Chapter

POLITICS AND GENDER ISSUES: AT THE CROSSROADS OF SEXISM IN LANGUAGE AND ATTITUDES. AN OVERVIEW OF SOME ITALIAN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

We present the principal findings of a research program, developed across the previous eight years, focused on politics and gender issues in Italy. The theoretical perspective is that of social representations (SRs) that disputes the transparency of language, affirming its capacity to mask power and ideological relations. We assume that gender is not a stable and immutable construct within each individual, but rather a performative construct related to fluid and mutable aspects built in the interactions

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between social actors. The Italian political landscape, in constant evolution, permitted the investigation of gendered dynamics in attitudes of ordinary citizens, in political communication related both to the press about women and men politicians, and enacted by deputies in their parliamentary speeches. The investigative aim of these different studies has been to underline the interdependent relationship between social context, language, media, representations, and the political system. We present results centred on social representations of ordinary citizens towards men and women involved in high political offices, on political communication in the Italian press from 1979 to the last decade, and on parliamentary speeches made by men and women deputies from 1976 to 2009. In our research we used triangulation models of theory – such as the multiple references to the SRs and to constructs of gender roles, stereotypes/counter-stereotypes, ambivalent sexism, linguistic sexism, the linguistic category model, agency – triangulation of data – both lexical and numerical – and the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Before the presentation of the principal findings, we illustrated the international literature concerning the psycho-social constructs used in our research. Through these studies we have shown the role of gender biases in the representations of common people and in the language of both the press and politicians. These biases often converge on the crystallization of a gender gap favourable to the politically committed man, but in some cases, overcome gender differences. In the latter instance we have illustrated how language may also be the medium through which to counter stereotypes and prejudices against women politicians and stimulate representations favourable to a greater feminine presence in politics.

Keywords: politics and gender, sexism, language and attitudes, social representation theory, political communication, press analysis, parliamentary speeches, linguistic category model; agency

INTRODUCTION

Politics throughout the world is considered a masculine affair because women have a marginal role in terms of presence and type of political

charge. As shown by the the Inter-Parliamentary Union[1] (IPU 2017a) at the beginning of 2017, the world average of women in parliament reached 23.3%, with an increase of 6.5% from the previous ten years (16.8% in 2007). This average is far from the principles of gender equality and poses a problem regarding the ability of parliaments to be gender-sensitive. For these reasons, good practices have been demanded in order to increase the number of women Parliamentary deputies (MPs). Technical measures and cultural norms, which are among these good practices, can stimulate change towards a more balanced gender reality. Regarding technical measures, for example, quotas may facilitate the election[2] of women, while in the case of cultural norms, gendered role models and stereotypes that hinder the participation of women in politics can be addressed. In previous years, the IPU had identified social forces and cultural institutions through which to counteract these gendered dynamics. In 1994, it stated that the media is one of the more efficient ways through which to fight these stereotypes and prejudices that had made the entry of women in politics more difficult (Sensales & Areni, 2017).

Nevertheless, research carried out in this field has shown that the media in the eighties and nineties often continued to represent an obstacle rather than a resource for women's affirmation in the political world. Different sociological, social psychological, and linguistic surveys highlighted how the media tended to provide more coverage for men rather than women politicians (Carroll & Schreibeer, 1997; Kahn, 1992, 1994; Kahn & Golderberg, 1991). This gives significant disadvantages for women candidates who have received less media coverage than men, as demonstrated by experimental research (Kahn, 1992; 1994). Furthermore, it was proven that the media used a type of communication based on the most established gender stereotypes (Braden, 1996; Carroll & Schreibeer, 1997; Norris, 1997). Men were characterized by agentic traits (leadership,

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[1] IPU was created in 1889 as a permanent forum for political multilateral negotiations throughout the world. This international organization monitors also the gender composition of Parliaments around the world.

[2] Elections are a tool to increase the participation and representation of women in order to reach a "critical mass" in political institutions, conventionally defined as 30% involvement (see International IDEA, IPU, SU, 2013).

competence, tirelessness, strength, effectiveness) whereas women were characterized by communal traits (compassion, kindness, honesty, fragility, affability). Characterizations of women candidates (for a review see McGraw, 2003) focused on the aesthetic aspect (hairstyles, wardrobes, weight) and provided more detailed information on the private life (children, and marital status). Finally, it was ascertained that political communication in the media referred to different gendered issues. For men candidates these issues were the economy, business, taxes, defence, and foreign policy. On the other hand, for women candidates the media focused on women's rights, welfare, violence against women, abortion, AIDS, health, and education (Devitt, 1999).

Concerning the rare analysis of linguistic markers used to represent women politicians (for Italy see Basile, 2010; Pescia, 2010; Sabatini, 1987; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012; 2013; 2016a; 2016b; Sensales & Areni, 2017), a tendentious communication can be underlined that has obscured the presence of women in politics. This includes the over-use of generic masculine. This is a grammatical form that, in Romance languages such as French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, is a masculine declination that also refers to women. The English language, on the other hand, directly uses the masculine noun.

Through these results, research has shown that in the past the media has reflected the fact that women candidates were uncommon. For this reason they centred the attention on women politicians' gender and implemented sexist communication, both in attitudes and language, in order able to maintain the androcentrism of politics (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). In the late nineties and into the new century, this negative effect was partially changed in parallel with the decline of the novelty of women candidates. The gender perspective is less salient as they have become more present in the political landscape. For example, Hayes and Lawless (2015), in their analysis of local newspapers during the 2010 U.S.A. House of Representatives campaign, found no evidence that candidates' gender was related to the volume or content of media coverage. In general, worldwide research shows that the trend of recent political mediatized communication has a more balanced coverage between men and women

across different national contexts (Atkeson & Krebs, 2007; Bystrom, 2004; Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001; Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Heldman, Carroll, & Olson, 2005; Jalalzai, 2006; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008; Meeks, 2012; Ross, Evans, Harrison, Shears, & Wadia, 2013). However, the media only occasionally covers women more than men (Sensales et al., 2016b; Trimble, 2007; Wiliarty, 2010). This relatively balanced coverage is not necessarily a sign of genderless bias, as in some cases women are covered in a more negative manner than men – as is the case for news concerning Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the 2008 Democratic race (Lawrence & Rose, 2010).

Overall, the trend towards more balance does not occur in a clear way, but coexists with trends from previous decades, in that in some cases the media persists in a higher coverage of men than women (Falk, 2009; Fernandez-Garcia, 2016; Lühiste & Banducci, 2016; Sensales & Areni, 2017; Sensales et al., 2016b). This is further confirmed in the coverage of the most recent U.S.A. presidential election between August and November 2016 (Patterson, 2016), in which Donald Trump received 15% more coverage than Hillary Clinton, although the tone was overwhelmingly negative for both. These gender biases in coverage have been studied by experimental research that provide evidence for significant disadvantages for women candidates who receive less media coverage than men (Kahn, 1992; 1994). Among these disadvantages, Fernandez-Garcia (2016) cites the possible influence on the low participation of women in the public sphere, and the strengthening of the minoritarian role of women involved in politics (Falk, 2008; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008; Norris, 1997).

Another gender bias lies in the more frequent quotation of speeches made by men than those by women (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Fernández García, 2015; Gidengil & Everitt, 2000, 2003; Ross et al., 2013), giving the impression that men were more informed and qualified than women (Devitt, 2002). This trend is inverted in very few cases, such as for Italian newspaper headlines focused on ministers of the 2014 government (Sensales & Areni, 2017). In this case, it seems that newspapers have recorded and amplified the change taking place in the Italian parliament, with women more present than in the past, and are building a counter-

stereotypical representation of women as more agentic than men. Whether this representation will stimulate the overcoming of gender stereotypes, or lead to more sexist attitudes, remains an open issue related with the weight of perceived threat towards gender status quo.

With the recent popularization of political communication (Sensales, 2008), attention to physical attributes has also begun to affect men. This can be seen in coverage of the 2007 French presidential campaign in which Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy ran for office (Couloumb-Gully, 2009). Merlene Couloumb-Gully (2009) has shown that the focus was on physical aspects in the coverage of both candidates. However, this attention was modulated in a stereotyped manner, with the reference to the silhouette done according to the rules that prescribe a slender woman with infantile lineaments, and a robust, authoritarian man. Even the facial features were filtered in the same way by presenting Sarkozy, with his small, dark eyes and his large aquiline nose, as being severely and firmly determined, whereas Royal's smile was highlighted as a trait of kindness and affability. The extent to which the focus on politicians' physical aspect leads to a reduced perception of his/her competence is an object of the most recent experimental research. This can be seen in a study by Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) applied to the Sarah Palin case in the 2008 U.S.A. presidential election. The results showed the negative consequences of focusing on Palin's appearance, not only on the reduced assessment of her competence, but also on the reduced intentions of voting for the McCain-Palin ticket.

