activist', F=5, score=602.6).

13. Ho conseguito un master sullo studio delle *migrazioni* in termini sociologici, caratterizzato anche da un approccio pratico; ho svolto un tirocinio e successivamente un periodo di lavoro presso lo sportello *migranti* dell'INCA CGIL di Ferrara, ed anche la successiva pratica forense è iniziata focalizzandosi in particolar modo sui richiedenti asilo; tema che ho trattato per anni.²⁴

21 Lawyer_{FEM} and Legal Advisor on Gender Equality- Advocacy gender equality.

22 I specialise in combating gambling and against violence against women and domestic violence

23 Collaborated on drafting bills at the Justice Commission of the Chamber of Deputies concerning regulations in favour of women victims of violence and regulations aimed at eliminating the so-called 'gender gap'.

24 I earned a master's degree on the study of migration in sociological terms, also characterised by a practical approach; I did an internship and then a period of work at the migrant desk of the INCA CGIL union in Ferrara, and the subsequent forensic practice also began focusing particularly on asylum seekers; a topic I have dealt with for years.

14. ... dal 2020 svolge attività di consulenza legale per lo Sportello Donna, fornendo alle donne vittime di violenza, sia native che *migranti*, e ai loro figli minori, consulenza ed orientamento allo scopo di tutelarne i diritti e sostenerle nei processi.²⁵
15. Svolge attività di volontariato come *attivista* in Amnesty International – Italia.²⁶
16. *Attivista* diritti civili e dei diritti della comunità LGBTQTI+ | Architetto progetti²⁷

5. Conclusion

The choice of masculine to refer to women in prominent professions is a use of the Italian language that indicates the possibility of using the masculine in an over-extended manner. According to the experts on the subject, the low use of feminine nouns in Italian is due to the fact that nouns such as *avvocata* or *architetta* are felt to be uncertain, cacophonous, irrelevant or ridiculous. In addition, there is no shortage of examples of women at the highest echelons of society advocating the choice of the masculine to refer to themselves. However, this linguistic choice has been strongly questioned by feminist linguistics and the progressive sectors of Italian society for decades, as it highlights the tendency to obscure the presence of women, especially in power positions or in historically male-dominated areas.

In line with some previous studies carried out on the phenomenon, the data analysis evidence that 84.45% of the observed profiles lean towards the masculine when choosing a noun to identify them professionally, demonstrating that Italian female professionals feel benefited by the use of the masculine, probably felt as more prestigious and valid in order to obtain greater recognition. With respect to the geographical dimension, data indicate a slightly higher preference for masculine gender language in the South compared to the North, though differences are not substantial. In Northern Italy, masculine gender is used in 79.17% of cases, while in Rome, this figure rises to 82.88%.

25 ... since 2020 has been carrying out legal counselling for the Women's Desk, providing women victims of violence, both native and migrant, and their minor children, with counselling and guidance for the purpose of protecting their rights and supporting them in the processes.

26 Volunteers as an activist in Amnesty International - Italy.

27 LGBTQTI+ community rights and civil rights activist | Project architect

Regarding age, a trend emerges where female professionals who graduated before 1994 exhibit the highest propensity (13.39%) for feminine-coded professional titles. Conversely, despite advancements in gender equality, younger generations demonstrate a reluctance to adopt feminine professional designations (5.38% for those who graduated from 2014 onwards), potentially due to perceived negative connotations associated with feminine language and a desire to avoid potential career drawbacks.

The analysis of the corpus of profiles also shows that those who lean towards the use of the feminine grammatical gender in social media are professionals interested in gender equality and anti-discrimination activism, and this suggests that in Italy today, in order to publicly affirm one's option of being professionally identified as a woman, it is necessary to have a set of progressive values.

In conclusion, it emerges from the study that Italy still proves to be a rather conservative country with regard to the affirmation of women in leading roles. The recommendations for a non-sexist use of language that are periodically reiterated by experts and official bodies have practically no impact.

We are aware that the choice of title for professional self-description on LinkedIn may imply only a partial view of its use by users, who in this context may choose denominations that they believe will enhance their professional image rather than those they would use in everyday contexts.

As a future development of this research, it would be interesting to be able to ascertain in a personal way, e.g. through interviews, whether the language choices used for self-description remain consistent in the different contexts of use, online and offline, and also to investigate the reasons for the choice of the masculine gender, especially in the younger generations.

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