

THE EFFECTS OF LINGUISTIC AND EXTRALINGUISTIC FACTORS ON THE PERCEPTION OF GENDER IN ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A PILOT STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Critical insights from poststructuralist approaches to language, particularly feminist linguistics, argue that masculine generics reflect the principle that men constitute the normative standard for humanity (Lindqvist *et al.*, 2019), thereby encoding and reinforcing an androcentric worldview (Ehrlich, King, 1992: 152). Moreover, it has been hypothesized that language not only reflects reality but also shapes our perception of it. This perspective is rooted in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativism, which posits that language is not merely a conduit for thought but can play a significant role in shaping it (Gleitman, Papafragou, 2013: 504; Boroditsky, 2006: 1). A substantial body of research suggests that masculine generics evoke a male bias, effectively erasing women from mental representations and, by extension, from discourse, whereas gender-fair forms enhance their visibility on both cognitive and social levels (Stahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Gabriel *et al.*, 2008; Vervecken, 2012; Sczesny *et al.*, 2015; Sczesny *et al.*, 2016; Horvath *et al.*, 2016). In line with empirical evidence indicating that language is a tool that can influence our gendered perception of reality, the promotion of gender-fair language has gained significant momentum in recent years (Vervecken *et al.*, 2015: 1). It is believed that changes in linguistic perception can potentially drive social change. In this context, the importance of gender-sensitive language has been recognized and encouraged by the European Parliament (2018): «Gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language is more than a matter of political correctness. Language powerfully reflects and influences attitudes, behaviour and perceptions [...] Using gender-fair and inclusive language also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change and contributes to achieving gender equality».

Building on established research that demonstrates the influence of the language form of professional nouns on gender perception, this study aims to explore the extralinguistic factors that contribute to gendered associations within professional domains. While previous studies have quantitatively confirmed the impact of language form on gender bias, they have not sufficiently addressed the socio-cognitive mechanisms that underlie the perception of complex social phenomena, particularly the intersections of culture, gender, and power. In line with this, the study investigates whether and how extralinguistic elements, such as internalized gender stereotypes, societal norms and beliefs, personal experiences, shape the perception of gender in the context of occupational nouns.

The study utilizes a focus group methodology, involving four groups composed of students studying Italian as a foreign language at the Department of Italian Studies, Faculty of Philology, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each group corresponds to a different academic year of the first cycle of bachelor studies, and thus,

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to a different level of Italian language fluency. The total number of participants is 23. Since previous studies have focused exclusively on L1, exploring the FL context offers a complementary perspective that may provide new insights into gender dynamics across different language structures.

The question of foreign language acquisition is approached from the perspective of critical applied linguistics, an approach that interprets the process of foreign language acquisition in relation to the broader sociocultural context and the power dynamics within it (Pennycook, 2001: 10). Critical applied linguistics can be understood as «the intersection of various domains of applied linguistic work that operate under an explicit critical label, including critical discourse analysis [...] and critical pedagogy» (Pennycook, 2008: 169). It is concerned with how students perceive and evaluate different instances of institutional knowledge. In this regard, it embraces the concept of *critical language awareness*, which aims to «empower learners by providing them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experiences and practices, as well as on the language practices of others within the institutions they are part of and the wider society in which they live» (Clark, Ivanić, 1997: 217).

2. MALE-BIAS IN THE PERCEPTION OF PROFESSIONAL TITLES

Although women have occupied professional roles traditionally reserved for men in a gender hierarchy for decades, the persistent use of masculine generics in grammatical-gender languages continues to perpetuate an androcentric worldview. Extensive research has documented that professional titles presented in masculine generics evoke a male bias in mental representation, while gender-sensitive pairs increase the visibility of women (Stahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Vervecken, 2012; Sczesny *et al.*, 2015; Vervecken *et al.*, 2015; Sczesny *et al.*, 2016; Horvath *et al.*, 2016).

The impact of language forms on perception extends beyond mental imagery associated with male or female figures, influencing the evaluation of professional success and self-assessment of suitability (Sczesny *et al.*, 2016: 4). In a study involving German-speaking primary school children, girls perceived that women would be less successful in traditionally male professions when titles were presented in masculine generics (Vervecken *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, French-speaking adolescents provided a more gender-balanced evaluation of success in stereotypically male, female, and gender-neutral jobs when professional titles were presented in gender-sensitive pairs rather than in masculine generics (Vervecken *et al.*, 2015).