Gender stereotypes remain in the media coverage that focuses on gender-typed themes and personality traits (Hayes & Lawless, 2016). Some scholars demonstrated the persistence of this kind of gendered coverage in many contexts. Bystrom, Robertson and Banwart (2001) focused on the 2000 U.S.A. electoral campaign. Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) focused on the comparison of political communication concerning women and men candidates during electoral campaigns in Australia (2004), Canada (2006), and the U.S.A. (2006). Falk (2010) studied the media bias towards men and women towards the nine American presidential candidates in the 2008 election. Overall, the results of these

studies show a more fluid situation than in the past, in which elements of novelty, oriented to overcome gender discrimination, coexist with traditional views of gender relations that crystallize masculine power. This power asymmetry is also evident in the distribution of political charges that, at apical levels, show glass ceiling dynamics (Jalalzai, 2008) and result in women being marginalized. For example, the 2008 campaigns of Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, and Sarah Palin as Republican vice presidential candidate, incited discussion among scholars about an attempt to "crack the highest hardest glass ceiling" (Dittmar & Carroll, 2014). However, the failure of those endeavours, as in the race in 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, have demonstrated that although women are pressing to achieve the highest levels of political offices, these assignments still remain largely reserved for men.

The 2017 edition of the IPU-UN[3] Women Map shows only 17 countries in the world with a woman Head of State and/or Head of Government, while the number of women Ministers stands at 18.3% (UN Women, 2017). According to IPU (2017b) data on women's participation in executive government and parliament, Italy ranks 36th (out of 174) with 5 women Ministers (out of 18). Those numbers are very different from those of the 2014 government, where for the first time in Italy 50% of Ministers were women (8 out of 16). As commented elsewhere (Sensales & Areni, 2017), despite this positive position, the 2014 government still had forms of gender discrimination: some ministries covered by women were without portfolio—and thus less important due to a lack of budgetary autonomy—whereas each of the ministries led by men had portfolio.

This Italian political landscape, in constant evolution, permitted the investigation of gendered dynamics in attitudes of ordinary citizens, as well as in political communication from both press headlines about women and men politicians and from the deputies themselves in their parliamentary speeches. The investigative aim of these different studies is to underline the interdependent relationship between social context,

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[3] United Nations; the "UN Women" is dedicated to the implementation of gender equality and empowerment of women.

language, media, representations, and the political system. We will present the results of studies centred on the social representations of ordinary citizens towards men and women involved in high political offices, political communication in the Italian press from 1979 to the last decade, and parliamentary speeches made by men and women from 1976 to 2009.

We will show that gender biases towards politicians persist in linguistic choices of journalists and politicians, as well as in ordinary citizens' representations. Although these biases typically favor men politicians, this is not always the case. We will further show that language can also be used to resist the stereotypes and prejudice that affect women politicians. That is, language is a tool for the construction, but also the deconstruction, of the gender gap in the political sphere.

The theoretical framework of this research program, developed across the previous eight years, is that of social representations that assumes the capacity of language to mask power and ideological relations. These complex relationships can be identified through the analysis of specific linguistic devices that seem neutral but are instead bearers of discrimination. To preserve social complexity, the Social Representations Theory (SRT) privileges triangulation models (Flick, Foster, & Caillaud, 2015). These models lead to the hybridization of theories and methods that, in the recent past, have been considered as alternatives. We will show how these can enter a fruitful interrelationship. We used triangulation models throughout our studies. We triangulated the SRT, the constructs of gender roles, stereotypes and counter-stereotypes, ambivalent sexism, linguistic sexism, linguistic category model, and agency. We used triangulation of data, both lexical and numerical, and the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Our research program focused on four areas. First, we studied political, linguistic, and gender issues through the language and attitudes of 830 Italians who we interviewed in 2016 (Sensales, Areni, & Chirumbolo, 2018). Second, we studied sexist language and feminine representations in Italian newspapers. We will discuss the findings of four different studies on 1500 newspaper headlines. These headlines focused on twenty-nine Italian women ministers in five governments, from 2006 to 2014, and from

different political orientations (Sensales & Areni, 2016, 2017; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012, 2013, 2016a). Third, we studied Italian political communication and gender bias in two gender comparative studies. The first study analysed 591 newspaper headlines about three pairs of men and women politicians with different political orientations, all of whom served as presidents of the Houses of Parliament in three legislatures (1979, 1994, 2013; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2016b). The second study analysed 332 headlines about eighteen ministers of the Renzi government (2014), balanced by gender (Sensales & Areni, 2017). Fourth, we conducted a psycho-linguistic analysis of 904 parliamentary speeches given by six pairs of Italian deputies from different political orientation and serving in legislatures from 1976 to 2009 (Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales, Areni, & Giuliano, 2017, in press; Sensales, Giuliano, & Areni, 2016). The findings of these four areas will be presented after the illustration of the literature concerning psycho-social constructs used in our research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS PERSPECTIVE

Social representations theory (SRT) has investigated gender issues with different theoretical and methodological perspectives (Arruda, 2003). These perspectives include a series of empirical studies on this topic (Aebischer, 1985; Duveen, 1993; Sensales & Chirumbolo, 2004; Sensales & Pisilli, 2006; Dal Secco, Sensales, & Areni, 2010). Kruse, Weimer, and Wagner (1988), in their pioneering work, proposed the analysis of lexical style in media texts to reveal traditional stereotypes in gender representations. Our investigations are similarly rooted in this critical tradition that begins with several assumptions. The first assumption concerns the fact that social objects are extremely complex, therefore it is necessary that they be analysed in a non-reductionist perspective using triangulation models. These models preserve the complexity through the simultaneous use of different theories, data, methodologies, and

researchers (Flick et al., 2015). There is also the assumption that language is the most powerful vehicle in the construction and spread of social representations (Harré & Moghaddam, 2015). Finally, it must be taken into account that the media are social institutions stimulating socialisation processes and contributing to formation and dissemination of social representations (SRs). They are a determinant in the construction of common sense and help lay people in their understandings of the world (Joffe, 2015).

As one of the more influential scholars of SRs recently sustained (Marková, 2017), the fundamental unit of social knowledge for the SRT is constituted by the interdependent relationship *Ego-Alter-Object*, in which the self and others are related to the object of knowledge. The Ego is explored by interviews and/or questionnaires, while the Alter is the socio-cultural environment in which participants are immersed in a mutual interchange. In Marková's assumption, «due to their internal relations, data from the Ego and from the Alter are in a unique communicative relationship and both kinds of data constitute the processes of social representing.» (Marková, 2017, p. 281).

This basic assumption radically transforms the traditional position of social psychology on the relationship between lay people and mass communication systems. There is a linear causal relation in mainstream psychology that begins at mass media and arrives to lay people. In this way, lay people were viewed as passive subjects affected by the impact of mediatized messages. This reductionist and mechanistic view, typical of the mainstream, is substituted by a holistic dialogical interrelation between subjects and societal institutions that participate in different social groups, and in a perennial confrontation for the construction of a social world in which language and media play a central role in socio-cultural exchange. In this vein, the media largely replace the interchange that took place in the past through interpersonal communication.

The media builds a public sphere, a training site, a place of identity negotiation. The role of the media can only be studied by first rejecting those reductionist models that hypothesised the transparency of media messages and their subsequent linear transmission, from the source

(newspapers, TV, etc.) to recipient (the public). The basic assumption of the SRT is that the media, far from being neutral tools of information transmission, have an ideological and linguistically complex structure that must be made intelligible (cfr. Sensales, Areni, & Angelastro, 2008). The media continually interact with the public, showing how the data provided by lay people and mass media, often in a linguistic format, are interdependent of each other and contribute to the delineation of a complex picture of observed reality.

Under the influence of the linguistic turn in social psychology, begun with the discursive approach (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), the SRT assumes that language contributes to building reality, rather than simply reflecting it. Naming something affirms its objective existence, even when it is fictive. In this way, differences between categories of populations, when they are considered in verbal communication, gain objectivity and influence on people's conduct and thinking. As Billig (1991) remembers, quoting Marx and Engels, language is not a mirror of consciousness but instead builds the real and practical consciousness that gives an account of power relationships. In this perspective the media discourse confirms, produces, reproduces, or confutes ideologies by focusing on specific groups, elites, and regions of the world (van Dijk, 1998). For example, more information is provided from, and on, men, rather than on women or other "minorities." This therefore allows the sharing, dissemination, and permanence of social norms based on systematic discrimination of specific groups (van Dijk, 1998, p. 187-189).

