

Ideological and Phenomenological Aspects of Italian Pronoun Usage

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Abstract

This chapter is a study of Italian pronouns, viewed in relation to the social interaction and the experience of intersubjectivity that they articulate and in the context of the interface between ideology and language prevalent in modern Italy, from the age of Fascism to the present. Special attention is paid to the pronominal policies of institutions that purport to exercise regulatory power over the pragmatics of language, social interaction and gender recognition. Pronoun usage is examined in the context of actual dialogue and against the background of the various platforms of ideas by which political, educational, correctional and religious institutions attempt to condition the linguistic behaviour and self-positioning of speakers in the social activities of their daily lives.

Key words: Binarism, Italian, church, education, epicene, Fascism, gender, ideology, theology, trans-gender, Vatican

Introduction

In 1944, the United States War Department published a basic grammar of spoken Italian by Vincenzo Cioffari as a manual for American troops and government officials to be stationed in Italy subsequent to the Allied landing in Sicily on July 19, 1943. It was one of several manuals on the languages and cultures of European countries where American soldiers were likely to be temporarily based. These works had a double purpose: to equip military personnel with the linguistic tools they needed to carry out essential business and at the same time to ingratiate

themselves with the local population. In the section on the pronouns of direct address, Cioffari explained that Italian had four pronouns with that function, all equivalent to the English *you*, namely *tu*, *lei* and *voi* used in addressing a single individual and *voi* and *loro* in addressing groups of two or more--*voi* having both a singular and a plural meaning--and warned his readers that an important consideration to make in choosing the right pronoun was its ideological association. Pronouns of address had been perceived by Italians for some time as indicators of the platform of political ideas favoured by the speaker in relation to the official policies of the National Fascist Party of Italy. Cioffari informed his readers that the use of *lei* as the pronoun of courtesy could be easily regarded as an expression of hostility to Fascist ideology and hence as a posture of political defiance, whereas its replacement with *voi* might just as easily be taken by others as an overt indication of loyalty to the Fascist government and hence a disclosure of complicity in the implementation of its policies. "The Fascist government," he specified, "has required everyone to use *voi* instead of *lei* under penalty of fines" (Cioffari 1944, p. 29). His best advice was that American men serving in Italy should listen carefully to the way their interlocutors used Italian pronouns and should then imitate that usage as closely as possible to avoid giving the impression that they supported an antagonistic view of social and political practice. American troops and accompanying government officials thus learned that, even now that the Allies were massively present in a good part of the peninsula, pronouns were not the innocent elements of language that they appeared to be in standard grammar books but powerful instruments of ideological discourse.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine salient aspects of Italian pronoun usage considering it, beyond the rules of its grammatical governance, in the context of actual dialogue and in relation to the unspoken platform of ideas on which the speakers stand to hail each other,

to express their views, to argue a point or to perform a sacred ritual. In such contexts, the common grammatical view of pronouns as substitutes for nouns and noun phrases must almost always be set aside as an analytical category that can offer little access to ideas located beyond the structure of language or the linguistic surface of a text. This is particularly important in the analysis of political, gender-recognition, educational and religious contexts, all of which presuppose distinct platforms of ideas associated with powerful institutions that condition the development of thought among the people in their separate domains. By scrutinizing representative acts of verbal communication within such institutional contexts, we can recognize the primacy of personal pronouns in the language of social relations and understand their crucial function in the speakers' apprehension of others. Over against the institutional articulation of pronouns, we find the speakers' self-perception and inner experience of their place in the social and political environment of daily life, in the gender philosophy of society, and in the spiritual culture of their community.

The theoretical framework of this analysis of Italian pronoun usage consists of phenomenology and pragmatic linguistics, regarded as complementary approaches to language. The analysis is phenomenological in that it seeks to uncover the worldview implicit in pronoun choice and the idea that a social relation is generally understood as a lived experience, with serious implications for the speaker's self-perception in relation to the institutional order of society (Solomon 1978; Ricoeur 1992; Descombes 2014; Renaudie 2017). It is pragmatic in that it leverages the meaning-generating and referent-changing function of the social context of utterances centred on pronoun usage particularly in ideologically charged situations in which institutional policies and cultural traditions govern social behaviour and communication with authoritative norms (Zupnik 1994; De Fina 1994; Vizcaíno Ortega 1995), as well as in religious

contexts, in which theological dogma exercises control over the self-understanding of individuals and communities of faith.

The Pronouns of Fascism

When the American War Department published Cioffari's manual, the Fascist policy on pronouns of direct address was about 5 years old and was accepted throughout Italy by the general population, as indeed it had to be, though not everywhere with the same degree of conviction or without sarcastic recalcitrance. Cioffari had divided Italy into north and south and observed that in the northern regions, the trend was to address all family members and close friends as *tu* in the singular and *voi* in the plural, and everyone else as *lei* and *loro*, the pronouns used to show deference and distance, and to observe the local code of etiquette and formality with people beyond the immediate circle of family and friends. In the southern regions, on the other hand, *tu* was used more sparingly, with close friends and family members younger than the speaker, whereas *voi* was used for everyone else, in the singular as well as in the plural. The pronouns *lei* and *loro* were altogether avoided. Cioffari had somewhat oversimplified both the geography and the trends, but his point was clear: regional pronominal preferences were a datum of the local linguistic culture that reflected the community's perception of the structure of society and of the dynamics of interaction germane to it. In some areas, pronoun usage was closer to the ideal of Fascism, hence official policies were likely to be unevenly received, on account of the political distinctiveness of regional areas and their deeply-ingrained cultural habits. These factors could make Italians very obstinate: "If they use *lei*, they do not like to hear *voi*, and if they use *voi* they won't stand for *lei*" (Cioffari 1944, p. 29).

