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# SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE "MASCULINITY" GENDER CONCEPT IN THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** This article is devoted to the analysis of the semantic features of the "masculinity" gender concept in the Italian language. At the same time, the dominant position of the masculine gender in the language system, its use as a "universal" or "generic" form, and its semantic asymmetries in relation to feminine forms are examined. The presented small-scale scientific study investigates the formation of the grammatical gender category, its historical roots, particularly the aspects inherited from the Latin language. Furthermore, the article analyzes how the masculine gender is connected with social and cultural dominance in society. Based on linguistic and sociological approaches, it highlights the ways in which masculinity is represented in language units, vocabulary, and speech practices.

**Keywords:** linguistics, masculinity, gender, language, semantics, society, heritage, Italian, correlation, meaning, social.

**INTRODUCTION.** Language is a complex and multilayered system that can conventionally be compared to a living organism, as it exists in a continuous process of change, adaptation, and development. Every language possesses its own historical roots and is formed within a particular social, cultural, and political environment, developing in close interrelation with that environment. In this sense, language cannot be examined separately from the society that creates and uses it. On the contrary, language functions as one of the principal means of expressing the values, worldview, and social structure of a given community. From this perspective, the semantic analysis of the "masculinity" gender concept in the Italian language should be approached not merely as a linguistic phenomenon, but also as a product of broader socio-cultural processes. In particular, the formation of the grammatical gender category and the dominant position occupied by the masculine gender are closely connected with historically established social relations. The use of the masculine form as a "universal" or "generic" category is determined not only by the internal mechanisms of the language system, but also by power relations within society, the distribution of social roles, and culturally embedded stereotypes. Therefore, in analyzing the gender system of the Italian language—especially in identifying the semantic characteristics of the masculinity concept, it is essential to take into account the interaction between language and society. Such an approach makes it possible to interpret the linguistic dominance of the masculine gender not solely as a grammatical norm, but also as a historically constructed social phenomenon. As a result, the semantic layers manifested within linguistic units can be revealed more profoundly, and the roots of gender-based semantic asymmetries can be explained with greater clarity and precision.

**MAIN PART.** As this article is devoted to the semantic analysis of the gender concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language, the main section will address the emergence and development of the notion of masculinity within scholarly discourse. Beginning in the 1970s, first in the United States and subsequently across various European academic traditions, the interrelation between gender and language gradually evolved into an independent field of research. In particular,

scholarly attention increasingly focused on the ways in which the social and cultural implications of biological and sexual differences are reflected within linguistic systems.

Within this intellectual context, feminist scholarship played a pivotal role by subjecting the androcentric nature of language to critical examination, namely the tendency for masculinity to function as a central and often "normative" category in linguistic and cultural representation. A major turning point in this scientific paradigm is widely associated with the publication of *Language and Woman's Place*. Its author, Robin Lakoff, convincingly demonstrated that women's relatively constrained social status within society is reflected in their speech strategies, discursive practices, and linguistic representations[1]. Thus, the mechanism of reciprocal interaction between language and society, whereby language not only reflects social structures but also functions as an instrument for their reinforcement, became one of the central concepts of gender studies. Such an approach constitutes an essential theoretical foundation, particularly for the semantic analysis of the gender concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language. This is because the frequent use of the masculine gender in Italian as a "generic" or "universal" form may be interpreted not merely as a grammatical convention, but also as the product of historically constructed social hierarchies and cultural stereotypes.

Within the Italian context, however, the issue of language and gender developed more slowly in comparison with other European countries. Within the framework of the feminist movement, the question of linguistic reform did not occupy a central position for a considerable period of time. Consequently, explicit discussions concerning the gender-discriminatory aspects of language only began to gain significant visibility during the 1980s. One of the most important contributions in this regard was *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, authored by Alma Sabatini[2].

The principles proposed by Alma Sabatini — particularly the rejection of the generic use of the masculine gender and the systematic adoption of feminine forms in reference to women — possessed considerable theoretical significance; however, they were not widely implemented in practice. Even within the sphere of public administration, these recommendations were reflected only to a limited extent. For instance, *Codice di stile delle comunicazioni scritte*, developed by Sabino Cassese, contributed to a certain degree of standardization. Nevertheless, in subsequent years, the principle of "linguistic economy" came to predominate, causing the issue of gender-sensitive language to recede into a secondary position[3].

Within academic circles, scholarly conferences such as Donna e Linguaggio provided an opportunity to examine the issue from multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, as a general tendency, the field of "language and gender" in Italy largely remained confined to the sphere of individual scholarly initiatives. In other European countries, by contrast, developments in this area progressed far more dynamically. In Germany, for example, *Linguistik und Frauensprache*, authored by Senta Trömel-Plötz, generated extensive debate within academic discourse and subsequently contributed to the formation of gender-sensitive language policies[4]. At the same time, researchers such as Luise F. Pusch and Marianne Grabrucker further advanced this field of inquiry by contributing to the development of practical recommendations and gender-sensitive linguistic frameworks[5]. As a result,

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[1] Lakoff, R. *Language and woman's place*. Harper & Row. 1975.