In our investigations, we contend that language is a symbolic repertoire that contributes to producing, reproducing, or refuting shared norms and ideologies by activating specific social-psychological processes. In light of this assumption, we will explore the strategic use of language in representations of politics and politicians. These representations have been studied in lay people, in journalistic communication, and in professional politicians by analysing whether these representations improve or penalize the role of women engaged in politics.

GENDER STEREOTYPES
AND ROLE PRESCRIPTIONS IN POLITICS

According to the theory of gender stereotypes, certain attributes are perceived to be typical for each of the two genders. Women ("other-oriented") are characterized by "communal-expressive" traits (e.g., kindness, warmth, supportiveness) and by adhering to their family care activities. On the other hand, men ("power oriented") are "agentic-instrumental" (e.g., self-assertive, competitive, dominant) due to their projection into the world of work (Eagly, 1987). These kinds of stereotypes are rooted in the gendered division of labour, split into family and occupational social roles (Clow & Ricciardelli, 2011; Eagly & Diekman, 2006; Eagly & Mitchell, 2004; Eagly et al., 2000).

In this way, gender stereotypes are strictly linked to gender roles that define the appropriate behaviour for women and men (see the role congruity theory of Eagly, 1987). These stereotypes define the consequent different occupational fields and levels, always more prestigious for men than for women (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, gender stereotypes play not only a descriptive function but also a prescriptive one (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). By describing feminine and masculine traits, a consequent behaviour is expected. In the case of derogation from these expectations, there is a social sanction that is more evident for women than for men (see the "backlash effect" described by Rudman & Glick, 1999; 2001; 2008).

While some years ago these stereotypes were considered stable over time and cultures (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Wood & Eagly, 2002), more recently they have been found to be more flexible, malleable, and dynamic as a result of societal changes (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Garcia-Retamero, Müller, & López-Zafra, 2011; López-Zafra, Garcia-Retamero, Diekman, & Eagly, 2008; March, van Dick, & Bark, 2016). Particularly, Diekman and Eagly (2000) showed that women are increasingly perceived with masculine

attributes, whereas the attribution of masculine attributes for men remained more stable.

Gender stereotypes and role prescription are linked to the concept of sexism that is defined by Becker (2014, p. 1727) as «individuals' beliefs and behaviours or institutional practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based upon their gender or promote gender inequality (Swim & Hyers, 2009).» In this vein, sexism has been considered as directed towards both genders, but research has very often investigated sexism in relation to women. In the nineties attention was developed on subtle forms of sexism that went beyond the explicitly negative attitudes. In this perspective lies the Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996); gender prejudice is not assumed as explicitly negative, but instead takes ambivalent forms. Particularly, Glick and Fiske (1996; 1999; 2001) theorized that traditional attitudes towards both sexes have two components: hostile sexism (e.g., negative attitudes towards women/men in non-traditional roles), and benevolent sexism (e.g., positive attitudes towards women/men in traditional roles). The authors started from the consideration of the uniqueness of the relationship between men and women. This relationship is characterized by a close interdependence that reflects established power differences over time. The strong level of physical and psychological intimacy leads to ambivalence towards gender-based relationships (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Men and women show a bifurcation in their areas of competence, linked to the gendered division of labour. On one hand, men exercise their power over social, political, and economic structures. On the other hand, women are centred on control over interpersonal relationships, typically in the household domain. Based on this type of asymmetrical relationship, sexism is conceptualised as a specific form of prejudice about a supposed inferiority of women with respect to men that develops into different clusters of attitudes. When women are perceived to control men through sexuality or feminist ideology, a hostile, aggressive response is activated; these women threaten men by violating the traditional subordinate roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Conversely, when a woman adheres to traditional gender roles, attitudes oriented towards the protection and

idealization of the feminine gender are activated. These benevolent attitudes are positive towards those women who accept the dominance and control of men. They are extremely insidious because, they keep women in their subordinate position in exchange for paternalistic protection.

A similar dynamic is assumed in attitudes towards men. When masculine power, sexual behaviour, and the related paternalistic attitudes of superiority cause resentment, or when the masculine inability to deal with household activities is verified, there is hostility towards men. Conversely when men need women's care or maternalistic responses, or when they assure the protection of women and children and claim the importance of sexual romantic intimacy, then there are positive attitudes on the surface that underneath evoke prejudicial beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 1999). On these bases, Glick and Fiske (1996) constructed and tested the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) that measured Hostile Sexism (HS) and Benevolent Sexism (BS) towards women. In 1999, they proposed the same type of measure for men with the Ambivalence towards Men Inventory (AMI; Glick & Fiske, 1999) consisting of the dimensions Hostility towards Men (HM) and Benevolence towards Men (BM). The ASI was followed by several studies to test its validity, even at the transcultural level, while AMI has been less explored. In both cases, there is a lack of studies concerning the political field.

Literature about gender stereotypes and roles applied to politics is more developed. It has been shown that one of the problems for women engaged in politics is that expectations about their feminine characteristics (communal) conflict with the traits needed for leadership roles (agentic, e.g., masculine). Women could accept this conflict and, as a minority group, adapt to the contextual expectations to avoid being seen as "different" (Power & Berardone, 1998). It is this asymmetrical process where women could adopt masculine characteristics in order to comply with contextual norms, as also recently highlighted by Wood and Eagly (2010; 2012).

However, just in the political sphere, the social psychological literature states that deviation from role prescriptions is negatively evaluated, especially when it is managed by women (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau,

2002; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). In this way, women must choose between (1) being stigmatized because they do not conform to the role prescriptions and instead assume masculine characteristics and (2) being considered as inadequate to hold political office because of their adherence to feminine characteristics. In the latter case, literature tells us that women politicians would have a negative assessment about their ability to effectively hold political office as this ability is in open conflict with role prescriptions related to gender stereotypes (Koenig et al., 2011).

Regarding this problematic scenario, there are some other authors, such Deborah Jordan Brooks (2013) and Monica Schneider and Angela Bos (2014), who question this assumption and the idea that women candidates for political office are stereotyped as women in general. Brooks (2013), in several experimental studies, demonstrates how women are evaluated more as leaders than as women, as posited by the "leaders-not-ladies" theory. Schneider and Bos (2014) arrive at the same conclusions by assuming the perspective of the "sub-typing theory." They consider women politicians as part of a subgroup with different and specific characteristics from those of women in general, as they tend to embrace masculine traits and agentic features. In their study, they show how political women are not stereotyped as women, while the men politicians would be considered as a subgroup of men. In the latter case, men politicians are also seen with some feminine qualities such as empathy, thus demonstrating a kind of feminization of the political role.

In Italy, there are very few studies on the stereotypical/counter-stereotypical representations of women politicians by ordinary citizens (Sensales, Areni, & Chirumbolo, 2018) and in the press (Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012, 2013). In interviews with Italian women deputies, they argued that they did not accept masculinizing themselves and preferred to retain their feminine characteristics (Francescato & Mebane, 2011). Moreover, the representations of women ministers by ordinary citizens and in the press confirm their stereotypical characterization, with a prevalence of feminine traits, behaviours, and issues. In press representations, these traits coexist with some masculine traits. Among ordinary citizens,

counter-stereotypical behaviours are sanctioned for women ministers and awarded for men ministers.

In the case of ordinary citizens, our empirical research (Sensales, Areni, & Chirumbolo, 2018) explored the actual representations of men and women politicians. We studied the evaluations of their behaviours that either followed or counteracted gender stereotypes, in order to verify whether there is a connection between these representations and sexist attitudes. 830 Italian natives participated in a survey in 2016. They were balanced for gender (55.3% women) and in most cases (66.9%) were students of Sapienza University in Rome. We investigated the assessment of high/low effectiveness of a hypothetical woman/man Minister. We used a between-subjects design with two conditions characterized by stereotypical or counter-stereotypical behaviour (cooperative or agentic). We also studied the most profound aspects of representations by asking participants to freely associate the first three words to the stimuli words "woman/man minister." We also included the ASI and the AMI scales to explore the possible interrelation between the assessment of effectiveness of the minister and the level of hostile and benevolent sexism towards men and women.

We assessed whether our results would conform to one of two theoretical perspectives relevant to the political sphere. The first perspective was represented by the "congruity role theory," in which derogation from role expectations is negatively evaluated, especially when it is done by women. The second was represented by the "leaders-not-ladies theory" and the "sub-typing theory," in which women politicians escape the traditional gender role prescriptions due to the greater salience of political categorization respective to gender categorization. Furthermore, because research has found that hostile sexism predicts negative responses to non-traditional feminine sub-groups, whereas benevolent sexism predicts positive responses to traditional feminine subgroups (Glick & Fiske 2001; Sibley & Wilson 2004), we also tested these possible interrelationships.