Studies indicate that male bias may potentially have practical consequences (Lindqvist *et al.*, 2019). For instance, it was demonstrated that gender-fair forms increased girls' interest in stereotypically male occupations, suggesting that using paired forms in educational contexts may encourage girls to consider careers traditionally associated with men, potentially influencing their career choices (Vervecken *et al.*, 2013: 124). Masculine generics have been found to decrease women's motivation to apply for job interviews and reduce their sense of belonging in professional spheres perceived as identity-threatening environments (Stout, Dasgupta, 2013). Additionally, in a hiring simulation study, men were rated as more suitable candidates for leadership positions when job titles were presented in masculine generics, whereas both women and men were rated equally fit when titles were presented in gender-sensitive word pairs (Horvath, Sczesny, 2015).

Other studies suggest that masculine gender is encoded in perception as a marker of social prestige, which can undermine the effects of gender-fair language (Horvath *et al.*, 2016: 3).

In languages such as Italian and Serbian², some female forms of professional titles tend to be associated with lower societal status and reflect traditional meanings that imply male dependence [e.g., *ministra/ministarka* (minister) – ‘the wife of a minister’], or carry negative connotations related to sexuality and frivolousness (Marcato, Thüne, 2002).

Italian linguists advocating for gender-sensitive language use argue that female professional titles, like some neologisms, will gradually lose their negative connotations and come to be perceived as neutral if they are consistently used and integrated into language practice (Thornton, 2009; Robustelli, 2014; Giusti, 2018).

It is important to highlight that gender-fair language can be promoted through formal education and textbooks, which, in line with the principles of critical applied linguistics and critical pedagogy, have the potential to serve as powerful agents of social change. Contrary to these guidelines, a study focused on the linguistic representation of the professional sphere in Italian as a foreign language textbooks demonstrates that the use of masculine generics in professional depictions remains dominant, particularly concerning prestigious professions held by women (Vučenović, 2022). Findings from a recent study published in 2024 confirm the persistent use of masculine generics in textbooks when referring to prestigious professions (Frabotta, Pauletto, 2024). However, the study also identifies a clear trend in textbooks published after 2020 toward the inclusion of feminine forms – even for occupations traditionally dominated by men – such as *avvocata*, *giardiniera*, and *controllora* (Frabotta, Pauletto, 2024). The findings suggest that textbooks have become increasingly gender-aware; however, they also raise questions about the consistency of gender-sensitive approaches across Italian FL textbooks—specifically, whether such practices reflect a unified textbook policy or stem from individual editorial decisions and authorial perspectives.

3. METHODOLOGY

Considering the social-constructivist dimension of knowledge and perception, the research extends its focus beyond examining the impact of language form on male or female bias, aiming instead to identify and understand the underlying motivations, which may be deeply rooted in the participants’ personal knowledge of themselves and the world around them (Ritchie, 2003: 37). In line with this, the research also considers non-linguistic and unconscious factors that potentially influence students’ perceptions, reflecting broader cultural models and societal norms.

In the context of Bosnian society, the development of progressive egalitarian values is often constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, which continue to shape the perception of appropriate gender roles, even among younger populations (Vučenović, 2023; Spahić-Šiljak *et al.*, 2023).

The inquiries emerging from this research are inherently qualitative and are therefore assessed using focus group methodology. Focus group serves as a methodological tool typically employed to observe and analyze meanings that arise during group interactions, capturing social constructions and both collective and individual shared meanings that shape our perceptions (Finch, Lewis, 2003: 172)

The study also adopts a participatory approach, aiming to empower students to critically reflect on the social norms that influence language use and to encourage more inclusive language practices.

² Serbian is the L1 of the focus group participants. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, three official languages – Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian – are recognized, each corresponding to one of the country’s three constituent peoples.