The policy on pronoun usage was originally formulated on 12 February 1938 by the Ministry of Culture as an internal decree for government employees and members of the National Fascist Party. It peremptorily enjoined them from using the pronoun *lei* in any official report and communication with each other or with the general public. It also prescribed the use of *voi* as the pronoun of direct address among speakers related by differences in rank and *tu* in all relations of office parity within all government agencies. The policy was issued in a *Foglio di disposizioni*, a periodical publication that reached a very large readership among state employees and party members, and was reprinted in many Italian newspapers in order to alert the general public to the cultural change that was about to take place (Nichil 2010, pp. 237ff). It was reissued frequently in slightly different forms until its coverage extended to all areas that fell under the authority of the ministry of culture. It covered such activities as film production and dubbing as well as stage and radio performances, which is to say the media through which a large percentage of the nation could be reached and persuaded that the Fascitization of forms of address sounded quite natural in exchanges of all kinds (Catolfi 2015, p.12). This whirlwind of activity soon generated new stylistic criteria for writing and copyediting, along with much public discussion of the historical and ideological connotations of the pronouns in question. The secretary of the National Fascist Party, Achille Starace, assumed the leading role in the campaign, as the national arbiter of ideological correctness in the usage of pronouns and as state inquisitor in the disregard of ordinances concerning the Fascist style. In 1939 he prepared in Turin, in the premises of the Gioventú Italiana del Littorio, the official organization of the Italian Fascist youth movement, a large exhibit of visual and graphic materials displaying the Fascist policy on pronouns of direct address. The exhibit was called *Anti Lei*, and it was designed in every detail to mock anybody who might still persist in preferring *lei* to either *tu* or *voi* (Falasca-

Zamponi 1997, pp. 107-108). At the same time, he produced posters, vignettes and plaques, all promoting the use of *tu* and *voi* while denouncing the use of *lei*. He spared no effort to denigrate *lei* as the pronoun of courtesy and to eradicate it from contemporary language and thought.

There were two reasons for the Fascist campaign against the use of *lei* and in favour of *tu* and *voi*. In the first place, the pronoun *lei* was regarded as a foreign intrusion into the Italian language, into which it had tacitly introduced a sense of servility, unbecoming to the character of modern Italy and incompatible with the state's protection of racial purity and virility, which the language was expected to reflect. This was said on the mistaken assumption that *lei* was a Spanish derivative, coined during the latter's occupation of part of Italy and appropriated by a subdued people who had fallen into the habit of thinking like slaves imitating the linguistic practice of their conquerors, whereas in fact its existence was attested much earlier in the history of the language. In the second place, *lei* did not have a historical antecedent in the language of the ancient Romans, of whom the Fascists considered themselves legitimate heirs. All Fascists were expected to behave, gesture and think like the ancient Romans. The party symbol and the word "Fascism" itself were derived from the Roman symbol for power and authority, the *fasces*, consisting of a bundle of rods bound to the handle of an axe. The pronoun *lei* hence could not convey any of the heroic virility historically associated with *tu*, the pronoun used by the Romans to address each other in all social relations, or any of the hierarchical simplicity of *voi*, which had been used as a pronoun of deference since the earliest period of the Italian language.note

The distinguished linguist and historian of the language Bruno Migliorini started to promote the campaign in the journal *Critica Fascista* within a few weeks of the publication of the first *Foglio di Disposizioni* in which it was announced. He argued that, just as an official

construction plan for the development of an urban centre entails both demolition and restructuring, the Fascist plan for an overhaul of the pronoun system entailed the abolition of *lei* and the reinvigoration of *tu* and *voi*, to the advantage of Italian culture and society. In his view, the banishment of *lei* would help Italians divest themselves of their inherited inclination to servility and, simultaneously, of their taste for pomp and ceremony in daily life, while the revamping of *tu* and *voi*--the former to express comradeship and the latter seniority, at first for exchanges within the Party concerning official business but later in all areas of social life--would eventually reduce the distance between social classes and lessen regional dissimilarities (Migliorini 1938, p. 136). At this time Migliorini had a utopian vision of Fascist language policies. In his effort to provide the Fascist party with academic backing, he was joined by a host of well-known scholars, writers and journalists concerned with the role of language in the development of society. They produced a body of essays and position papers, not all with equal enthusiasm, to which the unyielding Fascist intellectual Asvero Gravelli, director of the journal *Antieuropa*, gave wide circulation in a special issue titled *Anti Lei* (Gravelli 1939, and cf. Matard-Bonucci 1988, pp. 987-989) much appreciated by Mussolini (Nichil 2010, p.238). Eventually the Fascist understanding of the pronouns of address entered grammar textbooks for high schools. Not long after the first ordinance, Migliorini observed that the system of Italian pronouns of address was in the process of being reconfigured (Migliorini 1938a, p. 74). He could not foresee then that in a few years *lei* would be restored to the full use that it enjoys today and that singular *voi*, which still continues to be used as a pronoun of address in various southern and central provinces of Italy, was destined little by little to disappear from the national language (Lepschy 2001, p. 117).

Lei was a third-person feminine pronoun used as a second person in addressing men as well as women, and, while it required adjectives and participles in the grammatical feminine when addressed to women, it required the masculine if addressed to men. To Fascist language observers, the mixed-gender syntax expressed some ambiguity concerning the addressee's sexual orientation. The free use of *lei* could betray the presence of a certain *incertezza sessuale* ("sexual uncertainty"), as the suspicion of homosexuality was called by Bruno Cicognani, author of the first article on the need to drop *lei* from the language, counterpoising its alleged suggestion of effeminacy to the Fascist conception of manhood (Cicognani 1938, p.3, and cf. Molinelli 2021, p.7). Indeed, one could argue on the basis of Cicognani's insinuation, homosexual men could have recourse to the rules of syntax as a route to the identification of possible homosexual relations. It must have seemed to the authorities that the use of *lei* might encourage by grammatical innuendo the expression of attitudes that could threaten the government's ideal of virility of the race, resist its drive towards population growth, and taint the patriarchal paradigm that informed the nation.

The Fascist vilification of *lei* was informed by two principles. The first concerns the character of the national language, regarded as a reflection of the mettle of the state and the spiritual temperament of the people. Mussolini and Starace believed that language can be manipulated by the authorities, on the one hand to discourage the discussion of social attitudes counter to the ideals of the state, and on the other hand to promote the development of militant enthusiasm for its utopian vision of the future. This understanding of language as a pedagogical instrument in the hands of the Ministry of Culture, or as an ideological state apparatus with formative potential, is especially relevant to the education of children, who grow up in a language configured to provide them with the thought-forms they need in order to learn how to

think as exemplary members of society, sheltered from undesirable ideas. This is very probably the reason why Starace's *Anti Lei* exhibit, though open to all, was especially directed at school children and promoted for class visits (cf. Franchina 1939). The second principle of the obloquy attached to the use of *lei* concerns specifically the nature of pronouns of address, which, far from being mere substitutes for nouns, were seen phenomenologically as vantage points that express the speakers' experience of the world and their perspective on social reality to the people they addressed, whatever the subject of conversation. The pragmatic potential of pronouns could be used either to reinforce the government's view of legitimate social relations or to disrupt them with innuendos and undertones.

