

**In Anticipation of Changes in the  
Language Inequality - the Public Life  
of Female and Male Genitalia in Italy**

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Have you ever wondered why, despite all the “we can do it” actions taking place to fight the inequalities between the sexes, there happens to be no reduction or a reduction for the wrong reasons? How about the way we speak in our respective languages around the world? There has been an increasing emphasis on personal pronouns and people fighting for the right to be called he, she, zie, and so on. What about the plain old sociolinguistics as such?

Languages seem to be having an ongoing historic period of sexism where the female equivalents of words have been used in a derogatory way while the male equivalents have stayed the same, meaning dominant or in control. There is no question about the gender differences in language use. According to the various theories of gender in the field of sociolinguistics, the speakers of a given language are defined by their sexual identity in relation to their cultural background and social attitudes towards gender itself. We all speak differently based on our biological sex as well as the social concept of gender. It has been proved and we all know it. The issue arises when we talk about being talked about based on what we say and how we say it. Our languages are controlled

by the society and by the options of what are the acceptable and unacceptable norms. We need social changes to cause changes in language and vice versa. Some theories that have developed over the years such as the deficit theory, the dominance theory, or the difference theory all seem to have one thing in common: the language of men as the basis of importance and the very core of noticeability as opposed to the supportive and emotional language of women putting them as the weaker version on the communication and societal scene. The status quo with regard to the inferior place of women in society is what prevents women and their language from gaining equal importance.

The deficit theory was first mentioned by Otto Jespersen in his book: “Language, its Nature, Development and Origin” in 1922 and in the famous chapter 13 he claimed that women’s language is not good enough and men’s language is the norm. Robin Lakoff in her work: “Language and Women’s Place” in 1973 explains that due to the women’s inferior status and weaker position in society their language is different and they end up in a vicious loop where the language use contributes to lowering their already low status. For instance, when a woman uses super polite forms like ‘would you mind’ or indirect commands and requests, because that is what has been acceptable and nurtured among female members of society, she is not taken as seriously as a man who would just be direct and more aggressive in discourse, especially that it has been commonly accepted for men to talk more than for women to talk at all. The question is why the coarse language and lack of intensifiers in speech have always been the norm?

The dominance theory studied by Zimmerman and West in 1975 talks about the powerful and dominant men’s language based on their higher position in society as opposed to the woman’s. Here we have the classic examples of male-female interaction observed, where men interrupt women and tend to speak more or delay their answers to women.

The difference theory is associated with Deborah Tannen, who in her book: “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation” (1990) claims that there are major differences between men and women and their use of

language due to the way they are brought up and educated. Men are supposed to use language to negotiate their independence and status in a group as opposed to women who are expected to use talk to negotiate collaboration and closeness. Men create togetherness with other men by doing things with them. Women use conversation to create togetherness, which confuses men and miscommunication takes place. It is about the differences rather than making one way of conversing better or worse than the other. Still, a picture of a wife who is trying to chat during breakfast she prepared for a husband who just wants to eat and go to his office seems to send a message of unimportant communicative skills versus serious business skills, does it not?

In order to link these above-mentioned various theories to the status quo of (fe)male language use, let us summarise what they say. All theories more or less claim that men and women use language differently due to their nature being nurtured in a specific context and based on what is expected from men and women in a given society. The major issue here is the way men and women are positioned on the sociolinguistic spectrum of a society as such. It has been proved that there might be lack of inclusion and equity among different members of various societies globally due to the fact that the male version is considered the norm in the unisex generalisation of things while female version is applied within limits of exclusively female world, hence not general in its perspective. To see this kaleidoscope of theories and their common denominator being put into practice let us look a little closer at the (in)significant examples of what gender differences and ongoing inequality have in common in the very language an average Italian uses and abuses. I will focus on two striking examples of why none of us actually manages to fully realise that social conditioning in the way we use a language is the result of gender stereotyping and hence inequality. Prepare for some strong language here since we are conditioned to believe genitalia are considered shocking as a social norm but there again it depends on their gendered usage.

We need look no further for gender disparity than when it comes to the ways the words “cazzo” (dick, penis) and “fica” or “figa” (cunt, pussy) are used. Linguistic sexism in Italy in this case is not only well but also thriving.

Wikipedia leaks (sic!) by mentioning that the word “cazzo” is used very commonly as emphasis to express your thoughts or to make the phrase more colourful as well as standing for penis. While the word “fica” or “figa” is mostly used to indicate a seductively attractive woman and therefore an object. This is not even the first definition in order of importance since first and for most, in the Sicilian version of Italian, it is the fruit of a common fig, followed by woman’s genitals and finally the above mentioned.

For example, someone says: “Cazzo, questo non ci voleva proprio!”, which, according to Cambridge Italian-English dictionary, means “Damn, I sure didn’t need this!”. We understand that the person is annoyed and uses the male genitalia word to show that they are strongly reacting to a situation and there is nothing wrong with thinking using strong language. Anger as a testosterone emotion is allowed to be expressed via male means. If a woman does it, thou, she is asked if it is PMS (Premenstrual syndrome) talking.

The same dictionary does not have any examples of “figa”, apart from mentioning it is an offensive way to talk about a woman’s vagina. There is a male version of “fica” there instead, which is “figo” or “fico”, and it means “cool” or “trendy”. Hence, if you make a word masculine it becomes something positive or even desired. Again, evolutionary insignificance of female means plays the part.

If the same someone says: “Guarda che pezzo di fica!”, which more or less means “Look what a hot piece of ass!”, we understand that the person is paying attention to the looks and objectifying the woman by reducing her to mere appearance.

Italy might have many “teste di cazzo”, meaning “dickheads” but they are just temporarily foolish and everyone has the right to be silly once in a while, right? “Fregne moscie”, on the other hand, just happened to be “pussies” and hence soft, without courage and therefore female. The synonymous expression

here is: “fare la femminuccia” or “to be a girl” and is used in a negative sense. You wish someone to stop being such a girl because that means weak, unmanly! Have you ever checked the antonyms of brave? Pusillanimous! Meanwhile, “il maschietto” or “baby boy” is never used in a negative sense because everyone is happy when a baby boy is born.

If you want to be brave you’ve got to have balls because “avere le palle” means you are the man for the job, even if you happen to be a woman. (Un)fortunately, a cunt, since being only female genitalia, is not even considered as such a strong offence towards people in Italy so they are labelled “pezzi di merda” or “pieces of shit” rather than anything else. Women and their genitalia cannot even gain the status of a rude word due to social conditioning and its presupposition that anything female must stay in bed and not spoken of in public.

All in all, the gender inequalities shown in these few examples prove the point that we should all start from the beginning and forget the language and its social conditioning in order not to be screwed by patriarchy. Sociolinguistics and the respective languages have always been under pressure from the male- or phallus-oriented origins. People still use female genitalia to abuse others and male genitalia to sort of praise everyone. What is it like in your languages? Is it the same or different? All I know is that we have a huge debate going on about the female suffixes and their inadequacy if one wants to be treated fairly in some languages. In order to change the attitude to life and gain equal respect for all, we need to change the language. I hope we can all do it like a girl but that’s a topic for a long debate and I would not dare to ‘rompere le palle’ meaning ‘bust your balls’ or ‘bitch’ about it here, so all I’m going to say is: I hope you enjoyed my mere contemplating of the linguistic meaning of life. I am looking forward to the better future with great anticipation, and you? Let us evolve.

## References

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