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**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 six 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 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 role and stereotypes/counter-stereotypes, ambivalent sexism, linguistic sexism, linguistic category model, agency – triangulation of data – both lexical and numerical – and 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 overcoming 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 Union¹ (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 Parliamentarians (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 election² 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

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).

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 & Schreiber, 1997; Kahn, 1992, 1994; Kahn & Golderberg, 1991), with significant disadvantages for women candidates, who 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 & Schreiber, 1997; Norris, 1997), presenting men as characterized by agentic traits (leadership, competence, tirelessness, strength, effectiveness) and women by communal traits (compassion, kindness, honesty, fragility, affability), and with a focus on the aesthetic aspect (hairstyles, wardrobes, weight), providing more detailed information on private life (children, and marital status) in the case of women candidates (for a review see McGraw, 2003). Finally, it was ascertained that political communication in the media referred to different gendered issues: for men candidates economy, business, taxes, defence, foreign policy; and 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 discuss 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, such as in the case of over-use of generic masculine (a grammatical form that, in Romance languages such as French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, is a masculine declination also used to refer to women, whereas English directly uses the masculine noun).

Through these results, research has shown how in the past, the media has reflected on 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 new century, this negative effect was partially changed in parallel with the decline of novelty of women candidates, who have become more present in the political landscape, rendering the gender perspective less salient. For example, Hayes and Lawless (2015) in their analysis of local newspapers during the 2010 U.S.A. House of Representatives campaign (in 380 congressional districts), find no evidence that candidates' gender is 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), while the media only occasionally covers women more than men (Sensales et al., 2016b; Trimble, 2007; Wiliarty, 2010). However, this 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, showing 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 has 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 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 in which statements by women were more quoted than those by men (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 when they quote more statements of women 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, as in the case of the

coverage of the 2007 French presidential campaign in which Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy ran for office (Couloumb-Gully, 2009). Merlene Couloumb-Gully (2009) showed 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, while for Royal, his smile – continually displayed after filing the upper canines – 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, as in the case of the 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 remained in the coverage referred to themes and personality traits (Hayes & Lawless, 2016). Some scholars demonstrated the persistence of this type of gendered coverage such as in the case of Bystrom, Robertson and Banwart (2001) for the 2000 U.S.A. electoral campaign; the case of Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) in the comparison of political communication concerning women and men candidates during electoral campaigns in Australia (2004), Canada (2006), and the U.S.A. (2006); and the case of Falk (2010), that studied media bias in the news on nine men and women American presidential candidates in the 2008 elections. 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, and traditional views of gender relations that crystallize masculine power, coexist. 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 campaign of Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination and that of Sarah Palin as Republican vice presidential candidate incited conversation among scholars about an attempt to “crack the highest hardest glass ceiling” (Dittmar & Carroll, 2014). However, the failure of those endeavours, as of the race in 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, have demonstrated that although women are pressing to get the highest levels of political offices, these assignments still remain largely reserved for men.

The 2017 edition of the IPU-UN³ 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). In another map of the IPU (2017b) capturing women's participation in executive government and in parliament on 1 January 2017, Italy ranks as the 36th position (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), the 2014 government, despite this positive position, had still shown forms of gender discrimination as some ministries covered by women were without portfolio (and thus less important due to a lack of budgetary autonomy), while 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, in political communication both related to press headlines about women and men politicians, and enacted by deputies in their parliamentary speeches. The investigative aim of these different studies is to underline the interdependent relationship between social context, 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. Through these studies we will show 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 overcoming gender differences. In the latter instance, we will illustrate 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.