To see how the question was dealt with by the general population, it is useful and sufficient to examine a couple of scenes from films that represent the pronominal situation realistically at different social levels. The films selected as illustrations have to do with the institutional imposition of a standard of social normality as reflected in language usage. Such normality is arbitrarily defined by institutions to express the metaphysical ground on which they stand and to articulate the ideology that they profess. Our first example is taken from Ettore Scola's film *Una giornata particolare* (1977), which tells the story of a romantic encounter between a housewife, Antonietta (played by Sophia Loren), and a radio announcer, Gabriele (played by Marcello Mastroianni). The encounter takes place in Rome on May 4, 1938, on the ideologically-charged day of Hitler's arrival in the capital for a meeting with Mussolini, less than three months after the government launched its campaign for the revitalization of *voi* and *tu* and the disparagement of *lei*. The whole city was ablaze with enthusiasm and eagerly displayed its support of the Fascist regime along the itinerary of Hitler's triumphal entry into the city. Antonietta and Gabriele are among the very few not participating in the fanfare. In a

conversation on the rooftop terrace of Antonietta's apartment building, used by the tenants to dry their laundry, Gabriele consistently addresses her as *lei*, whereas she always addresses him as *voi*. At one point, showing feigned annoyance at his silly playfulness, she reminds him of the government policy on the proper use of pronouns of address:

E poi, questo fatto del lei. Lo sapete ch'è proibito, no? Ch' è obbligatorio darsi del voi. Niente, pare che lo fate apposta. Da stamattina "lei, lei". Ma perché mi date del lei? "Lei è contenta, lei è sicura delle sue idee."... Ve ne siete andato? Meglio così...però poteva salutarmi.

("And then there is this 'lei' thing. You (voi) know that it's not allowed, don't you (voi)? That it's compulsory to address each other as 'voi'? Nothing doing, it seems that you (voi) do it on purpose. Since this morning, 'lei, lei.' Why is it that you (voi) keep calling me 'lei'? 'You (lei) are happy, you (lei) are sure of your ideas.' ... Have you (voi) gone away? It's better this way...but he could have said goodbye").

At this point Gabriele covers her head with a bed sheet hanging on the clothes line, embraces her mischievously and says:

Basta con il lei, da questo momento ti darò del tu. ("Enough with this lei, from now on I'll address you as tu.")

Antonietta is an uneducated woman, a mother of six children, who continues to shape all aspects of her grey existence in conformity with the expectations that Fascism has of Italian women, as patriotic mothers of large families and obedient wives, and she publicly shows her loyalty by adhering to the official policy on pronouns of address in all social relations beyond the

family. According to Scola, the Fascist propaganda on modes of address was effective enough for someone like Antonietta to think that the improper use of pronouns had already been criminalized by the state. She understands the policy as a legal prohibition for the whole of society, in all forms of communication, and suggests that Gabriele violates the law every time that he addresses her with the pronoun *lei* instead of *voi*, which to her mode of thinking, already fully under the influence of Fascism, she considers the only appropriate pronoun of civility between a man and a married woman who have only recently met. By contrast, Gabriele is an educated man who was dismissed from his job as radio announcer, ostensibly for his anti-Fascist sentiments but in actual fact, as he later reveals to her, on suspicion of homosexuality. He manifests his defiance of the Fascist linguistic style by choosing to address Antonietta as *lei*, until he decides that their playfulness, which she interprets as flirting, has gone far enough to justify moving the conversation to the reciprocal *tu* of familiarity and social parity.

The second example comes from Bernardo Bertolucci's *Il Conformista* (1970), which narrates the story of the assassination of an antifascist intellectual, a professor of Philosophy from the University of Rome (played by Enzo Tarascio), set up by his former student Marcello Clerici, the film's protagonist (played by Jean-Louis Trintignant), but carried out by gunmen of the Italian secret service. The story takes place between 1938 and 1942, and its script is particularly attentive to Italian pronoun usage in different social contexts immediately after the Fascist pronominal policy came into effect. In scenes that take place within the home, for example, the pronoun of reciprocal address is *tu* if the dialogue is between family members, but it is *voi* between prospective in-laws. Outside the home, friends address each other as *tu*, but casual acquaintances and officials use *voi*. Interestingly, a priest in the confessional box addresses the protagonist as *tu*, signalling the latter's moral inferiority, while he in turn replies

using the Fascist *voi*, just as he affirms that what he wants in life is to find the comfort of what he calls a normal existence outside the church. He pursues that goal by consciously conforming to the ways of the dominant majority and by working for a government agency that hunts down political subversives.

The most revealing scene concerning the pragmatics of pronoun usage in the story of the protagonist's pursuit of normality, however, is a brief telephone call made by Marcello to Professor Quadri from his hotel room in Paris. He asks the professor whether he would be willing to see him socially during his brief stay in the city, where he is spending his honey-moon. His real intention is to discover the professor's habits and planned whereabouts so that he might better plan his execution on the following day, 14 October 1938. The audience hears only Marcello's side of the conversation but can easily infer what his interlocutor is saying. Marcello addresses him using the deferential pronoun *voi*, in standalone and enclitic (-vi) forms. His words are meant to convey the regard and courteous distance of a former student, but after a few short sentences, Marcello realizes that the Fascist undertone inevitably heard by the professor upon hearing himself addressed as *voi* could raise suspicions about the motivation of his request, and he suddenly changes register to *lei*, hoping thereby to evoke nostalgia for the civil atmosphere of the time when they were both at the University.

Ero stato vostro studente a Roma...e avrei piacere d'incontrarvi. Venni a domandarvi la tesi di laurea. Era l'anno che voi avevate lasciato l'insegnamento. E voi ... e Lei mi disse, professore, il tempo della riflessione per me è finito, ora incomincia il tempo dell'azione. Si parla sempre molto di Lei a Roma.

