

The “Schwa” and its Impact on Italian Language and Society

Piermauro Catarinella, Mohd Ridzuan Abdul Malek

Academy of Language Studies UiTM Shah Alam, Malaysia

Email: piermauro@uitm.edu.my, mohdridzuan@uitm.edu.my

Suhardi Kram

Faculty of Sports Science & Recreation, Samarahan, UiTM Sarawak, Malaysia

Email: suhardikram@uitm.edu.my

Muhammad Usamah Mohd Ridzuan

Academy of Language Studies UiTM Penang, Malaysia

Email: usamah@uitm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARSS/v12-i10/15021> DOI:10.6007/IJARSS/v12-i10/15021

Published Date: 19 October 2022

Abstract

The Italian language differentiates between the masculine and the feminine for both nouns and adjectives. The Italian grammar rule requires that when addressing a group comprised of both men and women, the masculine plural is to be used. For example, the adjective “bravo” (clever) in the masculine singular is used to refer to a single male; “brava”, in the feminine singular, to indicate a woman; “bravi”, the masculine plural form, when referring to a multitude of men and women; “brave”, in the feminine plural, for a group of females only. Recently some writers and journalists have begun to contest this rule, considering it obsolete and disrespectful of non-binary people. The “schwa” is a final neutral desinence that is used in place of masculine plurals and, according to some people, makes the language more inclusive and considerate of the LGBTQIA+ community. The symbol of the “schwa” is an inverted letter “e” written like this: “ə”. The pronunciation consists of a sound that is a kind of intermediate form between the A and the E. The research of this paper aims to investigate various aspects of this new symbol, paying special attention to the impacts it has had within Italian society.

Keywords: Schwa, Writing, Italian, Grammar, Language

Introduction

The Italian language uses the masculine and the feminine. In Italian, when referring to a group of men and women the plural masculine is used. This rule has recently been questioned by a number of writers, journalists and politicians who have begun to use the “schwa” whose symbol is as follows: ə.

The letter “i” of the plural masculine is thus replaced with a letter that graphically resembles an intermediate form between an “a” and an “o”, that is the two vowels with which in Italian are used most frequently to identify the feminine and masculine genders. The reason some people have introduced the schwa is to use a more inclusive language, more respectful of all gender identifications. But what is really meant by inclusive language? Perhaps it is such when a language is free of words, phrases and tones discriminatory towards certain individuals or groups of people; a text is inclusive when it does not reinforce stereotypes and does not discriminate against persons according to age, abilities (Fameli, 2022) ethnicity, social status, sexual orientation or physical features. The grammatical genre of the Italian language is inherently in opposition with proponents of the schwa. Furthermore, the symbol for the schwa is non-existent in the Italian alphabet, but it is used to give visibility (others say to bring respect) to those people who do not recognize themselves in the two normative genders. However, it does have ancient origins; the term Schwa is attested for the first time in a medieval Hebrew spoken by a group of scholars around the tenth century A.D. In 1821, the German linguist Johann Andreas Schmeller compiled a grammar of Bavarian German (*Die Mundarten Bayerns, grammatikalisch dargestellt*) recognizing phonetic changes and needed a symbol (Treccani, 1936) indicating a very short vowel, which was ultimately determined to be close to the Hebrew Schwa. A few years later phonetics expert Alexander John Ellis used the same symbol to define an indistinct vowel present in the English language, and from there the schwa reached the international phonetic alphabet, compiled in the late nineteenth century (Culture, 2020). It seems possible that, in the future, it could become again an official alphabetic symbol (as in the past it was for the letters Y or W). There are no obvious limitations preventing the schwa symbol from being recognized officially as technologies can be easily updated; in fact, in the last year, Android and Iphone systems have inserted.

the “ə” next to the classic letters i and e. And even before the symbol of reversed e emerged, its significance (gender inclusivity) was denoted by the asterisk, suggesting need. This practice was ultimately replaced by the schwa symbol for two reasons:

1. The asterisk cannot have a precise and recognizable sound;
2. The international phonetic alphabet (IPA), the system adopted internationally to define the correct pronunciation of all written languages, already recognizes use of the schwa in some dialectal forms of Italian (Balocchi, 2019). Who, first, made use of this letter turned it upside down? Is it really a useful, heartfelt grammatical modification by society? Or is it just a force imposed by a small but loud faction of people with ideological and political implications? Could the official rules of Italian grammar change in the future because of this schwa? What consequences has the use of schwa had in Italian society thus far? This paper will endeavor to provide complete and exhaustive answers to these questions. One thing is certain however and must be recognized: following the introduction of this symbol on Facebook and other social media, many controversies have arisen and aggression even violence has increased between those who argue in support of the schwa and those who, instead, dispute its existence and usefulness. The use of the gender-neutral (which, it is useful to repeat, does

not exist in Italian) does not itself alone make society more inclusive, tolerant and respectful. For example, Hungarian, Finnish and Turkish languages are without gender but this does not correlate directly to their cultural tolerance and/or inclusivity. While it is evident that societal change cannot be brought about by linguistic change alone, we must recognize that there is a correlation between language and thought, which influence each other. The widespread adoption of the word “femicide” has not eliminated violence against women, however it has allowed for increased awareness of this violence; it has helped us to see better by creating, through language, a window revealing a panorama of oppression that would otherwise have been concealed (Blu, 2022). The issue of inclusivity, especially for LGBTQIA+ people (a point insisted upon by the schwa’s supporters) is not something that only affects the Italian language and society; similar experiments are being carried out in all European countries (France, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Norway) and various institutions of the EU are actively discussing the same concerns. A direct consequence of the use of schwa (which addresses a gender-neutral) was the creation of feminine words for professions previously only addressed in the masculine: “ministra” (female minister), “sindaca” (female mayor), “avvocata” (female lawyer), “arbitra” (female referee), “presidenta” (female president), “dottoressa” (female doctor) (Accolla, 2022).