Operationally, according to congruity role theory we would expect a higher assessment of political efficacy for stereotypical behaviours

compared to counter-stereotypical behaviours. That is, a woman minister would be applauded for collaborative/communal behaviour, whereas a man minister would be applauded for directive/agentic behaviour. We would also expect to find a positive correlation between benevolent sexism towards men and women (e.g., from the ASI and AMI scales) and the assessment of effectiveness in the stereotypical condition. In the case of counter-stereotypical behaviour, we expected to find a positive correlation between hostile sexism towards men and women and the assessment of effectiveness in counter-stereotypical condition, as a sign of aggressiveness towards those who challenge gendered social norms and roles (Sensales, Areni, & Chirumbolo, 2018).

Conversely, according to the "leaders-not-ladies" and "sub-typing" theories, we would expect a higher assessment of political efficacy for directive behaviour (agentic), for both woman and man ministers. In this case, the counter-stereotypical behaviour of a woman minister would be assessed as more effective than stereotypical behaviour. On the other hand, for a man minister stereotypical behaviour would be assessed as more effective than counter-stereotypical behaviour. For the man minister, this negative assessment of the counter-stereotypical behaviour is expected to not be as strong due to a certain feminisation of the political role (Schneider & Bos, 2014). With respect to the ASI and AMI, we would expect that there would be no correlation with the dimension of ASI and AMI scales due to salience of political identity over gender identity. With respect to the free-associations to stimulus-words, we explored the general vocabulary with the aim to verify: a) stereotypical vs counter-stereotypical associations for the man/woman minister; b) the salience of gender identity ascribed to the woman/man minister; and c) the presence of sexist associations for the woman minister.

The results showed that role congruence intervenes only in higher assessments of effectiveness of the woman minister with stereotypical behaviour, compared with the man minister with stereotypical behaviour. By contrast, the man minister was considered to be most effective in the counter-stereotypical condition, that is, in violation of gender stereotypes. Therefore, gender stereotypes seem to apply only to women, while the

hypothesised feminization of the political role (Schneider & Bos, 2014) rewards the man who exhibits "communal" behaviours. This induces a higher assessment of the effectiveness of his actions when oriented towards a counter-stereotypical direction.

Our results seem to confirm the congruity role theory. However, we will offer an interpretation that, integrating free-associative findings, also includes some aspects of "leaders-not ladies" and "sub-typing" theories. The results on free-associative production showed how references to gender stereotypes, and to the institutional domain, are greater for the man than for the woman minister. There is a recall to gender counter-stereotypes for the woman, but not for the man minister (Sensales, Areni, & Chirumbolo, 2018).

Moving on to the salience of gender identity, it was higher for the woman minister compared to the man minister, with the associations "woman" and "man" both occurring frequently, the first ones almost double than the second ones. In any case these two associations (e.g., "woman" and "man") were the most frequent associations. This result disproves the hypothesis that gender identity would be denied for women politicians (Brooks, 2013; Schneider & Bos, 2014) and only affirmed for men politicians (Schneider & Bos, 2014).

With respect to linguistic sexism, the only word present is "soup" [*minestra*[4]], associated with the woman minister, showing how a sexist bias in response to a still fairly unusual grammatical form acts at an unconscious level. Finally, an interesting outcome concerns the overtly negative associations produced about the man minister: money – corruption – thief. For the woman minister, these associations are very low. These last associations offer a possible reading-key for the overall results. Man, the protagonist of political life, is the object of a critic's signalling of the crisis of politics that in Italy, as in many other Western countries, seems ever more self-referential and far from the needs of citizens. This may have led to the development of an alternative point of view that promotes contamination with feminine qualities. These qualities may be

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[4] In Italian the words *minestra* (soup) and *ministra* (woman minister) are formally similar because of a small difference in the modification of a single vowel.

more targeted to the common interest and dialogue and thus perceived as being able to escape from the present political impasse.

By attributing a valorisation of collaborative behaviour for men, our survey participants could thus express the desire to change a political climate that is overly centred on masculine power dynamics. In this way, the choice to reward stereotypical feminine behaviour, for both the woman and man ministers, should be interpreted as a process that attributes to this behaviour an emancipative function for the whole political system. If this interpretation is correct, then this could explain the high assessment of women ministers who display communal behaviour. It may not merely be a reference/confirmation of the traditional gender stereotypes/roles. The positive counter-stereotypical associations for women ministers could express the need for hybridisation processes that intersect gender and political identities and in which traditional gender boundaries are overcome. However, the counter-stereotypical associations are infrequent for men ministers. This shows how power relationships make stereotypes based on masculine identity particularly robust and stable, as affirmed by Diekman and Eagly (2000). Consequently, these hybridisation processes are difficult to complete.

Finally, concerning the ASI and AMI scales, no correlations were found between the sub-scales and the assessment of effectiveness of the man/woman ministers' behaviour. This can be explained by the salience of the political identity. Although sexist attitudes are prominent, they are not associated with the perceived effectiveness of (man, woman; stereotypical, counter-stereotypical) ministers. That is, an identity as a politician can overcome perceptions of gender identity. This can lead to the evaluation of role congruity in relation to politics rather than to gender. However, we inserted the ASI and AMI scales after the effectiveness and free-association measures. The political identity may have taken precedence over gender identity as a result of our research design.

We are continuing this line of research at the current time. We are attempting to activate salience of gender identity, over political identity, by inserting the sexism attitudes scales before, instead of after, the effectiveness assessment and free associations. In this case, we will expect

a significant correlation between ASI and AMI scales with the assessment of effectiveness of the man/woman ministers' behaviour.

WOMEN POLITICIANS IN THE ITALIAN PRESS:
FROM STEREOTYPICAL TO
COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS

In 1997, the IPU stressed the gendered nature of mass communication and hoped that they "should become an agent of change through their approach to women or rather to gender at large" (IPU, 1997). As we have already seen, international research has shown that this hope is still far from being realized, even if in the last decades there are some signs of more positive trend in the representations of women politicians.

In Italy, a study by Eikon (2007) on the feminine presence in the daily press showed that politics is the only non-traditional field in which women have gained a significant space. The survey was conducted on a representative sample totalling 1416 articles published in 2006 by four Italian daily newspapers with different ideological-cultural orientations. The results confirmed the marginality of women compared to men that has already been highlighted at the international level (Ross & Carter, 2011). In fact, the vocabulary concerning women represented only 19% of total words, while the remaining 81% were dedicated to men. At the content level, it was pointed out how the most traditional stereotypes about women were reproduced. Thus, women were confined to entertainment and to the work areas that represent an extension of the family sphere, such as teaching. Compared with this trend, the only major exception was the reference to women in political activity. For example, Minister was the most woman-associated profession represented in the press, despite being the only one shared with men. Indeed, the most frequently mentioned women almost entirely belonged to the political sphere. This study showed how politics could make women newsworthy, giving them a visibility otherwise denied (Eikon, 2007).

Our surveys on the press representations of women politicians showed less clear results, as the visibility of gender identity for women is an object of negotiation. In some cases, women are over-represented and well evaluated but in other cases are obscured and presented in a very stereotypical way. An initial area of research regarded ten women ministers of two governments: the first was from the centre-left in 2006 (six women ministers), and the second from the centre-right in 2008 (four women ministers) (Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012; 2013).

Concerning this first area, two different investigations were conducted with five newspapers: the first on 175 full articles (Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012), the second on 514 headlines (Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2013). The content analysis of the full articles (Sensales et al., 2012), on one hand showed recursive references to the private sphere and to the body, in line with gender stereotypes verified by international literature (Braden, 1996; Aday & Devitt, 2001; Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008).

On the other hand, it also showed unexpected and highly counter-stereotypical referrals to competence and decision making (both linked to the agentic dimension). References to the private sphere are evoked for five women ministers – two of the centre-left and three of the centre-right – while references to the body are found for four women ministers, balanced between the two governments. Other stereotypical traits, such as tendency to dialogue, display of emotion, and attention to social and care activities are less present, and in any case associated only with women ministers of the centre-left. The counter-stereotypical referrals (agentic) are more evident for women ministers of the centre-left than for those of centre-right. These trends are not univocal, and in the next pages we will show how other references to agency are more prevalent for centre-right women politicians than centre-left women. As a whole, the results have shown feminine representations in which both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical traits coexist.