("I was one of your (*voi*) students in Rome...and it would be a pleasure for me to see you (*voi*) again. I came to ask you (*voi*) to supervise my thesis. That was the year that you (*voi*) stopped teaching. And you (*voi*)...and you (*lei*), Professor, said to me: 'the time for reflection is over for me, now begins the time for action.' We talk a lot about you (*lei*) in Rome.")

Marcello shifts to the *lei* code as if he and the professor were still interacting at the University of Rome, when he had asked him to serve as his thesis supervisor. The implication that he wanted to signal by his change of pronouns is that, despite his adherence to Fascism as a young man in tune with his times, he and his fellow students had not wavered in their admiration for their former professor, and in the conviction that his teaching was still very much with them. Marcello's recourse to *lei* is not a concession to the professor's anti-Fascism but a shrewd grammatical *captatio benevolentiae* improvised on the spot to secure his professor's confidence in order to plan his assassination more expeditiously.

With his choice of the pronoun *lei*, Marcello would like to insinuate in the professor's mind that he continues to think philosophically like him, that his mind is still imbued with his old professor's teaching, which he has grasped as the essence of his intellectual uniqueness as a person. For Marcello this attitude, known by phenomenology as a thou-orientation of the speaker (Schutz 1970, 185), is the psychological message conveyed above the explicit semantic content of his sentence by the pronoun *lei*, which he has shrewdly appropriated from the professor's response. Marcello hopes that the professor will regard as genuine the thou-orientation of his mind, beginning with his expression of shared sentiments of nostalgia for the intellectual openness of the professor's conversations with his students 9 years earlier in Rome. Thought is

always dialogical, as Plato had taught both the professor and the student of philosophy (*Sophist* 263e3, *Theaetetus* 190a5), and even when the thought process takes place in its most solipsistic form, to think is to orient the mind towards, and conduct a conversation with, an imaginary thou, and Marcello must persuade his interlocutor that he, as his beloved teacher, is still that thou for his former student, their current political partisanship notwithstanding.

Marcello's attempt to manipulate his interlocutor's perception of how he thinks consists of an underhand use of the philosophical concept of tuism, that is the Peircean pronominal conception of all thought as a dialogue between the first-person pronoun *I* and the second-person pronoun *tu* or *thou* (Sobrinho 2001, p. 31, Singer 1991, p. 163), or *lei* in Marcello's case, whether this dialogue partner is a real person or an imaginary projection of the speaker's self. Marcello's objective is to persuade the professor that he is still his former student's dialogic thou, which in essence would imply that Marcello continues to be his student, despite the political distance between them. Marcello here stands firmly on his party's ideological and philosophical platform for the Fascistization of the Italian people. The Fascist understanding of pronouns was meant to regulate dialogic exchanges between real people and, on that model, to condition the construction of the self that becomes the speaker's dialogue partner in the very process of thinking.

Pronouns in Gender Variance

Self-perception is a primary activity of the mind, an inner activity that gives meaningful shape to the relationship between the individual and the external social world, as the latter is found, not out there in its factual objectivity, but in the individual's consciousness as an ongoing lived experience. When self-perception is at odds with the community's external view of an

individual, the institutions of that community assume a posture of imminent encroachment on the individual's consciousness, with the intent of forcing it to comply with the majority view. The grammatical, philosophical and psychological issues involved in understanding community intrusion into the inner life of individuals have come to the fore in recent years with the ongoing discussion of the phenomenon of gender variance and the condition of gender dysphoria on the internet and social media. The discussion concerns all age groups, but it appears to be focused primarily on students, young community members whose rights and well-being need to be institutionally protected. The public debate concerns the conflict between those who feel that the school should respect and protect the students' right to determine the gender into which they should be classified, and those who believe that it should instead protect them from falling prey to gender-variance indoctrination by external groups.

Following the example of a number of universities, some primary and secondary schools in Italy have recently started to allow students to use an anonym, an alias of their choice, including a name and gender that differ from those in their official registration documents. These alternate identities can be used in all administrative correspondence and other written and verbal exchanges in the school itself. There are two categories of alias identities. The first category includes cases in which gender variance falls within the binary system of the language. The use of such alternate identities entails changing the gender of third-person pronouns and other lexical elements that must comply with the rules of agreement. In the second category we find aliases outside the binary system, in which the chosen identity is gender-neutral or gender-fluid. The use of such identities entails adapting the structure of the language to introduce a gender-neutral pronoun and other gender-neutral words to go with it.

In grammatical terms, the first category of gender variance concerns lexical choice and the logic of copular syntax, according to which the complement that follows the copula verb is identified with the subject that precedes it, which it moreover characterizes semantically, as in *Giulio è un bambino* ("Giulio is a little boy"). When the subject is a first- or a second-person pronoun, which in Italian are not grammatically marked for gender, the complement can also predicate the gender of the subject to which the pronoun refers if the predicate is itself clearly marked for gender. In such cases, since the subject pronoun is morphemically genderless while its referent has a gender identity, the complement can be said to have either a gender-revealing or a gender-assigning function, depending on whether the attribute that it names is ontologically consistent with the referent represented by the pronoun. Thus, in the short sentence *tu sei una bambina* ("you are a little girl"), the gender identity of the referent represented as *tu* is correctly revealed to be feminine if *tu* identifies as a girl, whereas it would be incorrectly assigned as feminine if *tu* identifies as a boy. But what if, as in Hebrew, the second person pronoun carried its own morphemic marker identifying its grammatical gender as the gender identity of the person to whom the pronoun refers before any identifying attributes can be predicated of it? In such cases the complement would have only the responsibility of agreeing with the subject pronoun grammatically because the gender of the pronoun would have been independently established, so that in a sentence like *tu (masculine) sei una bambina*, the predication would be in error because it would specify the wrong gender. Binary gender aliases, in other words, challenge the conventional logic of predication with the principle that the gender of the subject pronoun is not determined syntactically by the predicate but ontologically by the referent.

