

Strategies, challenges and opportunities for gender-expansive pedagogies in the beginner language classroom

Riccardo Amorati
Lecturer in Italian Studies
The University of Melbourne (Australia)
riccardo.amorati@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

Although grammatical gender is typically introduced early in the curriculum in the teaching of gendered languages, students are often expected to align with binary gender categories when referring to themselves, an approach that marginalizes gender-nonconforming learners. This article explores how linguistic forms beyond the binary can be integrated into second language curricula, with particular attention to beginner-level courses. It starts by discussing the importance of embedding gender-expansive language into pedagogical practices and then offers practical strategies for increasing the visibility of underrepresented groups or for neutralizing gender references. The article goes on to identify key factors that educators should consider when implementing gender-expansive approaches, examining how these can influence the uptake of gender-expansive pedagogies. Drawing on examples from Italian, the paper concludes with hands-on suggestions for introducing linguistic forms beyond the binary and facilitating discussions on gender justice from the earliest stages of language instruction while keeping content manageable for learners.

Keywords: gender-inclusive language, gender justice, language education, inclusion, gender

1. Introduction

When learning gendered languages, students are typically introduced to the notion of grammatical gender early in the curriculum and are required to choose between masculine and feminine forms when referring to themselves. This approach does not reflect the diversity of contemporary language classrooms, where students may identify as gender-nonconforming, i.e., their gender expression, identity or behavior does not align with conventional binary norms of “male” or “female” (see e.g., Knisely, Paiz 2021). This recognition is important, as enforcing binary grammatical choices on students with diverse gender identities – who are becoming more and more visible (see e.g., Harrison 2024 for the Australian context) - can contribute to feelings of exclusion and marginalization (Jäggi *et al.* 2025; Knisely 2022; Knisely, Paiz 2021).

There is ongoing debate regarding alternative approaches to gender representation in language teaching, particularly at beginner level, with many educators arguing that it can be impractical due to students’ limited L2 proficiency (Stark 2021, 2022). Yet, beginner-level

classes often focus on students' identities and experiences (Liddicoat 2009), making it crucial to expand binary models from the start.

Despite the evident need, teachers often lack clear institutional or curricular guidance on incorporating gender-expansive linguistic practices into their teaching (Knisely, Paiz 2021; Knisely 2022). The lack of official policies or widespread pedagogical frameworks on gender inclusivity places educators in the difficult position of balancing evolving social understandings of gender with the grammatical structures of the languages they teach (Knisely 2022a; Stark 2022; Knisely, Russell 2024).

To address these challenges, this article explores strategies for introducing gender-expansive language, defined as language that represents and validates a broad spectrum of gender identities (see section 2), into language education, with a particular focus on beginner classes. It first reviews important terminology and outlines the challenges associated with current usage in gendered languages such as Italian, presenting the rationale for integrating gender-expansive language into teaching practices. It then reviews linguistic strategies for increasing gender representation in the classroom and identifies key factors that teachers need to consider when deciding whether and how to incorporate gender-expansive language into their courses. Finally, the paper illustrates practical ways in which gender-expansive forms can be embedded into language instruction from the outset. Although all examples in this paper are taken from Italian, similar reflections can be made for other Romance languages such as French, Spanish and Portuguese, where comparable challenges/opportunities emerge (see e.g., Silva, Soares 2024; Sulis, Gheno 2022).

2. The starting point: terminology and linguistic issues in current language usage

Discussions on gender-responsive pedagogies are linked to broader debates on the use of linguistic practices that represent diverse identities. Various terms have been employed to describe these practices (see Amorati, Pirovano 2024 for an overview). This paper adopts the term expansive language (e.g., Pickering, van Leent 2024), which aligns with the Italian term *linguaggio ampio* (Gheno 2022a; 2022b). These concepts refer to language that acknowledges diverse identities, allowing individuals to feel represented without being constrained by norms that reproduce inequalities (Cavagnoli, Gasparrini 2024). Both terms are preferred over “inclusive” which implies a majority-minority framework, whereby a majority group “includes” a minority (Gheno 2022a). The idea of expansive language emphasizes the addition of new expressive forms to represent groups that are less visible or completely invisible in current language practices and highlights the need to “open linguistic spaces” for them (Manera 2021) to promote gender justice. Thus, advocates of expansive language do not aim to replace existing forms but to add new ones. The ultimate aim is to promote gender justice, understood here as the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals through the recognition and representation of diverse gender identities through linguistic practices (see also Amorati, Pirovano 2024).

Let us now examine why gender expansive language is needed, focusing on Italian as a case study. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of three levels of analysis: (1) how the language works structurally, i.e. in terms of grammar, (2) how the language is used and (3) who needs more representation based on current linguistic usage:

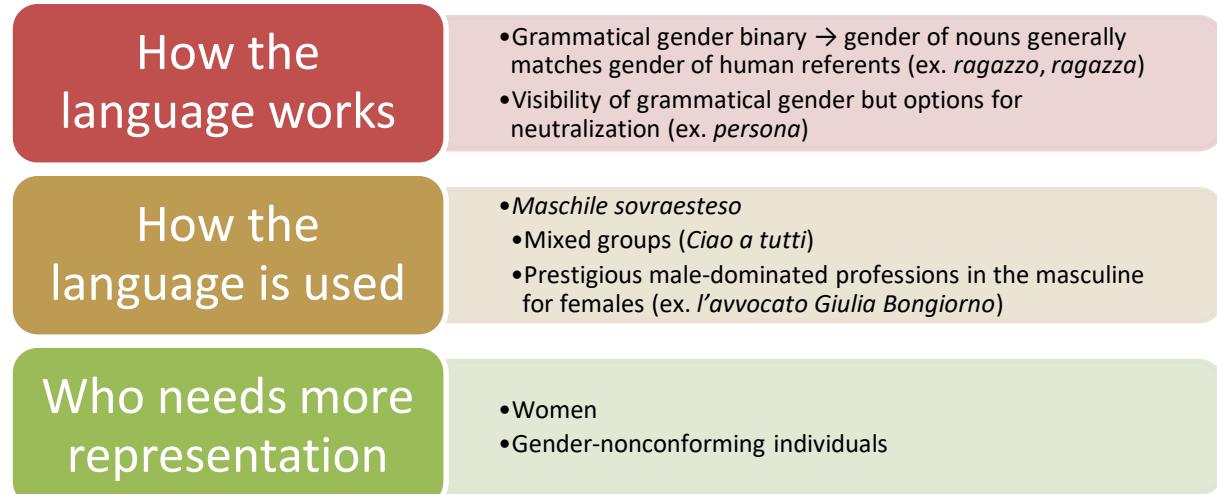


Fig. 1 How gender works in gendered languages like Italian

Italian, like other Romance languages, is structured around a grammatical gender binary, with nouns and related grammatical elements typically expressing gender agreement. In general, grammatical gender aligns with social gender in the case of human referents. For example, *ragazzo* (boy) is masculine, while *ragazza* (girl) is feminine. However, the alignment between grammatical gender and social gender does not occur in every case. An example is the word *persona* (person), which is always grammatically feminine regardless of the gender of the person in question (see section 4). Gender is also highly visible in Italian, appearing in nouns and their modifiers as well as in some compound verb forms.

As noted elsewhere (Amorati, Pirovano 2024), the main challenge to achieving gender justice in Italian lies not in the language itself, but rather in the way it is used. A concern in contemporary Italian usage is the practice of the overextended masculine (*maschile sovraesteso*), where the masculine form is employed as a generic default beyond strictly masculine referents to include mixed-gender groups or unspecified individuals. Research in psycholinguistics has consistently shown that the overextended masculine tends to evoke predominantly male mental images and interpretations, leading to a reduced cognitive visibility of other genders (Stahlberg *et al.* 2007; see also Sczesny *et al.* 2016 and Jäggi *et al.* 2025 for critical overviews). The prominence of the masculine extends to professional nouns referring to women in prestigious and traditionally male-dominated professions (Gheno 2022a; 2022b). For instance, a woman working as a lawyer or minister may be referred to using the masculine words *ministro* and *avvocato* rather than the feminine *ministra* or *avvocata*, since the feminine forms can sound less formal or less authoritative, reflecting how the masculine continues to signal higher status and professional recognition. It should be noted, however, that professional titles in the feminine are gradually gaining acceptance, especially in media and institutional discourse, signaling growing awareness of the issue (Cavagnoli, Gasparini 2024; Gheno 2022a).

Yet, despite these developments, socially entrenched norms continue to render women and gender-nonconforming individuals less visible in current linguistic practices, prompting ongoing public and scholarly debate on the matter for Italian and other gendered languages (see e.g., Gheno 2022a; 2022b; Jäggi *et al.* 2025). This calls for a reflection on how gendered languages are taught.

3. Is gender-expansive language relevant to language education?

Researchers and educators have long recognized that language education is not just about developing linguistic skills; it is also a crucial context for shaping and reshaping learners' identities (see Knisely, Paiz 2022; Liddicoat 2009). Scholarship in applied linguistics and education has responded to this by advocating for curricula, textbooks and pedagogical practices that acknowledge students' dynamic identities, including gender identities (e.g., Lesniak 2023; Osborne 2024). This shift aims to counteract the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ individuals in language classrooms and to promote more equitable learning environments (Knisely 2022). Teachers are increasingly called upon to support the use of gender-affirming language in their classrooms (e.g., Fuentes, Gomez 2022; Knisely, Russell 2024) and to challenge long-standing linguistic norms that privilege the male as the default (Jäggi *et al.* 2025; Sczesny *et al.* 2016).

Table 1 present some areas at the very start of gendered language courses that can present problems for gender-nonconforming students:

Teaching content	Binary forms
Subject pronouns	<i>lui/lei</i>
Birth	<i>Sono nato/a</i>
Nationality	<i>Sono italiano/a</i>
Adjectives	<i>contento/a</i>
Professions	<i>alunno/alunna</i>

Table 1 Example of areas that require a gender choice at the start of a beginner language course.

Traditional teaching materials often present gendered options in a way that makes students feel they must choose a gender, leaving them with the impression that no alternative exists. This can result in misgendering, which, whether accidental or deliberate, has been shown to be associated with anxiety, alienation and diminished self-worth (see e.g., Osborn 2022; Jäggi *et al.* 2025).

It is essential that language educators receive appropriate training to engage with issues of linguistic representation in ways that demonstrate respect and openness. Rather than relying on prescriptive or dismissive responses that present language as fixed and immutable, teachers should be encouraged to acknowledge the evolving nature of language and the innovative forms being adopted by different speakers.

Importantly, gender-expansive language education offers pedagogical benefits that extend beyond students who identify outside the gender binary. As Knisely (2022) notes, such approaches promote critical awareness of the relationship between language, identity and power, emphasizing that languages are dynamic systems shaped by their users. This perspective enables learners to develop a deeper understanding of linguistic diversity and sociocultural norms, thereby enhancing their intercultural competence and their ability to engage with issues of gender and identity in informed and reflective ways (see also Knisely, Paiz 2021; Frabotta, Manera 2024). Several studies also suggest that students exposed to gender-expansive pedagogies often demonstrate greater engagement, heightened empathy and improved language proficiency (see e.g., Knisely 2022 for an overview). By embracing approaches that recognise diverse gender identities and expand rigid linguistic norms, educators can foster classrooms that support all students' wellbeing, engagement and critical thinking about the complex interplay between language, identity and society.

