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Gender agreement in Italian compounds with *capo-*

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Abstract: Gender inflection for animated nouns in Italian presents challenges influenced by societal pressures and linguistic structure, especially in morphologically complex words like compounds. The study investigates gender inflection distribution in compounds with *capo-* compared to other nouns (i.e., occupations traditionally performed by women, by men, and the word *capo* in isolation), exploring the interplay of social, etymological and morphological factors. 192 native Italian speakers inflected masculine nouns to feminine forms after hearing the stimulus. Results reveal that respondents' attitudes towards gender-fair language significantly determine the use of feminine, indicating a complex interplay between linguistic structures and social perceptions. Despite historical resistance, the word *capa* in isolation shows increasing acceptance, challenging entrenched norms. In compounds, *capo-* element's gender inflection appears more resistant due to morphological complexity, with an interaction with number. This study advances our understanding of gender inflection, with implications for broader conversations about gender representation and language inclusivity.

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1 Introduction

Among Italian Noun Noun compounds, one of the most productive patterns is the one including the word *capo-* as the left-hand constituent. This type of compound exhibits interesting inflectional features depending on the semantic interpretation of the head. Some compounds, such as *capostazione* ('station master', lit. 'boss.station') only show internal number marking (i.e., $[capo_{SG} + x_{SG}]_{SG} \rightarrow [capi_{PL} + x_{SG}]_{PL}$), while other compounds, such as *capo.cuoco* ('head chef', lit. 'boss.chef') display both double inflection (i.e., $[capo_{SG} + x_{SG}]_{SG} \rightarrow [capi_{PL} + x_{PL}]_{PL}$, e.g., *capi.cuochi*) and external inflection (i.e., $[capo_{SG} + x_{SG}]_{SG} \rightarrow [capo_{SG} + x_{PL}]_{PL}$, e.g., *capo.cuochi*).

However, gender inflection appears problematic based on the etymology of *capo* (i.e., 'head' as a body part is a masculine word). Many dictionaries establish not to inflect the word *capo* according to gender, although native speakers appear to inflect it when the referent identifies with the feminine gender.

In light of the increasing awareness of growing need for non-sexist language, we investigate the strategies that native speakers follow when facing morphologically complex words that have *capo* as the initial constituents.

This study aims to single out constraints on gender inflection, and to disentangle social, etymological and morphological factors. Drawing on the results of a test conducted with native speakers, we provide evidence that the word *capo* in isolation is subject to gender inflection. However, the inflection of *capo-* as the first element of compounds appears to be constrained by morphological structure and to be influenced by grammatical number. Our results show that the responses were influenced by the speakers' attitude towards gender-fair language.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 covers background on compounds with *capo-* as their first constituent (Section 2.1), feminine forms in occupation titles, both with theoretical considerations and experimental results (Section 2.2), feminine forms of occupational titles in Italian (Section 2.3) and feminine form of the word *capo* in isolation (Section 2.4). Section 3 illustrates morphological issues in compounds with *capo-* when gender is added to nominal inflection. Section 4 presents our study, including materials (Section 4.1), procedure (Section 4.2), analysis (Section 4.3) and results (Section 4.4). Section 5 discusses our results, and Section 6 presents our conclusions.

2 Background

2.1 Compounds with *capo-*

Compounds featuring *capo-* as their initial constituent have been productive in the Italian language since its earliest phases. The term *capo* originates from Latin *cāput*, carrying different meanings, including ‘head’, in both physical and intellectual meanings, ‘extremity of something’, ‘initial part of a process or object’, and ‘essential or dominant element of a group or category’ (Micheli 2020:130–132).¹

In Medieval Latin, *caput-* appears within noun phrases with the second element in genitive case, emerging from a reanalysis of syntactic objects (Rainer 2021). They primarily denoted a person holding a leadership or authoritative position (e.g., *caput ecclesiae*._{GEN} ‘church leader’). This semantic feature persisted in Old Italian, where compounds with *capo-* referred also to human referents possessing authority over a group (e.g., *capofamiglia* ‘head of household’) or a place (e.g., *caporione*, originally from *capo del rione* ‘district master’, nowadays meaning ‘ringleader’).² As Micheli’s (2020:133–140) diachronic analysis shows, while originally coexisting with others meanings like ‘initial part of’ or ‘extremity of’ (e.g., *capomese* ‘first day of the month’) or ‘summit, top’ (e.g., *caposcala* ‘top of a stairway’), the denotation of a human referent became increasingly productive since the 16th–17th centuries, culminating in contemporary Italian, where this denotation is ‘firmly established’.

In contemporary Italian, we observe the structure *capo-X* identifying objects (as relics of Old Italian) and animate referents. Only the latter is a productive construction and therefore the one we focus on in our study.

Within this type of *capo-* compounds we can further classify between compounds where the second element is a noun referring to a group of animated referents both literally (e.g. *capobranco* ‘leader of the pack’) and metonymically (e.g., *capostazione* ‘station master’), and compounds where the second element is a professional noun (e.g., *capocuoco* ‘head chef’³). The former group expresses a clear

1 In Latin, the word *cāput* was neutral. The shift to masculine gender in Italian is a typical evolution observed with neutral Latin words.

2 This semantic shift from *head* as a body part to indicate ‘main, principal element’ is cross-linguistically known, e.g., Dutch *hoofd-ingang* ‘main entrance’; German *Hauptbahnhof* ‘central station’ (Hüning and Booij 2014); English *headline* (Gąsiorowski 2017); French *chef-lieu* ‘chief town’ (Rainer 2021); Swedish *huvudroll* ‘leading role’ (Walatek 2014).

3 Notably, compounds belonging to this group sometimes appear in reverse order, e.g. *caporedattore* and *redattore capo* with postulated unchanged semantics (Masini 2019). However, this property may not may not distinctly indicate coordination or attribution. There are instances of true coordinative compounds that always appear in a fixed order (e.g., *cassapanca* but **pancacassa*, lit. ‘crate.bench’, ‘chest’) (“natural coordination” or dvandva compounds in Arcodia et al. 2010). Conversely,

hierarchical relation between the constituents (i.e., subordinative compounds, where the elements composing the group are subordinated to the element *capo*), while the interpretation of the latter has undergone various semantic interpretations, placing these compounds into different classes:⁴

- (a) subordinative compounds: *capo-* is interpreted as the syntactic/semantic head of the compound with the second element establishing a syntactic dependency with it (e.g., *capo*_{HEAD}*redattore*_{COMPLEMENT} ‘chief editor’ denotes the ‘chief of the editors’);
- (b) coordinative compounds: *capo-* and the second element belong to the same interpretative level (in the aforementioned example, *capo*_{HEAD}*redattore*_{HEAD} indicates a referent who is simultaneously *capo* ‘chief’ and *redattore* ‘editor’);
- (c) attributive compounds: *capo* is interpreted as the modifier of the head to the right of the compound (hence, *capo*_{MODIFIER}*redattore*_{HEAD} refers to a *redattore* ‘editor’ who is specifically the *capo* ‘chief’ among the others) (Micheli 2020).