Literature Review

The schwa has been coined recently and therefore a copious and important scientific literature on the topic does not exist. However, there have been interesting studies that merit our attention. The topic is very divisive in that there are writers, activists and journalists both in support of the schwa as a neutral term in place of the masculine plural and strongly opposed, claiming it simply does not exist in the Italian language and has no scientific value, borne by progressive left-wing political ideology. According to Arcangeli (2022), we are facing a dangerous rift, passed off as a desire for inclusiveness, which would instead reform Italian to the sound of schwa. Arcangeli argues that the proponents for use of this symbol, aware that the inverted “e” could never be applied to the Italian language in a systematic way, preach unacceptable rules. For example, arguing that the inclusive forms of “direttore” (male director) or “pittore” (male painter) should be written with the last letter e inverted enshrine in fact the death of the feminine word “direttrice” (female director) and “pitttrice” (female painter), the result of a troubled linguistic-cultural evolution that, for centuries, has hidden the woman in the generalized use of masculine. With this text the linguist Massimo Arcangeli takes the position of protecting the Italian language against those who adopt and promote, even in official or institutional contexts, grammatically unacceptable forms. For De Benedetti (2022) the idea itself is seductive; he advocates for removing from Italian any obstacles that limit the full expression of oneself and for promoting solutions that allow all speakers to feel represented, in turn countering all words and expressions that are offensive and/or discriminatory. He argues that this will grant the right to linguistic self-determination - active and passive - to anyone who feels that the labels society places on them are wrong. De Benedetti observes that for some time already, on social media, as well as in newspapers and even in the official communications of some public institutions, the graphic symbol schwa has been used, seeking to remove the original sexist connotation of a word, i.e., the image of masculine or feminine, so as to make it suitable for a reality in which diversity is affirmed and legitimized. But again, how does one pronounce those words that end with the overturned letter e? This is a legitimate question that relegated even its most convinced proponents to use it primarily in the written form and much less in speech, more in articles than in podcasts.

A serious and amicable discussion on this issue, however, seems impossible now that social networks and even before them television talk shows have reduced the debate of schwa to a kind of martial arts fight with violent attacks and reproaches of all kinds. The topic's importance might be better understood if what is really foundational to the proposal were isolated: not inclusion, the rights of women or transgender people, the fight against patriarchy or the moral progress of humanity, but instead the desire to match a linguistic code with an ethical one, the idea that language must be at the service of identities before communities. De Benedetti remarks that changing a final letter of a noun does not affect the substance of society, pointing out that while continuing to use the masculine term "medico" (male doctor), women represent 54% of the profession. The prevalence of the masculine name "dottore" (male doctor) is inclusive because it also comprises the females, while the term "dottoressa" (female doctor) is only used for women and is therefore less comprehensive. He argues that it is more important to change reality before the language and not vice versa and, furthermore, those who use the schwa have a tendency toward moral blackmail and an elitist attitude. De Benedetti worries that, in the name of inclusivity, there is a concrete risk to seriously compromise the accessibility and functionality of the Italian language. Among those who, instead, argue that the schwa is important into demonstrating support for non-binary persons and promoting inclusivity, is international copywriter (Orru, 2020). She argues that the road to inclusivity is a difficult path, and that while it is not easy to break certain habits or change the way we express ourselves, language might be a means to allow everyone to feel part of the discourse. She argues that words used badly carry weight, that they can cut, radicalize prejudices and even fossilize a society wanting to evolve. She implores us to fight doctrine and the *status quo*, lamenting the fact that in Italian the recourse to masculine prevails so long as the group is mixed-gender (including women, non-binary, transgender and LGBTQIA+) or not singularly female. She stresses that the language we use daily is the most powerful and pervasive means of transmitting our vision of the world. She makes the case that in the Italian language, the space given to the masculine is disproportionately large and somehow corroborates the principle of a marginality about women, non-binary, transgender and others in society. In truth, there is no doubting the importance of language in our social construction of reality: through it are administered the many social rules indispensable to our survival, through its symbols and its filters one both comprehends then evaluates the world, others and themselves. Mrs. Orru argues that words such as "direttore" and "direttrice" (male and female director), "professore" and "professoressa" (male and female professor), "pittore" and "pittrice" (male and female painter), "poeta and poetessa" (male and female poet), "lettore" and "lettrice" (male and female lecturer), do not include other categories of people and therefore the schwa helps to make the language inclusive for all (not only for males and females); those above words should instead be written as follows: direttorə, professorə, pittorə, poetə, lettorə. According to Gheno (2021), sociologist and collaborator of the "Accademia della Crusca", (Crusca Academy) as well as professor of Humanities for Communication at the University of Florence, the schwa is surprisingly little-known with respect to its decades-long use and presence in the international phonetic Alphabet. She feels the matter is straightforward and that this symbol is useful, even necessary to overcome the gender binary, although she does concede that all nouns, adjectives, articles and prepositions should be ably manipulated to masculine, feminine and even neutral form as best-determined by the parties they are referencing, accounting for those who do not recognize themselves in either male or female gender. Ms. Gheno never proposed a total abolition of gender to be replaced with the indistinct (or neutral) gender, but she invites to take note of the many

people who feel uncomfortable with the fact that Italian has only male and female genders. The author applauds the fact that public institutions make use of the schwa such as the “Città di Castelfranco Emilia” (City of Castelfranco Emilia).