4. What strategies can we use? The gender-expansive teacher toolkit

Building on previous research conducted on a variety of gendered languages (Sczesny *et al.* 2016; see also Jäggi *et al.* 2025), Amorati and Pirovano (2024) have developed a toolkit comprising both pedagogical principles and linguistic approaches and strategies that teachers of Romance languages can implement to challenge linguistic asymmetries. Let us focus here on the linguistic approaches and strategies, as shown in Figure 2:

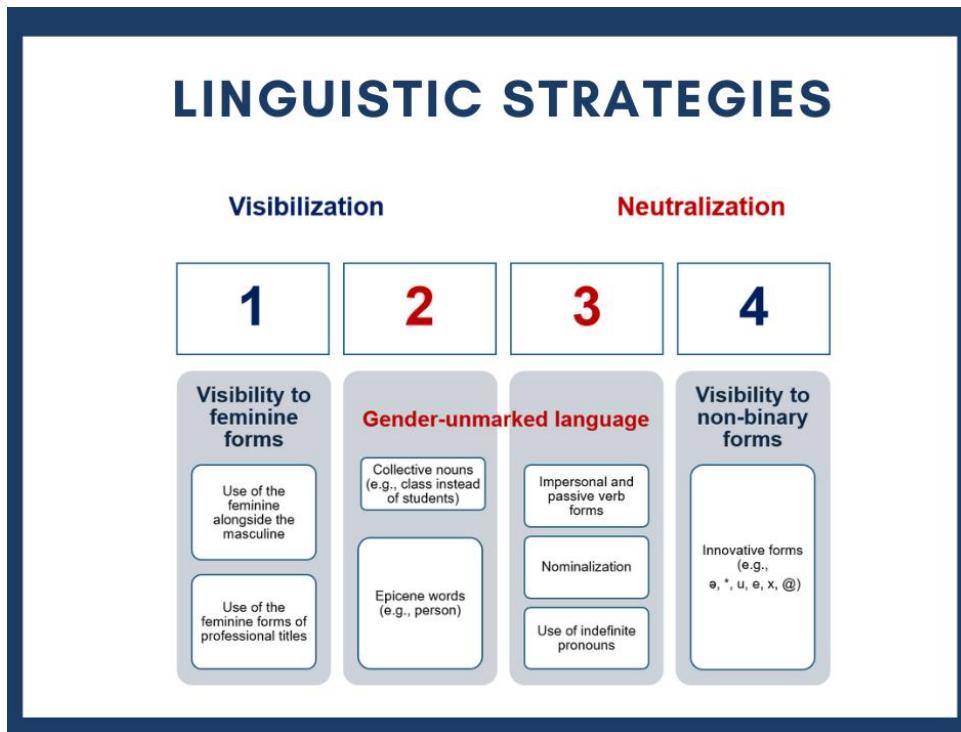


Fig. 2 Linguistic strategies for gender-expansive language use (taken from Amorati, Pirovano 2024)

The two approaches are visibilization and neutralization. For each approach two linguistic strategies are identified and listed in order of complexity, from the easiest (1) to the most difficult (2) to implement.

When speakers use “visibilization”, they wish to make feminine and non-binary forms visible in a language where the masculine is prevalent. For instance, in strategy 1 the feminine is used alongside the masculine instead of just the overextended masculine, e.g., *ciao a tutte*_{feminine plural} *e tutti*_{masculine plural} vs *ciao a tutti*_{overextended masculine plural} (hi everyone). It should be noted that the order in which masculine and feminine forms are presented can have socio-cultural and symbolic effects: listing the feminine first (e.g., *tutte e tutti*) can help counterbalance historically androcentric linguistic traditions, whereas the masculine-first order may implicitly reinforce the current dominant androcentric perspective (Cavagnoli, Gasparini 2024). As part of strategy 1, the feminine form is also used for all professional titles referring to women, e.g., *la ministra*_{feminine} vs *il ministro*_{masculine} for a woman minister.

In strategy 4, speakers adopt innovative forms that are used by gender-nonconforming communities, e.g., *ciao a tutta*_{non-binary ending}. These are more difficult to implement mostly because linguistic usage among gender-nonconforming speakers is not standardized and many different forms may co-exist (see later discussion in section 5)

The second approach is “neutralization”. Strategy 2 requires speakers to choose words that are the same for all genders, e.g., *la persona*_{gender-neutral} (the person) vs *l'uomo*_{masculine} (the man) or *la donna*_{feminine} (the woman). Strategy 3 is based on rephrasing: speakers modify sentences to remove gendered references, for example by using impersonal or passive constructions, non-gendered expressions or neutral grammatical forms (e.g., *gli studenti*_{overextended masculine} *devono consegnare il compito* - the students must submit the assignment → *la consegna del compito è obbligatoria* - the submission of the assignment is compulsory).

Several guidelines have been developed to support the adoption of expansive language, such as the *Gender-Inclusive Language Project* (UX Content Collective n.d.), which presents resources for multiple languages, including French, Spanish and Italian. For Italian, another useful reference is Vitiello's (n.d) *Guida pratica al linguaggio inclusivo in italiano* (Practical guide to inclusive language in Italian), which is freely available online and includes a variety of real-world examples and suggestions for more gender-just language use.

5. Key considerations for implementing gender-expansive language in the classroom

The next step involves examining how the approaches and strategies outlined in the previous section can be integrated into teaching practice. This is a complex endeavor, as educators must navigate and balance many factors, as illustrated in Figure 3 on the next page.

It is argued here that teachers play a dual role: they are both advocates for gender-expansive language practices and responsible practitioners committed to making pedagogically sound decisions that support student learning. It is important to emphasize that adopting a gender-expansive approach to language education does not entail the rigid enforcement of new norms or the replacement of traditional forms. Rather, in keeping with the notion of expansive language (see section 2), it involves broadening learners' linguistic repertoires, offering expanded communicative choices and fostering critical reflection.

As shown in Figure 3, the first factor to consider refers to the personal and contextual conditions in which teaching takes place (1). While much of the discussion around gender-expansive language rightly focuses on learners, it is essential to recognize that teachers are equally part of the process. Their professional agency, linguistic competence, personal identity and stance towards gender-expansive language must be considered as well. Educators should reflect on their own understanding of gender justice, their stance towards gender-expansive language and the receptiveness of their institutional and classroom contexts. In environments where gender discourse remains contested or unsupported, the integration of gender-expansive language may be impractical or unsafe both for teachers and gender-nonconforming students. Visibility can indeed be a double-edge sword for gender-nonconforming individuals in hostile contexts, where efforts to make gender-diverse identities more visible may unintentionally place students at risk and expose teachers to backlash (Osborn 2022). In these situations, a more cautious or gradual approach may be necessary: teachers could establish confidential, supportive environments where gender-nonconforming students can express themselves without fear of exposure or backlash and, if appropriate, use neutralization rather than visibilization forms (see Fig. 2) that avoid drawing undue attention but still signal a gender-just stance.