As noted by Micheli (2016 and 2018), analyzing plural forms provides insights into the syntactic head of these structures. Regarding plural inflection, in fact, it is particularly interesting to notice that two constructions emerge: while compounds having *capo*+group are clearly subordinate, and only inflect the first element in the plural⁵ (e.g., *capo*_{SG}*stazione* ‘station master’ → *capi*_{PL}*stazione* ‘station masters’), the same does not apply to the *capo.redattore* types, which appear both with external inflection (*capo.redattori*_{PL}) and double inflection (*capi*_{PL}*redattori*_{PL}). Since exclusively internal inflection in the latter group is not attested⁶ (i.e., **capi*_{PL}*redattore*_{SG}), a subordinative interpretation appears not corroborated by number inflection, being the head the *locus inflectionis*. A coordinative reading would explain double inflection, but less satisfactorily external inflection.

compounds appearing in both orders (e.g., *studente-lavoratore* ‘student.worker’ and *lavoratore-studente* ‘worker.student’) are argued to be “symmetrical attributives” rather than coordinative (Radimský 2015) because their meaning changes with inversion (“accidental coordination” or *karmadharāya* compounds in Arcodia et al. 2010), which is not the case of *capo*+profession. This makes this type of compound more similar to the type *radiogiornale* versus *giornale radio*, as described in Radimský (2013), where *capo* resembles a semiword/afixoid, which is reinforced by its phonology (bisyllabic, ending in -o).

⁴ We follow the classification method proposed by Bisetto and Scalise (2005).

⁵ Dressler (2006) also indicates *capo.stazioni*_{PL} as a substandard variation.

⁶ Micheli (2016) found three occurrences of internal inflection only with the compound *caporedattore* but not with others of the same type. Given the size of the corpus queried, i.e., ItWac (Baroni et al. 2009), consisting of 1.5 billion words, three occurrences are insufficient to establish statistical significance.

More convincingly, both the external and double inflection can be explained by interpreting the second element as the head of the compound and *capo-* as a modifier, i.e., with an attributive reading. In both cases, the head bears the inflection. The lack of inflection on the modifier is common in Italian attributive compounds (e.g., *parole*._{PL} *chiave*._{SG} ‘key words’ vs *stati*._{PL} *membri*._{PL} ‘member states’, Radimský 2016: 197–198).

2.2 Grammatical gender in Italian

Italian morphology, as generally observed in Romance languages, features masculine and feminine gender distinctions for nouns denoting both animate and inanimate referents.⁷ While gender assignment for inanimate objects is arbitrary and not phonologically predictable (Thornton 2022: 19), it is based on biological factors for animate referents,⁸ with few exceptions to this pattern, such as *soprano*._M or *sentinella*._F ‘sentry’.

Gender is evident through agreement with determiners and modifiers (e.g., *il*._M *cielo*._M *azzurro*._M ‘the blue sky’ vs *la*._F *nostra*._F *casa*._F ‘our house’), and through inflectional morpheme substitution (e.g., *il*._M *maestro*._M ‘the teacher’._M vs *la*._F *maestra*._F ‘the teacher’._F). However other possibilities exist.

As illustrated by Thornton (2022), animated nouns can be classified based on their morphological behaviour:

1. Symmetrical/asymmetrical nouns: symmetrical nouns, exemplified by the previous example *maestro* versus *maestra*, involve simple substitution of the inflection morpheme; asymmetrical nouns are those where the feminine form is created through a derivational suffix (e.g. *il*._M *professore*._M ‘the’._M professor’._M vs *la*._F *professor-essa*._F ‘the’._F professor’._F).
2. Nouns with distinct lexical morphemes for masculine and feminine (i.e., “eteronimi”) (e.g., *padre* ‘father’ vs *madre* ‘mother’).
3. Nouns where gender is only visible on agreement phenomena (i.e., “nomi di genere comune”) (e.g., *il*._M *cronista* ‘the’._M reporter’ vs *la*._F *cronista* ‘the’._F reporter’).

⁷ A comprehensive examination of gender as a semantic versus arbitrary category is beyond the scope of this study. For an in-depth investigation of the grammatical category of gender, see Corbett (1991). Additionally, Loporcaro (2017) provides a detailed analysis of the development of grammatical gender from Latin to Romance languages.

⁸ The study does not address inquiries concerning gender neutrality and its representation in Italian. This omission is not due to the limited significance of these issues in discussions on inclusive language, but rather to the complexity of inflection in a gendered language like Italian. We apologize for the binary approach adopted in this study and recognize that adequately representing the gender spectrum was unfortunately beyond our research scope.

4. Epicene nouns, which always appear with a specific gender (e.g., *la_F vittima_F* ‘the victim’ vs *il_M personaggio_M* ‘the character’).

Thornton (2022) underlines that while this classification captures general tendencies, social biases of speakers can alter them. In cases where a professional title is typically associated with men, speakers may employ different strategies when referring to a woman. In addition to a regularly inflected feminine form of the professional title, the feminine form can manifest solely as an agreement phenomenon on determiners and modifiers (i.e., “semi-marked forms”, Cignarella et al. 2021; Formato 2014, 2016), as in (1):

- (1) La ministro Marta Cartabia è stata convocata.
 the_F minister_M Marta Cartabia is been_F summoned_F
 ‘The minister Marta Cartabia has been summoned.’

Another option is not to express the feminine at all, even when referring to women, interpreting the professional title as an epicene noun, as in (2):

- (2) Il ministro Marta Cartabia è stato convocato.
 the_M minister_M Marta Cartabia is been_M summoned_M
 ‘The minister Marta Cartabia has been summoned.’

2.3 Feminine forms in occupational titles

As we have seen, while grammatical gender for inanimate objects is a semantically arbitrary category, using such opposition might raise issues when the referent is human.

Sabatini’s (1985) pioneering work on occupational titles in Italian, highlighted how these constitute a crucial aspect of sexist language use. She extensively analyzed masculine and feminine agentive nouns, particularly focusing on occupation titles that could easily be inflected according to Italian grammatical rules but are systematically left in the masculine form. The lack of a feminine inflection, is based purely on social reasons (see also Serianni 1997: 85: “grammatical uncertainties on [the point of feminine occupational titles] depend on extra-linguistic reasons, i.e., by the social transformative process accomplished during this century”, our translation).

To illustrate this extralinguistic bias, Sabatini (1985) listed several examples where the feminine inflection would not cause any phonological or morphological difficulty, yet the feminine version was systematically lacking or used in a derogatory sense: e.g. *ingegnere* ‘engineer_M’, for females engineer instead of *ingegnera*

‘engineer._F’ (contrasting to *infermiere/infermiera* ‘nurse._{M/F}’, *cameriere/cameriera* ‘waiter/waitress’, etc.); *ministro* ‘minister._M’ but not *ministra* ‘minister._F’; *sindaco* ‘mayor._M’ but not *sindaca* ‘mayor._F’; *magistrato* ‘magistrate._M’ and not *magistrata* ‘magistrate._F’, among others. She underlines that women were allowed to pursue many of these careers (e.g., diplomatic or magistrate) only in the 1960s, which is why Italian lacked the corresponding feminine inflection.