The director of Mircomega Paolo Flores D’Arcais (2021) openly opposed this opinion, calling it yet another reactionary idiocy passed off as progressive and ridicules the thesis of Professor Gheno. Flores asks whether the word schwa is a masculine, feminine or neutral noun and if the Italian Constitution is to be considered sexist. Art. 2: “La Repubblica riconosce e garantisce i diritti inviolabili dell’uomo” (The Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of man); the word man is universal masculine, including women. Art. 4: “La Repubblica garantisce a tutti i cittadini il diritto al lavoro” (The Republic guarantees to all citizens the right to work); cittadini is a masculine plural word but refers to female citizens too of course. Art. 17: “I cittadini hanno diritto di riunirsi pacificamente (Citizens have the right to meet peacefully); the same masculine plural used at art 4. Art. 21: “Tutti hanno diritto di manifestare liberamente il proprio pensiero (Everyone has the right to express freely personal thoughts and opinions); the word “tutti” is used in the masculine plural form and includes anyone. The topic is very divisive and dialogues about it are destined to last for a long time.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research based primarily on readings of current Italian newspaper articles (2020-2022) showcasing the application of the schwa in writing and speaking beyond use in everyday conversation and social media posts, instead focusing on official statements of certain public institutions. The introduction seeks to describe use of a new symbol that does not currently exist in the Italian alphabet. The pronunciation of this word is not complicated: the word schwa, contrary to what many think, has a soft sound. The “w” should not in fact be pronounced as “v”, but as a “u”. The “c” is not hard as in the Italian word “scuola” (school), but soft as in “piscina” (swimming pool). The “s” and the “h”, which is silent, help to reproduce the hissing sound “shhh”. So how does one pronounce the phonetic sound schwa or e upside down? Actually, it is not particularly difficult. One need only relax all the components of their mouth, without deforming it in any way and open it slightly. They should feel their vocal cords vibrate; the sound is indistinct, a bit like when someone takes us by surprise with a question and to buy time, we emit a sound by opening our mouths before speaking. It comes out naturally. To better explain: it is the sound we hear at the beginning of the English word about: it is not a real a (Italian “a”) and not even a real e (Italian “e”), much less an o but something in between. The debate about a more inclusive Italian language proposes the schwa precisely because, phonetically, it is located in the middle, it can be a meeting point between the vowels with which in Italian we most identify the feminine (a) and masculine (o) gender. The indistinct sound and intermediate spelling of the schwa brings a more inclusive language less linked to the dominance of the

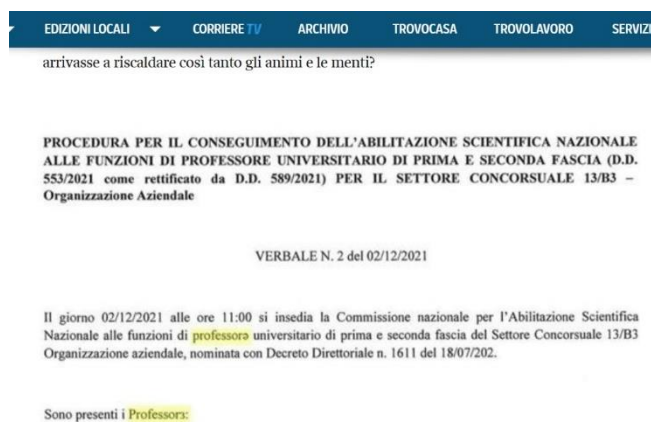
masculine gender and through which people, who do not recognize themselves in the gender binary, can identify. The results and discussion section analyse the social, cultural and political consequences of schwa's use. In the conclusion, the researchers' points of view about this new way of writing and speaking will be presented and it will be shown that this new form of politically correctness is occurring all over the EU.



Results and Discussion

Who, first, made use of this letter e turned upside down and is this really a useful and heartfelt grammatical modification by society? Is it instead just a force imposed onto us with severe ideological and political implications? It

should be noted that while the schwa is in vogue among writers, journalists, activist and opinion leaders of clear progressive left ideology, it is almost never used among linguists. On the contrary, authoritative scholars of the Italian language believe that the schwa, which a growing number of "politically correct" people want to use in place of the masculine plural in describing a group, is not a form of enrichment and inclusiveness but instead makes everything a heap of words without head or tail. These linguists include Professor Cecilia Robustelli, ordinary of Italian Linguistics at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia who has been working with the Accademia della Crusca for years - the oldest linguistic academy in the world, established in Florence in 1582, and whose institutional task is to take care of the purity of the Italian language - (Di Battista, 2018). The reason for her disapproval of the schwa is first of all technical: Professor Robustelli argues that the primary function of the grammatical genre in a text is to allow us to understand who and what we are referring to.