[2] Sabatini, A. *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 1987

[3] Cassese, S. (Ed.). *Codice di stile delle comunicazioni scritte ad uso delle amministrazioni pubbliche*. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento per la Funzione Pubblica. 1993.

[4] Trömel-Plötz, S. Linguistik und Frauensprache. *Linguistische Berichte, 57*, 1978. 49–68.

[5] Pusch, L. F. *Das Deutsche als Männersprache: Aufsätze und Glossen zur feministischen Linguistik*. Suhrkamp. 1984

within a relatively short period of time, language policies reflecting gender equality began to emerge not only at the academic level but also within institutional frameworks. Overall, the aforementioned developments provide an important empirical and theoretical foundation for explaining the semantic predominance of the gender concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language. The linguistic centrality of the masculine gender appears not merely as a product of grammatical structure, but rather as a complex phenomenon shaped by historical, social, and cultural factors.

Beginning in the 1970s, one of the most intensely debated issues within the framework of gender-oriented linguistic reforms concerned the use of the masculine gender as a "generic" or "universal" form. Although this phenomenon was initially accepted as a grammatical norm, its social and semantic implications subsequently became the subject of critical scrutiny, leading to the gradual emergence of alternative linguistic strategies[6]. In particular, the active use of feminine forms (feminization) and the expansion of linguistic devices aimed at achieving gender neutrality (neutralization) became increasingly widespread. In this process, certain new linguistic units and modes of expression also emerged, further confirming the dynamic nature of language systems.

These tendencies, in turn, gave rise to the necessity of reconsidering the semantic predominance of the gender concept of "masculinity" within the Italian language[7]. According to traditional grammatical conventions, the masculine plural form is employed to designate groups composed of mixed genders. Consequently, the masculine gender acquires the status of an "unmarked" linguistic category, functioning as universal and inclusive, whereas the feminine gender is treated as a "marked" category, activated only within specific contextual frameworks. This asymmetry manifests itself not only at the morphological level, but also across semantic and discursive dimensions.

A comparable imbalance can likewise be observed at the lexical level. For instance, in Italian, the lexeme *uomini* ("men") is frequently used to denote society or humanity in a general sense, whereas the term *donne* ("women") carries a considerably narrower semantic scope[8]. Such phenomena demonstrate the conceptualisation of masculinity not only as a grammatical category but also as a concept endowed with implicit ideological primacy. From this perspective, the issue of inclusive language is aimed at critically reassessing this asymmetric structure and at promoting social equality through linguistic means. However, this approach inevitably raises a more profound theoretical question: why has the grammatical and lexical system of the Italian language developed in precisely this way? The search for an answer to this question is closely linked to the historical evolution of language, in particular to grammatical structures inherited from Latin, as well as to the long-term influence of patriarchal social systems. Thus, a semantic analysis of the concept of masculine gender necessitates interpreting language not merely as a formal system, but also as a socio-cultural construction embedded within broader historical and ideological processes.

**DISCUSSION/RESULTS.** The issue of the intrinsic interconnection between language and social context is regarded as one of the key theoretical directions in contemporary linguistics. In particular, this factor plays a decisive role in explaining the semantic primacy of the concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language. From this perspective, the views advanced by P. Aquaviva are of particular significance and merit special scholarly attention[9]. In his work *Il nome*, he interprets the grammatical category of gender not merely as an element of a formal linguistic

[6] Lakoff, R. *Language and woman's place*. Harper & Row. 1975
[7] Spender, D. *Man made language*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1980
[8] Cameron, D. *Verbal hygiene*. Routledge. 1995
[9] Acquaviva, P. *Lexical plurals: A morphosemantic approach*. Oxford University Press.2008.

system, but as a conceptual structure closely linked to the ways in which human beings perceive and classify reality. According to Aquaviva's theory, although the category of gender exists within the linguistic system as an autonomous grammatical unit, its formation and functional realization are directly connected to lived social experience[10]. However, it would be incorrect to reduce this approach by interpreting the use of a particular gender form as always resulting from a consciously selected semantic intention. For instance, the use of the masculine gender for groups comprising mixed-gender subjects does not imply that the speaker is interpreting the group as exclusively male. Rather, such a phenomenon reflects a cognitively entrenched model that has historically developed within the language system and become firmly embedded in collective consciousness.