The theoretical framework of this research program, developed across the previous six years, is that of social representations that dispute the transparency of language, affirming its capacity to mask power and ideological relations. These complex relationships can be pointed out by 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

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

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. In our study, we used triangulation models – such as multiple references to the SRT and to constructs of gender role and stereotypes/counter-stereotypes, ambivalent sexism, linguistic sexism, linguistic category model, agency – triangulation of data, both lexical and numerical, and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The four areas of our research program concerned: 1) politics, language and gender issues through the study of sexism in language and attitudes of 830 Italian people interviewed in 2016 (Sensales, Areni, & Chirumbolo, 2018); 2) sexist language and feminine representations in Italian newspapers. We will discuss the findings of four different studies on 1500 newspaper headlines concerning the representations of twenty-nine Italian women ministers in five governments with different political orientations (from 2006 to 2014; Sensales & Areni, 2016, 2017; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2012, 2013, 2016a); 3) Italian political communication and gender bias, presenting the results of two gender comparative studies: the first on 591 newspaper headlines, focused on three pairs of men and women politicians with different political orientations and all serving as presidents of the Houses of Parliament in three legislatures (1979, 1994, 2013; Sensales, Areni, & Dal Secco, 2016b); the second is centred on press communication concerning 332 headlines about eighteen ministers of the Renzi government (2014), balanced by gender (Sensales & Areni, 2017); and 4) psycholinguistic analysis of parliamentary interventions of six pairs of Italian deputies with different political orientation in different legislatures (from 1976 to 2009, for a total of 904 speeches; 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 psychosocial 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 socialization processes and contributing to formation and dissemination of SRs. They are a determinant in the construction of common sense, helping lay people to 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. They build a public sphere, a training site, a place of identity negotiation, that asks to be studied by rejecting those reductionist models that hypothesized 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). They 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 the 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, far from being a sort of mirror of consciousness, builds the real and practical consciousness, giving 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). Thus, 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 where attributes perceived to be typical for each of the two genders are described, women ("other-oriented") are characterized by "communal-expressive" traits (e.g., kindness, warmth, supportiveness) and adhering to their family care activities, while men ("power

oriented”) are "agentic-instrumental" (e.g., self-assertive, competitive, dominant) because of their projection into the world of work (Eagly, 1987). These kinds of stereotypes are rooted in the gendered division of labour and they are split into family and occupational social roles (Clow & Ricciardelli, 2011; Eagly & Diekmann, 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), defining the consequent different occupational fields and levels – always more prestigious for men than for women (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This is such that gender stereotypes play, not only a descriptive function, but also a prescriptive one (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). In describing feminine and masculine traits, a consequent behaviour is expected. In 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, & Diekmann, 2000; Wood & Eagly, 2002), more recently it has been found that they can be more flexible, malleable, and dynamic than in the past, responding to societal changes (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Garcia-Retamero, Müller, & López-Zafra, 2011; López-Zafra, Garcia-Retamero, Diekmann, & Eagly, 2008; March, van Dick, & Bark, 2016). Particularly, Diekmann and Eagly (2000) showed that women are increasingly perceived with masculine attributes, while for men, the attributes remained more stable.

Linked to gender stereotypes and role prescription is 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, an attention on subtle forms of sexism, considering not only negative attitudes, was developed. In this perspective lies the Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) that concerns gender prejudice that is not assumed as uniformly negative, but ambivalent. Particularly, Glick and Fiske (1996, 1999, 2001) theorized that traditional attitudes towards both sexes have two components: the first hostile (i.e., negative attitudes towards women/men in non-traditional roles), and the second benevolent (i.e., positive attitudes towards women/men in traditional roles). The authors started from the consideration of the uniqueness of the relationship between men and women characterized by a close

interdependence that reflects established power differences over time, and has a strong level of physical and psychological intimacy that makes the ambivalence towards gender-based relationships pervasive (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Men and women show a bifurcation in their areas of competence, linked to the gendered division of labour. On the 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 how a specific form of prejudice about a supposed inferiority of women with respect to men develops two different clusters of attitudes. When women are perceived to control men through sexuality or feminist ideology, a hostile, aggressive response is activated towards these women who threaten men by violating the traditional subordinate roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Conversely, when the woman adheres to traditional gender roles, attitudes oriented towards the protection and the 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, in exchange for paternalistic protection, they keep women in their subordinate position.

