

The Case for a Duty to Use Gender-Fair Language in Democratic Representation

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Abstract

In the light of a study of the difference between political actors and ordinary citizens as language users, and based on three moral arguments (consequence-based, recognition-based, and complicity-based), we propose that democratic representatives have an imperfect duty to use gender-fair-language in their public communication. In the case of members of the executive, such as ministries, prime ministries, and presidents, such an imperfect duty could also be justified on democratic grounds. Their choice of using a gender-unfair language, we argue, can cast doubts on the fundamental democratic commitment to respect the agency of all present and future citizens as potential participants in the law-making process.

Keywords: gender-fair language, democratic representation, democracy, gender, philosophy of language, ventriloquistic implicatures

1 Introduction

It has been years since scholars started denouncing linguistic gender asymmetries, such as the generic use of the masculine to represent all human beings or the use of masculine role nouns for women professionals, and their impact on sexist attitudes.¹

Gender-fair language (hereby GFL) is an umbrella term referring to a range of different strategies — otherwise labeled as non-sexist language, gender-neutral language, and inclusive language — to avoid sexist uses of language. Different types of languages (Stahlberg et al. 2007) require different GFL strategies (see European Commission 2008). For instance, GFL

¹See Hellinger (1980) and Silveira (1980).

in natural gender languages like English, whose nouns are typically gender-neutral but that have gendered pronouns, mainly consists of adopting or creating gender-neutral words - especially gender-neutral pronouns or role names such as ‘they’ and ‘chairperson’, respectively. In genderless languages like Finnish, which only mark gender on specific nouns, GFL consists of paying attention to lexical choice. In grammatical gender languages like Italian, which mark gender on every noun and many agreement targets such as adjectives and articles, GFL typically takes the form of either neutralization (replacing masculine forms with gender-neutral forms) or visibility (replacing generic masculine forms with feminine-masculine word pairs).

Crucially, what counts as an appropriate use of GFL depends largely on the type of language concerned as well as theoretical and political perspectives. Indeed, GFL refers to a variety of strategies, initiatives, and reforms. Beyond these varieties, what characterizes GFL is (I) being introduced as a response to the recognition of structural gendered asymmetries shaping social relations in our societies. Moreover, (II) within the system of principles and presuppositions shaping what is deemed as a default practice within a language community, GFL aims to avoid the generic use of masculine forms, (III) it aims to achieve gender equality by reducing the harm caused or constituted by discrimination in language. Then, (IV) most members of a language community can recognize the use of GFL as an attempt at challenging the sexist use of language.

Professional and political organizations have already committed to adopting a language that can help reduce prejudice, forms of implicit discrimination, and stereotypes.² Yet, the adoption of GFL as a standard practice in public communication and everyday conversations is still met with harsh criticism. In some countries, it is the object of a polarizing political debate.

This is especially so in countries like Italy, where the issue has surged to the spotlight in the last decade. Politicians’ linguistic choices can provide insight into the dimensions and drives still at play nowadays in choosing whether to use GFL or not. Let’s now turn to three such examples.

In 2010, when Susanna Camusso became leader of the main Italian trade union, CGIL, she chose to adopt the gender-unfair, masculine title ‘segretario’ (union leader-m.sg.) instead of the gender-fair, feminine ‘segretaria’ (union leader-f.sg.) for herself, despite her personal preference and the linguistic norm of Italian (Adnkronos Redazione 2010).³ Given the character-

²See, among others, European Commission (2008).

³Hereafter, we use ‘f’ for ‘feminine’, ‘m’ for ‘masculine’, ‘pl’ for ‘plural’, and ‘sg’ for ‘singular’.

istics of Italian, especially the fact that all nouns are gendered and that the grammatical gender of personal nouns typically corresponds to their referent's gender, feminine titles are gender-fair when referring to a woman while masculine titles reinforce the idea that certain roles can only be fulfilled by men.⁴ In 2013, on the contrary, the President of the Italian lower chamber Laura Boldrini called for being addressed as 'la Presidente' (the-f.sg. President) (La Repubblica TV 2013). Almost a decade later, Giorgia Meloni, upon her appointment as (first female) Italian Prime Minister, released a formal note demanding that the masculine title 'il Signor Presidente del Consiglio' (the-m.sg. Mr.-m.sg. President of the Council) is used for her despite identifying as a woman (Open 2022).

On the one hand, the need to specify the preferred gendered form only arises if that specific form is not the default one. That is, the very need to specify a certain form makes explicit that the chosen form is not the default option, or that there is no established gendered form in that context. So, for instance, the fact that in 2013, Boldrini had to call for the gender-fair form and, in 2022, Meloni opted for the gender-unfair form can be seen as proof of a change in the default way to address women holding high-ranking offices in Italy.

On the other hand, the need to make these linguistic choices public demonstrates how politically sensitive the topic can be. It seems plausible to presume that if the choice to opt for a specific gendered form was perceived as peripheral, major political actors would need some other reason to bring the topic to public attention. The rise to the political mainstream of debates around gendered form is particularly telling in the case of Meloni: she and her party *Fratelli d'Italia* have often insisted that the debate on GFL is pointless, that the requests made by left-wing politicians over feminine titles are a waste of time, and that these disputes divert the public from important questions. Yet, issuing the note on the preferred title was one of the very first things Meloni did after taking office. While this choice can be seen as problematic insofar as it may jeopardize the struggle of less powerful women to be addressed in the feminine, we here focus on how Meloni's move reveals the political significance of GFL, one that holds even for those openly arguing for its irrelevance.