The participants are students of Italian as a foreign language at the Department of Italian Language and Literature, University of Banja Luka. Analyzing a foreign language context represents a significant distinction from previous studies, which have focused exclusively on first languages (L1). This aspect is crucial for comparing and better understanding the cacophonous effects and negative connotations associated with female professional titles in grammatical-gender languages, as confirmed in earlier research (Marcato, Thüne, 2002; Horvath *et al.*, 2016: 3). Since these phenomena have been documented only in L1, exploring the FL context offers a complementary perspective that may provide new insights into gender dynamics across different language structures. To achieve maximum group homogeneity while adhering to the sample size criterion of no more than 10 participants, 4 focus groups were organized. Each group corresponds to a different academic year of the first cycle of bachelor studies, and thus, to a different level of Italian language fluency. The total number of participants is 23. More details about each group are summarized in the table below:

Table 1. *Focus group participants data*

Focus group	Academic year (BA studies)	CEFR language proficiency level	Number of participants	F	M
I	I	A1-A2	9	8	1
II	II	B1	3	2	1
III	III	B2	3	3	0
IV	IV	C1	8	7	1

Each focus group session lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. During the sessions, students were asked to observe four selected occupational nouns from the textbook *Facilissimo* and respond to the following question: *Do you associate the occupational nouns with a female or male figure? Please elaborate on your answer.* Based on the specific developments in the focus group discussions, a set of follow-up questions was posed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors shaping gender perception. These questions prompted reflections on language form (masculine generics vs. gender-sensitive pairs), gender stereotypes, cultural aspects, personal and educational experiences, and more. The occupational nouns were selected from a specific section of the *Facilissimo* textbook and were presented to students in their original form as they appear in the textbook:

Image 1. *Selected occupational nouns from the textbook Facilissimo*





As the illustrations demonstrate, the noun formulations exhibit inconsistent and asymmetrical representations: blue-collar professions are presented in gender-sensitive pairs [*infermiere/a* (nurse); *commesso/a* (salesperson)], while those associated with power and prestige, although depicted with female figures, are expressed using masculine generics [*avvocato* (lawyer); *medico* (doctor)]. These specific representations raise important questions: is the language form the primary factor triggering mental associations with women or men, or are social and cultural perceptions of gender in the professional domain more decisive? Do students recognize the asymmetries in the representation of prestigious versus blue-collar professions, and do they respond with approval, indifference, or critical perspectives? To summarize the main research questions of the focus group, its structure is outlined in the table below:

Table 1. *The focus group structure*

<i>Input for participants</i>	<i>Research questions</i>
<p>After projecting the textbook content, students were asked the following question: 'Do you associate the occupational nouns with a female or a male figure? Please elaborate on your answer.'</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which linguistic and extralinguistic factors are decisive in shaping associations with male or female figures? Does the specific language form (such as masculine generics versus gender-sensitive pairs) play a key role in triggering these associations, or are they shaped more by socio-cultural factors (such as the entrenched perception of certain professions as predominantly male or female)? 2. How do students perceive inconsistent morphological forms of the presented nouns? Are these forms viewed as appropriate language use, unrelated to social or ideological factors, or are they seen as asymmetrical forms that reflect and reinforce inequalities?

	3. Is the perceived cacophonous effect of feminine nouns denoting prestige, as documented in previous research on L1, also replicable in the context of FL?
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4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. *The impact of linguistic factors*

4.1.1. *Masculine generics*

Some participants reported as prevailing the impact of the language form in triggering gendered associations. The influence seems to be particularly strong in the category of masculine generics, which is in line with the findings from previous studies reporting male-bias produced by masculine generics (Stahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Vervecken, 2012; Sczesny *et al.*, 2015; Vervecken *et al.*, 2015; Sczesny *et al.*, 2016; Horvath *et al.*, 2016). Participants indicate that they find morphological form to be highly suggestive and that it instantly triggers associations with a male figure, despite of the illustration showing a woman:

It is the language form that automatically leads us on to picture a man (Ig/F).

Some participants acknowledge that in spite of the awareness of the widespread use of masculine generics referring to both female and male doctors and lawyers, due to the effects of language form the first association that they form reveals a male figure:

My association is triggered by the language form. ‘Avvocato’ can be used to indicate both men and women, and for instance, if ‘avvocatessa’ was used as a generic form, my first association would probably involve a woman (Ig/M).

4.1.2. *Gender-sensitive pairs*

Although the impact of gender-sensitive forms in facilitating associations with women has been largely documented in some previous studies (Stahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Vervecken, 2012; Sczesny *et al.*, 2015; Vervecken *et al.*, 2015; Sczesny *et al.*, 2016; Horvath *et al.*, 2016), the perceptions shared during the focus group show a very sporadic and low impact of gender-sensitive pairs in triggering gendered associations. A plausible explanation is that the presented occupational nouns are consolidated as traditional female professions, historically dominated by women, especially *infermiere/infermiera* (nurse), which remains the emblematic female profession. Due to the particular employment dynamics, reinforced by the stereotypical views on professions, in this case the social rather than the linguistic factors result decisive in triggering gendered associations.