Resistance to social and linguistic changes has been so strong that occupational titles have remained in masculine forms, even when the job was performed by women, sometimes simply adding the word *donna* ‘woman’ before the masculine form (e.g. *la donna medico* ‘the woman physician._M’ instead for *la medica*, ‘the physician._F’). Sabatini mentions particular cases of agent nouns ending in the vowel -e, which can be either masculine or feminine. Interestingly, even in these cases, the feminine determiner was avoided, such as *il giudice* ‘the._M judge._{M/F}’ instead of *la giudice* ‘the._F judge._{M/F}’.⁹

Several reasons have been proposed to explain the resistance to inflect professional names according to gender, from uncertainty about the correct form¹⁰ to a perceived cacophony of the feminine ending, the belief in the neutrality of a generic masculine¹¹ (cf. Gheno 2019; Robustelli 2012), to even the “questionable belief [...] that masculine may confer a higher degree of ‘seriousness’ compared to its feminine counterpart” (Zarra 2017: 26).

These issues are far from trivial. Language reflects the conceptualization of gender as social category, and gender representation in language not only serves a distinctive function, but also communicates and reinforces values and prejudices, in what Kite and Deaux (1987) label the “gender belief system”.

The need for terms denoting women in certain positions has become increasingly urgent, creating a “complex two-way dialectic process [...] whereby language items both affirm and contest the status quo, and changes in social structures necessitate the development of new vocabulary” (Mills 2003:88).

9 The preference to avoid feminine inflection on gender-neutral words continues nowadays. One of the most famous examples of this refusal of the use of feminine determiners has been that of the first female, far-right, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who decided to define herself *il presidente* ‘the._M president._{M/F}’ instead of the intuitive *la presidente* ‘the._F president._{M/F}’ (Baccaro 2022). However, in newspaper and institutional contexts, she is often referred to as “la presidente”, indicating a notable fluctuation in usage preference.

10 Regarding uncertainties, it is important to mention the possibility of the addition of the feminine suffix -essa. This suffix raises issues because aside from forms fully established as neutral due to diachronic processes (e.g. *professoressa* ‘professor._F’; *principessa* ‘princess’) it is linked to a pejorative value (Cortelazzo 1995; Lepschy et al. 2002). Moreover, the suffix is not productive in the XX century as it was in the previous centuries (Thornton 2004), when it was also used to define the wife of a man who possessed the title or performed the profession indicated by the noun (Migliorini 1938; Serianni 1997).

11 This is something that is not supported by empirical data, as we will illustrate in this section.

A notable case is the postulated unmarkedness of the masculine gender (Jakobson 1939, 1960) in gendered languages like Russian. These considerations can be extended to Italian, where the feminine stresses that the noun cannot designate a masculine referent (with the interesting exception of when this is used in pejorative language), while the masculine can be used neutrally to signal a lack of sex reference when unknown or irrelevant in the context. However, experimental research has demonstrated that the supposed ‘masculine neutral’ gender is not truly neutral. Even in gendered languages like Italian, where gender is not a salient element of information, we still tend to interpret the referent as gendered. Thus, the use of generic masculine both mirrors and contributes to maintaining gender biases and prejudices (Cacciari and Padovani 2007; DeFranza et al. 2020; Formanowicz and Hansen 2021; Gygax et al. 2009, 2012, 2021; Moulton et al. 1978; Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012; Stahlberg et al. 2007; Wasserman and Weseley 2009): a ‘generic masculine’ activates the mental representation of a male referent, aiding a circularity in which gender conceptualization and linguistic expressions conveying it concur to reinforce one another (see Violi 1986). Gender in fact is “not only a grammatical category that regulates purely mechanical issues of concordance; it is, on the contrary, a semantic category that conveys a profound symbolism within the language” (Violi 1986: 41, our translation).

Numerous studies have explored the connection between sexist language and gender inequality in the job market (Bem and Bem 1973; Gaucher et al. 2011; Mastro-moro 2014). Additionally, research has shown that inclusive language incorporating feminine gender can positively impact recruitment and job expectations (Gabriel et al. 2008; Horvath 2015; Lindqvist et al. 2019; Lorenzon 2022; Verweken et al. 2013).

In the case of the Italian language, guidelines advocating for a non-sexist language have been circulating since the 1980s, despite resistance from political institutions and public demands (Azzalini and Giusti 2019; Cardinaletti and Giusti 1991; Gheno 2019; Giusti 2009; Giusti and Iannàccaro 2020; Marazzini 2017; Robustelli 2018; Zarra 2017).¹² However, the gender inflection of the word *capo* ‘boss’ has posed more challenges than other cases.

2.4 The feminine form of *capo*

As with the aforementioned ‘prestigious’ occupations and titles, the grammatical gender of the word *capo* did not present uncertainties when Italian society did not witness women in leading positions, thus *capo* almost exclusively referred to a man.

¹² As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, it is pertinent to mention the 2022 edition of the Dizionario dell’Italiano Treccani (Della Valle and Patota 2022), which is the first dictionary to present both feminine and masculine inflected forms for nouns and adjectives as entries. This represents a response to recent inclusionary needs in the Italian language.

This supposed unproblematic nature of *capo* gender was hence aided by a structural gender imbalance. However, contemporary society expects to see women too in leading roles, and, as we have seen in the previous section, many occupational titles have undergone progressive feminization.

Despite social changes that have impacted language and active propositions to combat sexist language (such as the pioneering work by Sabatini 1986, but also Robustelli 2012; Serianni 1997 and institutional guidelines like those from Piemonte Regional Council 2016), the word *capo* has consistently been referred to as unflected according to gender. *Capo* is still considered in its original meaning of ‘head’, thus with the masculine gender¹³ and the use of feminine *capa* has been deemed as “playful”, “colloquial” and “substandard” (Bisetto 2004; D’Achille and Thornton 2008), or even “pejorative” (Sabatini 1987).¹⁴ Although etymologically masculine,¹⁵ *capo*’s contemporary meaning as ‘boss’ or ‘leader’ stimulates interesting reflections when the referent is a woman.

Despite the prior assumptions, it is worth noting that the term *capa* is extensively used by speakers, not only within informal settings or for playful purposes. Journalism, for example, frequently employs the term, even in publications not aligned with the most inclusive demands of society. A search in the archive of *La Repubblica*, one of Italy’s most widely read newspapers, deemed ‘generalist’ (Fortunati and Sarrica 2004) or ‘polycentric’ (Vaglio 2006) and with a wide distribution across the nation (Gabbellieri and Scaglione 2021) reveals its usage in expressions such as *capa di gabinetto del sindaco* (‘chief of staff of the mayor’, 11.05.2022), *capa dell’istruzione comunale* (‘head of municipal education’, 02.04.2022), *capa dell’esecutivo europeo* (‘president of the EU executive’, 20.01.2022), *capa della Task Force* (‘head of the Task Force’, 24.04.2021), and also the compound *capa dipartimento* (‘head of department’, 15.04.2021). Such occurrences cannot be attributed solely to a recent trend, as examples from over 20 years ago also exist, such as *capa della Federcasalinghe* (‘head of the Federation of Housewives’, 29.03.2001).

Furthermore, the neutral use of the term *capa* has been observed by Cleis (2000) in the campaign “Internship. The advantage of practice”, promoted in 1999 by the Federal Office for Vocational Education and Technology in Switzerland. Billboards displayed images of young girls stating *Anche la mia capa è stata*

13 See the relevant exception of the dictionary Zingarelli (2022), which defines *capo* as invariable but admits the possibility of *capa* as well.