It is against this backdrop that we aim to elucidate some analytic and normative aspects regarding the use of GFL in democratic politics. Several

⁴In English the struggle aims at substituting feminine job titles for gender-neutral ones. In Italian, advocating for feminine titles has the same ultimate goal: that is, aligning these nouns to the rest of the linguistic system and getting rid of the supposition that certain social and professional roles are exceptional for women.

studies have already highlighted the importance of using GFL consistently (e.g., Lindqvist, Renström, and Sendén 2018; Kapusta 2016; Sczesny, Formanowicz, and Moser 2016). However, from this observation, it does not follow that all political actors have a duty to use GFL, or that the effectiveness of GFL reforms always prevails over countervailing reasons in favor of language status quo. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) have argued that we have at least a negative duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns to refer to genderqueer individuals. However, we still do not know if (and on what grounds) we can hold our politicians accountable for their (non)sexist linguistic choices. In this paper, we demonstrate that multiple grounds support the idea that most democratic actors (DR) have an imperfect duty to use GFL. In the case of members of the executive (ME), such a duty could also be justified on democratic grounds. To support our claims, we begin by distinguishing between the use of GFL in everyday interactions and politics (Section 2). Then, we differentiate between ordinary citizens and political actors as language users (Section 3). In light of this analysis, Section 4 spells out our normative argument. Section 5 concludes.

Two preliminary remarks are on point.

First, by the expression ‘political actors’ (PA) we mean to include several agents. It covers DR, such as non-elected party leaders, members of the parliament, members of local assemblies, trade-unionists, spokespeople who speak on behalf of social movements, religious, and cultural groups, and self-appointed representatives, like public intellectuals and scientists, who are recognized as having authority and credibility as language users. Moreover, it includes ME, such as ministries, prime ministries, and presidents.⁵ There might be significant contextual differences among ME. And, in some cases, ME can even be members of the legislature. We assume, however, that in taking on an overall and time-bound responsibility for the government of a democratic state, people in the top leadership roles of the executive branch can be expected to prioritize constitutionally democratic interests over partisan interests. Even if some ME rarely seem to do so, the scope of their roles is also defined by constitutional instruments, such as impeachments and motions of no confidence, that, on the one hand, apply uniquely to ministries, prime ministries, and presidents, and that, on the other hand, are meant to ensure the continuation of a constitutional and

⁵We recognize that our conceptualization of DR may sound overinclusive. In so doing, we aim to be consistent with ongoing debates on representation in political science and theory. On self-appointed representatives, (e.g., U2 frontman Bono, grassroots actors, and Oxfam spokesperson) who make claims to represent groups, people, and shared causes at public gatherings and on the media, see Montanaro (2012).

democratic government over time.

Second, this article does not enter debates on what properties define a woman.⁶ Our focus is on the deployment of words and expressions that can be understood as proxies to display the intention to avoid reproducing a sexist ideology.

2 Gender-fair language: varieties, complexity, and political significance

In this section, we'll focus on those uses of language aimed at avoiding expressing, voluntarily or not, sexism. Sexism can emerge from lexical items as well as from certain grammatical conventions. Examples of the former are words such as 'shrill', that "generally presupposes that certain women's voices are unpleasantly high or loud, in relation to an assumed female norm of quietness and a male norm of low pitch." (Mills 2008: 44-45). Examples of grammatical conventions expressing sexism are the use of masculine titles (e.g., 'chairman') for female referents, masculine terms for generic or unknown individuals (e.g., 'his' in 'Do you know who left *his* book?') and for mixed-gender groups (e.g., 'mankind' or 'congressmen' to refer to members of congress of different genders). We will indicate this set of usages as 'overextended masculine'.

GFL focuses on avoiding sexism in language and, thus, overextended masculine, *inter alia*. As mentioned in the introduction, GFL can be implemented either by emphasizing gender or by neutralizing it. Thus, as mentioned above, we can identify two families of strategies: *visibility* and *neutrality*. In what follows, we'll briefly present these approaches to GFL, highlighting the challenges they pose, especially for heavily gendered languages.

Visibility consists in using gendered terms so as to make women visible. Such a strategy, designed for heavily gendered languages, would correspond in English to referring to a woman with feminine nouns, such as 'chairwoman', and to generic and unknown individuals or mixed-gender groups with multiple forms of a term, e.g., respectively, 'Do you know who left *her or his* book?' and 'congressmen and congresswomen'.

Neutrality, instead, involves avoiding linguistic elements that provide information on the referent's gender. In English, an example of neutralization is the singular use of pronoun 'they': it allows referring to generic or unknown individuals, that may be of any gender, with a gender-neutral term.

⁶See Alcoff (2005) and Kapusta (2016).

A further example of neutralization from English is the use of ‘chairperson’ to refer to both generic or unknown individuals and to specific individuals, regardless of their gender. In this respect, ‘chairperson’ works like most English personal nouns: except for a handful, such as the compounds of ‘man’, they have a single gender-neutral form. Finally, we can mention the use of gender-neutral terms for mixed-gender groups, e.g., ‘members of congress’ instead of the overextended masculine ‘congressmen’ or split form ‘congressmen and congresswomen’.

Visibility and neutrality constitute different approaches to achieving gender fairness in language. So far, all the examples used to illustrate these strategies have been in English. However, how GFL gets put into practice greatly differs from one language to another, also depending on the extent to which gender is marked in a specific language. In particular, using gender-fair strategies can be especially demanding in heavily gendered languages. It is, however, these languages GFL is mostly relevant to.

As we mentioned in the introduction, scholars tend to identify three groups based on how pervasive gender is in their grammar: genderless languages, natural gender languages, and grammatical gender languages. Languages of the first kind, such as Turkish and Hungarian, do not mark gender even in pronouns. Natural gender languages, such as English and Danish, have gendered personal pronouns, but most nouns are gender-neutral. Finally, grammatical gender languages, such as Italian and German, mark gender not only on personal pronouns but on almost every noun. Moreover, in languages of the last type, agreement targets, namely, linguistic items such as articles, adjectives, and part participles, that are in a syntactic relationship with nouns, are gendered too. So, gender-fair strategies in grammatical gender languages impact many more elements than their English counterparts.