Educators must also take into account their students' level of linguistic proficiency (2). At beginner levels, the principle of “less is more” is particularly relevant. Students may not yet possess the language proficiency needed to produce complex grammatical forms, such as those involving passive constructions or abstract reformulations outlined in the Toolkit (strategy 3, see Fig. 2). In this sense, CEFR descriptors can serve as a useful reference point for calibrating inclusive language practices. At A1 and A2 levels, for instance, teachers might

prioritize simple strategies such as using the feminine alongside the masculine or incorporating collective nouns to neutralize gender references. At B2 and C1 levels, by contrast, learners could be encouraged to experiment with more complex reformulations involving nominalization and passive constructions. Depending on their context, teachers may also choose to address gender justice only as a topic for reflection, inviting learners to critically examine the linguistic norms they encounter, such as the overextended masculine, without necessarily asking them to produce gender-expansive forms.

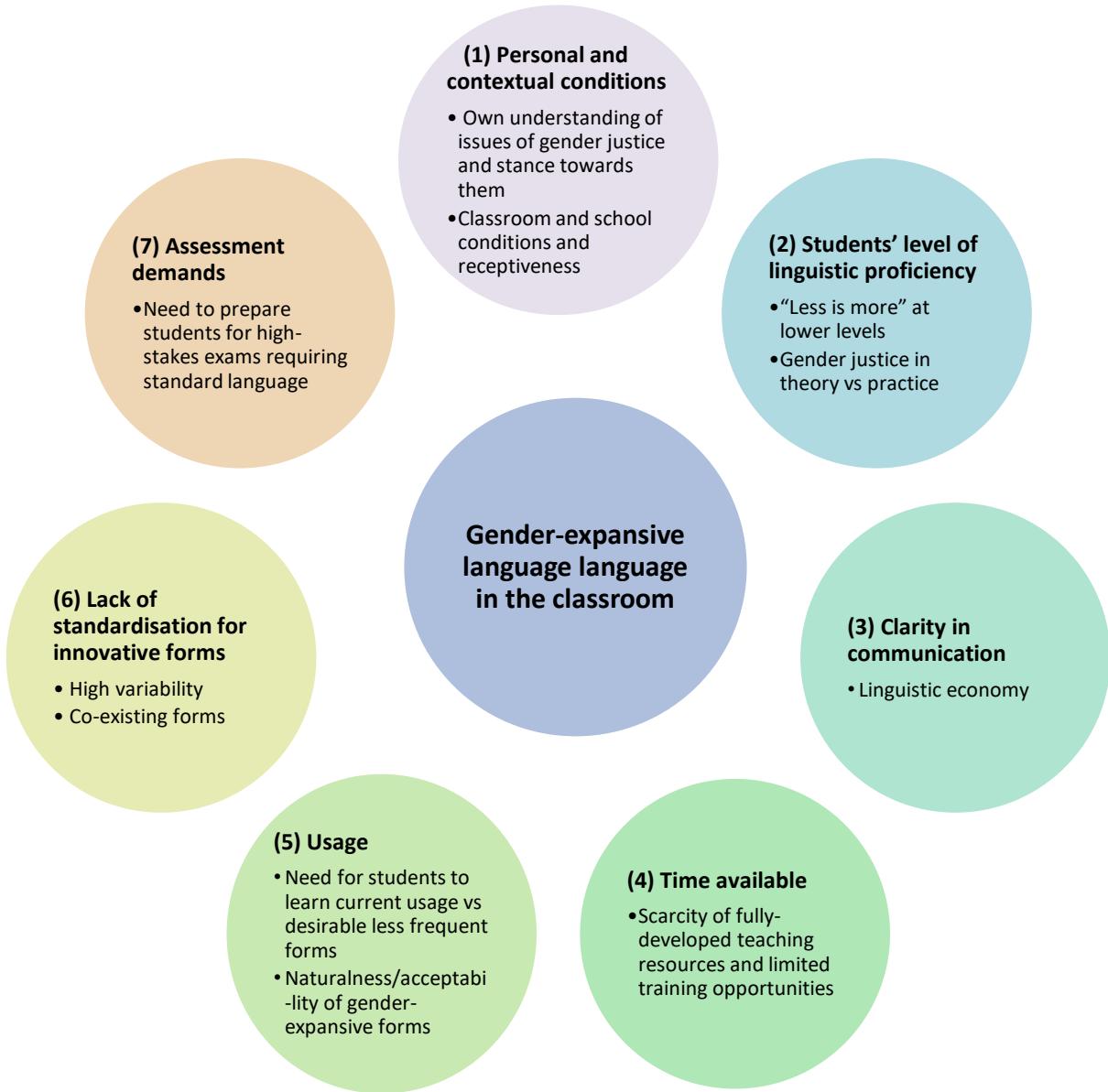


Fig. 3 Factors to consider for the implementation of gender-expansive language in the language classroom

Another important consideration is clarity in communication (3). As noted earlier, the systematic use of the masculine generic influences mental representations in ways that make women and gender-nonconforming speakers less visible (Stahlberg *et al.* 2007; Sczesny *et al.* 2016; Jäggi *et al.* 2025). However, in certain contexts, using the masculine form is necessary to preserve clarity and avoid overly complex constructions that could arise

if masculine, feminine and non-binary forms were used in every instance requiring gender agreement. Teachers may decide to use gender-expansive forms in particular situations, such as greetings or class instructions and provide explanations for not applying them consistently.

Another factor is the time available (4). Language textbooks often do not adequately reflect gender diversity (Frabotta, Manera 2024) and teaching resources for Italian and many other languages are limited, leaving teachers with the responsibility of creating their own materials.