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, then there is hostility towards men. Conversely when men need women's care, involving maternalistic responses by women, 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 and has 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, i.e. masculine). Women could accept this conflict and, as a minority group, adapt to the expectations of the

context to avoid being seen as "different" (Power & Berardone, 1998). It is in this asymmetrical process where women would adopt masculine characteristics in order to comply with contextual norms, as also recently highlighted by Wood and Eagly (2010, 2012).

However, 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, & Diekmann, 2000; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). In this way, women must to choose between being stigmatized because they do not conform to the role prescriptions and instead assume masculine characteristics, and 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 as Deborah Jordan Brooks (2013) and Monica Schneider and Angela Bos (2014), who question this assumption and the fact that women candidates for political office are stereotyped as women in general. Brooks (2013), in several experimental studies, demonstrates how they are evaluated more as leaders than as women, as posited by the "leaders-not-ladies" theory. Schneider and Bos (2014) arrive to the same conclusions by assuming the perspective of the "sub-typing theory." They propose to 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 features that are agentic. 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 about 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 the press, these traits coexist with some masculine ones, while in 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 that, in their behaviours, follow or counteract 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 66.9% of cases, were students of Sapienza University in Rome. Using a questionnaire, we investigated the assessment of high/low effectiveness of a hypothetical woman/man Minister, in two different conditions characterized by stereotypical or counter-stereotypical behaviour (cooperative or agentic). Each participant expressed his/her assessment for only one of the conditions. With the help of an associative task, 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.” At the end of the questionnaire, we inserted 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 compared two different theoretical perspectives by verifying if, in the political sphere we observed what is hypothesized by either 1) the “congruity role theory” for which the derogation from role expectations is negatively evaluated, especially when it is done by women; or 2) by the “leaders-not-ladies theory” and the “sub-typing theory” for which women politicians escape the traditional gender role prescriptions due to the greater salience of political categorization than gender categorization. Furthermore, because research has found that hostile sexism predicts negative answers to non-traditional feminine sub-groups whereas benevolent sexism predicts positive answers to traditional feminine subgroups (Glick & Fiske 2001; Sibley & Wilson 2004), we tested these possible interrelationships.

Operationally, according to the theory of the gender role congruence, we expected a higher assessment of political efficacy for stereotypical behaviours compared to counter-stereotypical (i.e. collaborative behaviour [communal] for a woman minister, but directive behaviour [agentic] for a man minister), and a positive correlation between benevolent sexism towards men and women (the two sub-dimensions of ASI and AMI scales) and the assessment of effectiveness in the stereotypical condition. In the case of counter-stereotypical behaviour, we expected a positive correlation between hostile sexism towards men and women and the assessment of effectiveness in counter-stereotypical condition, considered 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 expected a higher assessment of political efficacy for directive behaviour (agentic), both for women and men ministers. In this case, the counter-stereotypical behaviour of women would be assessed as more effective than the stereotypical woman, whereas for men stereotypical behaviour would be assessed as more effective than the counter-stereotypical man. For the man minister, this negative assessment of the counter-stereotypical behaviour is expected to not be as strong, because of a certain feminization of the political role (Schneider & Bos, 2014). Concerning ASI and AMI, we have assumed that there is no correlation with the dimension of ASI and AMI scales due to salience of political identity over gender identity.

In relation 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 show 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, inducing a higher assessment of the effectiveness of his actions when oriented towards a counter-stereotypical direction. If our results seem to confirm the role congruency theory, we will offer an interpretation that, integrating associative findings, refers also some aspects of “leaders-not ladies” and “sub-typing” theories.