Comparing these findings with the international literature on the intersectionality of political party identity and gender identity – mostly regarding the United States – we have only a partial confirmation for the

connection between images of the political parties and gender stereotypes. In particular, the centre-right parties (Republican in U.S.A.) are linked to masculinity and agentivity and centre-left parties (Democrat in U.S.A.) to femininity and communality (Hayes, 2005; Schneider & Bos, 2016; Shafer, 2013; Winter, 2010). In press representations of Italian women politicians, the women of the centre-left are characterized by both more feminine and more masculine traits than those of centre-right. This result reflects the tendency by leftist culture to promote politics empowering women. For instance, in the past political Italian election in 2013, the Democratic Party was the only party to promote gender equality in the formation of electoral lists. On the other hand, the rightists tend to crystallize women in their feminine stereotypical traits, according to their conservative tendencies (Hershey & Sullivan, 1977). The same typology of ministries presents a different trend related to the political orientation of the governments. If we consider the temporal range of 2006-2014 that witnessed the alternation of five governments (see Sensales & Areni, 2017), the centre-left governments were more attentive to the feminine prerogative, attributing more ministers with portfolio (e.g., with more importance due to their budgetary autonomy) and in more counter-stereotypical areas, compared to the centre-right governments.

With regards to stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical fields, the construct of gender issue ownership (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003) can highlight the advantage, in terms of electoral success, of women participating in political life who deal with areas traditionally associated with the feminine gender. In our investigations, we studied women ministers who were already in office, thus it remains to be seen if there is a possible positive impact of these representations that run counter to the expected impact of stereotypes and gender roles. For example, these representations may stimulate a more gender-inclusive socio-cultural change parallel to the higher presence of women politicians, thus avoiding regressive societal responses.

The use of socio-psychological literature allows us to make two alternative hypotheses about possible answers to the processes in place. Such hypotheses could coexist, stimulating a possible socio-cultural

transformation. In one case, consistent with scholars on sexist attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1999), we can hypothesize a hostile reaction to women who are in violation of role expectations. In the other case, we can hypothesize a cautious acceptance of the change, conditioned by the assessment of the practical performance of women ministers that challenge established social norms. In light of these two hypotheses we may assume that gender is not a stable and immutable construct within each individual, but rather a performative construct, as stated by Butler (1990). It is related to fluid and mutable aspects built in the interactions between social actors. The processes, linked to the way in which any novelty can be tackled, become themselves more open to change by finding the most important vehicle of these interactions in language. Starting from this last theoretical assumption, in the next section the focus will be on the relation between representations, language, and gender in political communication by illustrating both specific theoretical constructs and results of empirical research.

REPRESENTATIONS, LANGUAGE, AND GENDER IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Different theoretical perspectives have analysed political communication. Concerning the critical approaches, there are two different lines of research focused on language and gender. The first approach is based on the Austrian-German critical tradition of politics-linguistics (*Politolinguistik*). Begun in 1996 by Armin Burkhardt's contribution, it was followed by the works of many different European scholars (Cedroni, 2014; Reisigl, 2008; Reisigl & Wodak, 2000; Wodak, 2015; Wodak & de Cillia, 2006; Wodak & Forchtner, 2017; Wodak, de Cilia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999). These works focused on the study of semantics, hermeneutics, pragmatics of discourse, and linguistic acts of politicians and other people with a decisional role in the media and other important cultural domains. Politics-linguistics began by using mainly qualitative

analyses, specifically critical discourse analysis, but recently has developed integrated models that also make use of quantitative and statistical text analysis methods (Baker 2012; Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery 2013; Baker, Gabrielatos, KhosraviNik, Krzyzanowski, McEnrey, & Wodak 2009; Gabrielatos, McEnery, Diggle, & Baker, 2012). The second line of research is rooted in the SRT and is devoted to the study of sexist and gendered representations in both mediatized political communication (Sensales & Areni, 2015, 2016; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012; 2013; 2016a; 2016b) and in political institutions (Sensales, Areni, & Giuliano, 2017; in press; Sensales, Giuliano, & Areni, 2016). In the following section, we will focus our attention on some of these studies and illustrate the theoretical constructs, centred on language, used in our investigations.

Naming Politicians

Naming practices have been an object of interest concerning sexism and anti-sexism. A strong contribution of feminist thought (Mills, 2003) has focused on the choice to use titles and surnames in the construction of women's social identities. In the few surveys regarding linguistic sexism in mediatized political communication, it can be seen that informal language is still more pervasive for women than for men (Uscinski & Goren, 2011). There is a higher usage of first names for women (Falk, 2008b; Uscinski & Goren, 2011), whereas men are often referred to by surnames (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). As reviewed by Uscinski and Goren (2011), Falk (2008a) compared newspaper coverage of the announcements of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to run for the U.S.A. presidential office, and demonstrated how Clinton was referenced by first name 3% more often. Compared to Obama, her title of Senator was omitted 15% more often. There are insidious effects implicated in these gendered linguistic practices. These are largely analysed by social psychology and demonstrated by experimental findings that show how referencing a woman by first name, or without a formal title, produces an image of

inferiority in the audience (Sebastian & Bristow, 2008; Stewart et al., 2003; Takiff, Sanchez, & Stewart, 2001).

In Italy, there are surveys that illustrate the asymmetrical use of a first name and of the full name (typically two ways of naming with gender visibility), for women but not for men (Sabatini, 1987; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2016b). Particularly, we found gender biases in naming practices in a study of 591 press headlines on the representations of three pairs of men/women Presidents of the Houses of the Italian parliament in 1979, 1994, and 2013 (Sensales, Areni, and Dal Secco, 2016b). These gender biases show how there was an over-utilization of surnames that was more evident in naming men than women and that did not give gender visibility. In the first two legislatures, both with centre-right governments, there were different gendered trends. In 1979, the use of first name only was completely absent for the woman President, while in 1994 it was used for the woman President. It was absent for men Presidents in 1979 and 2014. Contrarily, there was a similar use in the 2013 centre-left government – although also rare –of the first name for both men and women, interpreted as a general process of trivialization to make politicians closer to the people.

In another study, on 332 press headlines on the representations of eight pairs of men and women ministers of the 2014 centre-left government, we have found similar findings regarding the general over-utilization of the surname; the references to the full name were for women only (Sensales & Areni, 2017). Contrastingly, the use of the first name was only for men and not for women, which «highlights a dynamic functional to the logic of the mediatization/personalization of politics. This rhetorical device, can generate a sort of proximity between men politicians and ordinary people (Sensales et al., 2016b), confirming the popularization of an androcentric politics. On the other hand, the lack of proximity between women politicians and ordinary people can be interpreted as a signal that the women ministers are inserted by reporters into an elite that can stimulate opposite reactions towards her distance from common people, as an elite that has a higher status requiring respect, or as a privileged group that nourishes forms of anti-politics.» (Sensales & Areni, 2017, p. 527).

Linguistic Sexism

Linguistic sexism concerns the use of specific linguistic forms that discriminate the feminine gender. In Romance languages (e.g., French, German, Italian, Spanish), these forms are particularly salient because of feminine/masculine declination of nouns and other correlate forms, such as adjectives and pronouns, with the same gender markers as the nouns to which they refer. This characteristic renders Romance languages particularly sensitive to linguistic gender biases in respect to natural gender (e.g., English) and genderless languages (e.g., Chinese; see Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012). In Italian, the most common sexist grammatical forms include the generic masculine. This is a gendered biased form used also to indicate feminine gender, in accordance to a hierarchy favourable to men. These sexist forms also include the dissymmetric feminine (e.g., the feminine definite article before the surname). The specific feminine (e.g., the grammatical feminization of a typically masculine form, often using neologisms) and the epicene forms (e.g., a nominal form lacking in gender) are non-sexist linguistic forms.

As Angelica Mucchi-Faina (2005) underlined, the generic masculine makes women invisible because the masculine is used to indicate both genders. The dissymmetric feminine makes gender visible, but by using a lexical form asymmetrically, only for women. This scholar concludes that in order to promote a non-sexist usage of language, grammatical forms encompassing both genders must be adopted. This could be by the visibility implicated in specific feminine forms, already used or created, that render gender explicit and manifest on neutral bases.

In social psychology, there is a tradition of studying the relationship between language and gender (see Freed, 2003). This tradition is focused on the social and psychological implications in the use of linguistic sexism (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012). It has been shown that the role of specific categories and linguistic forms, such as the generic masculine, can promote and reinforce prejudices, gender stereotypes, and sexist attitudes (Cacciari & Padovani, 2007; Sczesny, Moser, & Wood, 2015; Stahlbeerg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007; Wasserman & Weseley,

2009). Experimental research has shown the negative consequences of using this sexist form: it undermines self-esteem, motivation, professional performance, and the effectiveness of women by threatening their sense of belonging (e.g., Briere & Lanktree, 1983; Cameron, 1998; Cralley & Ruscher, 2005; Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011; McConnell & Fazio, 1996; Merkel, Maass, & Frommelt, 2012; Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016). These findings not only experimentally show the negative consequences of the use of gendered specific linguistic forms on women themselves (e.g., Bem & Bem, 1973; Crawford & English, 1984; Crawford & Unger, 2004; Gastil, 1990), but also show that they contribute to creating pervasive androcentric representations that make women invisible throughout society (e.g., Ng, 2007; Stahlberg et al., 2007).