14 An interesting exception is represented by the guidelines proposed by the Municipality of the city of Turin (Bianciardi and Parisi 2017), which recommends the use of the feminine *capa* to refer to a woman with a leading role, but specifically warns not to apply this recommendation to compounds starting with *capo*.

15 In Southern dialects and regional Italian, the feminine variant *la capa* with the meaning ‘head’ is also largely used (or *la capu* in Salentine dialects, as one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out).

apprendista ('my boss_F too was an intern'). In this case, no particular connotation was attributed to the use of *capa*. Cleis (2000) indicates that, despite not being officially accepted, *capa* was widely used among young people at the time of the study.¹⁶ Moreover, recent analysis examining the use of gender stereotypes and linguistic sexism in children's books confirms the use of *capa* in Italian translations (Veronese 2022).

It is intriguing that a term subject to such debate lacks a thorough analysis investigating its use, perception and history in contemporary Italian.

3. Current issues

3.1 When *capo* is an element of a compound

In Section 2, we observed that internal inflection is the sole possibility for *capo*-_{SUB} compounds, occasionally accompanied by external inflection for *capo*-_{ATTR.} type. Italian dictionaries do not account for gender inflection based on the human referent of the compound, consistent with the assumptions related to the word *capo* discussed earlier. Consequently, a female station master is argued to be referred to as a *capo.stazione*.

However, *capo*-_x_{SUB} compounds conventionally remain uninflected in both gender and number when referring to women, despite being inflected in number when the referents are men (as generally recommended by dictionaries, see also Dressler 2006; Gheno 2018; Padrosa-Trias 2010; Telve 2011). Hence forms such as (3) should be prescriptively express:

- (3) Le capostazione Anna e Maria
 the-_{F.PL} chief-_{M.SG}station Anna and Maria
 'The stationmasters Anna and Maria.'

In the case of attributive compounds these challenges are arguably less visible, since these compounds have the option of external inflection ((4a) and (4b) are almost equally present in corpora, see Micheli 2016), and *capo*- can be treated more easily as a prefixoid:

- (4) a. I caporedattori Gianni e Marco
 the-_{M.PL} chief-_{M.SG}editors-_{M.PL} Gianni and Marco
 'The editors in chief Gianni and Marco.'

¹⁶ The feminization of the language she refers to deals with Switzerland, however, as the author underlines, the Italian in Italy and Swiss Italian are deeply interrelated culturally and historically.

- b. I capiredattori Gianni e Marco
 the-_{M.PL} chief-_{M.PL} editors-_{M.PL} Gianni and Marco
 ‘The editors in chief Gianni and Marco.’

A lack of gender inflection poses challenges for native speakers striving for a language free of sexist biases.

Our study aims to investigate the usage of feminine *capa-* as a compound element by Italian native speakers, discerning between social resistance, etymological reasons, and morphological obstacles. To achieve this, we will analyze gender inflection of *capo-* in comparison to traditionally feminine and masculine occupational titles, the isolated word *capo*, and two types of *capo-* compounds: *capo-SUB* and *capo-ATTR*.

4 The study

4.1 Materials

The inflection of *capo-* as the first constituent of subordinate and attributive compounds was compared with that of i) words without *capo* firmly established in their feminine inflection because referring to occupational titles traditionally occupied by women; ii) words without *capo* firmly established in their masculine inflection because referring to occupational titles traditionally occupied by men; iii) the word *capo* in isolation to verify differences in its use as a free form versus within a compound. As said, the word *capo* (both in isolation and within compounds) refers to a leading position, and consequently it is traditionally associated to men. The five categories of nouns with examples are shown in Table 1.

Occupational titles traditionally associated to women were selected based on their well-established feminine inflection in the literature (Proudfoot and Cardo 2005; Cortelazzo 2017; Frabotta 2022; Giani 2019; Giusti and Iannàccaro 2020; Gheno 2019; Ricci 2021; Robustelli 2000; Sabatini 1987; Sulis and Gheno 2022).

Titles traditionally associated with men were selected for their resistance to accepting feminine inflection, as identified by Miglietta (2022) and Zarra (2017).

Professional titles with potential double endings (e.g., *avvocatessa/avvocata* ‘lawyer._F’) were excluded because of theoretical considerations (see footnote 11) and experimental findings suggesting gender bias is linked to specific suffixes (Merkel 2013; Merkel et al. 2012; Mucchi Faina and Baino 2006).¹⁷

¹⁷ Interesting exceptions to these claims are reported by Lorenzon (2022) and Ricci (2021) who did not find a significant difference in perception of the endings.

Table 1: Target noun categories with their relevant properties.

Category	Social bias	Contains <i>capo</i>	Compound	Example masculine	Example feminine	
					Only agreement	Feminine inflectional morpheme
1. Occupational titles traditionally occupied by women	NO	NO	NO	<i>il ballerino</i>	<i>*la ballerino</i>	<i>la ballerina</i>
2. Occupational titles traditionally occupied by men	YES	NO	NO	<i>il ministro</i>	<i>la ministro</i>	<i>la ministra</i>
3. <i>Capo</i> in isolation	YES	YES	NO	<i>il capo</i>	<i>la capo</i>	<i>la capa</i>
4. Subordinate compounds with <i>capo-</i>	YES	YES	YES	<i>il</i> <i>capostazione</i>	<i>la</i> <i>capostazione</i>	<i>la</i> <i>capastazione</i>
5. Attributive compounds with <i>capo-</i>	YES	YES	YES	<i>il</i> <i>capocomico</i>	<i>la</i> <i>capocomico</i>	<i>la capacomica</i> <i>la capacomica</i>

Into our sample, we included both subordinate and attributive compounds that appear among the 900 most frequent compounds with *capo-* as the first element in the itWac corpus. The second elements of the subordinative compounds were either masculine or feminine; the second elements of the attributive compounds were words whose feminine form is inflected both with or without a derivational suffix. Each category comprised eight words, as described below. The complete stimulus set is shown in Table 2.

4.2 Procedure

The test was carried out through a web-hosted survey platform. At the onset, respondents received information that they participated in a study on feminine occupational titles, and that they would be presented with sentences in which a male referent would be mentioned which they needed to replace with the corresponding word for the female referent. An example of a sentence is given in (5):¹⁸

- (5) I chirurghi hanno operato per più di quattro ore
 the_{M.PL} surgeons_{M.PL} have operated for more than four hours
 ‘The surgeons operated for more than four hours.’

¹⁸ The complete set of sentences is listed in Appendix 1.

Table 2: Stimulus set.