As mentioned in the introduction, we’ll consider examples of the adoption and rejection of GFL in Italy. Thus, it’s important to better understand what gender-fair strategies look like and how challenging can be to employ them in Italian. To this end, let’s see a few comparisons between English and Italian examples. Consider (1) for instance:

- (1) A schoolteacher is not satisfied if the pupils are not interested in what he says.

To make this English sentence gender-fair, one only has to change the pronoun ‘he’. However, to make (2), the Italian counterpart of (1), gender-fair, one should change all the elements in italics:

- (2) *Un maestro non è soddisfatto se gli alunni non sono interessati a quello che lui dice.*
 A-m.sg. schoolteacher-m.sg. not is satisfied-m.sg. if the-m.pl. pupils-m.pl. not are interested-m.pl. to what that he-m.sg. says
 “A schoolteacher is not satisfied if the pupils are not interested in what he says.”

That is, while making the English (1) gender-fair only requires modifying the pronoun, doing the same with the Italian (2) involves changing, on top of the pronoun, the articles, nouns, and adjectives. Clearly, then, it is more demanding.

As mentioned above, one can make a sentence gender-fair by repeating gendered terms in both the masculine and the feminine, thus making gender visible, or by avoiding gendered terms altogether, thus neutralizing gender. With respect to the English example (1), the first strategy (namely, visibility, ‘V’) amounts to using both ‘he’ and ‘she’. The second strategy (namely, neutrality, ‘N’), instead, amounts to substituting ‘he’ with a gender-neutral pronoun such as ‘they’. The results are as follows:

- (1-V) A schoolteacher is not satisfied if the pupils are not interested in what he *or she* says.
 (1-N) A schoolteacher is not satisfied if the pupils are not interested in what *they* say.

As for the Italian (2), the following are possible visibility and neutrality versions:

- (2-V) *Un maestro non è soddisfatto o una maestra non è soddisfatta se gli alunni schoolteacher-f.sg. not is satisfied-f.sg. if the-m.pl. pupils-m.pl. e le alunne non sono interessati e and the-f.pl. pupils-f.pl. not are interested-m.pl. and interessate a quello che lui o lei dice.*
 interested-f.pl. to what that he-m.sg. or she-f.sg. says
 “A schoolteacher is not satisfied if the pupils are not interested in what he or she says.”
- (2-N) *Chi insegna non trova soddisfazione se la classe non è*
 Who teaches not finds satisfaction if the class not is

interessata a ciò che viene detto.
interested to what that is said
“The one who teaches does not find satisfaction if the class is not
interested in what it is said.”

The first option (visibility) is heavily redundant, while the second one (neutrality) involves a great deal of rephrasing to avoid gendered terms. Crucially, both strategies require the speaker to focus and put in a lot of effort in order to express themselves gender-fairly. So, while English speakers need to pay attention to using GFL and may make mistakes, this is even more so for speakers of grammatical gender languages like Italian. It will be especially important to keep this fact in mind in making normative claims concerning the use of GFL as the related difficulties weigh on the feasibility of consistently adopting gender-fair strategies in certain contexts.

Importantly, the topic of GFL is a political topic, in several ways. In particular, GFL constitutes an explicit topic of discussion among and within political organizations: language has traditionally been at the center of feminist demands. Relatedly, the adoption of GFL, or the refusal to do so, signals affiliation with a specific community or ideal. In particular, we argue that the use of GFL gives rise to *ventriloquistic implicatures*, as defined by Nunberg (2018).

Nunberg (2018) introduces the notion of *ventriloquism* as the “conversational maneuver” through which “in using the ‘marked’ form the speaker associates himself with the attitudes of a group whose norms wouldn’t ordinarily govern linguistic choices in the speech-situation” (Nunberg 2018: 267). Marked forms are less frequent forms that “suggest some additional meaning or connotation absent from the corresponding unmarked forms.” (Levinson 2000: 137).

Gender-fair expressions tend to be more complex, less usual and less neutral in register than their counterparts: they are marked and are, thus, candidates to generate ventriloquistic implicatures. Moreover, they can be used to associate oneself “with the attitudes of a group whose norms wouldn’t ordinarily govern linguistic choices in the speech-situation.” (Nunberg 2018: 267). In particular, gender-fair expressions can be used to associate oneself with the attitudes of feminist groups, whose norms don’t ordinarily govern speech-situations. We can thus analyze Boldrini’s call to be addressed with the feminine ‘la Presidente’ (the-f.sg. President), rather than with the more common masculine form, in this light: by asking for the gender-fair form, Boldrini associates herself with a group whose norms wouldn’t ordinarily govern linguistic choices in the speech-situation, namely with advocates of

gender equality, specifically feminists.⁷ That is, Boldini’s request to be addressed with the gender-fair form conveys a ventriloquistic implicature signaling affiliation with feminist groups.

Furthermore, we argue that when gender-fair expressions become the norm, the refusal to use such expressions also gives rise to a ventriloquistic implicature. Consider, for instance, Meloni’s formal request to be addressed with the masculine ‘il Signor Presidente’ (the-m.sg. Mr.-m.sg. President). In this case, Meloni associates herself with the conservatives that reject GFL and question its feminist assumptions. That is, Meloni’s request conveys a ventriloquistic implicature signaling affiliation with conservative groups. Unlike what happened in 2013 with Boldrini, in 2022, Meloni had to specify that she didn’t want the feminine form to be used for her. This depends on the fact that, in recent years, the use of feminine forms such as ‘la Presidente’ has become increasingly more common. Hence, although gender-fair expressions are typically marked and their use gives rise to ventriloquistic implicatures, in contexts where they are the norm, it’s the refusal to use them to give rise to an implicature of this kind.