The results on associative production show how references to gender stereotypes, and to the institutional domain, are greater for the man than for the woman minister, while 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 highlighted as being higher for the woman minister compared to the man minister, with the associations “woman” and “man” both occurring frequently—204 and 113 occurrences for women and men ministers, respectively. These two associations (i.e., “woman” and “man”) were the most frequently occurring 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).

As for 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 partially unusual grammatical form acts at 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 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, and promoting contamination with feminine qualities that are more targeted to the common interest and dialogue and 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 need for renewing a political climate that is too centred on masculine power dynamics. In this way, the choice to reward stereotypical feminine behaviour for the woman and man ministers should be interpreted as a process that attributes to this behaviour an emancipate function for the whole political action. If this interpretation is correct, then for the woman minister, this is the prevailing function referred to in the high assessment of effectiveness in communal behaviour, rather than a mere reference/confirmation of the traditional gender stereotypes/roles. The same counter-stereotypical associations, such as those linked to the institutional dimensions, to the woman minister can express the need for hybridization processes that intersect gender and political identities and in which traditional gender boundaries are overcome. For the man minister, the counter-stereotypical associations are infrequent, showing how, at a subliminal level, this hybridization is more problematic because of power relationships that make the stereotypes based on masculine identity particularly robust and stable, as affirmed by Diekmann and Eagly (2000).

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. Also in this case we can refer to the salience of politics for which the hypothesised activation of sexist attitudes through the request of assessment of efficacy for a stereotypical / counter-stereotypical behaviour of a

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.

man / woman minister has appeared inconsistent. A political identity that can change the way to do politics overpassing gender identity and leading to the evaluation of role congruity in relation to politics rather than to gender.

In this moment, with a questionnaire given in 2017 to 616 university students, we attempt to activate salience of gender identity, over political identity, by inserting the sexism attitudes scales before 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 already highlighted at the international level (Ross & Carter, 2011). In fact, the vocabulary concerning women represented only 19% of total words, while the remaining 81% was 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, not only was it that Minister was the most woman-associated profession represented in the press, despite being the only one shared with men, but it also emerged that most frequently mentioned women almost all belonged to the political sphere. In this way, Eikon study showed how politics

could make women newsworthy, giving them a visibility otherwise denied (Eikon, 2007).

Our surveys on press representations focused on women politicians showed less clear results because 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 stereotyped way. An initial area of research regarded ten women ministers of two governments: the first 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 prevalent for centre-right women politicians than centre-left. 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; particularly that 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). It emerges in the press representations of Italian women politicians that the women of 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 (in the most recent political Italian election in 2013, the Democratic Party was the only party to promote gender equality in the formation of electoral lists), while 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 are more attentive to the feminine prerogative, attributing more ministers with portfolio (that is with more importance due to their budgetary autonomy) and in more counter-stereotypical areas, than the centre-right governments. Regarding the reference to stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical fields, we can remember how the psychological literature has used the construct of gender issue ownership (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003) to 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 are inconsistent with 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, 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 the 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) that 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 both in 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 illustrating 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, with a strong contribution of feminist thought (Mills, 2003) 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), with higher reference to 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), in an empirical study, 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, and her title of Senator was omitted 15% more often, compared to Obama. 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, Sensales, Areni, and Dal Secco (2016b), in a study of 591 press headlines concerning representations of three pairs of men/women Presidents of the Houses of the Italian parliament in 1979, 1994, and 2013, found gender biases in naming practices. These gender biases show for example, 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; for both 1979 and 1994, it was absent for men Presidents. Contrarily, in the 2013 centre-left government, there was a similar use – although also rare – of the first name both for men and women, interpreted as a general process of trivialization to make politicians closer to the people.

In another study on 332 press headlines about representations of eight pairs of men and women ministers of the 2014 centre-left government (Sensales & Areni, 2017), we have found similar findings regarding the general over-utilization of the surname, as the references to the full name were for women only. Contrastingly, the use of the first name was only for men, and not for women showing how his reference “highlights a dynamic functional to the logic of the mediatization/personalization of politics that, with 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 of 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 (e.g., Chinese; see Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012) languages.