The issues involved in the process of gender predication in this category of aliases were dramatized by Stefano Calvagna's in his film *Un nuovo giorno* (2016) a few years before the idea

of gender variance was contemplated as a possibility by school administrations.¹ This is the first Italian film to illustrate the psychological distress and the linguistic problems raised by the phenomenon of gender dysphoria in great detail. The story is based on the biography of the transgender actress Sveva Cardinale (born Paolo Catanzaro), who plays herself in the final scenes of the film, but it has historical and literary precedents in Italian culture that go back at least to the late Renaissance. Such precedents are accounts of individuals who were male by birth but experienced life as females, openly using feminine attributes with first-person pronouns when referring to themselves, as in the disconsolate expression *trista me, amara me* ("how sad I am") frequently repeated by a young man who was *più femina che l'istesse femine* ("more woman than the women themselves") described in detail by Giambattista Della Porta in his *Della fisionomia dell'huomo* (Della Porta 1610, p. 294-295; first Latin edition, 1586). If the Italian first-person pronoun, here used in the accusative form *me*, had a morphological gender mark, the speaker would have used the feminine form because the ontological identity being expressed is feminine, while the anatomical identity is masculine. In an early scene of *Un nuovo giorno*, when she is still a young child (played by Niccolò Calvagna), the protagonist says *Io non sono Giulio, sono Giulia* ("I am not Giulio, I am Giulia") in response to the teacher's roll call in class, choosing the feminine form of the complement that corresponds to her gender identity, which, though not morphemically shown by the pronoun *io*, she declares with total certainty as feminine. She claims that she has been incorrectly assigned a male body by nature and, on the assumption that the sexual identity of the body is necessarily identical with the gender identity of the person in it, she has been unjustly consigned to the masculine gender by society and given the masculine name Giulio.

¹ I would like to thank Maurizio Scontrino for making it possible for me to view this film, which is no longer available to the general public.

By saying that she is Giulia, the child uses the morphemic form of the name that articulates her sense of self rather than the biological objectivity of her body. The first-person pronoun, whether explicitly pronounced or null--that is, expressed in the morphemic configuration of the verb--is the primordial point of access to one's self, independently of and prior to any consideration of one's body. The question "who am I?" is not primarily concerned with the objective categorization of my anatomy but with my identity as a person, experienced by me as such in my consciousness and manifested to others in my relationship with them. For Giulia, that essence, and not her body, is the only deictic focus of her first-person pronoun, with respect to which the body is only an *it* with its own third-person attributes. As an *it*, it has no claim to personhood, its pronoun being called a "third-person" pronoun only by convention.

The operative principle in the process of gender predication is that society's perception of each of its members outclasses and eclipses their individual self-perception. The school, as the institution responsible for shaping children into responsible adults in society, is charged with the task of making sure that their self-perception corresponds to the perception that society has of them. Thus, the school counsellor (played by Gianna Paola Scaffidi), speaking on her own behalf as a professional and on behalf of the teachers and principal, and hence embodying the scientific knowledge of her profession as well as the institutional wisdom of the school, says to the child, *a me non sembri affatto una bambina* ("you don't look at all like a little girl to me"), and concludes their conversation with the words *tu devi solo cercare di essere come la natura ti ha creato* ("you must try to be only the way nature has made you"), emphasizing both her perception of gender identity as a biological characteristic of the body and the principle that, at least as far as gender is concerned, a person's self-perception is correct only if it conforms with society's perception. The

counsellor's use of the subject pronoun *tu*, which is not grammatically required, is equivalent to a gesture of emphasis, underscoring the child's obligation to conform.

When the school counsellor urges Giulio to cease being the way she is now and to learn how to be the way she was made by nature, she unwittingly admits that the pronoun *tu* can in fact refer independently to the gender identity of the protagonist's self-perception, which today's Italian principals would call his alias identity. If their conversation were dubbed in Hebrew, in which the second person pronoun has morphemically distinct masculine and feminine forms, the situation would be somewhat different. For the counsellor would have to choose between the feminine and masculine pronoun forms at the very beginning of the thought process verbalised by the utterance, either contradicting herself or momentarily confirming the child's self-perception. In the rest of the film, Giulia is addressed consistently in the feminine gender in direct conversation and referred to by the third-person pronoun *lei* (she or her) by most other characters before and after the operation, all of them having recognized, some before others, that Giulia's self-conception is the only valid one.

The second category of gender variance includes persons who do not identify with either gender and hence ask to be referred to by an epicene pronoun. In English this is resolved by using *they* with a referential meaning in the singular. Despite the odd episode of clamorous controversy, singular *they* enjoys wide currency, its use being authorized by prestigious dictionaries and endorsed by powerful institutions. In Italian the question is somewhat more complex because *loro*, which is the exact translation of the third-person plural pronoun *they*, does not appear to be evolving towards an epicene singular and does not yet have any currency with a singular referent other than in the subtitles of foreign films translated *ad verbum*. In many

situations, this is not a problem because Italian grammar does not generally require the use of the third-person subject pronouns *lei* and *lui* (or the older forms *ella* and *egli*), so that it is frequently possible to avoid specifying by pronoun choice the gender of the referent. Thus, the English *They (sing.) are coming* translates easily as *viene*, a standalone verb without an independent pronoun specifying the gender of its subject. The same thing, however, is not possible in compound tenses of verbs conjugated with the auxiliary *essere* (*to be*) or when the person is described with gender-marked adjectives and nouns, since the rules of agreement require their declination in the gender and number of the subject. But when it is contextually possible to use unmarked predicates, pronoun omission is the language's natural way of avoiding an unwanted description of the subject's gender.

No such omission is possible, however, with singular *them*, because Italian third-person object pronouns must be used and are necessarily marked for gender. The third-person pronouns *lo* and *la*, declined for usage in accusative constructs, and the corresponding forms *gli* and *le* used in dative constructs, are inevitably gender specific. The English expression "I see them (sing.)", in which *them (sing.)* represents the genderless singular they in the objective case, must be rendered as either *lo vedo* or *la vedo*, with a clear indication of the person's gender. Similarly, "I am writing to them (sing.)" can be rendered as either *gli scrivo* or *le scrivo*, respectively "I am writing to him" and "I am writing to her." The Italian grammatical structure forces the speaker to disregard pronoun preference and to assign a gender identity to persons who do not wish to be classified as either male or female. And since the rules of agreement require morphemic gender markers in nouns, adjectives and past participles, binary gender classification echoes throughout the sentences and paragraphs. Conventional Italian pronouns, in other words, do not generally

acknowledge the existence of persons with non-binary gender identity in society, for the simple reason that the language itself has a binary structure.