There is, however, an example suggesting that the language form can overcome the impact of social factors, even in case of extremely gendered professions. The example involves a student who reported that *infermiere/infermiera* in his case evoked an association with a man:

The language form was decisive. We are instantly exposed to the male noun, and when we translate it to Serbian, again we have the male noun coming first (Ig/M).

This example sparks another important aspect that regards the word order in gender-sensitive formulations, suggesting that the first word that participants are exposed to might have a decisive impact on the perception. This is consistent with the findings documented in previous studies, according to which gender-fair forms increase the perceived percentage of women in professional roles, but only if the feminine version is read first (Gabriel *et al.*, 2008: 212). The highlighted example, however, suggests that the word order is also relevant in reference to associations with male figures.

Although the professions of lawyer (*avvocato*) and doctor (*medico*) were presented in masculine generics, their formulations prompted some participants to reflect upon the male-bias of masculine generics:

Had there been both genders, I might have pictured a woman first, but being exposed to only one gender, my association is instantly related to a male figure (IIIg/F).

A follow-up comment from another participant highlights the importance of the word order:

And if there had been ‘medica/medico’, where ‘medica’ would have come first, I would instantly connect it with a woman (IIIg/F).

4.1.3. *The impact of the structural linguistics norm on the perception of feminine occupational nouns*

In grammatical-gender languages, the tendency to use masculine forms when referring to occupations held by women is widespread and deeply ingrained in both formal registers and everyday communication. From a linguistic perspective, the prevalence of masculine forms is legitimized by structural linguistics approaches that analyze language as an abstract system (*langue*), divorced from contextual and social factors (Filipović, 2011; 2018). Within a traditional structuralist framework, the masculine gender is traditionally regarded as neutral, inherently capable of referring to both male and female agentives.

This notion of the masculine gender as generic and neutral has been critically reevaluated, particularly through poststructuralist approaches and disciplines such as feminist linguistics. These critiques, supported by insights from sociolinguistics, pragmatics, critical discourse studies, have shifted the focus from formal language analysis to the examination of language use in specific communication contexts, emphasizing the impact of extralinguistic factors such as gender, race, social class etc. in shaping communication patterns, as well as language norms and ideologies.

Moreover, it is posited that the language system, as a structure intricately embedded within social reality, cannot be neutral. Instead, it functions as both a mirror reflecting social and power dynamics, hierarchies, and cultural norms, and as a potent instrument that shapes our perceptions (Savić, 2004; Savić, 2011). In this context, the masculine gender is argued to be non-neutral, as it embodies the principle of the male as a norm, thereby reinforcing and legitimizing an unequal hierarchy rooted in an androcentric worldview (Silviera, 1980; Irigaray, 1991; Sabatini, 1993; Pauwels, 2003; Thornton, 2009; Robustelli, 2012).

For decades, formal language education in both Italy and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been grounded exclusively in the structuralist paradigm, neglecting concepts and advancements from post-structural approaches and social psychology. By embracing the structuralist paradigm as both dominant and exclusive, formal language education has acted as a vehicle for the perpetuation and legitimization of the notion of the masculine gender as inclusive and comprehensive, while stigmatizing female forms as unnatural, derogatory, or even grammatically incorrect. Recent research indicates that some FL textbooks have begun to incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective, presenting occupational nouns in gender-sensitive pairs (Vučenović, 2023: 110; Frabotta, Pauletto, 2024). However, decades-long exposure to a single paradigm, whose validity has been reinforced and legitimized through the authority of formal education, has undoubtedly influenced students' perception of the appropriate language form. In this context, the reflections expressed by some students reveal a conviction that the feminine gender does not even exist for certain professions³:

I am certainly not at all surprised to see a girl study law, but it is simply the language form that makes me picture a man, since female forms for certain occupations do not exist (IIIg/f).

During the discussion, the use of the masculine generic '*ministro*' in reference to a woman was brought up, prompting one student to ask:

Is there a female word for '*ministro*' in Italian? (IIIg/f).

The inconsistencies between *avvocato* and *medico* vs. *infermiere/a* and *commesso/a* revealed uncertainties regarding the grammatical correctness of the feminine nouns, both in Italian and L1⁴:

These forms [avvocata; advokatica], are they grammatically correct? (Ig/f)

For most of these occupations I am not even sure about their correct form, which is probably why I avoid using them (Ig/f).