Occupations traditionally linked to women	Occupations traditionally linked to men	capo in isolation	Subordinate compounds with capo-	Attributive compounds with capo-
<i>infermiera</i> 'Nurse'	<i>chirurgo</i> 'Surgeon'	<i>capo</i> 'Boss'	<i>capotreno</i> 'Train conductor'	<i>caporedattore</i> 'Editor in chief'
<i>maestra</i> 'Teacher'	<i>architetto</i> 'Architect'		<i>caporeparto</i> 'Department head'	<i>capocarceriere</i> 'Head of prison officers'
<i>commessa</i> 'Shop assistant'	<i>sindaco</i> 'Mayor'		<i>capoclasse</i> 'Class monitor'	<i>capocameriere</i> 'headwaiter'
<i>cassiera</i> 'Cashier'	<i>deputato</i> 'Member of parliament'		<i>capogruppo</i> 'Group leader'	<i>capocronista</i> 'News editor'
<i>segretaria</i> 'Secretary'	<i>ministro</i> 'Minister'		<i>capogabinetto</i> 'Head of cabinet'	<i>capomaestro</i> 'Master builder'
<i>ballerina</i> 'Dancer'	<i>magistrato</i> 'Magistrate'		<i>capobranco</i> 'Pack leader'	<i>capocomico</i> 'Lead comic'
<i>portiera</i> 'Concierge'	<i>ingegnere</i> 'Engineer'		<i>caposezione</i> 'Head of section'	<i>capocuoco</i> 'Chef'
<i>cameriera</i> 'Waitress'	<i>assessore</i> 'Assessor'		<i>caposquadra</i> 'Foreman'	<i>capooperaio</i> 'Head laborer'

Each category’s target words were equally split between plural and singular forms, with their syntactic roles balanced between subject and direct object. All target words were preceded by a definite article.

In Italian compounds with *capo-* are sometimes written juxtaposed (e.g., *capo redattore*), unverbated (e.g., *caporedattore*) or hyphenated (e.g., *capo-redattore*) (Micheli 2016: 21). This graphic variation may introduce a potential confounding factor (because the element *capo* is sometimes isolated and other times not (Juhasz et al. 2005; Marelli et al. 2015), potentially affecting its inflection. To mitigate this, sentences were presented auditorily using a natural-sounding text-to-speech synthesizer.

Participants could listen to the sentences as many times as needed, with no time constraints on their responses. They were instructed to rely on their intuitions, with responses not judged as right or wrong. After listening to a sentence like (5), they completed a written sentence such as (6) with the corresponding noun in its feminine form, preferably including the preceding definite article:

- (6)
- _____ hanno operato per più di quattro ore

_____ have operated for more than four hours

‘_____ operated for more than four hours.’

After receiving instructions, participants provided information about their occupation, language background and proficiency, educational attainment, gender, and age. Subsequently, the sentences were presented in a randomized order. Each participant listened to sentences containing two out of the eight targets within each category, totaling 10 sentences. Following this, participants indicated on a five-point scale: i) their awareness of the ongoing debate on inclusive language, ii) the frequency of their own use of inclusive language, and iii) the importance they attributed to inclusive language (see Appendix 2).

4.3 Analysis

The analysis aimed to provide a description of the forms that the participants used to refer to the occupational roles in feminine form. Participants had various options for marking grammatical gender: they could omit marking altogether, mark it on the target noun, the definite article, or both. For plural nouns, they could use either a plural or singular form. Furthermore, there was an asymmetry between marking in subordinate and attributive compounds. In subordinate compounds, participants had limited choice, primarily marking gender or number on the first constituent (*capo-*), while in attributive compounds, they had the flexibility to mark on either or both constituents. This diversity of possible responses resulted in varied participant choices. The grammatical gender (masculine/feminine) and number (singular/plural) of the responses were manually categorised. This was performed for both the determiner and the noun. Additionally, the gender and number of the first and second constituents of subordinate and attributive compounds were categorized separately. Consequently, for these compounds there was a categorisation for the first constituent, another one for the second, and a third one for the two together (i.e., feminine when at least one of the constituents was inflected according to feminine gender).

The analysis focuses on the distribution of the gender and number variables. For gender, the frequency of gender marking on the noun and on the article within each of the five noun types was examined. Furthermore, the effects of syntactic function in the sentence (subject/direct object), number (singular/plural), and three participant background variables (attitude towards gender-inclusive language, age, and gender) were tested.

The analysis of number was limited to items presented in plural in the test, particularly focusing on the two constituents of the compounds. Differences between the five noun types and any potential effects of syntactic function (subject or direct object) and participant background variables were considered, but not for number.

The statistical analysis is a mixed effects logistic regression model, with gender of the noun and that of the article as the outcome variables and the explaining variables described above as predictors. The predictor awareness of gender-inclusive language was estimated as the sum of the three ratings of the three statements at the end of the questionnaire. We performed this analysis once for the gender of the articles and the nouns, and a second time for the element *capo* in isolation and as the first constituent of the compounds. Additionally, we asked whether the participants marked gender of the attributive compounds on the first element (e.g., *capacuoco*), the second (e.g., *capocuoca*) or on both (e.g., *capacuoca*).

4.4 Results

The questionnaire was completed by 192 respondents, including 134 women, 57 men, and one participant who did not identify as either male or female. All were native speakers of Italian, with six reporting a second native language (i.e., Croatian, Sardinian, English, Spanish, Turkish or German). Their age ranged from 19 to 74 years, with an average of approximately 44 years. 168 respondents lived in Italy at the time of the survey, the remaining 24 reported living in another country. The highest educational level obtained by 32 participants was middle school or high-school, while the remaining 160 had obtained some form of university degree. The participants' responses towards gender-fair language were generally favourable. Over 97 % reported having at least some awareness of gender-fair language, more than 90 % used it at least every now and then, and more than 85 % had a neutral or a positive attitude towards it. The attitude towards gender-fair language correlated weakly with age (younger participants had a somewhat more favourable attitude towards gender-fair language), with participant gender (female participants had a somewhat more favourable attitude towards gender-fair language) and academic degree (attitude towards gender-fair language was somewhat more favourable in participants with a university degree).

The total number of responses was 1920. However, not all responses, could be used for the analysis. These included 327 responses where the determiner was missing, and 190 responses with nouns other than the target nouns (e.g. *responsabile* instead for *capo/capa*, or multiple possibilities like “*capa* or *capo*”) in the stimulus sentences.

Table 3 shows the proportions of determiners and nouns inflected for number and gender. There was considerably more variation in the gender of the nouns compared to determiners, which were predominantly feminine. As expected, the results for morphologically simple words revealed a scalar inflection (occupations traditionally

Table 3: Proportions of determiners and nouns inflected for number and gender.

			Determiner			Noun		
			<i>n</i>	Plural	Feminine	<i>n</i>	Plural	Feminine
Occupations traditionally occupied by women	Object	Singular	90	–	0.97	90	–	0.97
		Plural	96	1.00	1.00	96	1.00	1.00
	Subject	Singular	60	–	1.00	93	–	0.99
		Plural	87	1.00	0.95	87	1.00	0.95
Occupations traditionally occupied by men	Object	Singular	45	–	0.98	46	–	0.96
		Plural	53	1.00	0.81	111	1.00	0.76
	Subject	Singular	100	–	0.88	138	–	0.82
		Plural	46	1.00	0.91	47	1.00	0.89
<i>Capo</i> in isolation	Object	Singular	91	–	0.76	89	–	0.65
		Plural	69	1.00	0.70	63	0.76	0.59
	Subject	Singular	91	–	0.74	91	–	0.65
		Plural	59	1.00	0.73	57	0.96	0.56
Subordinate compounds	Object	Singular	96	–	0.95	99	–	0.16
		Plural	66	1.00	0.92	66	0.58	0.12
	Subject	Singular	88	–	0.92	88	–	0.06
		Plural	98	1.00	0.93	101	0.65	0.16
Attributive compounds	Object	Singular	88	–	0.93	89	–	0.84
		Plural	134	1.00	0.90	137	0.99	0.80
	Subject	Singular	92	–	0.96	97	–	0.74
		Plural	39	1.00	0.95	41	1.00	0.68
Total			1,593	1.00	0.90	1,730	0.90	0.67

linked to women → occupations traditionally linked to men → word *capo* in isolation).