In Italian, the most common sexist grammatical forms are the generic masculine (a gendered biased form used to also indicate feminine gender, in accordance to a hierarchy favourable to men) and the dissymmetric feminine (the feminine definite article before the surname), while the specific feminine (the grammatical feminization of a typically masculine form, often using neologisms) and the epicene forms (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 – for women only. This scholar concludes her observations with the argument that, to promote a non-sexist usage of language, grammatical forms encompassing both genders must be adopted, by means of 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; Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009). Experimental research has shown the negative consequences of using this sexist form that 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 reducing 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 for the 2014 government, we have found a statistically significant presence of the non-sexist linguistic form, underlining that leftist culture is strongly bound to the emancipation process for women (Sensales et al., 2013, 2016b). This strong link was already highlighted by the 2006 centre-left government, which had the lowest values for the generic masculine (however, superior to non-sexist form), and higher values of the dissymmetric feminine in relation to the other governments (Sensales & Areni, 2017).

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 – namely, 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 showing “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; 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 became considered an epicene, non-sexist form. This grammatical transformation can be reflected in a journalistic use of a more non-sexist language. This is confirmed in another study of 160 articles conducted in Italy (Sensales & Areni, 2016). In this study, we found a higher level of non-sexism in language when referring to the woman president of Confindustria [General Confederation of Italian Industry is the Italian employers' federation and national chamber of commerce], Emma Marcegaglia (elected in 2008), compared to the woman Secretary of the CGIL [the leftist Italian Trade Union], Susanna Camusso (elected in 2010). This last result, contrasting with the others, showed a higher level of linguistic sexism for the representations of right/centre-right women politicians compared to those of left/centre-left; this can be explained by the peculiarity of the epicene noun “president.” Conversely, the noun “segretaria” (woman secretary), compared to the masculine declination “segretario” (man secretary), concerns an occupation of lower status that may have led journalists to privilege its masculine declination even more to emphasize the prestige of the charge of secretary of CGIL. According to this explanation about journalists’ linguistic choices for the women heads of these two political offices, the political orientation of the two organizations appears to be of secondary importance and nullifies the traditional linguistic differences in the representations of women in the centre-right and centre-left. 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 force these consolidated uses and can promote linguistic stability or change.

Abstraction/Concreteness in language

An additional field of study focused on language was developed by Semin and Fiedler (1988), and is devoted to the analysis of the specific inferential

psychological processes that bind the message sender to the target of communication. This field of study refers to the Linguistic Category Model (LCM). The LCM was also 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 concerning gender differences. The LCM assumes that the level of abstraction and concreteness of the terms used to describe people and events would vary depending 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, such as for the use of adjectives) or on contextual characteristics external to the subject (high level of concreteness, as in the case of the use of descriptive action verbs) (Semin & Fiedler, 1991).

The model was applied to ingroup/outgroup confrontations, showing that for the ingroup's positive evaluation there was high abstraction level, using adjectives that valorise the members of the ingroup, whereas for the negative evaluation there was high concreteness level, that attributes the origin of negativity to the context. A specular trend was found for the outgroup, with a high concreteness level for positive evaluations versus 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. In particular, 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. In fact, they proved that, compared to men candidates, the women candidates were described using the most concrete positive terms (verbal forms) and with more abstract negative terms (adjectives), thus favouring cognitive inferences that made the context salient for positive evaluations, while making salient women candidates' internal stable characteristics for negative evaluations.

In some of our studies we used the LCM, particularly 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. Specifically in our investigation

(Sensales & Areni, 2016), the data showed an attention to the situation rather than the person in 75% of cases. In this way, women politicians were weakened and attributed little psychological salience. Concerning the valence with which the ministers were described, a positive trend emerged clearly 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 obscuring their role (focusing primarily on the situation), but on the other hand evaluating their personal characteristics more positively than negatively. These results leave open the question of whether the trend obtained was gender biased or not, because there was no analysis of the representations of men ministers. By focusing comparatively on men and women ministers of the 2014 government (Sensales & Areni, 2017), we tried to address this lack of information.