4.1.4. *The cacophonous effect of feminine designations*

Research indicates that in the context of L1 masculine generics are often privileged over feminine forms due to their perception as markers of social prestige and their association with both grammatical and social superiority (Horvath *et al.*, 2016: 3). In languages such as Italian and Serbian, certain feminine professional titles are frequently linked to lower social status, reflecting traditional meanings that imply male dependence [e.g., *ministra/ministarka* (minister) – 'the wife of a minister'], or they carry derogatory connotations (for Italian see Marcato, Thüne, 2002: 191).

The focus group participants expressed that they perceive feminine designations as 'unnatural' or 'ill-sounding'. This observation aligns with findings from a study on Italian

³ The grammatical correctness of prestigious feminine occupational nouns and their adherence to the norms of word formation in Italian have been thoroughly examined by Italian linguists (Sabatini, 1993; Thornton, 2009; Robustelli, 2012; Giusti, 2011; Fusco, 2019; Gheno, 2019) and have been recognized as valid by the supreme authority on the Italian language, the *Accademia della Crusca*.

⁴ Students' perceptions are likely influenced by norms and language practices in both their L1 and FL, each of which has traditionally stigmatized feminine nouns while privileging masculine generics.

L1, where female participants who opted to use masculine generics did so because they felt the feminine forms were either aesthetically displeasing or seemed unprofessional (Thornton, 2009). However, it is crucial to emphasize that the cacophonous effect is observed exclusively in L1, whereas in Italian FL, feminine nouns are perceived as neutral:

‘Medico’ and ‘medica’ sound equally to me. Both words have the same number of letters (IIg/M).

To me there is no difference between ‘avvocato’ and ‘avvocata’, it is merely a question of different gender, like with other words. In our language however the suffix –ica [advokat-ica] is somehow denigrating⁵ (IIg/F).

The highlighted distinction suggests that it is not the language form itself that triggers perceptions of inferiority vs. superiority, but rather the cultural and ideological meanings embedded within it.

Participants have confirmed the patterns identified in previous studies regarding the negative connotations of feminine nouns in L1. These include the perceived social prestige, superiority, and professionalism associated with masculine forms, in contrast to the inferiority and lower status attributed to feminine nouns⁶:

When we say ‘doktor’ [male doctor] it sounds more serious, and when we say ‘doktorica’ [female doctor] it is somehow lowering the status (IIIg/F).

Some of them sound really bad, and also, a distinction is made. Why am I ‘psihološkinja’ [female psychologist] and not ‘psiholog’ [male psychologist]. It implies that a different title has to be assigned to a woman, because she is a poor little woman (IVg/F).

As previously highlighted, masculine forms are associated with prestige, competence and seriousness:

I perceive ‘doktorica’ [female doctor] as a simple hospital worker, while ‘doktor’ [male doctor] sound like something higher, more intellectual (Ig/F).

When someone says ‘doktor’ [male doctor] I immediately think of someone who has knowledge, someone involved in ‘serious’ medicine, for instance surgeon, and all those serious, high functions (Ig/F)-

Even though the word ‘advokatica’ [female lawyer] exists, many women would rather use the word ‘advokat’ [male lawyer] because they think that as ‘advokaticice’ [female lawyers] they would be taken less seriously (IIg/F).

Another conspicuous example of power relations encoded and reinforced through language is reflected in the perception of the nouns *sekretarica* (female secretary) and *sekretar* (male secretary). The male noun is associated with competence, high-status and prestige, whereas the female noun is not only associated with lower-status, but also with superficiality and frivolousness, as well with the sexuality and promiscuity:

⁵ Although *avvocata* is perceived as a neutral form in Italian FL, the negative connotations associated with the suffix *-essa* are well-documented in Italian L1 (Sabatini, 1993; Marcato, Thüne, 2002; Thornton, 2009; Robustelli, 2014).

⁶ The following examples illustrate reflections on L1, and are all expressed in L1. This tendency to reflect in L1 highlights cross-linguistic influence, which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Some feminine forms like for example 'sekretarica' don't have positive connotation, since they are associated with sexuality, which is not the case with the masculine form 'sekretar' (IIg/F).

'Sekretar' implies a higher position, while 'sekretarica' is, kind of like - the mistress of her husband is his secretary (IIIg/F).

In the movies secretaries are presented as naïve and easy. When we say 'sekretar', to me it seems professional, and when I hear 'sekretarica', I instantly think about some female secretary in a mini skirt (IVg/F).