This does not mean, of course, that Italian cannot express unconventional approaches to gender, such as those involved in non-binary gender, transgender and intergender identities. At the moment a number of academics, linguists, translators, and publishers are considering ways in which the language can keep pace with social change (e.g., Gheno 2019). For the written language, various accommodations have been suggested, including replacing the gendered vowel with an asterisk or with the phonetic symbol for schwa, as in the third-person pronouns *l** and *lə*, each standing for both *lo* and *la* as equivalents of the English *them* (sing). These appear to be the most frequently used accommodations on social media, on websites and blogs, in email messages and, less commonly, in print. But since not all keyboards have easy access to an ə, this symbol is at times replaced in print or on the internet with the number 3. In accordance with this typographical style, the gender-neutral form of the word for "child," which in conventional Italian is *bambina* in the feminine and *bambino* in the masculine, can be written as *bambin**, *bambinə*, or even *bambin3* (D'Achille 2021, pp. 77-81). But because such solutions, in addition to eliminating the grammatical gender of the referent, in effect increase the number of symbols in the alphabet, there is considerable scepticism about the rapidity with which any of the proposed changes can achieve appreciable currency, since a non-alphabetic gender-neutral symbol will figure perforce as a new letter in the written language.

The issues are somewhat different in the spoken language. The addition of a gender-neutral symbol to the alphabet of the written language implies the addition of a new distinctive sound to the phonemic catalogue of the spoken one. Learning to pronounce a schwa at the end of

words that have always been heard with a clear vowel inevitably poses certain problems. This means that the types of accommodations that are being contemplated for written Italian may not be easy to accommodate in speech, in which awkwardness and artificiality can easily aggravate a difficult social situation. We can illustrate the difference between written and spoken approaches to the urgency of finding a singular epicene pronoun by examining how a gender-neutral episode in an English-language film for television is rendered in written captions and dubbed speech for Italian audiences: *The Sanctuary*, a well-known episode (3.8) of *Star Trek Discovery* (December 2020), directed by Jonathan Frakes. This is an excellent source for our purpose because it is the first episode in all the Star Trek TV series to feature the coming out of a transgender character aware of the power that third-person pronouns have to assign gender identity. In the crucial scene, the sixteen-year old character Adira Tal, who has been referred to with the pronouns *she* and *her* by other characters, makes a startling statement. When Lieutenant Commander Stamets comments that "she is fast" at unravelling systems for the storage and transmission of cyphered information, Adira, with a hesitant voice and facial movements conveying emotional difficulty, corrects his pronoun usage: "they...not she. I've never felt like a she or a her... so I would prefer they or them... from now on." The Lieutenant Commander smiles and replies with a phonetically unaffected "Ok", though with a facial gesture indicating warm appreciation of the emotional strain involved in such a declaration.

In the version of the episode for Italian television, called *Il rifugio*, Adira's speech is rendered in the caption with a translation *ad verbum*, using *loro* as the Italian equivalent of the English gender-neutral singular pronoun: *Loro...non lei. Non mi sono mai sentita una lei. Perciò, d'ora in poi preferisco loro*. The average reader is not accustomed to seeing *loro* treated as a singular pronoun in Italian, but here there is no awkwardness in the sentence itself. The pronoun,

however, does suggest that we should expect to hear considerable awkwardness in the spoken version of future dialogues translated in this manner, since one would have to decide whether this singular *loro* would call for grammatical agreement, in which case verbs, adjectives and nouns would have to be declined as plural but interpreted as singular, or for referential agreement with the person represented by the pronoun. The grammatical awkwardness would be somewhat analogous to the one encountered in the use of a plural verb with the pronoun *lei* by illiterate speakers in such sentences as *Lei mi sembrano inquieto* ("You seem restless"), cited as current by Migliorini in his analysis of the confusion among the unschooled surrounding the use of *lei* and *voi* before the Fascist policy regulating pronoun usage: the pronoun is a third-person feminine singular used a second-person masculine singular, the verb is the plural form that would normally be used with *voi*, and the adjective is masculine singular (Migliorini 1938, p. 136). In the case of *loro* used as a replacement for *she*, plural forms would be incongruous with the ontology of the referent, while singular forms would be incongruous with the ontology of the language, and in neither case could gender neutrality be achieved beyond the pronoun other than by resorting to unidiomatic circumlocutions.

On the other hand, in the dubbed version of the scene of Adira's coming out, the text is rendered *ad sensum*, in a manner that avoids the need for a gender-neutral pronoun altogether, there not being in the spoken language a comfortable way of rendering it: *Adira, non lei. Non mi identifico come una lei o una donna, perciò... Io preferisco Adira e basta d'ora in poi*. A literal backtranslation of the spoken text is: "Adira, not she. I do not identify as a she or a woman, therefore ... from now on, I prefer Adira and nothing more." In the context of a conversation, gender neutral language must sound natural, consistent with the stylistic conventions shared by the participants, and this is what the translators of the dubbed text tried to achieve. The adoption

of *loro* as a second person singular pronoun does not have in Italian anything resembling the degree of social acceptance that singular *they* has in North America, and hence the translators had to have recourse to rephrasing. They used the character's name as a substitute for the gender-neutral pronoun and the noun *donna* (woman) as a substitute for the direct object pronoun by which the lieutenant was in the habit of referring to his young assistant. Their linguistic strategy was amply criticized on the internet by Italian aficionados (cf. *Talkingtrek.it*) who thought that the oral version betrayed the ideological intentionality of the original, correctly rendered in the written version by the pronoun *loro*, obviously considered by the caption translators too awkward for the spoken language. The sense of awkwardness generated by a phrase, however, is inversely related to frequency of its occurrence in the living language, and that means that it can be overcome with continued usage, as the speakers become accustomed to its sound. Ironically, the spoken translation reverses the relationship that is normally assumed to obtain between noun and pronoun in traditional grammar: here the noun is a substitute for the pronoun, rather than the other way round. The noun is treated as if it were a "pro-pronoun" (Kirtchuk 1999, p. 41). In the resulting Italian version of the dialogue, Adira's self-disclosure is viewed only as that of a person who does not want to be perceived and identified as a woman. The oral text says nothing of Adira's self-perception as a person for whom there is no space in the binary system. By omitting the genderless singular *they*, the Italian dubbed version continues to view Adira through the binary system of gender classification that the original scene was meant to subvert.