Additionally, usage (5) should be taken into consideration. Since gender-expansive forms are not widely adopted, focusing exclusively on “desirable” gender-expansive options runs the risk of making students learn forms that diverge from current mainstream usage. Returning to one of the examples reported in Table 1, *Sono italiano/a* (I’m Italian), a teacher might suggest the alternative *Sono una persona italiana* (I’m an Italian person), which foregrounds the individual rather than the gender. However, this formulation will likely sound marked or overly formal to many native speakers. A more natural alternative like *Vengo dall’Italia* (I come from Italy) obscures gender altogether and may offer a pedagogically and communicatively effective compromise. However, it might lose something in terms of self-identification. Each form involves trade-offs between fluency, clarity, identity expression and gender-just stance. Rather than treating these tensions as problems to be resolved definitively, they can be viewed as productive spaces for reflection and dialogue. They highlight the importance of pedagogical flexibility and critical engagement. As teachers, we can encourage critical reflection on gender justice by discussing our linguistic choices openly with students, inviting them to consider what is socially meaningful and contextually appropriate

Another issue is the lack of standardization of innovative forms (6), which has resulted in multiple co-existing options and can make it difficult for teachers to decide which forms to prioritise. Teachers should consult empirical studies or guidelines on language use within gender non-conforming communities. In general, language use in these communities is highly variable, with multiple non-binary forms available and considerable variation in usage. Notably, some gender-nonconforming speakers may still prefer binary forms (see e.g., Prunotto 2018). Therefore, non-binary students should be allowed to use binary forms if they wish, reflecting authentic practices (see also section 6.3).

Finally, in many contexts teachers need to consider assessment demands (7), as they must prepare students for high-stake exams, where examiners may not be familiar with gender-expansive forms and could mark them as incorrect. This creates a tension between fostering gender-expansive language practices and ensuring students’ success in standardized tests, which rely on the traditional forms presented in textbooks (Frabotta, Manera, 2024). To address this, teachers need to explain to students that the gender-expansive forms they introduce can differ from the standard grammatical forms expected in official contexts.

Based on the discussions presented in this section and the specificities of their own context, teachers can opt for different levels of implementation of gender-expansive language. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, implementation should be flexible and context-sensitive. A proposal with different levels of uptake for gender expansive pedagogies is presented in Figure 4. This continuum is not intended as a prescriptive tool, but as a reflective framework to support teachers in identifying where they currently stand and how they might gradually and sustainably expand their practice in line with their own considerations in relation to the factors outlined in this section. It is important to note that the continuum does not correspond to CEFR proficiency levels, as it does not necessarily reflect language ability but rather the extent to which gender-expansive practices are integrated into teaching. That being said, the CEFR and the continuum can, of course, complement each other. At lower levels of the CEFR, inclusive language work might focus on simple forms of address, greetings or self-introductions that acknowledge students’ gender identities. At intermediate

and advanced levels, learners can explore more complex ways of expressing inclusivity and engage in deeper discussions of gender justice in language use, particularly in relation to discourse, identity and sociolinguistic variation.

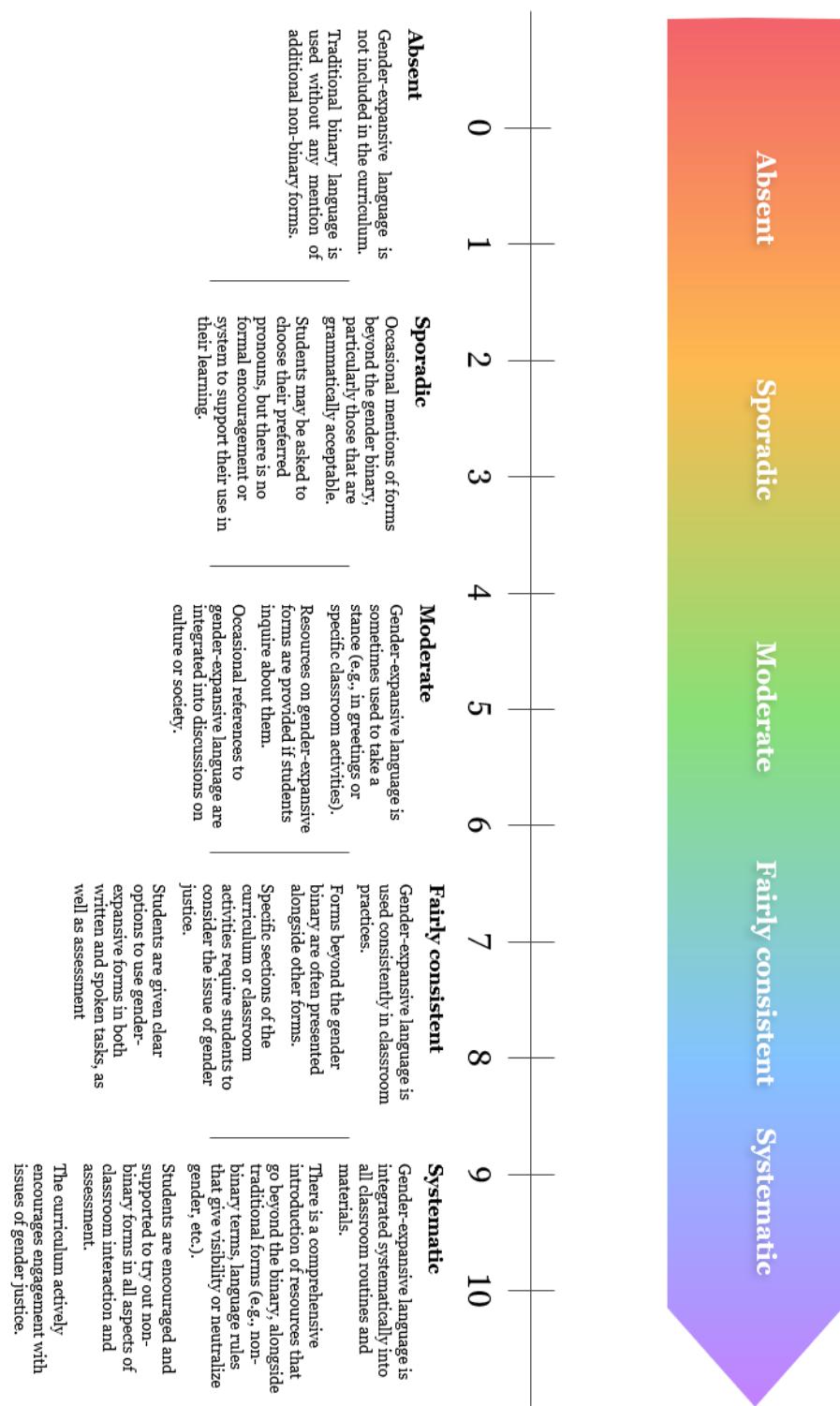


Fig. 4 Different levels of uptake of gender-expansive linguistic practices in the language classroom

6. Introducing gender-expansive language into beginner Italian language courses

This section presents practical examples of how gender-expansive language can be integrated into beginner-level courses. Drawing on the toolkit and the key factors discussed earlier, the following paragraphs illustrate how typical classroom topics can support reflection on gender-expansive forms, even in the early stages of language learning. As observed previously, while the examples are for Italian, similar observations can be made for learners of other Romance languages (see e.g., Silva, Soares 2024).