5. THE CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE

Focus groups revealed that the perception of professional titles in Italian is significantly influenced by students' L1, a phenomenon known as *cross-linguistic influence*. This concept refers to the "influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that person's knowledge or use of another language" (Jarvis, Pavlenko, 2008: 1). In the context of Serbian L1 and Italian FL, this transfer arises not from differences but from similarities between the structural features of the source and target languages, particularly in terms of gender assignment to nouns. Both Italian and Serbian are grammatical-gender languages in which grammatical gender, when referring to human beings, typically aligns with the natural gender of the referent (Jarvis, Pavlenko, 2008: 133). However, in both languages, the use of masculine generics to designate female occupations and titles is documented as a pervasive and widespread practice (Sabatini, 1987; Cardinaletti, Giusti, 1991; Robustelli, 2012; Fusco, 2019; Savić, 2004; Savić, 2009; Filipović, 2018; Cvetinčanin Knežević, Lalatović, 2019).

The way some participants express their reflections suggests that the structural principles of gender assignment internalized in Serbian are replicated in Italian, leading students, despite exposure only to Italian nouns, to automatically translate the presented nouns into Serbian and consider them from the perspective of their mother tongue (e.g., '*Doktorica*' [female doctor] reminds me of...; I associate '*advokatica*' [female lawyer] with...). Thus, the influence of language form on perception is mediated through the L1, which serves as the basis for mental associations. Furthermore, this transfer is both linguistic and cultural, as participants' social perceptions of professions are shaped and influenced by the cultural models and ideologies embedded in the society in which they live.

6. THE IMPACT OF EXTRALINGUISTIC FACTORS

6.1. Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes, in their descriptive and prescriptive forms, are often described in relation to two concepts that are considered fundamental modalities of human nature: *agency* and *communion* (Sczesny *et al.*, 2019: 103). The first dimension, associated with men, involves qualities such as dominance, competence, and strength, and prescribes that men should be assertive, but not weak. The second dimension, associated with women, includes qualities such as warmth and compassion, suggesting that women are, and should be, socially sensitive and compassionate, but not dominant (Sczesny *et al.*, 2019: 104; Hentschel *et al.*, 2019). Although social expectations based on stereotypical personality traits attributed to women and men may not always reflect their actual characteristics,

these stereotypes nevertheless play a crucial role in shaping and influencing perceptions of their appropriate social and professional roles.

The focus group revealed that the perception of professions is significantly shaped by the stereotypical beliefs about the appropriate and expected roles of women and men. For instance, some reflections indicate that the profession of a *lawyer* is perceived as embodying traits such as rationality, competence, strength, and dominance, and is therefore associated with men, whereas the role of a nurse is perceived as emotional, dedicated to others, and compassionate, leading to associations with women:

Lawyers are intelligent, they dominate in the courtroom. I've always associated them with male figures (Ig/F).

When I hear 'lawyer' strength and attitude come to my mind instantly, and therefore it evokes a male figure. I have a feeling that male voices are generally more appreciated and acknowledged in comparison with the female ones (IVg/F).

The type of work carried out by a nurse can be related to motherhood. It involves care and kindness, which is why I associate the profession with women (IIg/F).

In relation to the perception of *lawyer*, a significant issue arises concerning the internalized negative effects caused by the violation of the prescribed gender hierarchy. While explaining why the example of *lawyer* in her case triggered associations with men, one participant asserted that arrogance is a necessary trait for lawyers. However, when asked whether women can also display arrogance, she responded: *Yes, they can, but that wouldn't be professional* (IIg/F). This attitude exemplifies the concept known as the *dominance penalty*, wherein women who display traditionally masculine traits and competencies are judged negatively. Such behavior is perceived as a threat to the traditional gender hierarchy, thereby challenging the existing power dynamics (Rudman *et al.*, 2012, p. 166).

6.2. Historical context

Historical context refers to the political, social, cultural and economic setting within which ideas, beliefs and societal norms are shaped. The historical context of Western civilization is rooted in dualistic concepts and structural principles that imposed rigid divisions between male and female essences and societal roles. The structures arising from these principles and categorizations often reflect and reinforce unequal power relations, which have historically had a particularly negative impact on women (e.g., their exclusion from voting, political participation, education, etc.). Feminist authors have interpreted the historical context of Western civilization as primarily patriarchal, emphasizing that even in today's democratic societies, many of the patriarchal values remain deeply entrenched (Millett, 1970; Pateman, 2016). The traditional division of social and gender roles within a particular historical context has had a profound impact on perceptions, further reinforcing the perceived naturalness of what are considered male and female professions.