What is more, since public communication of state representatives is meant to express what democratic institutions stand for, the choice of using gender-unfair language conveys the idea that women have a lower social standing in that society. From this angle, state representatives’ public appeals with a gender-unfair language communicate a message of inferiority and alter the social relationship of equality between members of a democratic society. In this sense, they generate ventriloquistic implicature, but they also constitute a form of expressive harm (Anderson and Pildes 2000, 1544).

As we shall see in section 4, the recognition of different ventriloquistic implicatures impacts how we can justify normative expectations regarding the linguistic choices of DR and ME.

3 Ordinary citizens and political actors as language users

In this section, we list three fundamental factors (spontaneity, authority, and credibility) to distinguish between two ideal types of language users – ordinary citizens (OC) and PA (democratic representatives and members of the executive). In highlighting such categories, we do not claim that spontaneity, authority, and credibility are the only conceptual lenses to account

⁷‘President’ is not marked as either ‘f’ or ‘m’ because it is indeclinable.

for differences in status between speakers. They are however consistent with research in philosophy of language, sociolinguistics, and political philosophy.

To be sure, our analysis does not apply to PA in their private non-professional interactions with friends, family members, and partners. There might be cases, as with presidents and prime ministers, in which the public and private persona are expected to perfectly overlap, but this is disputable. Several scholars have already observed that there are many differences between legislators, leaders, and ordinary speakers. According to Maitra (2012: 95), “a legislator in a democratic society has the authority to give or take away rights and powers from members of that society by enacting legislation. But an ordinary speaker [...] does not appear to have any such authority”. For Charteris-Black (2005), a successful political leader has a more pressing need to achieve a sense of congruence with the attitudes and emotions of their listeners. This can be explained by the need to establish a relationship with the represented who can make judgments based only on what a political actor does and says in public.⁸ Furthermore, each of the three conceptual lenses admits differences in degree. It is platitude to notice that PA do not have the same degree of authority and credibility. Since we aim to offer a general analytic framework, we will not deal with such variations here. We will approach this issue a bit more indirectly in Section 4.

Firstly, when giving prepared speeches, PA have more time to think about what they say.⁹ The message is professionally shaped, and, in some cases, the speech is composed by teams of professional writers who use words and expressions to convey explicit and implicit messages. PA, as opposed to OC, can read parts of the speech. They also find strategies to generate support and emphasize some claims. For instance, in his 2002 Labor Party Conference Address, Tony Blair used pairs of clauses in which the syntax and lexis were matched to produce memorable and quotable phrases (Charteris-Black 2005: 5).

Crucially, that speeches are prepared, instead of spontaneous, enables PA to use GFL even in languages where doing so is most difficult, such as grammatical gender languages. As shown in section 2, these languages mark gender pervasively, and a speaker wanting to adopt gender-fair strategies has to mind several elements of their sentences. As we pointed out, this makes expressing oneself gender-fairly in grammatical gender languages far more challenging than in languages such as English. This is especially so

⁸On this issue, see also Ball and Peters (2000).

⁹Notice that PA also answer many real-time questions without preparation. Since those answers are one of the most important ways to connect with the audience, we consider them as public appeals.

given that one has to go against ingrained linguistic habits: one has to turn the gender-unfair sentences that naturally come to mind into gender-fair alternatives. Applying the visibility or neutrality strategies presented above on the fly is extremely difficult and many mistakes typically result from such attempts. On the contrary, if one has the opportunity to plan their speech in advance, applying such strategies becomes easier. Moreover, turning gender-unfair sentences into gender-fair ones requires linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic skills and is, thus, easier for professional writers than for laypeople. Hence, it is not unreasonable to expect PA' speeches to be gender-fair even for grammatical gender languages precisely because they are written in advance and by professional writers.

The second factor we consider is speakers' authority, an issue extensively discussed in the literature on subordination and hate speech.¹⁰ Taking into account the authority as language users appears an obvious way to differentiate between OC and PA as language users.¹¹ Even if it seems intuitive that speakers must occupy a certain position of authority to secure uptake, speaker authority needs not necessarily derive from social and institutional positions. In some cases, OC acquire authority because of bystanders and listeners' reactions (Maitra 2012: 107). It is therefore too simplistic to suppose that as language users, PA differ from OC just because the latter cannot obtain the same kind of context-relative authority in speaking situations. Friends, for instance, can be recognized with enough context-relative authority to make listeners accommodate presuppositions and secure uptake.

There must be some other ways to explain the difference between OC and PA in terms of their authority as language users. One may point to the fact that since some people are associated with the activities related to the governance of a country, they have presumptive authority because language use is accompanied by the capacity to act. This line of reasoning would make PA' authority as language users parasitic on their political authority. This also oversimplifies. The kind of authority PA can have as language users does not necessarily correlate with democratic institutions being recognized a legitimate claim right to rule. In some cases, like that of presidency, they may overlap, but this is not a rule — also because political authority “is taken to be *prima facie* objectionable and difficult to attain” (Adams 2020: 562).

In the case of PA, language use is also accompanied by the capacity to

¹⁰See Langton (2018), Kukla (2014), and Maitra (2012).

¹¹We do not refer to authority in general, but rather to one's authority as language user in a particular situation. Authority is in this sense relative to a specific normative system. On this issue, see Langton (2018) and Adams (2020).

simultaneously address many people who are situated in different places.¹² This suggests that between OC and PA, the difference in authority as language users can be framed in terms of authority jurisdiction (understood as the social context where speakers have the power to enact or reject norms).¹³ Even if some OC are accompanied by a great deal of in-group authority, they have limited jurisdiction, and their authority is contingent on a case-by-case recognition of the relevant in-group authority relations (Whitten 2019: 560). Such recognition may depend on structural patterns that go beyond the configuration of a discursive interaction at a particular time. To borrow an example from Lepoutre (2022: 4), the words of an American Neo-Nazi activist may carry weight among white supremacists, Far Right movements, and other political groups. And, when presidents speak, we know that they may influence what members of Congress, senators, governors, and future presidents will deem permissible (Tulis 1987).