She worries that in removing the endings to words all the morphological links disappear and the text or speech becomes a bunch of disjointed words (Vivaldelli, 2021). The schwa also undermines textual or speech cohesion: grammatical gender is assigned to terms that refer to humans based on sex. Sociocultural gender, that is the social perception of what sexual belonging entails, represents something different. But beyond this Robustelli believes that by introducing the schwa in the Italian language and eliminating the word-

endings, one creates only confusion within the study of linguistics and this has potentially damaging effects. Therefore, from a strictly linguistic point of view, the use of the Italian

reversed letter e is impossible in the reality of the Italian language, far beyond the intentions of the progressive-left which believes that the male and female gender are limiting - and therefore offensive - for all people who identify "non-binary" i.e., those who do not recognize belonging to the male or female gender, regardless of biology. Trials were administered measuring the schwa's functionality and, on live radio, a text using the schwa was read that



VISO COSÌ, IN MILIEU
scambiato per femn
sue radici nella trac
re nessunə che abbi
nzi di far scattare u
rillano per question

resulted in a total lack of understanding (Fratello, 2021). The use of schwa creates great confusion both in reading and especially in conversation because so many people are not able to understand the meaning of one or more words (Galici, 2021).

Thus, for many, it seems that this a random imposition which has no scientific rationale from a linguistic point of view but is the result of a new "no gender" ideology, increasingly popular in Italy and the rest of Western Europe. The language, according to Paolo D'Achille, professor of Italian Linguistics at the University of "Roma Tre" and President of SILFI (International Society of Linguistics and Italian Philology), should not be at the service of a particular political ideology (Argento, 2021). But schwa's politically oriented supporters have great influence in Italian politics, so much so that the Ministry of Education and University has resorted to it in an official document regarding a public competition electing a university professor (De Conto, 2022), thus abolishing the distinction between male and female, appealing to the new gender theory. When Italian language scholars, including Massimo Arcangeli, professor of Italian linguistics at the University of Cagliari, launched a petition to stop the schwa from being used by public institutions, insults and threats against them by supporters of the inclusive language swiftly came about (Orlandi, 2022). The first to introduce the schwa in Italy were Michela Murgia and Roberto Saviano, two famous writers but not pure linguists. Both use the schwa because they are politically aligned with left progressivism and the Democratic Party (preceding the Italian Communist Party). Mrs. Murgia, dubbed "the queen of schwa" and "woke" left-wing champion, uses the symbol as a political weapon to try to bring down political opponents (Adkronos, 2021). Mr. Roberto Saviano, known to the general public as the author of "Gomorra" (a book discussing the mafia) uses it while making numerous grammatical errors, making his writings difficult to understand. While interviewing the Russian-American writer Masha Gessen, Saviano writes: "è l'intelltualə che per primə ha descritto il suo potere criminale" (she is the first intellectual person who wrote about his criminal power). The term intellectual, in Italian "intellettuale", is already neutral (in the sense that it can refer to anyone) and use of the schwa, in this case, is unnecessary. Any name in Italian cannot be separated from related articles, articulated prepositions, pronouns, adjectives, past participles. And the effects of systematic use of the schwa - short or long term - would be devastating. Is it worthwhile to alter the Italian language in favor of a minority mannerism? Is it just a whim? Unfortunately, it's much greater a concern than for mannerism: it's not a linguistic issue, but an ideological one (Alberti, 2022). From a technical point of view, therefore, we can comfortably state that the schwa is not a useful grammatical change because it is assumed to be, by majority society, an illogical symbol, not at all inclusive, but

instead a foreign body within the Italian language. It is not even a neologism because many new words are born every year in every language, without changing the language's structure. But even if we do not use it, we might not offend those who feel neither man or woman and we might not strengthen the idea that the Italian language is a male-dominated one should we pursue other solutions. Italian has many epicene words that can be used for both males and females without variations in their structure. For example, instead of writing "candidatə" (candidate, with the e upside down), the word "person" (persona in Italian) can be used as it does not mark any gender. The use of the schwa is nothing more than whimsy of the politically correct which claims to eliminate all differences, even between masculine and feminine. Writing "autorə", using the schwa instead of the normal words "autore" or "autrice" (author in the masculine and feminine forms), or "direttorə", using the inverted e as final letter - and not "direttore" or "direttrice" (male and female director) - also means destroying the feminine, a form that, through a troubled linguistic-cultural evolution, took centuries to obtain dignity. In this way, under the alibi of inclusion, conquests that have been borne with difficulty from the generalized use of the masculine are erased. Certainly, languages change, not *ope legis*, but in a natural way; they do evolve, but the linguistic innovation always follows the social one. Defenders of the schwa stand as champions of inclusion issues and want to impose their worldview on the broader community. And they do so knowing full well that it is impossible to apply schwa systematically. Unfortunately, the arguments to support its use are poor and the political- ideological vision prevails. Language is everyone's heritage and cannot be dictated by a minority (Mascheroni, 2022). The creation of new linguistic symbols to invent a different form of inclusive communication, very attentive to the needs of LGBTQIA+ and non-binary people, did not take place only in Italy, but also in other countries of the EU. In France, for example, the neutral pronoun "iel", contraction of "il" (him) and "elle" (she), in compliance with the concept of inclusion for those people who define themselves as non-binary and therefore do not recognize themselves in either the male or female gender, made its entry into the Petit Robert, the most famous dictionary of the French language. In France also, as in Italy, therefore, an important cultural institution yields to the diktats of the politically correct and bows to an ultra-progressive crusade that views gender as a social construct and wants to eliminate the concept of biological sex (Vivaldelli, 2021). The neutral pronoun was introduced because, according to Le Petit Robert, it is often used by the French and is becoming a common word. This inclusion was favored by President Macron's wife (Nidi, 2021) but there were also protests caused by this grammatical and ideological movement. Education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, stated that "inclusive writing is not the future of the French language" while a member of the Parliament, François Jolivet, said that those responsible for the Petit Robert dictionary are just political supporters of "wokism" (Meotti, 2021). This term, politically, evokes the idea of a progressive awakening: the "awareness of social and political problems such as racism and inequality" (Franceschini, 2021). A woke person is attentive and sensitive to facts and issues of racial and social justice and woke supremacy is the belief that "woke people are superior to those of all other races, and should therefore dominate the society" (Vivaldelli, 2021). Wokism is the new thinking of the international progressive left which has embraced, in recent decades, the politics of identity, especially in enhancing particular linguistic forms.