The exchange between Adira and the Lieutenant Commander was also meant to bear witness to the North-American debate on the use of personal pronouns in relation to an individual's right to gender variance. From a linguistic point of view, the issue at the heart of the discussion is whether third-person pronouns should be conceived of as objective labels of a

gender category assigned by grammar on the basis of biology, or whether they should not be defined as subjective expressions of the self-conception of the person with respect to the idea of gender itself. Adira alludes to the debate by analogy, but timidly and nervously, focusing on the internal tension of gender dysphoria and not on the ethical or legal entitlement to subjective gender expression and pronoun determination. The dubbed wording of the exchange, on the other hand, alludes emphatically to the version of the discussion taking place in Italy. In the dubbing, Adira's timid conditional ("I would prefer") is replaced with a more resolute indicative (*preferisco*), and the sentence is concluded with an added *e basta*, a peremptory phrase closing the discussion to further argument, like the brusque gesture of an exasperated participant in a public debate. In Italy, the public discussion of gender variance is openly ideological and centred, as might be expected, around the concept of identity-- *identità di genere* is a key term (if not *the* key term) in the discussion. That is very probably the reason why in Italian Adira, says the text, does not identify herself (*non mi identifico*) as a woman, where the English has only "I have never felt like a she or her." Adira speaks her preferred pronoun usage from an internal psychological vantage point in English, with signs of gender dysphoria, but from an external ideological platform in Italian, with signs of ideological partisanship.

Pronouns from Platforms of Authority

The divergence between the two approaches to pronoun usage in situations of gender variance emerges with distinctive clarity in controlled social environments in which the relationship between a preestablished platform of ideas and an individual's self-perception can be managed with authority and coercion. In the Italian penitentiary system, for example, transgender women prisoners are held together with prisoners who are women by birth. In

some prisons, the administrative personnel and the correctional officers continue to refer to them by their deadnames and masculine pronouns, thereby denying them any acknowledgement of their chosen gender identity, whether that identity is feminine or non-binary (Zago 2019, p. 9). In other prisons, transgender inmates are addressed and spoken of in the feminine gender. But the officers' use of feminine pronouns is perceived by the inmates as an institutional convention rather than a recognition of their identity as women and their entitlement to the social and physical activities allowed to prisoners who are female by birth. In such prison environment, feminine pronouns for transgender women are an exclusively grammatical and not at all a recognition of their new gender identity. *Ci sono cose che non risolve il 'lei'*, ("there are things for which the use of *she* is no solution"), succinctly reported a transgender woman inmate who was always addressed, and referred to, in the feminine but was denied access to the green space were non-trans women prisoners were allowed to socialize (Hochthorn and Cottone 2012, p.148). The implication is that though transgender women prisoners had become surgically female, they were still perceived as men. That is why their potential behaviour in the prison community, their interests and their sentiments were expected by the officers to be those typical of men. The pronoun *lei* addressed their new sexual identity but not their gender identity, which remained unchanged. For correctional officers, it seems, a man acquires his gender identity together with his anatomy at birth and cannot change it even if he surgically changes his sexual organs. In their usage, the feminine third-person pronoun recognizes the new sexual identity but not the gender identity of transgender women inmates. The feminine essence of their character remains beyond the reach of officers' pronouns and is absent from their consciousness other than as a claim by the women themselves.

It may be instructive to compare this use of the third-person pronoun to the way Pope Francis has used it in connection with the identity of a transgender person. In an interview of 2 October 2016, he told journalists that in 2015 he had some correspondence and a meeting with a transgender man, and narrated the details with some tenderness, showing that he appreciated the suffering of the young person who felt imprisoned in the wrong body prior to undergoing the transgendering operation. After the surgery, this person began to live the life of a man and got married. Pope Francis related that he asked him for a papal audience as a transgender person: *ha cambiato questa identità civile e lui - che era lei ma è lui - mi ha scritto...* ("he changed his civil identity and he, who was she but is he, wrote to me..."(Bergoglio 2016). Pope Francis, it seems, had no difficulty acknowledging that this person's gender identity as a man was actually present in him before his transition. The surgeon changed his sexual identity so that it might coincide with his gender identity, and this enabled him to change the record of his civil identity as a woman so that he might now be officially regarded as the male that he has become physically and that he always was psychologically. Unlike correctional officers, the Pope recognizes both his gender and his sexual identity. Since Italian is a null-pronoun language, it is impossible to discern in the third-person verbs used by Pope Francis the gender of the individual, but the English version of the interview issued by the Vatican leaves no doubt about it. Thus, where the Italian text has *Prima era una bambina, una ragazza che ha sofferto tanto. Si sentiva ragazzo ma era fisicamente una ragazza*, the English version reads "He was born a female, a girl, and he suffered greatly, because he felt like a boy but was physically a girl. Here *ø-pronoun si sentiva* and *ø-pronoun era* have an epicene form, but in the English text the Pope specifies that he intended the masculine gender. Exactly the same thing is true of the Spanish text, since Spanish is also a pro-drop language. In his dialogue with the journalists, the Pope spoke of the

man's pre-surgical experience in a participative manner that presupposes the concomitant performance of a facial or vocal gesture of understanding, which helped bring back to virtual presence something that was distant in both time and space.

In a dialogical situation, a third-person referent is always separate and somewhat removed from the experience of the linguistic exchange, even if emotionally and spiritually near. The speakers' perception of the degree of separation is context specific and can be analysed in terms of immediacy of perception. Immediacy is an indication of the speaker's sense of the "directness and intensity" (Wiener and Mehrabian 1968, p. 4) of the third-person referent invoked in an utterance. When they function as substitutes for names, pronouns necessarily exhibit a lower degree of immediacy than the names themselves, since the anaphoric relationship of the pronouns to their referents implies that the mind must go through a longer conceptual distance to grasp the relationship between the pronoun and the referent: first from the pronoun to the noun, and then from the noun to its referent. But in cases where they do not function as substitutes, the immediacy of perception that they make possible is very high on account of their indexical sense and of the fact that their pronunciation is normally accompanied by a gesture of pointing, performed physically or vocally, giving the impression of being oriented towards the referent.