Since they can have authority over larger jurisdictions, PA' linguistic choices can more easily favor emulation and repetition beyond speakers' social networks.¹⁴ The press and mass media institutions follow PA around. They share, broadcast, and repeat what PA say. For this reason, PA, as opposed to OC, can start linguistic trends with their speeches, catchphrases, and slogans to a greater extent than OC.¹⁵

By altering frequency and patterns of use, PA can alter the conventions governing some words' use, and the inference one could draw from their choices of specific expressions. As Tirrell (2012) documents, after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the government of Rwanda wanted all use of 'Tutsi' and 'Hutu' stopped. This capacity to generate transmission of linguistic practices across contexts has also at least another implication. Especially when words and utterances carry social meaning, PA can contribute to defining what counts as the most common representation of social reality. For instance, as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 114) report, once asked about the evidence supporting his claim that three million illegal alien votes cost him the popular vote, "Trump replied by invoking the only sources of validation that mattered: Many people have come out and said I'm right".

Interestingly, there are intermediate figures between OC and political representatives with respect to authority jurisdiction and influence on large

¹²This mechanism is exemplified by signaling strategies, such as 'dogwhistle', 'code words', and 'implicit political messaging'. On this issue, see Saul (2019) and Khoo (2017).

¹³See Langton (2018: 138 – 41) and Langton (2009: 98).

¹⁴Recall here that we include self-appointed representatives, like public intellectuals and scientists, among PA.

¹⁵On this issue, see Olsen and Harvey (1988).

audiences. For instance, influencers with thousands of followers act in a way that used to be a prerogative of political figures and, given how information spreads nowadays, their linguistic choices get taken on by their followers and shared through social media, reaching more and more people. Influencers have the chance to prepare their content in advance, hence they resemble PA with respect to spontaneity as well. However, influencers and PA come apart when considering their credibility: influencers do not generally have the same level of credibility regarding issues connected with policy decisions.

PA can access more pieces of information, relevant data, facts, and insider notices that validate their linguistic choices. In this sense, PA, if compared to OC who share the same political view, benefit from a surplus of *prima facie* credibility as language users. They are those who can transform some ordinary expressions into what should be recognized as the default language of those people who aim to advocate a certain interest. Let us explain.

OC can impose their linguistic choices as the most appropriate, but the validity of such choices tends not to depend on the fact that they are in a better position than most to grasp what can become a standard way to communicate a shared view of the world. Their capacity to impose language choice connects more easily with authority relationships and in-group patterns of recognition. Of course, there are also cases where OC rely on privileged access to some information to validate their language use. But this does not entail that such language use will become standard for communication between different groups of friends, colleagues, or relatives.

For instance, leaders of a progressive movement can justify their linguistic choice by referring to common practices in progressive movements across the globe, data on discrimination, the rise in racist incidents, urban-rural inequalities, and so on and so forth.¹⁶ Such a *prima facie* credibility surplus can also cause alarming distortions. Think of scapegoating: the president, who is also a commander-in-chief, and, therefore, has access to the best reports and analyses, uses expressions portraying some groups as existential threats to the stability of our society. Exactly because OC know that they have privileged access to some pieces of information, it is more likely for them to believe that their choice to use or not GFL is appropriate.¹⁷

Crucially, the speaker's identity can distort the performative force of

¹⁶This claim is not necessarily valid across party lines. In a polarized environment, where party members disagree on moral and political issues, there might also be disagreement on what counts as relevant evidence. It is enough for us to say that the argument applies vertically in the relationship between represented and their representatives.

¹⁷Here, we borrow from Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 61).

their speech act, either weakening or strengthening it.¹⁸ Thus, PA' credibility surplus could trigger an illocutionary amplification, resulting in them performing a different and stronger speech act than the one an ordinary speaker would have performed through the same linguistic conventions: while the use of gender-(un)fair language on the part of an ordinary citizen might simply come out as a personal choice, the very same action performed by a democratic representative might instead be interpreted as the establishment of normative limitations. Hence, recalling what we said in Section 2, the audience might be nudged into using gender-(un)fair language upon hearing PA doing it. It is against this backdrop that in the next section, we study the justification of DR and ME's duty to use gender-fair language.

To sum up, PA, if compared to OC, have more time to think about what they say. They also have larger authority jurisdictions and an enhanced capacity to start linguistic trends. Furthermore, at least within the group of people who share the same ideology, PA can benefit from a surplus of prima facie credibility as language users.¹⁹ It is against this background that in the next section, we will discuss the duties of different PA to use GFL.

4 A duty to use gender-fair language

We now turn to the possible justification of a duty to use GFL. In approaching normative problems that require a combination of individual and collective actions, political philosophers tend to search for general duties that apply to most people.²⁰

In this case, if we follow the analysis of Section 3, there can be significant differences in the normative standards regulating the linguistic choices of OC, DR, and ME. We thus take OC, DR, and ME one at a time. We first show that there are plausible, yet not definitive, moral grounds to justify both a duty of OC to use GFL in their everyday interactions and a duty of DR to use GFL in their public appeals. We then demonstrate that in the case of ME, using GFL is not only a moral matter but also a way to express the general democratic commitment to respect the agency of all citizens.

¹⁸This is the phenomenon of 'illocutionary amplification' (Kukla 2014). For instance, an older male faculty member attracted to his young female graduate student will not be able to invite her because, due to his social positioning and the asymmetry of power between the two, "his speech act can be taken up only as a request or an order" (Kukla 2014: 455).

¹⁹On the other hand, though, PA can, due to their role, be considered as less credible among those of opposite ideology. We will come back to this in Section 4.

²⁰See Howard (2021) and Lichtenberg (2010).