Compared to the abovementioned study (Sensales & Areni, 2016), both the average level of abstraction and positive valence of the adjectives have increased. 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 have 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 evoked from the references to their aesthetic aspect.

Concerning gender comparison, general findings show no differences 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, who in turn were more frequently characterized with adjectives having a negative valence. 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 in personnel selection, judges show considerable gender bias, using linguistic abstraction (adjectives) to represent women with unfavourable characteristics regarding internal stability, whereas for positive evaluations they used concrete terms leading to a focus on the situation. However, 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. On the other hand, 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, with women 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 (a non-assertive modality, subject to the fulfilment of the given conditions, that in Italian, unlike English, is present for all verbs) or direct voices of people, quoted in the media.

The pronominal forms as markers of agency in the press

There are different research traditions about the use of personal pronouns from different contexts and disciplinary views. In social psychology, the pioneering work of Mulhaüsler and Harré (1990) is 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, already implicated in lexical organization, that can be studied through an analysis of both real and symbolic interactions.

The theoretical tradition, more attentive to the pronominal system, is the critical perspective of discourse analysis (van Dijk 2012, pp. 23-25), in which the

main focus, concerning 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 such that, 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 as Sendén, Lindholm, and Sikström (2013) have considered pronouns as markers of social and agentic categories, focusing on the evaluative context, selected for the 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. In a study about media representations of ten women ministers of two governments with different political orientations in 2006 and 2008 (Sensales et al., 2013), we detected, for agency, 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 the abovementioned 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 showed no gender differences in the use of the pronouns *I* and *we* by politicians, contrasting 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 18 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), where personal pronominal forms occurred with similar frequencies in the speeches of both men and women deputies. “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

There is a field of study focused on the use of pronominal forms as markers of agency and of gender differences in the parliamentary domain. If we analyse the 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 (Sensales, Areni, & Giuliano, in press): “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; Bijeikienė & Utkā, 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 essentialist⁵ explanations of linguistic variations are inadequate to understand the findings obtained. This was stimulated to overcome the binary logic that 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

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.

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)

From this last perspective, Bijeikienė and Utkā (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, the two scholars 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*, while 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 that seems to prefer the use of the pronominal form related to the collective dimension.

In this critical framework Federica Formato (2014) often finds different results. In the comparison between two corpora of men and women Italian deputies (MPs), she shows that the “*noi*” (*we*) is overused as the subject pronoun, to a statistically significant extent, by men MPs compared to women MPs. The subject pronoun *noi* is used to stress agency, showing how men MPs seem conscious of their active parliamentary roles in resolving social problems, while the women MPs 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 the pronominal uses are subject to many types of variations sensitive to specific socio-political contexts by considering how social actors manipulate language according to the different needs 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 studies on the Italian Parliament conducted primarily with gender comparative purposes in mind (Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales et al., 2017, in press). The first study (Sensales & Areni, 2015; Sensales et al., 2017) is focused on a diachronic and gender comparison related to 441 parliamentary interventions made by two pairs of politicians, with different political orientations, in the First (between 1976 and 1993) and Second Republic⁶ (between 1994 and 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 regarding 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*, whereas there were no gender differences in the use of conditional verbal forms. Conversely, there were no significant gender differences at all for parliamentary speeches made during the Second Republic by two other pairs of MPs. In this way, the linguistic behaviours displayed by MPs contribute to the building of social representations of politicians themselves, marked or unmarked by gender stereotypes that interact with other cultural dimensions following an “intersectionality”⁷ pathway linked to the conception of gender as a performative construction (Weatherall & Gallois, 2003; Wodak, 2015). Concerning the two MPs pairs, the findings showed a higher use of the *we* pronominal form than the *I*, confirming the cohesive, contrastive, and agentive role of the *we* as the most used form in the parliamentary field (Bazzanella, 2002, 2009a, 2009b, 2014; Bijeikienė & Utkā, 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) about 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. In the speeches of the two pairs of politicians, this tendency to be more centred on others finds its explanation in consideration of the fact that an activity such as parliamentary one is, by definition, aimed at achieving the common good.