Sexism in political mediatized communication has been the object of Italian studies that have shown a general over-utilization of sexist linguistic devices. The results of these studies point to the wide use of the generic masculine as an indication of the solidification of a gap in favour of men engaged in politics, and the reduction of women's salience. In parallel, an increase over time of the non-sexist forms (specific feminine and epicene forms) (Sensales & Areni, 2017) has been noted as a sign of the major presence of women in parliament and of a changing socio-cultural context. In this vein, the political domain can contribute to the reduction of the perceived incongruity between gender role and political social role, rendering politics more gender inclusive.

In a recent study, we have shown (Sensales & Areni, 2017) that in three Italian governments (2011, 2013, 2014), there was an increase in the use of the specific feminine regarding the previous two governments (2006, 2008). This trend confirms the findings of prior surveys (Sensales et al., 2016a) showing that this increase is parallel to the incremental presence of women in politics and to the support of the Democrat Party (PD, the centre-left party), which is particularly favourable to a balanced presence of women/men in Parliament. Indeed, in the last three governments, there was support from the PD, indirectly for the 2011 government and directly for the governments of 2013 and 2014, where – as

we mentioned earlier—the Heads of Government were from the PD. It is not by chance that we have found a statistically significant presence of the non-sexist linguistic form for the 2014 government, underlining that leftist culture is strongly bound to the emancipation process for women (Sensales et al., 2013, 2016b). Concerning the temporal increase in the use of the specific feminine, we pointed out how it must be considered with caution. In fact, we have found that journalistic communication sometimes uses the specific feminine to reflect a subtle form of sexism: when it is used in a derisive or negative context. In this way, a non-sexist linguistic marker is formally presented to mask a sexist approach to women. This shows an ambiguity in the use of the feminine specific with a prevalent negative function that illustrates well the opacity of language. Thus, the media utilize the appropriate gender declination in «an apparent sanitization (for the term see Ng, 2007) of the words that, nevertheless, supports the routinization of masculine dominance through a derisive, sarcastic context for women.» (Sensales & Areni, 2017, p. 527).

The findings of a study on the press representations of three dyads of men/women Presidents of the two Houses of Parliament in 1979-1994-2013 are different (Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2016b). The linguistic dimensions of sexism/non-sexism for women surprisingly showed the prevalence of non-sexist language on the sexist dimension. As a possible explanation for this result, we referred to the specific linguistic form "president," derived originally from the masculine, but afterwards considered as an epicene, non-sexist form. This grammatical transformation can be reflected in a journalistic use of a more non-sexist language.

This was confirmed in another study of 160 articles conducted in Italy (Sensales & Areni, 2016). We found a higher level of non-sexism in language when referring to Emma Marcegaglia, elected in 2008 as the president of the (rightist) Italian employers' federation and national chamber of commerce, compared to Susanna Camusso, elected in 2010 as secretary of the CGIL, the leftist trade union. These results showed a higher level of linguistic non-sexism for the representations of right/centre-right women politicians (e.g., Marcecaglia) compared to those of

left/centre-left (e.g., Camusso). This can be explained by the peculiarity of the nouns "president" and "secretary" in Italian. "President" has the epicene (e.g., genderless) form, whereas "secretary" is declinated for both genders.

The noun "segretari<u>a</u>" (woman secretary), compared to the masculine declination "segretari<u>o</u>" (man secretary), is an occupation of lower status; this may have led journalists to privilege its masculine declination. Journalists typically apply the masculine form to Camusso: this is both a sexist linguistic form and a way to emphasize the prestige of the charge of secretary of CGIL. According to this explanation, the political orientation of the two organizations appears to be of secondary importance and the traditional linguistic differences in the representations between women in the centre-right and centre-left is nullified. In this way, we have demonstrated how language is built from its uses and, at the same time, in a context that may confirm or deny these consolidated uses promoting linguistic stability or change.

Abstraction/Concreteness in Language

An additional important field of study focused on language was developed by Semin and Fiedler (1988). This field concerns the analysis of the specific inferential psychological processes that bind the message sender to the target of communication and uses the Linguistic Category Model (LCM). The LCM has also been applied to political communication (Anolli, Zurloni, & Riva, 2006; Carraro, Castelli, & Arcuri, 2008; Menegatti & Rubini, 2007, 2013; Semin & Rubini, 1994; Sensales & Areni, 2016; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012), but there are very few studies on gender differences. The LCM assumes that the level of abstraction and concreteness of the terms used to describe people and events depends on how and where the sender of the message intends to canalize the attention of the receiver. In this way, the attention can be canalized on stable and durable characteristics of the agent (high abstraction level e.g., the use of adjectives) or on contextual characteristics

external to the subject (high concreteness level e.g., the use of descriptive action verbs) (Semin & Fiedler, 1991).

This model was applied to ingroup/outgroup confrontations, showing that there was a high abstraction level for the ingroup's positive evaluation, including the usage of adjectives that valorise the members of the ingroup. On the other hand, there was a high concreteness level for the negative evaluation that attributes this negativity to the context. A specular trend was found for the outgroup: there was a high concreteness level for positive evaluations but a high abstraction level for negative evaluations (Semin & Fiedler, 1991).

Menegatti, Mariani, and Rubini (2012) and Rubini and Menegatti (2014) replicated this result in a study on linguistic abstraction as a means of discrimination against women. The authors examined negative linguistic judgments against women in the field of personnel selection. The results showed that the selectors used linguistic abstraction as a tool to unfavourably represent women. They showed that, compared to men candidates, the women candidates were described using the most concrete positive terms (verbal forms) but more abstract negative terms (adjectives). This favoured cognitive inferences that made the context salient for positive evaluations while making salient women candidates' internal stable characteristics for negative evaluations.

We have used the LCM in several studies in order to analyse Italian press representations of women ministers in the 2006 centre-left, 2008 centre-right, and 2011 caretaker governments (the latter strongly supported by centre-left party; Sensales et al., 2012; Sensales & Areni, 2016). The LCM was applied with the aim of identifying possible bias in the use of language related to different political orientations of the three governments. Results showed a general focus on situational factors, rather than on the stable characteristics of women ministers, independent of their political orientation. More specifically, our investigation (Sensales & Areni, 2016) showed an attention to the situation rather than to the person in 75% of cases. In this way, women politicians were weakened and attributed little psychological salience.

With regards to the positive or negative of women ministers' descriptions, a positive trend clearly emerged when journalists focused on the person. In these cases, the adjectives were negative only 8% of the time, whereas 55% of the valence was positive. Thus, the press showed an ambivalent attitude towards women ministers. On one hand, they obscured their role by focusing primarily on the situation. On the other hand, they evaluated their personal characteristics more positively than negatively. These results leave open the question of whether this trend was gender biased or not, as there was no analysis of the representations of men ministers. We addressed this lack of information in our comparative study on the representations of men and women ministers of the 2014 government (Sensales & Areni, 2017),

We found that the level of abstraction and positive valence towards women ministers increased, relative to the preceding study (e.g., Sensales & Areni, 2016).

However, whether these positive assessments are linked to sexist qualities, such as aesthetic aspects, or if they are related to other stereotypical or counter-stereotypical characteristics, remains unexplored. We proposed a possible explanation linked to the well-known "women are wonderful" effect (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991). This effect is related to benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and underlines that there are more positive attributions to women than men, especially when women are involved in stereotypical roles. In our case, positive attributions could have been evoked from references to their aesthetic aspect.

Concerning the comparison of men and women ministers, the general findings do not show a difference in the average level of abstraction. For most of the cases, the observed averages were slightly higher than those of theoretical averages. In contrast, there were statistically significant differences in the valence of the adjectives, with a greater positive valence for women than for men. In this way, the gender expectations implied by the LCM were contradicted. In fact, in their research, Menegatti et al., (2012) and Rubini and Menegatti (2014) showed that judges show considerable gender bias in personnel selection, using linguistic abstraction

(adjectives) to represent women with unfavourable characteristics regarding internal stability. On the other hand, they used concrete terms for positive evaluations, leading to a focus on the situation.