Our goal is to demonstrate that there is at least an imperfect duty to use GFL. We, therefore, accept that countervailing considerations may weaken the normative force of the duty.

4.1 Ordinary citizens

One may derive a duty of OC to use GFL in their everyday interactions from a more fundamental duty to rescue others from the harm of gender discrimination. If OC can effectively prevent the harm of gender discrimination by using GFL, then, as the argument goes, they ought to do so insofar as doing so is not unreasonably burdensome. Yet, gender discrimination is a structural and large phenomenon in which most OC have little control over the outcome. In this case, even if, as we argued in Section 2, the use of a non-default GFL can signal affiliation with advocates of gender equality through a ventriloquistic implicature, individual linguistic choices can rarely be considered as an example of effective rescue. In the face of large-scale phenomena, such as the spread of misogynistic speech and gender discrimination, in which individuals have little or no control over the outcome, it seems unlikely for an individual choice of using GFL to be decisive in shaping general linguistic standards. And this is a problem: the fact that individual contributions are seldom relevant can leave most language users off the hook. Moreover, in grammatical gender languages, such as French and Italian, where gender marking is pervasive, the use of a gender-fair expression, which is not among the standard options in everyday conversations, is both unlikely to count as an effective rescue and difficult for ordinary language users.

Since the way gender is encoded in a language may be associated with markers of equality, one may then turn to a recognition-based argument for the duty of OC to use GFL. Where respect is conceived as an entitlement, speakers owe women recognition of their social position and moral equality. The denial of recognition can manifest in the curtailment of basic rights, but it can also manifest in how people evaluate one's standing in society and capacity to engage in socially valuable activities. In societies where women are already underrepresented in the highest leadership positions, the use of gender-unfair language may implicate, for instance, that women fit into existing symbolic resources, that some positions and forms of recognition are associated with men only, that women have their voices unheard, that women people's social role is subordinate to men's.²¹ Against this backdrop,

²¹Women's disproportionate underrepresentation in positions of workplace authority is well documented in the empirical literature, see Longarela (2017).

if language is a tool to acknowledge a person's identity, establishing shared frameworks and patterns of social coordination, then the use of GFL in everyday interactions, and the ventriloquistic implicatures it generates, can be a way to publicly recognize the moral, social, and political equality of women. On this account, OC have a duty to use GFL in their everyday interactions derived from a more fundamental duty to be respectful of each person.

In a liberal and democratic society marked by the fact of pluralism, one may, however, also raise concerns over a fundamental disequilibrium in this justification of a moral duty of OC to use GFL in their everyday interactions. Especially considering how language can shape individual and inter-group identities, such a duty can impact the fundamental social interest in promoting the pluralism of viewpoints, the ways some groups maintain a shared identity across generations, and the public persona some members of society, including women, may desire recognition for.

There is at least another way to justify a moral duty of OC to use GFL in everyday interactions, while also accepting the facts that OC, as individual language users, can have little or no control over the harm of gender discrimination, and that there might be disagreements on what counts as a legitimate proxy for recognition. Such an argument is built on the idea that the use of gender-unfair language makes OC liable to accusations of complicity in the spread of misogynist ideas and practices. This can be seen by considering, once more, the ventriloquistic implicature that such usages convey. By using GFL, one affiliates themselves with advocates of gender equality while, on the contrary, refusing to use it signals affiliation with groups that oppose gender equality. In this case, the duty to use GFL is derived from a more fundamental duty to avoid complicity in wrongdoing. In contexts where GFL is generally understood as the default option, and, therefore, the choice of using a gender-unfair language generates ventriloquist implicatures, the duty to use GFL is in fact a duty not to refuse using GFL. In contexts where acceptance of dominant social norms may be seen as the default interpretation of silence, OC, who do not want to see themselves as contributing to the success of misogynist ideas and practices, should use GFL.²² It is a way to distance oneself from the connection that links individual agency with a large-scale phenomenon for which none of us can be held directly accountable and, instead, to affiliate oneself with the struggle toward gender equality.

²²On silence and presupposition introduction, see Ayala and Vasilyeva (2016) and Maitra (2012).

Irrespective of the justification given, there are considerations that go against a moral duty of OC to use GFL in their everyday interactions. First, there might be concerns regarding personal safety with regard to strong negative reactions by other participants in conversations (see the discussion in Maitra 2012). Second, since, as we highlighted in Section 2, it is not easy to employ GFL, it seems odd to expect all speakers to always use GFL appropriately. Linguistic abilities can vary greatly across the population: non-native speakers have lower linguistic competence than native speakers; language learning may also be part of a general process reproducing social inequality structures. Opportunities for planning our linguistic production may also vary depending on the context. One may find it particularly difficult to use gender-friendly language in quick writing exchanges and informal oral settings.

Based on this analysis, we do not deny that OC may have a duty, grounded on a more general moral duty, to use GFL in their everyday interactions. Nevertheless, several factors, including concerns about pluralism, challenges related to collective action, and differences in linguistic abilities, indicate that the scope of this duty might change from context to context, and that there might be several countervailing normative demands to be weighed. Such factors also let us think that a duty of OC to use GFL would hardly add much to the normative forces shaping our conversations. Some people—who are exactly those members of society contributing to the spread of misogynist ideas, practices, and language—may have strong enough countervailing reasons to dismiss it as trivial. Others—who consider gender discrimination and gender-unfair language as serious problems—may, in fact, be committed to using GFL for already existing and independent reasons.

4.2 Democratic representatives

Since DR are citizens like everyone else, one can argue, they can have a duty, grounded on a more general moral duty, to use GFL. And, if all citizens had a moral duty, towards one another, to use GFL in their everyday interactions, then, especially considering our analysis in Section 3, it would be reasonable to conclude that DR should be held even more accountable for their linguistic choices. Many considerations that speak against a duty to use GFL do not apply to the case of political figures who convey public appeals. For one, political speeches are normally planned and, sometimes, result from the back-and-forth between many staff members with linguistic competence.