Will the official rules of Italian grammar change in the immediate future due to the schwa? We believe we must answer no, not only for what was stated by illustrious linguists cited in the previous paragraph (Paolo D'Achille, Cecilia Robustelli, Massimo Arcangeli) but also

because Crusca Academy itself does not recognize any scientific value to the schwa. The desire for its adoption and a strong ideology of a minority part of the country, which is the most progressive and mediatically dominant, cannot change the grammatical structure of the Italian language. For now, grammar, spoken language, logic, common use, common sense and history inform us that the respect for people cannot and must not depend on a word-ending. Language is always decided by use and speech, not dictated by an ideologized elite. Consider the naivety in thinking that real respect for people depends on a graphic sign, even while civil battles are fought more with keyboards than in public. On one side there is a minority group that claims to teach everyone else to express themselves more correctly and more politically and, on the other hand, there is a real country that does not share that opinion and would like to resist, not so much a madness (which usually passes) but an ideology, which is possibly more dangerous. There is a feeling that the schwa, conceived and studied to include non-binary and LGBTQIA+ people, ironically, tends to exclude the majority of the country. Graphic signs such as the schwa appear as ideological measures that instead of defending the identity of each, in the end annihilate first gender and then people (Mascheroni, 2021). The fact that the schwa cannot change the Italian language in the short term can be seen from the fact that it has two grammatical genders, masculine and feminine, but not the neutral, just as, in the grammatical category of the number, it distinguishes the singular from the plural, but does not have the dual, present in other languages, including even ancient Greek. We must openly acknowledge this, aware of the fact that biological sex and gender-identity are different from grammatical gender. Roberta D'Alessandro, professor of Syntax and Linguistic Variation at the University of Utrecht, argues that the schwa is unable to make changes to the Italian language because it is not part of it. Exactly like the accent on the letter e; the schwa provides just spelling conventions and it would be very wrong to consider them part of the language. Language is spoken and decided by the use of its speakers and can never be imposed. A rule like that of the schwa, in the Italian system that engages the binary gender and has the masculine by default, cannot be acquired (Betti, 2021). Schwa is unable to change Italian grammar even according to Pietro Gambino, teacher of Italian language and culture at the "Ca Foscari" University of Venice for several reasons: the symbol of the inverted e has contraindications and contradictions from a linguistic and also a social point of view. It cannot be taught because it does not exist in Italian and also does not make the Italian language more inclusive at all; the fight against discrimination is done in the social-realm: in determining rights of citizens and social and legal equality, not by grammar and morphology (Panza, 2022). It is not the words themselves that discriminate, but the intentions behind them. It is right to fight discrimination, but the schwa does not truthfully make language inclusive because it discriminates against those who are unable to use or understand it: the elderly, dyslexic and visually impaired, for example, and more generally people who would like to apply grammar according to its existing rules without necessarily giving it a sexual connotation. It therefore risks becoming jargon, that is a language used by few within a small circle, and excluding others. Furthermore, there is another danger: that the schwa is only used for marketing purposes by brands or people who care to show their customers/supporters that they are open, inclusive and modern but, in real life, continue to discriminate on the basis of gender, skin color, age and more.

What consequences has the use of schwa produced up to this point within the Italian society, which does not want to integrate the ungendered desinence into their language? The schwa, championed a symbol of an inclusive language, has been rejected by almost all linguists.