I think that the perception of this occupation [nurse] is rooted in historical structures. For instance, in war times women were taking care of the injured men, because all the men participated in the war. Maybe that is the reason why a female figure appears as the first association (Ig/M).

Some participants express an awareness of the strong influence of the patriarchal historical context in shaping their perceptions of appropriate female and male roles. What is particularly noteworthy is the attribution of common sense (Fairclough, 1989) to patriarchal hierarchies by some participants, suggesting that, despite the inequalities embedded in societal structures, they believe there is no point in resisting these hierarchies, as they are perceived as inherently and naturally structured:

Throughout the history men have always had higher status, and it remained like that. It is difficult for this to change (Ilg/M).

It's the way things are and this cannot be changed (IIIg/F).

6.3. *Popular culture*

Popular culture, in this context, refers to the products of the cultural industry, primarily manifesting in the forms of films, series, and books. It has a profound impact on shaping young people's perceptions and worldviews (Kumar Singh, 2022). In this vein, popular culture serves as a powerful vehicle through which traditional gender hierarchies can either be challenged or further reproduced and reinforced. The findings from this study suggest that the portrayal of female figures in non-traditional roles within popular culture can significantly influence consumers, fostering an alternative and emancipated view of women and thereby contributing to women's empowerment. A student reported that *medico* (doctor), although presented in masculine, in her case triggered associations with a female figure:

I associated 'medico' with women. I instantly remembered Meredith from Grey's anatomy (IIIg/F).

As is often the case in empirical studies employing qualitative methodology, discussions tend to delve deeper and reveal patterns that were not initially framed as explicit research questions. In this instance, participants expressed an awareness of the detrimental effects of popular culture in normalizing and reinforcing gender stereotypes:

I saw a TV show concentrated on a male and a female lawyer. Even though she was officially in charge, he was more dominant and more important (IVg/F).

When women are presented as dominants, it turns out that they obtained a lot of things through their charm (IVg/F).

And they are always pretty (IVg/F).

The road to success of female characters is questionable (IVg/F).

6.4. *Personal experience*

Another significant factor influencing the formation of gender associations in the professional sphere is personal experience, which is inherently shaped by the societal and cultural norms of the community in which individuals live and develop. These norms, being inextricably linked to broader societal structures, frequently mirror traditional gender hierarchies. In this context, a student illustrates that her associations with the term

infermiere/a (nurse) are not primarily influenced by linguistic gender forms but rather by the lived experiences within her community:

The first time that we came in contact with this job, it was performed by a woman, and also later on, while growing up, in most cases nurses were women (Ig/F).

A similar rationale was provided to explain the association of the term *medico* with a male figure:

I was influenced by personal experience. As a child I was very sickly, and I was always cured by male doctors (IVg/F).

However, in other instances, exposure to an environment where women are emancipated and occupy prestigious professions has led participants to associate these roles with a female figure, irrespective of the linguistic form or the profession's traditional alignment with the male domain:

I associated 'doctor' with women because where I come from we have more female doctors (Ig/F).

I am aware that social context and stereotypes imply that this job [lawyer] is more common for men, but my association was guided by the experience in my family, where women are in legal profession, so for me it comes as more natural to picture lawyer as a woman (IIg/M).

6.5. *Personal experience in correlation with the cultural model*

Cultural models are defined as mental representations or cognitive schemas that are collectively shared among members of a social group (Preston, 2006; Bennardo, de Munck, 2013). These models, described as “molar organizations of knowledge” (Bennardo, de Munck, 2013), encapsulate interpretations of the world that are constructed from widely accepted folk knowledge, which is regarded as a set of the obvious facts of the world (Preston, 2006).

In Bosnia ed Erzegovina patriarchal values remain deeply ingrained, significantly influencing social norms and beliefs. The stereotypical belief in male inherent superiority within the professional domain appears to be internalized and integrated into the cultural model. This often manifests as deeply rooted, implicit, or even unconscious patterns that profoundly shape gender perceptions. During the focus group discussion, one participant shared a valuable insight that encapsulated all of these patterns.