All this seems intuitively plausible, but there is a serious problem. Such

a straightforward argument leaves aside important factors, and, for this reason, it is too simplistic to be useful. Actually, DR, because of their special position in a democratic society, may be exempted from certain duties, such as the duty to use GFL, even if this duty is normatively salient for the broad population. We cannot diminish the importance of the fact that, in their public appeals, DR speak on behalf of large groups. For instance, elected representatives may speak on behalf of their constituency, and non-elected representatives may speak on behalf of a community of people with shared interests and practices. There might therefore be good reasons to think that a duty of DR to use GFL in their public appeals may overwhelmingly impact the fundamental interest of certain groups to promote their viewpoints in their own way.

Furthermore, the idea that DR have a duty to use GFL in public appeals does not necessarily depend on the argument that all citizens owe one another a duty to use GFL. It is entirely plausible that DR have a duty to use GFL even if we remain agnostic on the question of whether all citizens (all citizens who are not DR) have a duty to use GFL. There might be some inherent characteristics in the role of a democratic representative within a democratic society that justify more compelling normative standards. To address this issue, we consult the political philosophical understanding of those normative relationships that constitute the role of a democratic representative.

To recall what we said in the introduction, most PA can count as DR. In short, a democratic representative is a member of society who is recognized by other members of society as someone who is entitled to represent a group — the represented people — in the democratic decision-making process. In virtue of a generally accepted process, DR, on the one side, have an entitlement to represent the represented people and, on the other side, the represented people have an entitlement to evaluate and sanction the representative.²³ Built into the description of DR there is therefore the idea that they have more power and authority to influence decision-making than lay citizens.

Such a surplus of authority and power supports the intuition that DR have a duty to use GFL in public appeals, even if the same duty does not apply to OC in their everyday interactions. As we mentioned earlier, consequentialist reasons speak in favor of a duty to use GFL. While citizens are not individually able to render aid that can rescue women from the harm of discrimination, DR, whose speech has a greater influence on the

²³See Rehfeld (2018) and Mansbridge (2011).

democratic discourse, can support otherwise dispersed people to act together in a more meaningful way. On this account, the duty to use GFL in public appeals can be derived from a more general duty to enable action that can rescue someone from harm.

Moreover, the deliberate choice of DR to use masculine forms is not only a way to show little interest in reforming sexist language. Even if DR use gender-unfair language for purely strategic and opportunistic reasons, their linguistic choices, especially when DR have the support of a strong constituency, expressively demonstrate that there is a social base for the idea that women should be branded as lower in status. In a political system grounded on the recognition of the political equality of all members, such an explicit misrecognition supports the idea of a duty of DR to use GFL in their public appeals.

We have also claimed that the use of GFL can be a way to distance from wrongdoing, and that DR have more power and authority to influence democratic discourse than lay citizens. If the use of gender-unfair language in public appeals may legitimize the spread of misogynist practices and ideas, then the use of GFL in public appeals, and the ventriloquistic implicatures it generates, is a way to demonstrate that there is no room for discrimination in a democratic public sphere. Given the surplus in authority and power to influence public discourse, there is an additional point supporting an argument for a duty to use GFL grounded in the duty to avoid complicity. That is, DR' use of gender-unfair language generates duties that lay citizens would not have had if public discourse had been different. In using gender-unfair language, DR like Camusso make the rest of the audience wonder whether their supporters approve of such linguistic choices. In this way, they create a situation in which lay citizens have to visibly distance themselves from the linguistic choices of their representatives. This would shift part of the onus to avoid complicity in wrongdoing back to individual citizens who, however, do not have the same authority to direct public discourse.

Taken together, these arguments confirm the idea that DR can have a duty to use GFL grounded on more general moral duties. Therefore, there seems to be good reasons for the public to hold DR like Boldrini and Camusso accountable for their linguistic choices, even if this entails standards that do not apply to OC themselves.

There is, however, still room for the pluralist objection. That is, since speech shapes how DR are perceived by the public, holding DR accountable for not using GFL may limit their capacity to differentiate themselves from competitors. The pluralist objection might be particularly problematic in at least two cases: cases in which DR are clearly committed to delivering

socially valuable public goods but make bad linguistic choices; and cases in which certain gender-unfair words are perceived as a key component of the self-image of a group. Anyway, one may object that in publicly justifying laws and policies, elected democratic representatives, unlike ordinary citizens in their private and everyday interactions, should refer to reasons that members of the public can accept, and that are consistent with the idea that all human beings are free and equal.²⁴ On this view, if the use of gender-unfair language expresses the inferiority of some members of society, then DR should always be held morally accountable for their linguistic choices.

Even granting that in some cases, there are considerations that speak against the idea that DR have a duty to use GFL, the pluralist objection does not prove the idea of a duty of DR to use GFL in their public appeals unsound. It simply highlights two points: first, some countervailing reasons can limit the scope of the duty in certain contexts; second, the duty does not necessarily apply to all possible DR. Nevertheless, our argument implies that DR, even under this fairly permissive account, have the burden of proving that a linguistic choice violating the moral duty to use GFL in public appeals is the only realistic way to communicate certain ideas in a democratic public sphere. In other words, unless using GFL significantly affects the shared interest in representing a plurality of worldviews and delivering socially valuable public goods, it is legitimate to hold DR morally accountable for their sexist language.

4.3 Members of the Executive

So far, we have focused on OC and DR. We now turn to a subset of DR, such as ME like Meloni. There seems to be little reason to doubt that ME ought to respect some linguistic norms. If the moral argument applies to the cases of DR, it follows logically that ME, who have more authority and power to influence democratic discourse than everyone else, should respect at least the same moral standards. This way of reasoning is straightforward. Furthermore, to recall what we said at the end of Section 2, public appeals of ME can constitute expressive harm. With their linguistic choices, ME can expressively deny certain citizens recognition as equal members of society. In democratic societies grounded on the equality of all members, this generates moral reasons to use GFL in all public appeals.