It should be noted that a part of the scarce existing literature comparing men with women is concerned with fields other than mass media and politics. However, the LCM is increasingly regarded as working in a socially determined situation that modulates the communicative purposes and, consequently, the abstraction level and valence of language (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Semin, 2009). In our case, newspapers showed a willingness to attribute psychological salience, with their focus on stable characteristics, to both men and women. Women were represented by a decidedly more positive valence than their men colleagues in parallel with a social-cultural and political context that has begun to valorise the feminine presence. The presence of women MPs, of about 30%, has reached the "critical mass"; women politicians are less peripheral and, consequentially, are more important.

Agency in Language

Agency is defined as recognition of power, attribution of responsibility, capability to control one's own behaviour, and the impact that these can have on the behaviour of others (Duranti, 2004). The concept was particularly studied during the 1970s and 1980s in different disciplines, such as linguistics and sociology. Later, agency became a focus of social psychological analysis, cultural anthropology, and media studies (Ahearn, 2001; Carli, 1990, 2006; Hall & Donaghue, 2012; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Duranti (2004) pointed out that language can manipulate agency by specific grammatical markers, such as the pronominal forms. In this case, the variations between impersonal forms and first person singular and plural indicate a variation in agency, from a very low to a high level. Other markers of agency are conditional verbal forms. This is a non-assertive modality and subject to the fulfilment of the

given conditions, that in Italian, unlike English, is present for all verbs. These markers also include direct voices of people quoted in the media.

The Pronominal Forms as Markers of Agency in the Press

There are different research traditions on the use of personal pronouns from different contexts and disciplinary views. In social psychology, the pioneering work of Mulhaüsler and Harré (1990) focused on pronouns from different points of view, such as in the construction of individual and collective identities, in terms of agency, moral responsibility, and so forth. For Mulhaüsler and Harré (1990), pronominalization – referring to oneself and others – has communicative functions implicated in lexical organization. These functions can be studied through an analysis of both real and symbolic interactions.

However, the theoretical tradition that is more attentive to the pronominal system is the critical perspective of discourse analysis (van Dijk 2012, pp. 23-25). The main focus of this approach applied the political domain is on conversational place (De Fina, 1995; Liebscher, Dailey-O'Cain, Müller & Reichert, 2010; Yates & Hiles, 2010), with incursions into mass media communication (Allen, 2007; Boyd, 2013; Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Iñigo-Mora, 2013; Kuo, 2002; Proctor & I-Wen Su, 2011; Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008; Zand-Moghadam & Bikineh, 2015).

The mainstream has worked on this domain. For example, experimental research has shown that people with a lower social status mostly use the *I* form, while people with a higher social status most commonly use *we* (see Kacewicz, Pennebaker, Davis, Jeon, & Graesser, 2013). Other scholars, such as Sendén, Lindholm, and Sikström (2013), have considered pronouns as markers of social and agentic categories, focusing on the evaluative context for different pronouns. Their findings have shown that individuals in positive contexts tend to use individual, rather than collective pronouns, and self-inclusive rather than self-exclusive pronouns.

In Italy, we have explored agency in a survey in which we have triangulated SRT with agency. We focused on media representations of ten women ministers of two governments (2006 and 2008) with different political orientations (Sensales et al., 2013). With regard to agency, we detected the presence in press headlines of both *I/we* and of direct discourse quoted in these headlines. Comparing the agency attributed by journalists to women ministers of the centre-right, as opposed to the centre-left, we showed that the reference of direct discourse and the presence of *I* and *we* privileged the women ministers of the centre-right, and thus attributed to them greater agency. This result is consistent with literature that affirms how the centre-right parties show a more agentic image than the centre-left parties (Hayes, 2005; Schneider & Bos, 2016; Shafer, 2013; Winter 2010). For Italy, this result is confirmed by the same women politicians who participated in a survey (Francescato & Mebane, 2011), in which the centre-right women had a higher level of agency than their centre-left colleagues.

Concerning gender comparative analysis, we conducted a study on the representations of women and men ministers of the 2014 government (Sensales & Areni, 2017). The statements quoted in press headlines by journalists did not show gender differences in the use of the pronouns *I* and *we* by politicians. This contrasts with results of the analysis of Italian press interviews given by men and women politicians in 2009 (Basile, 2010). In this analysis, Basile (2010) studied the role of agency in eighteen interviews, published in 2009 by three daily newspapers, with men and women involved in politics. She found gender differences with men being more agentive and having a higher use of *we* than women. On the contrary, our result confirms other previous Italian surveys concerning the parliamentary context until 2009 (Formato, 2014; Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales, Areni, & Giuliano, 2017, in press). Personal pronominal forms occurred with similar frequencies in the speeches of both men and women deputies. As we stated «the differences between the press analysis in 2009 (Basile, 2010) and the findings in Parliament pose a question about the relationship between the two contexts: the parliamentarian, more elitist, in which gender stereotypes can be overcome in spite of the androcentric

environment, and the mediatic, more popular one, in which gender stereotypes are rooted. In those two different realities, until 2009, the same politicians seem to make specific linguistic choices, modulating differently the linguistic markers used in their speeches. In the sentences quoted in the headlines of 2014 these gender differences in linguistic behaviours disappeared, with men and women politicians using first personal pronominal forms in the same way. We have interpreted this result as the possible signal of a social evolution in which the same politicians feel openness towards feminine emancipation and act linguistically with genderless differences, going beyond gender stereotypes.» (Sensales & Areni, 2017, p. 528).

Parliamentary Debates and the Pronominal Forms as Markers of Agency and Gender Differences

An important and relevant field of study focuses on the use of pronominal forms as markers of agency and of gender differences in the parliamentary domain. If we analyse this literature, we can observe an evolution over time where the assumption of gender differences in parliamentary speeches is increasingly becoming more nuanced. As we affirmed:

«The most recent literature on gender differences in language use has shown that the political communication performed by men and women parliamentarians only partly reflects and reproduces asymmetries and stereotypes widespread in society (Bei Yu, 2014; Bijeikienè & Utka, 2006; Bright, 2012; Christie, 2002; Formato, 2014; Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales, Areni, & Giuliano, 2017; Wodak, 2003). In other words, the surveys on parliamentary speeches proved that the essentialist[5] explanations of linguistic variations are inadequate to understand the findings obtained. This was stimulated to overcome the binary logic that

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[5] The theoretical reference to essentialism is to the binary logic of opposition/polarisation between genders, for which there are masculine and feminine characterizations/ attributes/verbal styles, denoting stable and unchanging identities.

had prevailed in the studies about gender, sex, and language until the beginning of the 1990s (Freed, 2003). Starting from the classic work of Lakoff (1975), and moving to further works, such as West and Zimmerman (1983) and Fishman's (1983), the essentialist binary tradition, typical of the research in the 1970s and 1980s, conditioned the field of study on the language and gender relationships. With the social constructionist turn in the 1990s, thanks to feminist works (see Ehrlich, 2008a, 2008b), this essentialist tradition has been overcome. The change in theoretical perspective also impacted the research on political communication, and induced to dispute the legitimacy of the notion of a 'women's style' in political language (Shaw, 2009, 2011) and of gender as a static two-faced attribute (Wodak, 2015), in favour of more nuanced gender linguistic differentiations, themselves rooted in fluid identities intersecting with multiple group memberships.» (Sensales, Areni, & Giuliano, in press, p. 23).

Bijeikiené and Utka (2006), focusing on the differentiation between *I* and *we*, assume that the use of the first person singular pronoun *I* establishes personal responsibility, the most direct means of self-reference and personal involvement. Conversely, the *we* form refers to collective responsibility. Studying the speeches made in the Lithuanian Parliament, they focused on gender differences in the total occurrences of personal pronouns. They found a slightly higher tendency for men politicians, in comparison to women, to use the explicit form of the first person singular pronoun *I*. On the other hand, women politicians tended to use the explicit form of the pronominal form *we* slightly more often than their men counterparts. We can comment on this result as a signal of the persistent communal characterization of women, who seem to prefer the use of the pronominal form related to the collective dimension.

In this critical framework Federica Formato (2014) often finds different results. She has shown that the "*noi*" (*we*) is overused as the subject pronoun, to a statistically significant extent by men (vs. women) parliamentary deputies in Italy. The subject pronoun *noi* is used to stress agency, showing how men deputies seem conscious of their active parliamentary roles in resolving social problems, whereas the women

deputies do not have the same confidence. In this proposal, Formato refers to the distinction between the core and peripheral members of Parliament as a community of practice. On the basis of this distinction, the linguistic agentic use of *noi* by men can be explained as a consequence of their core role, whereas women fail to demonstrate a similar linguistic behaviour due to their peripheral role. The two above mentioned examples underline how pronominal uses are subject to many types of variations. Moreover, they are sensitive to specific socio-political contexts in that social actors manipulate language according to the different needs that they want to express.