However, despite being used by a minority of writers and activists heralding left-wing progressivism, it has produced consequences within Italian society on a socio-cultural and also juridical level. The near-obsession for a more inclusive (only in respect to the LGBTQIA+ and non-binary people) and politically correct language has led many airlines (Italian, European, American, Australian and even Japanese) not to welcome passengers on board with the classic greeting: "ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard"; this in order to strengthen its adherence to the values of diversity and inclusion (Freda, 2021). The words "ladies and gentlemen" have been replaced with gender neutral terms. However, doubts have risen about it being a free choice, suggesting possible marketing purposes in order not to be accused of homophobia and/or transphobia by progressive leftist activists. Last year, the Turin book fair (an important cultural event where newly published books for adults and children are presented), all exhibited publications adhered to concepts of "diversity" and "inclusion". All the publishing houses present at the exhibition adapted to the new norm, under penalty of exclusion from the event (Bianchi, 2021). The titles of children's books were written with the schwa or with the final asterisk (Piccol* feminist* or Piccolə femmistə) in order to erase any reference to the male or female gender, all strictly neutral. During that event, a *lectio magistralis* was presented entitled: "Is it for boys or girls? And if we were free to be girls and boys, as we prefer?". In some cases, it is even dangerous to affirm one's own common sense because you risk being insulted or threatened. What happened to Kathleen Stock, a convinced feminist and professor of philosophy at a prestigious university, is surreal. Mrs Stock suffered serious threats and insults that forced her to have to teach remotely, for fear of physical repercussions on her person. She said one thing many relate to simple common sense: biological sex remains predominant and transgender people should not frequent spaces reserved for women such as locker rooms and bathrooms. The feminist teacher was accused of being transphobic and was also left alone by the university union, which decided not to act regarding the threats that teacher received. It is just the latest example of an activism that, with the excuse of defending a group from discrimination, promotes media pillory and invokes censorship against those who do not abide by the same gender ideology (Vivaldelli, 2021). The Italian association "Arcilesbica" was targeted by the LGBTQIA+ lobby claiming that "the substitution of gender identity to biological sex would harm policies dedicated to women's rights, for example by leading to misleading data in research on domestic violence, salaries, careers, access to public funds. Transgender people need targeted policies and additional resources, not deducted from the already scarce ones reserved for women" (Lombardi, 2020). There exists what seems to be a violent battle between feminists and transsexuals to determine what the term woman means. Are women born or can they become? Can trans people, who reject a man's body and identity, be considered women? Feminists, on one hand, defend their struggles and their history and argue that the definition of women must remain linked to biological sex and not to gender identity, according to which a person determines their own gender; and, on the other hand, want to bring down this barrier and accuse adversaries of transphobia, of being TERFs, an acronym standing for "trans-exclusion radical feminists" or "gender critical". Dialectical but violent clashes, insults and serious threats occur. Even stars like Adele, merely for having publicly declared to be a proud woman, have been brutally attacked and insulted by the term TERF. For transgender people, what matters is only the notion of gender and not a question of biology. Anyone can, in this perspective, distance themselves from the sex they were born by. But there is no escaping to human nature. Such a banal observation can be costly due to irrational censorship established by identity politics (Vivaldelli, 2021). Victims of this violent

ensorship also include Michela Murgia, champion of gender free ideology, and Chiara Tagliaferri who, during a radio broadcast, told the story of Lana and Lilly Wachowski, directors and producers of "The Matrix", born with male names of Larry and Andy before their sex changes. Both were accused of "misgendering" (having used both the masculine and feminine endings addressing Lana and Lilly Wachowski) and of "deadnaming" (using their masculine names before their sex changes); unacceptable "transphobic linguistic practices" in short (Libero, 2021). Favoring gender-free language does not tolerate different thoughts. A 29-year-old student, during an online lesson, allowed herself to express an opinion and was forced to leave the university where she was studying. During a discussion on women's rights she said: "I don't think a transgender woman is really one of them. In my opinion, a woman is someone with a vagina". The "woke ideology" is totalitarian and undemocratic precisely because it does not allow either dialectics or different opinions (Orlandi, 2021). It is becoming more and more difficult to criticize this ideology without being censored or threatened. The inclusion and cancellation of the male gender advocated by the schwa has forced male students at certain schools to wear skirts. According to various educational administrations, going to school with a skirt helps inclusion (Braghieri, 2021). Of course, some parents protested this decision, imposed on underage students, but administrators replied simply that the school's task is to teach diversity and that, if they did not agree, they could choose to send their kids to another school. Another such case occurred in a high school in Monza, near Milan. Monza is a city at the forefront of the sexual fluid ideology. Male students, influenced by schwa and gender ideology, attended their lessons wearing a skirt in order "to express their desire to live in a place where they feel free to be who they are and not be defined by their clothes" (Franza, 2021). The battle against sexism, in favor of gender equality everywhere, both in school and in the workplace, is sacrosanct, but these students seem to confuse the issue of gender equality with that of cancelling sexual identity. This initiative of the Zucchi High School in Monza plastically expresses one of the basic concepts of gender theory: there are no sexes, sex is an autonomous construction of the individual and is fluid.



Therefore, the categories "male" and "female" are banned, as are the grammatical rules of the Italian language that distinguish between masculine and feminine gender. The Cavour High School in Turin, in accordance with new "gender fluid" language, has adopted the use of the schwa to call all students regardless of gender: the indistinct word "studentə" (student). According to the school's headmaster, in so

doing, all pupils will be able to live and study in a more serene, inclusive environment, respectful of all diversities (Boezi, 2021). Gender ideology is increasingly gaining ground in Italian schools. The latest innovation is the "gender free register" in high schools which allows a student to register with the gender that the student feels they have. An initiative to create the so-called "career alias" was introduced in recent days at the Nervi Severini artistic High School in Ravenna on the occasion of the "International day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia" which was then adopted by the scientific and artistic High School Serpieri of Rimini and the classical High School Scipioni-Maffei of Verona. The idea spread to other