Nevertheless, in framing the normative significance of a duty to use GFL as a moral issue, it overlooks the specifically democratic reasons that can

²⁴Here, we refer primarily to a Rawlsian understanding of public justification. See Rawls (1996).

justify Meloni's duty to use GFL. A democratic perspective helps us to see whether it is possible to justify the idea that ME have a duty to use GFL, even in cases where OC and other DR are not expected to abide by the same linguistic standards, or in cases where there are different moral grounds to evaluate linguistic choices of OC, DR, and ME. Our argument will help to see that no matter what we think about OC and DR, there are democratic grounds to hold ME accountable for their linguistic choices.

On this account, we argue, the duty to use GFL in public appeals can also be derived from a more general duty to protect the preconditions for democratic integrity. As said, ME enjoy a significant surplus of authority and power to influence the democratic discourse. Moreover, they can benefit from institutional channels to communicate with the public. ME, as opposed to DR, who, as we have seen before, represent specific interests and groups, have also the entitlement to represent the entire public.

The mechanics of democratic representation has been studied mostly in relation to legislative function or to politicized actions that take place beyond the confines of traditional parliamentary activities and negotiations (Urbinati and Warren 2008). As a matter of fact, ME also fulfill several representative functions. For instance, in international meetings, ministers and presidents represent the whole country. As a symbol of the unity of the nation, ME can issue directives that manage specific operations of the government in times of crisis. During the celebration of historical events and anniversaries, they address the people and carry out symbolic acts to affirm basic principles, such as equality of all people, liberty, and justice. In this way, what ME say serves as the appropriate model to judge how the demos as a whole stands with respect to key issues and principles.

In their public appeals, ME like Meloni, therefore, speak on behalf of the entire demos. From such a privileged position, ME's linguistic choices can be understood as expressing the norm. For this reason, the public use of gender-unfair language by ME may lead both other countries and the domestic public to cast doubts on the fundamental democratic commitment to respect the agency of all present and future citizens as potential participants in the law-making process. Without such a public assurance, some citizens may lose motivation to continue participating in all those activities, such as voting and participating in public demonstrations, that create the preconditions for democratic institutions to have a legitimate claim right to rule.

One may resist this conclusion. People may argue that ME are expected to consider the interest in representing the multiplicity of viewpoints that shape the democratic public at a certain moment in time. This is so because the public use of GFL may cause someone (e.g., very conservative members

of society) to lose motivation to continue participating in democratic activities. This objection, we think, can be approached from two different angles.

One may bite the bullet and stress the idea that ME are not expected to represent the people-as-they-are-now, but rather they should represent the people-as-they-should-be given the fundamental normative commitments shaping a democratic society. One may also accommodate the objection and argue that philosophers should find the most appropriate content of a duty to use GFL. Such appropriate content would be the result of a balance between the interest in respecting the commitment to pluralism and the interest in respecting the agency of all present and future citizens. In both cases, however, our claim remains valid: even if we leave aside the standard set of moral reasons, there is a democratic ground to justify the duty to use GFL of ME.

To recap: we argued that in most cases, even if several countervailing considerations speak against a duty of OC to use GFL in their everyday interactions, PA should be held accountable for their linguistic choices. DR have a duty, grounded on more general moral duties, to use GFL in public appeals unless they are able to demonstrate that a gender-unfair language is necessary to communicate the ideas they represent in a democratic public sphere. ME also have a duty, grounded on the same general moral duties, to use GFL in public appeals. Moreover, a more general duty to protect the preconditions for democratic integrity yields a duty to use GFL in public appeals.

Three final remarks are on point. First, even if we have framed the duty in positive terms, it could also be presented as a negative duty not to use certain words or expressions (Dembroff and Wodak 2018). To demonstrate that moral and democratic arguments speak in favor of a duty to use GFL, it does not seem necessary to specify whether such a duty is positive or negative. Or better, we remain agnostic about the specific character of the duty to use GFL. Much depends on the justificatory strategy social and political philosophers choose, to wit: while harm-based and recognition-based arguments suggest that the duty is positive (namely, speakers ought to use GFL to rescue people from harm or to recognize women), a complicity-based argument supports a negative duty (namely, speakers ought to avoid using gender-unfair expressions in order not to be considered as an accomplice).

Second, we acknowledge that there might be other non-moral reasons to justify the duties of PA to use GFL. To recall some claims made in Section 3, the use of gender-unfair language may affect the credibility of democratic institutions.

Third, the extent to which PA' decision to use GFL is an example of ventriloquism is highly contextual.²⁵ Several factors, such as what counts as the default option in a specific context and the public idea of what is 'mainstream' feminism, will contribute to determining whether the use of GFL is perceived as a way to reject sexist stereotypes. Speakers cannot completely control how their speech will be received. It might also be challenging to follow all debates on what counts as a genuine rejection of sexist stereotypes and misogynist language. PA, we therefore argue, fulfill their duty when they use forms of GFL that are generally perceived as an attempt, though not necessarily the best one, to avoid sexist expressions.

5 Conclusion

We first studied the differences between GFL in ordinary conversation and GFL in politics. Then, we compared ordinary citizens and political actors as language users. In light of this analysis, we have argued that three moral arguments (consequence-based, recognition-based, and complicity-based) can justify the claim that democratic representatives and members of the executive have an imperfect duty to use GFL. We also distinguished between members of the executive and other democratic representatives, as there are cases in which the duty binds the former but not the latter. Members of the executive, though, can remain accountable for their linguistic choices on democratic grounds.

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²⁵We wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

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