6.1 Gender-neutral pronoun

Students are typically introduced to subject pronouns in Italian from the very start of their learning journey. This provides an opportunity to incorporate a brief explanation of how the non-binary singular “they” can be rendered in Italian, accompanied by a simple illustrative example. For instance, the expression *È di Roma* may refer to “he is from Rome,” “she is from Rome,” or, in a gender-neutral reading, “they (gender-neutral) are from Rome.” The linguistic demands of this concept are minimal, yet its inclusion sends a clear message: as educators, we are acknowledging linguistic diversity, opening space for dialogue and demonstrating awareness of the experiences and needs of gender-nonconforming individuals. In doing so, a minority perspective is embedded within the curriculum from the outset.

6.2 Grammatical gender and agreement

When introducing grammatical gender, it is important for educators to avoid conflating grammatical gender with social gender (see also Knisely, Paiz 2021; Amorati, Pirovano 2024). As noted in section 2, while there is alignment between the two, it should be made clear to students that a binary grammatical system does not prevent speakers from expressing identities beyond the gender binary. Students should also be reminded that the primary function of grammatical gender is to ensure agreement between words, not to define identity. If needed, sentences can be restructured so that agreement does not reflect a person’s gender identity. This becomes particularly relevant when teaching adjective agreement in Italian, where adjective endings typically signal the gender of the speaker or referent. In the teaching resource presented in Figure 5, students are offered the option to choose between masculine, feminine and non-binary forms. The inclusion of non-binary forms gives visibility to the identities of learners who do not identify within the traditional gender binary, helping them feel seen and represented in linguistic practices. When selecting a non-binary form, students can use the gender-neutral noun *persona*, allowing adjectives to agree with *persona* rather than with the subject. In written tasks, students may also use non-binary symbols, such as the Italian gender-neutral letter schwa (see e.g., Gheno 2022a). This approach demonstrates that moving beyond the binary is possible and that the language required to do so remains accessible even at the beginner level.

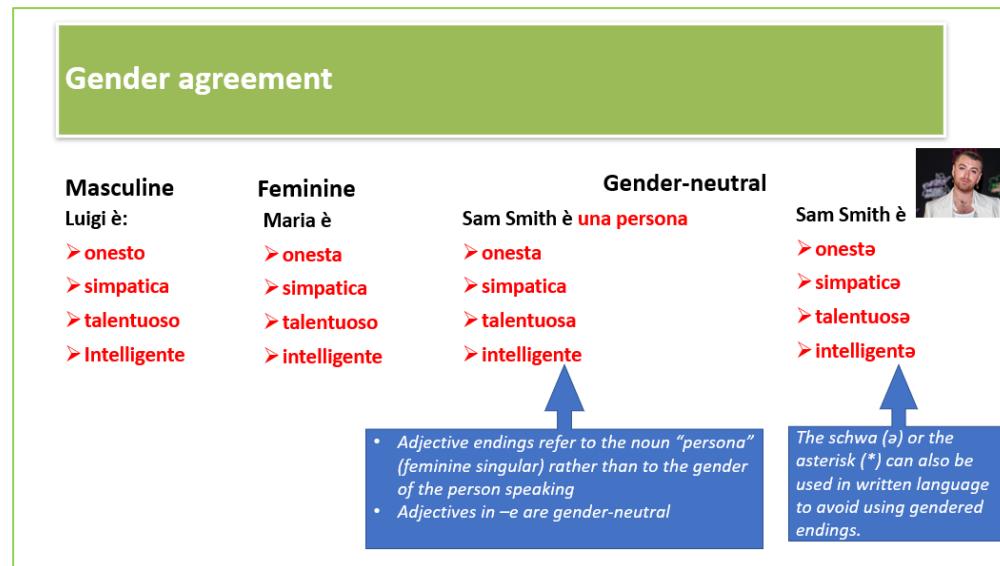


Fig. 5 Adjective agreement in Italian beyond the binary

Teachers might also consider incorporating materials that prompt reflection on the use of the *maschile sovraesteso* (overextended or generic masculine), particularly as it pertains to referring to mixed-gender groups in Italian. As noted in section 2, traditionally, Italian grammar dictates the use of the masculine plural even when a group is predominantly female. When this rule is introduced in the classroom, it often elicits spontaneous reactions from students who question its fairness. These moments provide valuable opportunities to foster critical thinking about the sociolinguistic implications of this grammatical convention. Students can be introduced to alternative strategies they may encounter in contemporary Italian to avoid the overextended form. For example, teachers might explain why they use expressions such as *ciao classe* (hi class) instead of gendered masculine-generic forms like *ciao ragazzi* (hi guys). Importantly, teachers can emphasize that the use of alternatives is context-dependent: learners are not required to adopt them, but they can choose to do so as a way of signalling a particular stance or awareness of the issue.

Teachers can also encourage students to examine the default presentation of masculine forms in dictionaries and textbooks. For example, looking up the Italian word for "child" typically yields *bambino*, presented as the default option despite referring specifically to a male child. From the outset, it is important to engage students in reflecting on the ideological underpinnings of such conventions and their broader implications. Teachers can draw attention to the fact that some dictionaries, such as the 2022 edition of Treccani, have begun including both masculine and feminine forms (e.g., *bambino* and *bambina*, see Gheno 2022a) and use this as a springboard for classroom discussion. Students can be prompted to consider why such changes matter and how they contribute to more gender-just linguistic practices. Building on these reflections, students can then be asked to analyze the presentation of gendered forms in their textbooks and learning resources. As Frabotta and Manera (2024) note, language textbooks often do not fully reflect the diversity and complexity of gender and may even present stereotypical or stigmatizing portrayals. For this reason, engaging students in critical analysis of textbook content and the grammatical rules they encounter can help foster empathy, greater social awareness and more inclusive perspectives. As a class activity, students could also be asked to propose alternative ways to present grammatical information in their textbooks, such as listing both gendered forms rather than just the masculine and/or offering gender-neutral examples, so as to make materials more representative of diverse identities.