In this sense, the "generic" status of the masculine gender should be understood not merely as a linguistic convention, but as a specific mode of perceiving reality. This mode is encoded through language and is shaped by social hierarchies and cultural values that have evolved over the course of historical development. Consequently, the manifestation of the masculine gender as an "unmarked" category, alongside the restricted and "marked" status of the feminine gender, generates a conceptual asymmetry at the theoretical level. These theoretical perspectives are also consistent with the philosophical ideas advanced by Simone de Beauvoir[11]. In particular, in her work *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she emphasizes that masculinity is associated with universality and the capacity for generalization, whereas femininity is characterized in terms of partiality and secondary status[12]. This idea is also reflected in linguistic systems, thereby reinforcing the generalising function of the masculine gender. A semantic analysis of the concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language therefore requires the study of language not merely as a grammatical structure, but as a complex system intrinsically interconnected with social consciousness, historical experience, and cultural constructions. Through this approach, the primacy of the masculine gender is interpreted not only as a linguistic norm, but also as a deeply rooted conceptual model. Belonging to the Romance language family, Italian historically developed on the basis of Latin and should be regarded not as the result of a complete rupture, but rather as a product of continuous evolutionary development[13]. For this reason, its grammatical system has preserved numerous archaic elements, particularly the category of gender, while simultaneously reorganising them into new phonetic and morphosyntactic forms. In particular, this historical legacy emerges as one of the decisive factors in explaining the semantic primacy of the concept of "masculinity."

As is well known, although Latin possessed a three-gender system—masculine, feminine, and neuter—the neuter gender gradually disappeared during the historical development of the Romance languages, with its functions largely being absorbed by the masculine gender. As a result, the semantic and grammatical prominence of the masculine category became even more reinforced. This process is evident not only within the morphological system, but also at the lexical level. For example, the Latin lexeme *populus*, meaning "people" or "society," belonged grammatically to the masculine gender[14]. At the same time, the lexeme *gens* also existed; however, its usage was largely confined to the designation of lineage, clan, or ethnic community. This semantic differentiation demonstrates that concepts referring to society as a whole were frequently encoded through the masculine gender, whereas the feminine gender remained restricted to comparatively narrower and

[10] Acquaviva, P. *Lexical plurals: A morphosemantic approach*. Oxford University Press.2008.
[11] Beauvoir, S. de. *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949) 2011.
[12] Butler, J. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge. 1990.
[13] Vincent, N. Latin. In M. Harris & N. Vincent (Eds.), *The Romance languages* (pp. 26–78). Routledge.1988.
[14] Lepschy, A. L., & Lepschy, G. *The Italian language today*. Routledge.1988.

more specific meanings. This phenomenon is likewise reflected in contemporary Italian: for instance, the use of the lexeme *uomini* to denote humanity as a whole may be interpreted as the result of historical-linguistic continuity. Thus, the "generic" function of the masculine gender is not accidental, but rather constitutes the continuation of a conceptual model formed through a long process of historical development.

From this perspective, a semantic analysis of the concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language also necessitates a diachronic approach[15]. This is because the asymmetry inherent in the category of gender is determined not only by contemporary social factors, but also by structural features inherited from ancient linguistic systems. Consequently, the linguistic primacy of the masculine gender emerges not merely as a grammatical norm, but as the product of historical and cultural continuity. In order to attain a deeper understanding of the semantic primacy of the concept of "masculinity" in the Italian language, it is necessary to trace its roots not solely within modern social structures, but also within a much earlier historical stage—namely, that of ancient Roman society[16]. This is because Latin, which constituted the foundation of the Romance languages, transmitted to subsequent linguistic systems not only a grammatical structure, but also an entire social worldview embedded within the language itself. The social organisation of Roman society was characterised by a rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal order, at the centre of which stood the institution of the *pater familias*. This figure was regarded not merely as the head of the household, but as a legal субъект endowed with absolute authority over both property and family members. Whereas male citizens possessed full political and civic rights, women occupied a socially and legally restricted position: first subordinated to the authority of the father and subsequently to that of the husband. Such a system reinforced institutional inequality between the sexes and contributed to the formation of society as fundamentally a "society of fathers."

**CONCLUSION.** The primacy of the masculine gender, particularly its use as a generalising and normative category, must be interpreted within this historical and cultural context. Whereas the male subject came to be perceived as "universal" and "absolute," the category of femininity developed within a secondary and semantically restricted framework. These observations are consonant with the theoretical perspectives advanced by Simone de Beauvoir, who conceptualises woman as "the Other" (*l'Autre*) and man as the "primary subject"[17]. From this perspective, the asymmetry observed within the gender system of the Italian language cannot be regarded as a random phenomenon, but rather as a historical legacy directly linked to the social structure of ancient Roman society. Moreover, this phenomenon is not exclusive to Italian alone; it is likewise observable across other Romance languages, thereby indicating Latin as their common source. Consequently, a semantic analysis of the concept of "masculinity" necessitates both a diachronic and a sociolinguistic approach[18]: It presupposes the study of grammatical categories within the linguistic system without separating them from the historical social relations that shaped their formation. Thus, the linguistic primacy of the masculine gender emerges not merely as a formal grammatical phenomenon, but as a socio-cultural construction formed over the course of long historical periods.

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