cities, including Cesena, where a debate developed between supporters and detractors of the proposal. The introduction of “career alias” seemingly bypasses the law and legitimizes the theory of gender fluidity based on self-perception, i.e., gender no longer being male or female based on natural sex assigned at birth, but on how one feels at the moment. Furthermore, according to the principle of self-perception, if, for example, a student during the school year feels male for a few months, then female for a while and then again the sex assigned at birth, he encounters a chaotic situation, generating confusion even among teachers and classmates (Giubilei, 2022). The legitimization of the separation of sexual identity from biological data is a disservice to adolescents who are forming their own personality and who should find in the school a point of reference and not a place that supports a vision of only a part of society. Promoting a career



alias threatens to undermine the psychological identity of students, even minors. The art school of Ravenna has also adopted the gender-free register for students, which allows them to replace their personal official name with a chosen one in school documents (Venturi, 2022). In some Italian schools, gender free ideology has led to the installation of so-called “neutral bathrooms”. The problems of the school seem to have taken a back seat by pupils and managers: now the priority is “genderless” bathrooms. This happened at the Macchiavelli Capponi High School in Florence pursuing the goal of eliminating sexual genders in order to avoid discrimination (Galici, 2021).

Schools have become popular venues for these ideological battles. The condition of school buildings throughout Italy is generally disastrous, but for some institutions gender free bathrooms seem to be the priority at the expense of safety and other critical issues. The Municipality of Milan, led by a Mayor of the Democratic Party, who supports and advocates gender fluid ideology, recently proposed a special register for trans people who have not changed the sexual attributes with which they were born. Apart from the questions on the legal validity of this register and its compatibility with national legislation, it seems that this initiative is dictated by the ideology of which the schwa is the bearer, that is to include more and more transgender people in society. Anyone can go in front of a Civil State Officer and declare, for example, their name is Maria and not Giovanni (Campo, 2022). Recently on TikTok there have been many videos made by trans influencers in which the theme of sex change is trivialized. The social network permits underage users to access countless such videos to the point of “brainwashing” children and pushing them beyond parental control (Freda, 2021). Videos posted by transgender influencers like Bella Fitzpatrick, Alex Consani and Jaison Jowett, viewed tens of thousands of times, make gender transition seem relatively straightforward. Those web stars, without having any psychiatric or surgical skill and without encouraging children to discuss these delicate issues with their family, give advice on how to carry out hormonal therapies and surgical operations necessary for sex change. These videos make millions of children believe it is easy to change their sex and that it is the answer to all their problems. TikTok seems to disseminate these controversial videos by applying an MOU stipulated with Stonewall, an NGO that promotes in every social context, including environments frequented by children, material extolling LGBTQIA+ rights and culture. Even many films of the past (when political correctness was not an issue and the whole society enjoyed greater freedom of expression) are now judged sexist, racist, homophobic,

misogynistic. Famous films such as the 1978 *Il Vizierto* (The little vice where it was still not clear whether homosexuality was a vice or an inclination), 1979's *La patata bollente* (The Hot Potato, where a rough and semi-illiterate worker saves a young homosexual boy from a lynching and hosts him at his house), 1956's *Totò, Peppino e la malafemmina* (Totò, Peppino and the bad girl, where a wench is judged badly because she is an artist in a night club), 1981's *Fracchia, la belva umana* (Fracchia, the human beast, where actor Lino Banfi sang the song "benvenuti a sti frocioni" (welcome to these gay men) which he admitted he would never do today because satire and comedy about LGBTQI+ are dead (Parrella, 2021), and many others, are censored because they are not in line with the values of the politically correct (Mascheroni, 2021). When we talk about censorship, we are not referring to the state but to progressive liberal ideology which is not regulated by the law yet but which still manages to impose its vision on society. The obsession for political correctness is not only dangerous and undemocratic; it is also ridiculous and castrates the creativity of any artist. Today, before shooting a film, the director must be joined by a "gender manager" who ensures that the movie does not have scenes or dialogues that could end up under the censorship of the politically correct (Melodia, 2021). Disney, for example, like all other entertainment multinationals, has already bowed to the dogmas of political correctness and "wokist" ideology. The company has in fact promised more inclusiveness in its productions and works to ensure that underrepresented groups, such as racial minorities and the LGBTQIA+ community, comprise at least 50% of its characters (Alberti, 2022). The last film produced in 2022, *Lightyear: the true story of Buzz*, contains scenes that promote LGBTQIA+ culture. But not everyone is willing to remain subservient to the politically correct because their tastes and points of view are very different. Netflix, for example, which in past years had fully bowed to the dogmas of political correctness and progressive "woke" culture, has invited its employees to leave the company if they feel offended by the content it is producing (Vivaldelli, 2022). The giant streaming company now offers a variety of TV shows and movies, some of which can be provocative. Artistic expression must be free and must not be censored in advance; only spectators should freely decide what is appropriate for them. Despite the ferocious attacks that many LGBTQIA+ associations have aimed at TV program "Closer" (where a comedian says that in the West you can freely kill someone, but you cannot hurt the feelings of a gay person) the programming of "Closer" was not interrupted. Of course, escaping criticism of heavy progressive ideological censorship is not easy and those who act against it do not always realize that they may have to pay a very high price, either in terms of career or in media pillory to which they are subjected. Truly paradoxical is the case of soccer player Idrissa Gana Gueye, who ended up at the center of an international controversy, accused of homophobia. He asked to be exempted from playing a football match for personal reasons, to not be forced to wear the jersey with rainbow colors, symbol of LGBTQIA+ rights, on a day to combat gender discrimination. The issue has sparked enormous controversy. Many fans have stigmatized the footballer's behaviour and some State officials have asked to evaluate the situation carefully. His conduct was deemed deplorable and the football federation asked the player to apologize publicly, under penalty of expulsion from European football fields (Prisco, 2022). Only the President of Senegal (and the player in question is a Senegalese citizen) defended him, asking that his personal beliefs be respected (Fiorenza, 2022). Is there still, in Italy and other EU countries, the freedom to decide whether to support the LGBTQIA+ cause or not? Deciding not to support the LGBTQIA+ political ideology does not *ipso facto* make a person homophobic and disrespectful of single homosexuals. The Catholic Church also proposed, in response to requests of LGBTQIA+ lobbies, two days of prayer, love