6.3 Negotiating gender choice for gender-nonconforming students

As observed in previous studies (Amorati, Pirovano 2024; Pirovano, Amorati forthcoming), teachers should adopt strategies that support gender-nonconforming students in expressing their identities within the constraints of Italian grammatical structures. Students could be encouraged to use visibilization or neutralization strategies, as outlined in Figure 2 (strategies 2-3-4). This approach can be linguistically demanding for beginner learners and, in the case of innovative non-binary forms, may also lead to produce language that is not officially recognized. As discussed in Amorati and Pirovano (2024), two additional compromise strategies may be introduced to address these challenges. The first can be labelled “random choice strategy” (see also Knisely, Paiz 2021). When learners find visibilization/neutralization too complex, they may be encouraged to select either the masculine or feminine form at random for a given task, without needing to maintain that choice in subsequent tasks. The emphasis is on internal consistency within each individual task, rather than long-term adherence to a single gendered form. The second strategy can be labelled “implied meaning”. In this case, students may select a binary form (masculine or feminine) and explain that they are associating this form with a gender-neutral term which is grammatically masculine or feminine rather than to their own gender identity. For example, a student might choose the feminine form because they are thinking of themselves as a *persona* (person) or the masculine form in reference to *individuo* (individual) and communicate this reasoning to the teacher and the rest of the class. These nouns do not need to be explicitly included in their writing/speaking, which helps avoid sentence structures that may be too complex for students. The learner’s gender choice follows a personal logic rather than being random (as in option 1) and can therefore be experienced as more empowering for their affirmed identities. Overall, such strategies offer a practical way for gender-nonconforming students to engage with gendered grammar at a level appropriate to their linguistic competence, while also equipping them to navigate formal assessments, such as proficiency exams, where binary structures remain the norm.

7. Conclusions and actionable steps

As observed before, gender-expansive language plays a central role in allowing all learners to claim the right to self-definition. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties that can come with implementing gender-expansive practices (see section 5). Teachers, for instance, may need time and support to confidently integrate new linguistic forms, while learners may initially find some expressions unfamiliar or may resist using forms that are not yet standardized or widely accepted. Recognizing these factors enables educators to approach gender-expansive practices realistically, tailoring them to their specific teaching contexts and fostering open discussions with learners about the complexity of the issue.

It is also important to move away from a confrontational or overly militant approach to linguistic inclusion. This approach is understandable given the marginalization that communities seeking recognition have endured over time and continue to experience. However, it may risk alienating some learners or educators. Rather than framing the adoption of gender-expansive language as a battle, we should think of it as a process that supports students’ development into more respectful, socially aware and competent language users.

Figure 6 outlines key actionable steps that educators of Romance languages can adapt to their specific contexts in pursuit of a more equitable language classroom. Central to this effort is the creation of a classroom culture grounded in respect and justice, which teachers can foster by modelling gender-just behaviors, such as employing gender-expansive language in greetings, normalizing pronoun sharing while respecting students’ privacy and consciously avoiding gender stereotypes in communication and interaction. Curriculum integration should

aim to expand students' linguistic options in contexts requiring gender marking and also ensure representation of queer identities, which are often excluded from language textbooks (Liddicoat 2009; Frabotta, Manera 2024). Equally significant is encouraging critical reflection on traditional linguistic norms and conventions, enabling students to develop empathy, social awareness and metalinguistic competence. These outcomes help shape language users capable of engaging with diversity beyond the classroom.

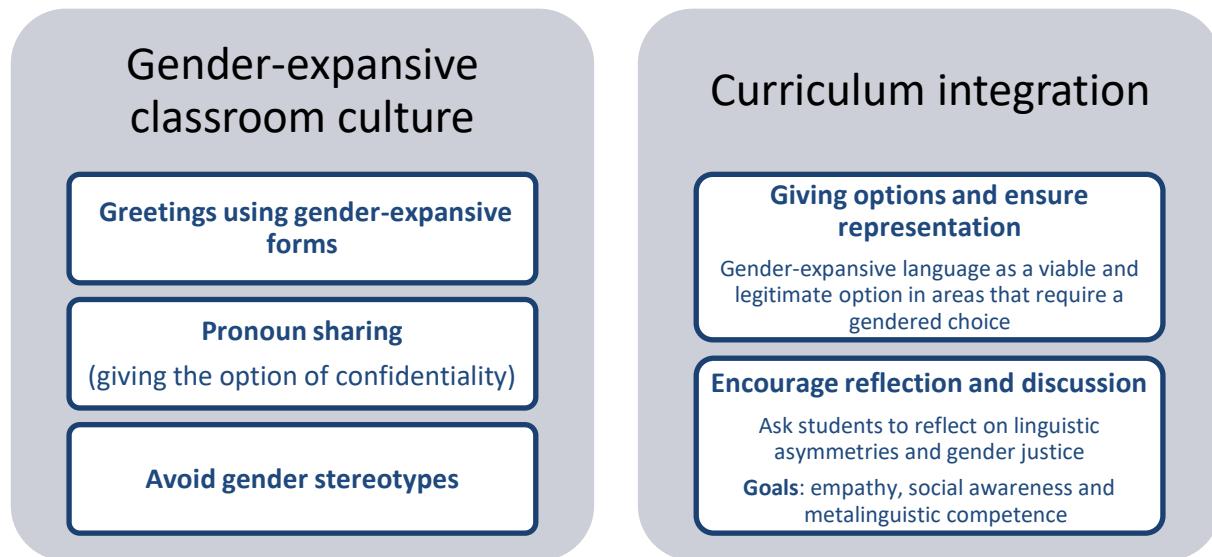


Fig. 6 Actionable steps for educators implementing gender-expansive practices

References

Amorati, R., Pirovano, E., 2024, "Opening linguistic spaces in the gendered language classroom: The gender-just teacher toolkit", in *Ricerche Di Pedagogia E Didattica. Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 19(2), pp. 181–196, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/20375>, Access on: Aug 21, 2025.