The perception of immediacy in third-person pronominal reference is fundamental to the theological significance of the Catholic mass because it concerns its most sacred moment. In the final doxology of the Eucharistic prayer, at the very heart of the mass, we find a third-person pronoun repeated three times. Raising the chalice with wine and the paten with the host of the Eucharist, the priest intones a sacred prayer with a threefold reference to Christ. In the original Latin version, the words are *per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso* (*Ordinario* 2007, p. 19). In this

formula, *ipse* is not a personal pronoun as such but a pronoun of emphasis that presupposes the invisible presence of a personal pronoun. According to classical Latin usage, *ipse* would normally be expected to occur together with a personal pronoun, as in *eum ipsum*, to invest it with greater semantic distinctiveness and pragmatic emphasis, but, in virtue of its intensifying force, it can also stand alone, carrying by itself the semantic valence and the pragmatic efficacy of the combination. In the liturgical formula the personal pronoun is hence silently present, pointing, through the agency of *ipse*, semantically to the anaphoric presence of the name of Christ elsewhere in the text of the mass and deictically, with the gestural aid of reiterated signs of the cross and the action of blessing with the host itself (Fortescue 1914, p. 360), to the sacramental presence of Christ in the host and wine being elevated by the priest as he recites or chants the sacred pronouns.

After Vatican II, when the text of the mass was first prepared for celebration in modern languages (1962), in accordance with precise rules for the translation of the Eucharistic prayer issued by the Dicastery for Divine Worship (Dicastery 2001, p. 41), the formula was generally rendered by dropping the pronoun of emphasis, pronouncing only the previously unheard personal pronoun and entrusting it with carrying out the pragmatic task of *ipse*. The formula thus became *per lui, con lui e in lui* in Italian, *through him, with him and in him* in English, *Durch ihn und mit ihm und in ihm* in German, and *par lui, avec lui et en lui* in French. But in later editions of the text (1970 and 1983), the Vatican translators changed the Italian version to *per Cristo, con Cristo, e in Cristo*, replacing the pronoun with the name, while leaving the French and English text intact. Masses in Spanish, on the other hand, were allowed to include the name of Christ in the first position and the pronoun *él* in the other two, a very short anaphoric distance away from the name: *por Cristo, con él y en él* (Giraudó 1993, p. 143). The inference to be drawn from this

textual comparison is that, for the Vatican translation authorities, the pragmatic salience of the third-person pronoun, on which the liturgical effectiveness of this solemn moment of the mass depends, is not equal in all cultures. In Italian its degree of immediacy is perceived as being comparatively weak and is hence replaced by the name of Christ.

The two Italian versions of the Latin formula may be regarded as emerging from two theological platforms conceived to give rise to different concepts of liturgical performance, each emphasizing a distinctive understanding of the function of the mass and of its intended perception by the faithful in attendance. In a liturgical celebration using the pronominal text *per lui, con lui e in lui*, the priest can compensate for the semantic separation of the pronoun from its referent by performing the gestural language prescribed in the rubrics of the doxology slowly and solemnly, thereby focusing the attention of the faithful on the immediacy of the transubstantiation taking place on the altar at that very moment through the agency of the celebrant. The gestural accompaniment of the pronouns, though much less elaborate than in the pre-conciliar mass, is still a considerable indexical tool. On the other hand, a liturgy based on the repetition of the name, *per Cristo, con Cristo e in Cristo*, has no anaphoric separation to compensate for and hence can rely more heavily on the verbal content of the text rather than on the prescribed ritualistic gestures, which in this case can be subdued and performed quickly, at even greater distance from the pre-conciliar celebration (Lever 1983, p. 1217). The first liturgical style points to a theological figuration of the mass that emphasizes the miracle of transubstantiation and invites the faithful more to the adoration of the sacrament than to reflection on the words pronounced by the priest, whereas the second style takes its bearings from a theology that emphasizes the view of the mass as a memorial re-enactment meant more to

elicit meditation on the events described than to induce worship of the transubstantiated bread and wine.

A similar theological manipulation of the art of translation is contained in modern versions of the Latin *sursum corda*, pronounced by the priest as an invitation to raise one's heart to God at the beginning of the dialogical preface to the Eucharistic prayer. The sense of the Latin expression is based on the adverb of upward motion *sursum*, but the text is ambiguous because there are no verbs or pronouns indicating whose *corda* should be raised. The Vatican has resolved the ambiguity in the English version for North America by rendering the text with a second-person plural verb and its corresponding adjectival pronoun, *lift up your hearts* (*General Instruction*, par. 148), and in Italian by using the first-person plural, *in alto i nostri cuori*, without adding a verb (*Ordinamento generale*, par. 148). In both versions, the priest associates himself with the congregation, on whose behalf he offers the solemn prayer, but in the English celebration, he does not include himself among the parishioners to whom *sursum* is referred but offers his prayer by standing outside and above their community, as a sacred minister issuing an explicit order or an exhortation. In the Italian version, on the other hand, he explicitly places himself among the faithful in attendance by means of the inclusive pronoun *noi* in its adjectival form *nostri*. The Italian text thus reflects a clear conception of the liturgy as a communal celebration, which is instead downplayed in the English version.

The platform of ideas from which an utterance is made, whether in a sacred or a secular context, has significant influence on the verbal and gestural articulation of thought, and on the sense of immediacy with which pronouns convey the presence of their referents to the listener. In the communicational interface between speakers' intentions, social context, language structure and accompanying gestures, pronouns emerge as the pivotal element for all parties involved.

They do so with particular intensity in situations of gender variance, in which the pronouns used can have great emotional, ethical and ideological significance for dialogue participants as well as third-person referents and representatives of the institutional or social context of the discussion. For all those operating with conviction within the binary structure of the Italian language, the need to produce gender-neutral pronouns, or their effect by circumlocutions, whatever its source, is a disruptive intrusion. In the modern history of the language, however, the most dramatic interface between these parties around pronoun usage was surely the Fascist policy on pronouns of address, ostensibly to eradicate traces of subservience to foreign cultures, but in actuality to change the way people thought in a strategy designed to make them conform to the ideal models of men and women the party advocated for the whole of Italy.

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