Internal to our research program, we have triangulated digital text analysis with qualitative-contextualist analysis (Ignatow, 2015; Sensales, 2017) in two gender comparative studies on the Italian Parliament (Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales et al., 2017; in press). The first study (Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales et al., 2017) focused on a diachronic and gender comparison with 441 parliamentary speeches. These speeches were made by two pairs of politicians from different political orientations in the First (1976-1993) and Second Republic[6] (1994-2009). The results show the salience of the temporal context in relation to gender linguistic behaviours. The differences, according to men/women dyads, appeared only in the speeches given in the First Republic. In this case, the findings were partly in line with the expectations of stereotypical linguistic behaviours, with men more agentive than women via the greater use of the pronominal forms of *I* and *we.* There were not any gender differences in the use of conditional verbal forms. Conversely, there were no significant gender differences for parliamentary speeches made during the Second Republic by the two pairs of deputies. In this way, the linguistic behaviours displayed by deputies contribute to the building of social representations of politicians themselves. These social representations can be marked or unmarked by gender stereotypes that interact with other cultural

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[6] The First Republic refers to a proportional electoral system, centred on the role of political parties, with very few women in Parliament, whereas with Second Republic moved to a majority electoral system, with a centrality of leaders, a mediatization of politics, and an increase of women in Parliament.

dimensions following an "intersectionality"[7] pathway linked to the conception of gender as a performative construction (Weatherall & Gallois, 2003; Wodak, 2015).

With regards to the two deputy pairs, the findings showed a higher use of the *we* pronominal form than the *I,* confirming the cohesive, contrastive, and agentic role of the *we* as the most used form in the parliamentary field (Bazzanella, 2002; 2009a; 2009b; 2014; Bijeikiené & Utka, 2006; Formato, 2014; Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales, Giuliano, & Areni, 2016; Sensales et al., 2017; in press; van Dijk, 2000). The result can be interpreted in the light of what was stated by Kacewicz et al., (2013) on the increased use of the *we* pronominal form by persons with higher status. They would use the form *"we"* because it is more psychologically centered on others, rather than reductively folded in on themselves. This tendency to be more centred on others in these speeches finds its explanation in consideration that an activity such as participation in parliament is, by definition, aimed at achieving the common good.

The second study was focused on 463 parliamentary speeches conducted in the course of the XIV legislature (2001--2006) (Sensales, Giuliano, & Areni, 2016; Sensales et al., in press). These speeches were made by four pairs of deputies, differentiated by gender and political orientation. The differences in agentic linguistic styles were shown only in some cases. There was a generally more frequent pronominal use of the first-person plural than the first-person singular. There was also a gender difference with greater utilization of the first-person singular by men. This result was explained in light of the aforementioned research where the *I* form was used by men deputies and seen as a marker of personal responsibility, of self-reference, and confidence (Bijeikiné & Utka, 2006). For that reason, the *I* use was evaluated as particularly agentive. From that perspective, we interpreted our results as related to the Italian context of the Second Republic, in which there was a democracy in transition that was increasingly centred on the leaders (cf. Calise, 2016; Campus, 2016). This focus on an individual identity would make salient a subjectivity

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[7] For the first use of this concept, see Crenshaw 1989, and in recent years, Collins & Bilge 2016; Cooper 2016.

enacted by a masculine leadership rather than by the party, as a collective identity more linked to the communal dimension.

We also detected, in a qualitative contextualist analysis on the categorical amplitude of *we*, an overuse of the "specific we" (e.g., *our party*) by women, along with an underuse of the "superordinate we" (e.g., *Italy, Italians*). Because the "superordinate we" is related to the need of increasing political consent and broadening of the hegemonic basis (Serino & Pugliese, 2006), this result can be interpreted as a lower tendency towards an agentive rhetorical strategy by women. It can be explained by the peripheral role played by women in parliament, illustrated by Formato (2014). This is linked to the need to reach a "critical mass" of women deputies that can affect power relations, still in favour of men, despite some growth of women in parliament (Childs & Krook, 2008; 2009). The results for the categorical amplitude of *we* are thus in the direction of a differentiation in the stereotypical sense, with men oriented to a greater use of a "superordinate," more agentic *we* than women, in accordance with their core role.

The changes in the Italian political and social context helps explain both the different reference to *I* or of *we* and the categorical amplitude of *we*. In effect they occasionally seem coherent with gender identity, and at other times incoherent because of the greater salience of political identity. It remains unexplored what would happen in a parliament where women have finally reached the "critical mass" that would not consign them to a peripheral role.

CONCLUSION

The results of our research program suggest some conclusions about the role of political communication in promoting politics as a less gendered-biased field. This role is not performed in a linear way but through contradictory dynamics that in some instances see a prevailing androcentric perspective, and at other times show a focus on the positive role of women. These contrasting elements may be the result of a fluid

reality that has not yet had time to reach stability. This is a reality in which the same feminine presence in the Italian parliament saw, in the 2013 elections, the highest number of women in parliament, allowing them to reach the "critical mass." In this way Italy, with just over 30% women parliamentarians (IPU, 2013), has risen from 56th out of 140 countries in 2010 (Francescato & Mebane, 2011; Pacilli, Mucchi Faina, & Berti, 2012) to 29th out of 188 countries in 2013 (IPU, 2013).

The social representations framework of our research program has shown the strong interdependence and communicative relationship between Ego-Alter-Object and language. In our research, we explored the Ego by implicit and explicit measures of a questionnaire administered to laypersons. The Alter has been analysed in both mediatized and parliamentarian communication, while the Object focused on politics as an androcentic field. Thus, the linguistic choices of social actors have been made intelligible in relation to different constructions of a socio-cultural reality focused on gender and political roles. From this point of view, the linguistic behaviours enacted by journalists and parliamentary deputies contribute to the building of social representations of politicians themselves, marked or unmarked by gender stereotypes. These social representations in turn interact with ordinary citizens' representations of politics and politicians. With regards to ordinary citizens, we have noted how political crisis leads them to emphasize feminine communal behaviours as a possible answer to resolve the crisis, rendering the political realm nearer to the people. In the future we can imagine that it could be normative for politicians to act in a communal way, thus overcoming traditional gender stereotypes.

The focus on language, considered far from neutral, allowed us to show how language is involved in creating the symbolic universe, both of speakers and of recipients of communication. Language affects the way people think, behave, evaluate, and create expectations. From this point of view, we can consider a circularity between the conceptualization of gender and the linguistic expressions that guide it (Bazzanella, 2010), thus making it difficult to change the sexist attitudes present in society. Our findings shed light on this difficulty. Overcoming this difficulty requires a

level of awareness to break the penalising automatisms acting in language, making it possible to redefine gender-oriented relationships, leading to greater symmetry. This redefinition may redeem the role of women, freeing them from the shadowy area where they have been relegated to date.

Our assumption of a context-sensitive reading and interpretation of results, avoiding the binary essentialist gender logic, allows us to think in terms of situated gender identities. These identities are continually constructed and negotiated through language and in interaction with various other roles, which are made salient by the context in which social actors move. In accordance with intersectionality processes, the founding processes in studies of gender differences from a critical perspective (Romaniuk, & Ehrlich, 2017; Sensales, et al., 2017; Weatherall & Gallois 2003; Wodak, 2015; Wodak & Forchtner, 2017), we have shown the strong link with the performative conception of gender. Gender as a performative construct overcomes the binary opposition between men and women, and this false dichotomy/opposition that has fictitiously rendered natural, static, and immutable gender-marked linguistic behaviors. This binary usage has contributed to the construction and preservation of traditional gender distinctions through the rhetoric of gender differences that in the past have perpetuated existent power relationships (Freed, 2003; Sensales, in press).

At the present, we can only observe a more openness towards a change in power structures. Politics becomes one of the battlefields for more symmetrical gender relationships. Our research has illustrated the partial convergence in the representation of politics by ordinary citizens, press, and deputies, promoting hybridisation processes of gender identities. In this way, these representations contribute to the building of more complex identities in which normative and counter-normative aspects coexist. This is a clear sign of a reality that can generate conflictive attitudes by promoting powerful transformations in gender relationships. What will happen in the future is an open issue. In the meantime, research can contribute to the spread of a higher awareness of the nature and consequences of these dynamics. That awareness can challenge sexism in attitudes and language, paving the way towards a different centrality of the

role of women. Politics thus becomes the terrain in which women gain a space that gives voice to their emancipation demands. In this way, such requests for their importance will be able to go beyond the starting point of the subjective emancipation, towards a redefinition of the existing inequitable gender power balances, and to promoting a general societal change.

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