Cavagnoli S., Gasparini L., 2024, "Ma insomma non si può più dire niente?", in Pantella A. (ed.), *WORDS. Cosa significa parlare inclusivo*, Mediobanca, pp. 11-17, Available from: <https://www.mediobanca.com/it/sostenibilita/words-cosa-significa-parlare-inclusivo.html>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Frabotta S., Manera M., 2024, "Linguaggio inclusivo: limiti e potenzialità di uso nei manuali di italiano L2/Ls", in Jafrancesco E., Fratter I., Tucci I. (ed.), *Educazione all'egualianza di genere ed educazione linguistica*, Florence, Firenze University Press, pp. 83–95, Available from <https://doi.org/10.36253/979-12-215-0484-2.08>, Access on: Nov 10, 2025.

Fuentes R., Gómez Soler I., 2022, "Instructors' navigation and appropriation of gender-inclusive Spanish at a U.S. University", in *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 24(5), pp. 534–553, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2022.2150499>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Gheno V., 2022a, "Al margine della norma: pratiche di lingua 'ampia' per un'emersione sociale delle diversità", in *Circula*, 16, pp. 21-39, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.17118/11143/20451>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Gheno V., 2022b, “Questione di privilegi: come il linguaggio ampio può contribuire ad ampliare gli orizzonti mentali”, in *AboutGender*, 11(21), pp. 388-406.

Harrison J., 2024, “Non-binary students in Aussie schools increase twentyfold in four years as teachers are warned about language”, in *SkyNews*, Available from: <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/nonbinary-students-in-aussie-schools-increase-twentyfold-in-four-years-as-teachers-are-warned-about-language/news-story/701a69a6c6c0ae63626828dd6be8701e>, Access on: Nov 12, 2025.

Jäggi T., Gygax P. M., Decock S., Gabriel U., Hoof S. V., Verhaegen H., Vincent C., 2025, “Beyond She and He: A framework for studying the cognitive, psychological and social effects of gender-neutral pronouns”, in *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X251346193>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Knisely K. A., Russell E. L., 2024, *Redoing linguistic worlds: Unmaking gender binaries, remaking gender pluralities*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters.

Knisely K. A., 2022, *The gender-just language education project*, Available from: <https://www.krisknisely.com/plan-for-justice>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Knisely K. A., Paiz J. M., 2021, “Bringing Trans, Nonbinary, and Queer Understandings to Bear in Language Education”, in *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, 9(1), pp. 23-45.

Lesniak F., 2023, “The pursuit of a gender-just language classroom”, in *Modern Language Journal*, 107(2), pp. 633-636, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12874>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Liddicoat A. J., 2009, “Sexual identity as linguistic failure: Trajectories of interaction in the heteronormative language classroom”, in *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 8(2-3), pp. 191-202.

Manera M., 2021, *La lingua che cambia*, Torino, Eris.

Osborn M., 2022, “Nobody ever correctly recognizes me: Nonbinary presentation, visibility, and safety across contexts”, in Segal M.T., Demos V. (eds), *Advances in Gender Research*, Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 51–69.

Osborne D. M., 2024, “Challenges and lesson plans for gender-inclusive Portuguese instruction”, in Soares C., Silva G. V. (eds.), *Inclusiveness beyond the (non)binary in Romance languages*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 139-155.

Pickering J., van Leent L., 2024, “Teaching English and the grammatical use of the pronoun: Queer(y)ing the teaching of writing”, in *Read Teach*, 78(1), 37–45, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2312>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Pirovano, E., Amorati, R., forthcoming, “Empowering voices: A guide to gender-expansive language education”.

Prunotto G., 2023, *Gender inclusivity in italian: Can gender neutrality be reached in a gendered language? Difficulties, proposals and public perception of the phenomenon*, Graduate

Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports, 11719, Available from: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/11719>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Sczesny S., Formanowicz M., Moser F., 2016, “Can gender-fair language reduce gender stereotyping and discrimination?”, in *Frontiers of Psychology*, 7(25), Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00025>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Silva G. V., Soares C. (eds.), 2024, *Inclusiveness beyond the (non)binary in Romance languages: Research and classroom implementation*, London, Routledge.

Stahlberg D., Braun F., Irmel L., Sczesny S., 2007, “Representation of the sexes in language,” in *Social Communication. A Volume in the Series Frontiers of Social Psychology*, Fiedler K. (ed.), New York, Psychology Press, pp. 163–187.

Stark K., 2022, “Bewertung und Vermittlung gendergerechter Sprache durch DaZ/DaF-Lehrkräfte: Evaluation and teaching of gender-sensitive language by GSL/GFL teachers”, in *Informationen Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, 49(6), pp. 557–574, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1515/infodaf-2022-0055>, Access on: Nov 22, 2025.

Stark K. S., 2021, *Gendergerechte Sprache im DaZ/DaF-Unterricht: Bewertung und Vermittlung durch DaZ/DaF-Lehrkräfte*, Augsburg, Available from: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-76058-2>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.

Sulis G., Gheno V., 2022, “The debate on language and gender in Italy, from the visibility of women to inclusive language (1980s–2020s),” in *The Italianist*, 42(1), pp. 153–183, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2022.2125707>, Access on: Sep 22, 2025.

UX Content Collective (n.d.) The Gender-Inclusive Language Project, Available from: <https://uxcontent.com/gender-inclusive-language-project/?fbclid=IwAR0GhENXupPNzh7TxFEvU0dYNugAfUKdaq-3TFZv5N7RRB7lCMRjdCAAZyY>, Access on: August 18, 2025.

Vitiello R., n.d., *Guida pratica al linguaggio inclusivo in italiano*, Available from: <https://www.rubenvitiello.com/it/guida-pratica-linguaggio-inclusivo-italiano/>, Access on: Aug 2, 2025.