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OCCUPATIONAL TITLES IN ITALIAN:
CHANGING THE SEXIST USAGE

1. Introduction

The present paper is written primarily from a feminist point of view. This is a present choice of the writer, who was actively involved in linguistics long before acquiring feminist awareness. An attempt has been made to be as objective as possible in order to see things as they are, but the writer also has very strong ideas as to what they ought to be.

Feminist awareness and interest in language have been closely associated in my mind and have allowed me to see and feel to what extent the language we use misrepresents us and is directed against us.

In this paper, which is oriented towards practical usage, I shall concentrate on occupational titles, which form a most significant area of Italian sexist language, and one in particular where - contrary to accepted belief - change is possible and linguistically defendable.

Unfortunately, the significance and the full cultural and political implications of sexist language have not yet been recognized in Italy and are just slowly gaining ground even in feminist circles. This is rather strange, considering the strength of the movement in the last decade and the stress laid by many feminists on the cultural component of our struggle. Only lately have Italian women begun to become aware of the double role language plays in our life, as a reflection of a social and sexual arrangement on the one hand and as a perpetuation of sex stereotypes on the other. Studies are now being published about differences in the written style of women and men, about the whole symbolical apparatus of our man-made culture, about the importance of metaphors and especially of sexual metaphors. But what is still to be recognized is the importance of the one all-pervasive metaphor built into our language: I mean the metaphor of gender itself. Because it is built into our language it seems inevitable and causes a feeling of impotence and frustration, but this feeling is often extended to cases where linguistic changes are possible within the structure of Italian, without doing violence to the language. It seems to me that our attitude is often one of awe toward this sacred monster of language, as if language itself were an authority to which we were forced to submit. Language has its own rules, of course, but it is fundamentally a tool for the expression of our feelings and thoughts. The strongest defenders of linguistic purity are frequently politicians and media people, who exploit it as an instrument of manipulation and mystification, thus wreaking linguistic havoc.

Language is a dynamic system which constantly grows and changes. The latest edition of one of the leading Italian dictionaries, compiled by Nicola Zingarelli, which is about to be published, lists 9,000 new entries (that is, neologisms coined in recent years and now officially recognized) since the previous edition of 1970; statistically, this means two new words per day!

2. Precedents for Deliberate Language Change

Many deny the possibility of intentionally bringing about linguistic changes. But there are significant precedents for deliberate language change in response to class consciousness. For example, some job titles in modern Italian which had acquired a particularly pejorative connotation have now disappeared from usage under pressure by the holders of such titles. For example, facchino (porter) has been replaced by the awkward four-syllable compound word portabagagli, difficult to shout out in a crowded, noisy station; spazzino (street cleaner) and the dreadful Roman vernacular term mondezzaro (garbage man) both have been mutated into the made-up word netturbino. Another interesting example is serva (housemaid) whose masculine counterpart had already grown out of use with the virtual disappearance of men servants. Finding a suitable replacement for serva has been difficult. Several attempts have been made, none of which is really satisfactory: donna di servizio, donna a ore (meaning cleaning woman), collaboratrice domestica - used in more official language - and the latest rather ridiculous abbreviation colf, which stands for collaboratrice familiare. What is interesting, though, is that if serva has disappeared in its literal meaning, it is still used in a metaphorical sense as an insult and always in the feminine, whether it is addressed to a woman or a man: E' pettegola/-o come una serva or e' una serva ("S/he gossips like a servant girl.")

If class consciousness could bring about linguistic changes and even create awkward, cumbersome neologisms (which are not questioned today), I trust that feminist consciousness of sex-biased language could do more. We should at least keep in mind that the sexist bias affects the numerical majority of the population!

Ignorance of Italian as well as of linguistic tends to reinforce resistance on 'purist' grounds. It is quite clear that deepseated prejudices caused by lifelong conditioning of men as well as of women are at the root of the problem.

3. The Italian Gender System

A major obstacle to language change in the above sense is the Italian gender system, which like the Spanish and the French is grammatically based, with two genders: masculine and feminine (always mentioned in that order). Animate nouns are normally classified according to sex (natural gender), whereas inanimate nouns have grammatical gender. Some animals have both a masculine and feminine form; either the same root with different endings: e.g., il gatto/la gatta, il cavallo/la cavalla (the cat, the horse), il leone/la leonessa (the lion, the lioness), where the feminine is formed by adding the suffix -essa; or two different words: e.g., il cane/la cagnora, il bue/la vacca or la mucca (the dog, the bitch, the ox, the cow), etc. Generally, the unmarked form is the masculine (with some exceptions: bue, gallo (rooster), etc.). But there are a number of animals whose names only have a feminine form, which is evidently the unmarked one: la volpe, la mosca, la tartaruga, la zanzara, la formica etc. (the fox, the fly, the turtle, the mosquito, the ant, etc.). To indicate the male of the species we have to add the adjective maschile, e.g. la volpe maschio. Most of these words indicate small animals, insects, but there are some important exceptions, such as la pantera, la