and homosexuality as evidenced by the first national retreat for twenty-three gay and lesbian couples that took place in Cesenatico (Italy) in April 2022. The official position of Cardinal Reinhard Marx was public affirmation that “homosexuality is not a sin” (Perri, 2022). We therefore live in a historical period in which a harmful and violent ideology wants to cancel rules of nature and subject the majority of the population to its own way of being. Politically correct and certain gay and transgender activism represent limitations to and, in many cases, even danger to freedom of speech, expression and action.

Conclusion

After examining all aspects of the schwa, we can conclude that the attempt to eliminate gender from the Italian language has failed. The evolution of a language is much slower than that of society. The schwa is not able, as yet, to modify the rules of Italian grammar and has been negated by the most illustrious scholars of the Italian language including Paolo D’Achille, Cecilia Robustelli and Massimo Arcangeli. Another important linguist expert, Luca Serianni (Fiori, 2021), states that that this graphic sign makes the spoken language very difficult to understand; because it can only exist in the written form, its success is absolutely limited. Whoever defends the schwa knows very well that it is impossible to apply it systematically. The Italian language is not a conservative one and it would be wrong to underestimate its great transformations following World War II and onward. Serianni has been asked if ideologies can change a language; according to him, this can succeed only in dictatorial regimes. Changes imposed from “above” are more difficult in a democratic society such as that of Italy. For this reason the schwa’s possibility to coercively intervene on the Italian alphabet and language seems doomed to failure.

However, it has been able to influence Italian society and culture in many aspects by imposing an inclusive language for certain categories of people (LGBTQIA+, transgender, non-binary). It is the result of the “wokist” ideology, very strong in Italy and in European institutions (Parliament and Commission) where the political parties in power are those of the left, pushing for politically correct to have greater voice; it has become a form of conformity and whoever does not comply is subjected to hatred and ferocious attacks (Subiaco, 2022). Adequate terms must be used, not to offend sensitivity. Therefore, it is necessary to abolish the endings that are themselves offensive towards those who feel neither man nor woman. So, the Italian adjectives “cari” and “care” (dear referred to men and women) are replaced with “carə” (genderless dear) with the schwa, the inverted letter e (Giordano, 2022). Not only Italy but the whole European Union is increasingly sympathetic to the demands of the LGBTQIA+ lobby and not to countries that dare to challenge the dominant progressive ideology, such as Poland and Hungary, which have passed laws banning pro-LGBTQIA+ advertising campaigns aimed at minors. The European Commission, through Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders, is launching a series of legal actions to protect the fundamental rights of LGBTQIA+ people in Hungary and Poland (Vivaldelli, 2021). All EU countries, not just Italy, must submit to this new form of lexical and ideological dictatorship. In France, for example, parents who do not support the gender transition for their children risk losing parental authority (Vivaldelli, 2022). In Spain, subjects such as history and philosophy are no longer taught, replaced by other so-called more inclusive ones, such as ecofeminism and LGBTQIA+ rights (Consoli, 2022). In Belgium, a person’s biological sex is eliminated from identity cards and sex changes can be unlimited because, for gender fluid people, sexual identity varies over time (Vivaldelli, 2021). In Norway, Santa Claus is

represented by a gay man kissing another man (Braghieri, 2021). Recently, the Council of Europe, (an organization whose purpose is to promote democracy, human rights, European cultural identity and the search for solutions to social problems in Europe) called on all EU countries to facilitate the change of sex also for minors and remove the obligation to choose the gender in legal documents (Galici, 2022). Last but not least, the European Parliament now has its own special ambassador for LGBTQIA+ people who introduced a new way to represent and celebrate Christmas in the politically correct form: the “transgender Virgin Mary” (Leardi, 2021). Western Europe is going through a bad and shaky period: the Russia-Ukraine war, risk of a new world conflict, nuclear threats, economic recession, frightening increase in energy costs. But this does not seem to matter much to the politicians of Brussels. Despite these serious problems, the main issue discussed weekly by the European Parliament is that of neutral bathrooms and inclusive language, which must be applied throughout the European Union (Benignetti, 2022). We live in an era of obsession with gender, differences and specificities, of the smooth and ultra-cautious use of words that are bent to be absolutely inclusive. The use of schwa and other inclusive language, in response to demands of the LGBTQIA+ world, recall so-called “cancel culture” - a phenomenon that blames, often retroactively, without trials and on the basis of collective hysteria, historical or famous personalities for having said or done something today considered offensive or politically incorrect towards some minorities - because they all tend to impose a narrow vision. It would be interesting to study the relationships between all these phenomena that affect the language, culture and society in which we live. But this, eventually, could be the subject of a future essay.

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