In the case of compounds, there was a substantially higher percentage of feminine inflection for attributive compounds compared to subordinate compounds. This is due to the exclusive consideration of the lemma: In attributive compounds, respondents had the option to inflect only the second element, leading to a higher percentage of feminine inflection. The difference between subordinate and attributive compounds stems from the tendency for inflection to affect the rightmost element in attributive compounds, while subordinate compounds typically undergo internal inflection on the *capo* element, which is more resistant to inflection (as seen in *capo* in isolation and the type *capocuoca* in Table 7).

We tested the effects of syntactic function and number together with respondent age, gender, and attitude towards gender-fair language on the gender of determiners and nouns. The results are shown in Table 4. The values in this table represent the predicted proportions (on a logarithmic scale) of feminine gender for the five noun

Table 4: Predictor effects on gender of the determiner and of the noun. Significant effects are in bold.

	Determiner		Noun	
	Estimate	Standard error	Estimate	Standard error
Female-dominated	9.081	1.147	5.708	0.509
Male-dominated	6.289	0.997	−2.927	0.460
Isolation	4.105	0.844	−4.401	0.467
Subordinate	6.953	1.015	−8.324	0.559
Attributive	6.876	0.997	−3.441	0.460
Syntactic role	0.045	0.254	−0.290	0.170
Number	−0.437	0.275	−0.175	0.173
Respondent age	0.003	0.028	−0.014	0.012
Attitude to gender fair	0.460	0.145	0.260	0.062
Respondent gender	−0.975	0.759	−0.191	0.333

categories and the effects of the five predictors on these proportions. The only predictor with a significant effect was respondents’ attitude towards gender-fair language. Respondents who scored higher on this variable, were more likely to use the feminine form of the determiner or of the noun.

The impact of attitude towards gender-fair language is illustrated in Figure 1, showing the predicted proportions of feminine responses for the five stimulus categories across the range of responses to the gender-fair questions.

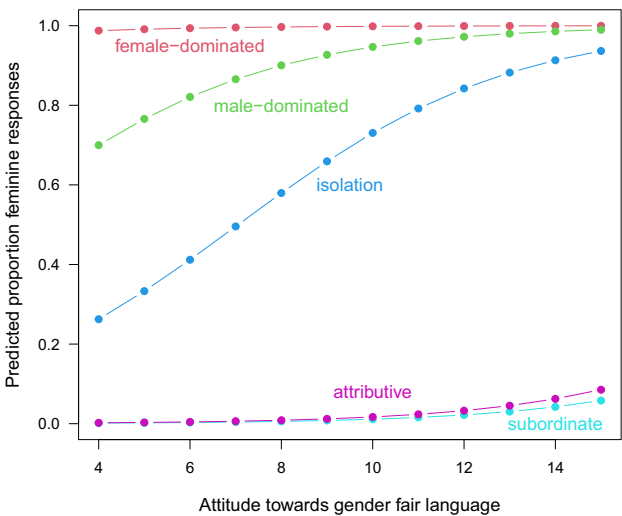


Figure 1: Proportions feminine nouns predicted by attitude towards gender-fair language.

Table 5 shows the proportions of feminine forms for *capo* in isolation and as the first constituent of subordinate and attributive compounds. The proportion is obviously highest when *capo* was used in isolation and considerably lower in the two compounds. Interestingly, the proportion of feminine responses appears to be affected by the stimulus number, that is the proportions of feminine responses were higher in plural. Table 6 presents the estimates of the effects of the same predictors used in the previous analysis, indicating that the effects of number and attitude towards gender-fair language were both significant.

Table 7 shows how often the first and the second constituents of attributive compounds were marked for gender. As expected, the table shows that feminine gender was more commonly marked on the second constituent. Specifically, it was predominantly marked on only the second constituent, less frequently on both the first and the second constituent, and least frequently on only the first constituent. In singular forms, the first constituent (*capo-*) was marked as feminine in 12 out of 186 cases, while in plural forms, it was marked as feminine in 55 out of 177 cases. Noun number, therefore, appears to have an effect on the gender marking of *capo-* in these compounds. For the second constituent, there was a less pronounced number effect. This constituent was marked as feminine in 132 out 186 singular cases and in 133 out of 177 cases.

Table 5: proportions feminine capo-forms.

	Isolation (n = 365)	Subordinate (n = 360)	Attributive (n = 372)
Singular	0.65 <i>capa</i>	0.11 <i>capareparto</i>	0.06 <i>capacameriera</i>
Plural	0.72 <i>cape</i>	0.18 <i>capereparto</i>	0.31 <i>capecameriere</i>

Table 6: Effects on the grammatical gender of capo. Significant effects are in bold.

	Estimate	Standard error
Isolation	1.323	0.484
Subordinate	−5.710	0.692
Attributive	−5.150	0.656
Syntactic role	−0.113	0.259
Number	1.919	0.339
Age	−0.052	0.027
Attitude to gender-fair language	0.401	0.137
Respondent gender	0.034	0.707

Table 7: Gender marking on constituents in attributive compounds.

		Singular		Plural	
		Element 1 <i>capo-</i>		Element 1 <i>capi-</i>	
		Masculine	Feminine	Masculine	Feminine
Element 2	Masculine	51 (0.29) <i>capocuoco</i>	3 (0.25) <i>capacuoco</i>	29 (0.24) <i>capicuochi</i>	15 (0.27) <i>capecuochi</i>
	Feminine	123 (0.71) <i>capocuoca</i>	9 (0.75) <i>capacuoca</i>	93 (0.76) <i>capicuoeche</i>	40 (0.73) <i>capecuoeche</i>

In sum, the results reveal significant differences in the gender usage across the five noun categories examined. Participants consistently employed feminine forms for occupations traditionally performed by women, while only roughly 15 % of the time when that occupation was expressed by a subordinate compound with the word *capo-* as its first constituent. Respondents with a more favourable attitude towards gender-fair language demonstrated a higher likelihood of employing feminine forms.

The feminine form *capo* was relatively frequent when used in isolation,¹⁹ but less when it constituted the first element of a compound. Interestingly, participants exhibited a higher propensity to use feminine forms for plural items compared to singular ones, and again, respondents with a favourable view on gender-fair language were more likely to use the feminine form than those who had a less favourable view. Regarding attributive compounds, respondents preferably marked feminine gender on the second element and less often on the first. When marking feminine gender on the first element, they were more likely to do so for plural than for singular compounds.

5 Discussion

The experiment aimed to assess the distribution of gender inflection according to social, etymological and morphological resistance, and the degree to which these

19 We want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comment regarding a potential regional variations in the acceptance of *capa* as a feminine form. However, the data in our study does not allow us to address this question directly, as the dialects represented in our sample were not carefully balanced. Future research should investigate this topic further by considering regional linguistic differences in more detail.

factors affect the responses. The findings provide a detailed analysis of how syntactic function, number, and respondent characteristics influence the gender marking of words.