When we have to choose a doctor to treat us, I have this unconscious idea that maybe a male doctor would do a better job. The same goes for lawyers – I feel like men would be more effective. I remember when my uncle needed a lawyer for something, and they recommended a female lawyer, telling him she was the best in town. But he said, ‘How can I hire her? She’s a woman. How can she defend a man?’ I know we shouldn’t think like this, but there’s something inside me telling me that a man would do a better job (IVg/M).

The internalized socializing pattern of male superiority is described as ‘something inside’, an intuitive, invisible force that the student cannot precisely define. When asked

what influences attitudes like the one expressed by their colleague, participants identified patriarchal heritage as the underlying source:

We all carry it inside of us. Those are the consequences of patriarchy. For instance, if I take my mother as an example, to her it is perfectly natural to be inferior, always positioned in second place. And sometimes it is not easy to recognize those patterns, and that you are actually living like that, that you are in a bad place, and that you can do better than that (IVg/F).

7. CONCLUSION

This study delves into the underlying motivations behind participants' associations of specific occupational nouns with a particular gender. The findings reveal that, in certain cases, the form of language used can prompt mental associations with either men or women. The results align with previous research confirming a male bias triggered by masculine generics. In contrast, gender-sensitive noun pairs tend to foster associations with women.

During the discussion, a significant cross-linguistic influence was observed, as participants frequently referred to their L1 while discussing the occupational nouns.

One of the research questions addressed the issue of the cacophonous effect associated with feminine occupational nouns, which, consistent with previous studies, was confirmed for the participants' L1. Specifically, students reported perceiving L1 feminine nouns denoting prestigious professions as harsh-sounding, unnatural and containing negative connotations. It is important to note that this cacophonous effect was observed exclusively in L1, whereas in Italian FL, feminine nouns were perceived as neutral. This distinction suggests that it is not the linguistic form itself that triggers perceptions of inferiority or superiority, but rather the cultural meanings and ideologies embedded within it.

Although the research is qualitative in nature and does not quantify the precise occurrences of associations triggered by linguistic forms versus those influenced by extralinguistic factors, the rich set of qualitative data obtained during the focus groups allows for a tentative conclusion that extralinguistic factors have played a more significant role in shaping gendered associations. The decisive factors identified include gender stereotypes, historical context, popular culture, and personal experience. These factors reflect specific societal norms, ideologies, and power dynamics in which the students are immersed, underscoring the underlying patriarchal values embedded in the linguistic and sociocultural context of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The discussion has encouraged some students to express awareness and take critical stances toward elements of patriarchal heritage that position women in subordinate roles, leading them to critically reflect on how these norms can be perpetuated through language use, for example, through derogatory connotations associated with some feminine nouns and perceived competence and prestige associated to masculine generics. This approach aligns with the concept of *critical language awareness*, and while the focus group served as a methodological tool in this context, its potential to foster critical reflection and empower participants should also be recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool in the classroom. The findings indicate that students are often unaware of the social and ideological underpinnings of language use and norms, which can lead them to perpetuate inequalities within what they perceive as a neutral and non-ideological system of linguistic and social values, which is why the study strongly affirms the necessity of integrating activities that promote *critical language awareness* (e.g., workshops, discussions) into teaching practices.

This is especially relevant in light of the fact that formal education, including textbooks and teachers' approaches to language instruction, may reinforce partial and uncritical perspectives, thereby contributing to the naturalization and legitimization of inequalities.

8. STUDY LIMITATIONS

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the underlying motivations behind students' associations of occupational nouns with a specific gender. Consistent with this aim, a quantitative analysis was intentionally excluded, precluding the possibility of precisely quantifying the occurrences of associations triggered by linguistic forms as compared to those influenced by extralinguistic factors. By prioritizing the exploration of deeper patterns shaping perception beyond language form, the study sacrificed the rigor and precision that would have been afforded by the inclusion of quantitative methods.

The study was conducted within an educational context characterized by a relatively small number of students enrolled in Italian language programs. This limited participant pool suggests that a quantitative approach would not meet the minimum sample size requirements for statistical validity. Consequently, a fully qualitative design was adopted, rather than a mixed-methods approach that would entail a preliminary quantitative phase followed by qualitative analysis. Nonetheless, the proposed mixed-method trajectory may serve as a valuable framework for future research in this domain.

In light of the findings from some recent studies that indicate a significant trend toward the inclusion of feminine professional nouns (Frabotta, Pauletto, 2024; Vučenović, 2023), future research could explore whether the presence of these forms contributes to enhancing the visibility of women at both cognitive and social levels.

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