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.

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

The second study was focused on 463 parliamentary speeches conducted in the course of the XIV legislature (5-2001/4-2006) (Sensales, Giuliano, & Areni, 2016; Sensales et al., 2017, in press) by four MPs pairs, 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, while a gender difference appeared, with greater utilization of the first-person singular by men than by women. This result was explained in light of the aforementioned research where the *I* form was seen as a marker of personal responsibility, of self-reference, and confidence (Bijeikine & Utko, 2006), and used by men MPs. For that reason, the *I* use was evaluated as particularly agentic. 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 enacted by a masculine leadership rather than on the party, that is, on a collective identity more linked to the communal dimension.

Finally, regarding the categorical amplitude of *we*, examined with a qualitative contextualist analysis, an overuse of the “specific we” (e.g. *our party*) by women, along with an underuse of the “superordinate we” (e.g. *Italy, Italians*) was demonstrated. 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 agentic rhetorical strategy by women. It can be explained in reference to the concept of the peripheral role played by women in parliament, illustrated by Formato (2014), and linked to the need to reach a “critical mass” of women MPs that can affect power relations, all 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 also with their core role.

In our surveys, the changes in Italian political and social context contribute to explain both the different reference to *I* or of *we*, as 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 renders less peripheral their role.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the results of our research program suggest some conclusions about the role of political communication in promoting a vision of 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 be stabilized. This is a reality in which the same feminine presence in the Italian parliament saw, in the most recent elections, a higher number of women in parliament than in the past, allowing them to reach the “critical mass.” In this way Italy, with just over 30% of women parliamentarians (IPU, 2013), has jumped in rank, rising 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).

Concerning our theoretical choices, the social representations framework of our research program has shown the strong interdependence between Ego-Alter-Object, all posited in a unique communicative relationship focused on 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 parliamentary communication, while the Object was concerned with the politics as an androcentric field. In this way, the need to make the linguistic choices of social actors intelligible has been studied in relation to different representations, which all contribute to the construction of a socio-cultural reality related to gender and political roles. From this point of view, the linguistic behaviours enacted by journalists and MPs contribute to the building of social representations of politicians themselves, marked or unmarked by gender stereotypes, which in turn interact with ordinary citizen representations of politics and politicians. Concerning ordinary citizens, we have noted how political crisis leads them to emphasize feminine communal behaviours as a possible answer to resolve this crisis, rendering the political realm nearer to the people. In this vein, 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 being neutral, allowed us to show how language is involved in creating the symbolic universe, both of speakers and of recipients of communication, by affecting the way they 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, which would require a level

of awareness that could break the penalising automatism acting in language, making it possible to redefine gender-oriented relationships, and 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, even with the contribution of political communication both mediatized and as related to the institutional domain.

Our assumption of a context-sensitive reading/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 accord to intersectionality processes, which became 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 showed the strong link with the performative conception of gender overcoming the binary opposition between men and women. This false dichotomy/opposition has fictitiously rendered natural, static, and immutable gender-marked linguistic behaviors and has contributed to building and preserving traditional gender distinctions through the rhetoric of gender differences, which in the past has 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 hybridization processes concerning gender identities. In this way, these representations contribute to the building of more complex identities in which normative and counter-normative aspects coexist, 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 about the nature and consequences of these dynamics. That awareness can challenge sexism in the 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 to push towards a redefinition of the existing inequitable gender power balances by promoting a general societal change.

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