The key finding that respondents' attitudes towards gender-inclusive language significantly influenced the use of feminine forms for both determiners and nouns is noteworthy. This underscores the influence of social and psychological factors on linguistic choices, suggesting that language use may reflect societal attitudes or individual beliefs regarding gender equality. As indicated in Table 4, the estimates for "attitude towards gender fairness" are positive and significantly different from zero. This resonates with broader conversations about the impact of societal attitudes on linguistic behaviors.

The discussion on the word *capo* in isolation reveals several interesting observations. Compared to occupational titles traditionally performed by men, *capa* was found to be less accepted as a feminine form, as shown in Table 3. This discrepancy suggests a potential etymological resistance towards accepting *capa* as a feminine term: this resistance highlights broader issues of linguistic conservatism and etymological adherence. Historical usage and entrenched linguistic conventions may contribute to its resistance to gender inflection, reflecting a reluctance to deviate from established language norms. However, it is worth noting that such barriers can potentially be overcome with a gender-fair attitude, as our results show. The frequency of *capa* in usage suggests that it holds a significant place in the Italian lexicon and is commonly employed in various contexts, contradicting previous studies considering this word derogatory, playful or simply incorrect. Moreover, several respondents, who decided not to inflect the word and did not use *capa* (and were hence excluded from the tally of feminine responses), opted for alternative terms such as *responsabile* or *manager*, i.e., nouns where gender is only visible on agreement phenomena ("nomi di genere comune", Thornton 2022). This behavior might indicate that despite *capa* is not fully accepted by some speakers, there is still a perception that *capo* is inherently masculine in nature. This perception might stem from societal norms or historical linguistic conventions that have traditionally associated certain roles or positions with masculinity but are still considered as under linguistic change. These findings are significant not only in the context of this study but also in providing insights into the broader discourse surrounding gendered language. The observations regarding the word *capo* in isolation highlight the multifaceted nature of linguistic phenomena and the interplay between linguistic structures, social perceptions, and individual attitudes. They contribute valuable perspectives to the ongoing debate regarding the usage of gender-specific terms and the implications for gender inclusivity in language. Furthermore, they shed light on the complexities of linguistic representation and the need for nuanced approaches to address gender biases in language.

The lower rate of inflection observed for the word *capo* compared to occupational titles traditionally performed by men could potentially be attributed to a more recent discourse surrounding this specific case. As outlined in Section 2, proposals for the feminization of occupational titles in Italian have been documented since the 1980s, however the same cannot be said for the term *capa*. Consequently, speakers may exhibit resistance towards a relatively novel change, opting instead for conservative strategies that have been shown to be historically employed in response to gender-fair language initiatives (Blaubergs 1980; Parks and Robertson 1988).

When examining the element *capo-* within compound words, the results indicate that attitudes towards gender-fair language alone may not suffice to justify feminine inflection of this element, as the outcomes for these categories are low. These results were expected due to several considerations that we mentioned in Section 2. Moreover, being *capo* the left-hand constituent, it is subject to lexicalization and prosodic factors, since in Italian disyllabic left-hand constituents tend to be perceived as prefixoids where the final vowel has no longer inflectional properties (see also Iacobini 2015: 1665; Thornton 1996).

However, the influence of the noun number on the usage of feminine *capa* as the first element of a compound presents an interesting pattern: the plural forms in subordinate, and even more in attributive compounds showed a higher frequency of feminine responses. This finding, as shown in Table 5, may have different explanations.

Phonological reasons might be at the basis for a preference of the use *cape-* in plural than *capa-* in singular. The presence of the vowel *-a* in the singular in fact is a clear morphological marker of feminine inflection, while the vowel *-e* possesses less clear gender features. The characteristics of the vowel involved may have effects on the degree of commitment to phonological cues: the presence of the vowel *-a* in the singular forms may evoke a stronger association with femininity in speakers' mind and perceiving the singular forms as inherently more feminine due to phonological frequencies might require a stronger commitment to mark the noun as feminine. On the other hand, if speakers perceived the vowel *-e* as carrying weaker phonological associations with femininity, they may be more likely to inflect the corresponding element in plural contexts. Overall, a potential influence of phonological factors on gender marking highlights the complex interplay between linguistic structure, phonological properties, and social perceptions. Further research exploring this relationship can offer valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying language use and contribute to a deeper understanding of gender inflection in linguistic contexts.

Another possible reason for this correlation might be due to cognitive processes at play that prioritize clarity and distinction when referring to multiple objects or individuals, thus making feminine forms more salient or preferable in such contexts. The decision-making process regarding linguistic inflection is intricately linked to

the activation of grammatical categories, particularly number and gender. When speakers opt not to inflect anything, they effectively disconnect the categories of number and gender, resorting to a neutral or default masculine singular form *capo-*. However, when the number category is activated it might stimulate the consideration of gender inflection as well, in line with the observations made by Corbett (1991 and 2000), according to whom number and gender have a cumulative exponence, where the morphological marking of number appears cumulated with that of gender. This implies that the activation of the number category prompts speakers to evaluate and potentially inflect the noun for gender, leading to a more complex linguistic decision-making process. In essence, the activation of the number category might serve as a catalyst for the consideration and utilization of gender marking in language. This interplay between grammatical categories underscores the intricate nature of linguistic structure and the cognitive processes involved in language production and comprehension. Further exploration of these mechanisms can provide valuable insights into the underlying principles governing language use and the factors influencing gender marking in particular contexts.

An explanation of the interplay between gender and number inflection is probably due to an effect of the stimuli. Our experimental design strategically presented the *capo* element in plural forms, maintaining the plural inflection of the word *capo* for both the compound categories under investigation. This decision was motivated by the inherent necessity for internal inflection in subordinate compounds, a phenomenon well-documented in corpus studies such as Micheli (2016). In order to ensure stimulus uniformity across both compound categories, attributive compounds were presented with a double inflection. The overabundance of both external and double inflection is nevertheless shown, with some attributive compounds even possessive two plural forms (Micheli 2016).²⁰ This approach aligns with the overarching aim of stimulus consistency and balancing in order to maintain equilibrium in the linguistic cues presented to participants. However, it is worth noting that this decision has arguably influenced the inflection of gender in plural, considering the lower degree of gender inflection in the singular form of *capo*, potentially perceived as a prefixoid. This can be explained based on the interpretation of *capo-* as a “learned element” in compounds: in its basic form, it is perceived as an affixoid (thus, it tends not to have feminine inflection, i.e. *capa-*), but if it is changed to its plural form in the stimulus, then it is less likely to be interpreted as an affixoid, which makes the inflection to *cape* more plausible. This appears corroborated by a lack of correlation between gender and number for the category of *capo* in isolation, which strengthens the hypothesis of a stimulus effect. This observation

²⁰ In Micheli’s (2016) study attributive compounds were traditionally considered coordinative compounds.

suggests that when participants were presented with specific linguistic cues, such as plural forms in compound words, their choice of gender marking was influenced. The consistency in the gender marking responses across plural contexts in fact indicates a potential cognitive mechanism at play, wherein participants may have been primed to associate the plural form with feminine gender marking due to the stimuli presented. It is essential to acknowledge that further data are required to fully validate this hypothesis and elucidate the intricacies of such linguistic phenomena. While our study provides some insights into the potential influence of linguistic stimuli on gender marking, additional research endeavors are necessary to confirm the robustness of this effect across diverse linguistic contexts and participant populations. Future research should delve deeper into the potential ramifications of stimulus effects on gender and number inflection. Specifically, investigations should explore the extent to which stimulus presentation impacts linguistic decision-making processes and the subsequent manifestations of gender and number marking. By elucidating the nuances of this relationship, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the cognitive mechanisms underlying language use and the intricate interplay between linguistic structure and external stimuli.

Some limitations of this study, such that one of a stimulus effect, should be taken into consideration for future research. Our experimental design, for instance, focused on replacing masculine forms with feminine forms, may not fully capture the intricacies of gender representation in Italian. Future studies could explore the impact of introducing gender-neutral options. Additionally, future research could not only investigate the grammatical aspects of gender inflection, but delve into semantic analysis. An interesting aspect to investigate might also be the exploration of the psychological mechanisms that influence these linguistic choices and how they may differ across various languages with different gender systems. Investigations could also look into how these language patterns evolve over time as social norms around gender continue to shift, as this study appears particularly suitable for replication studies.

6 Conclusions

Our study reveals the intricate interplay between linguistic structure and social factors in shaping language use, specifically regarding the gender marking of Italian compounds with *capo-* as their first constituent. Attitudes toward gender, grammatical number, and the type of compound all seem to influence how speakers manage gender in language.

The usage of *capa* in isolation is present in a significant number of responses, thus showing its increasing establishment in the language, contrary to previous

reflections on Italian language. Conversely, the gender marking of *capa-* as a compound element is remarkably marginal, even among speakers who pay attention to gender-fair expressions. Additionally, the gender marking of *capa-* as a compound element was found to be influenced by number inflection, with attributive compounds in the plural exhibiting a higher frequency of feminine responses, suggesting an interesting interaction between noun number and gender marking.

Our research contributes to the research on inflection of morphologically complex words, as well as the ongoing conversation about gender inclusivity in language. Language both reflects and influences societal attitudes toward gender, and the deliberate use of gender-fair language can have broader implications on language structure.

Further research should explore the impact of gender-neutral options, semantic analysis, psychological mechanisms, and the evolution of language patterns over time. These insights extend beyond linguistics, informing broader societal discussions about gender inclusivity and language representation.

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Appendices

1. Full list of stimuli

	Singular	Plural
Traditionally feminine	<i>Fortunatamente l'infermiere era gentilissimo</i> 'Luckyly the nurse was very kind'	<i>Mio figlio ha ascoltato il suo maestro e si è convinto a iniziare musica</i> 'My son listened to his teacher and was
		<i>I segretari dell'ufficio Erasmus mi hanno aiutato moltissimo con la domanda</i> 'The secretaries of the Erasmus office
		<i>Mia sorella ieri ha visto i ballerini della Scala in centro a Milano</i> 'Yesterday my sister saw the dancers of the ballet company of the

(continued)

	Singular	Plural
	convinced to start studying music'	helped me a lot with the application'
	<i>Il commesso del supermercato mi è corso dietro con il latte dimenticato</i>	<i>Ho visto il cassiere mettersi in tasca dei soldi e allontanarsi</i>
	'The supermarket clerk ran after me with the forgotten milk'	'I saw the cashier putting some money in his pocket and walk away'
	<i>Il mio architetto ha già iniziato a seguire i lavori</i>	<i>Hanno convocato il deputato al Consiglio</i>
	'My architect has already started supervising the work'	'They summoned the deputy to the Council'
	<i>L'ingegnere ha completato il progetto</i>	<i>Il ministro in carica si è recato oggi al vertice</i>
	'The engineer completed the project'	'The minister in charge attended the summit today'
Traditionally masculine		
		Scala theater in the center of Milan'
		<i>I portieri dei palazzi vicini uscirono tutti per aiutare</i>
		'The concierges from the nearby buildings all came out to help'
		<i>Ho ringraziato moltissimo i camerieri per il servizio eccellente</i>
		'I thanked the waiters very much for the excellent service'
		<i>I Chirurghi hanno operato per più di quattro ore</i>
		'The surgeons operated for more than four hours'
		<i>Le ultime due elezioni sono state vinte da due sindaci molto competenti</i>
		'The last two elections were won by two very competent mayors'
		<i>Oggi il sindaco ha nominato due nuovi assessori</i>
		'Today the mayor appointed two new councilors'
		<i>Stamattina il testimone è stato interrogato dai magistrati</i>
		'This morning the witness was questioned by the prosecutors'
capo in isolation		
	<i>Il mio capo ha lavorato tanti anni come apprendista</i>	<i>Basta, oggi vado ad affrontare il mio capo</i>
	'My boss worked as an apprentice for many years'	'Enough, today I'm going to face my boss'
	<i>Il tuo capo non ha una gran voglia di lavorare</i>	<i>Perché non senti il capo per un aumento?</i>
	'Your boss doesn't really want to work'	'Why don't you hear from the boss about a raise?'
		<i>I miei capi sono persone simpaticissime, spesso usciamo insieme</i>
		'My bosses are very nice people, we often go out together'
	<i>Il capotreno mi ha appena informato</i>	<i>Ho appena incontrato il mio</i>
		<i>I nostri capigruppo non sono potuti</i>
		<i>Sono andata a sentire i capi se posso andare a casa prima</i>
		'I went to ask the bosses if I can go home early'
		<i>Ho visto i tuoi capi nel nuovo ufficio</i>
		'I saw your bosses in the new office'
		<i>Il presidente ha incontrato i capigruppo dei</i>

(continued)

	Singular		Plural	
capo- in sub-ordinate compounds	<i>che dovremmo ripartire a breve</i>	<i>caporeparto; ha detto che il lavoro deve essere finito per domani</i>	<i>andare alla riunione di istituto</i>	<i>due partiti</i>
	'The train conductor just informed me that we should be leaving soon'	'I just met my department manager; he said the work must be finished by tomorrow'	'Our class leaders couldn't go to the school meeting'	'The president met with the group leaders of the two parties'
capo- in attributive compounds	<i>Il caposezione ha appena illustrato il progetto ai dipendenti</i>	<i>Si ringrazia il capogabinetto del presidente per aver partecipato alla riunione</i>	<i>I due capibranco hanno cacciato la preda per i piccoli</i>	<i>L'amministratore ha convocato i capisquadra per un briefing sulla sicurezza</i>
	'The section manager has just explained the project to the employees'	'We thank the president's chief of staff for attending the meeting'	'The two pack leaders hunted prey for the young'	'The administrator called the team leaders for a safety briefing'
capo- in attributive compounds	<i>Il nuovo capomaestro ha deciso di aggiungere due colonne al progetto originale</i>	<i>Durante l'ultima sfilata di Armani hanno premiato il caporedattore di Vogue</i>	<i>I nuovi capicarcerieri hanno avuto un confronto con il detenuto</i>	<i>I due ristoranti in centro hanno entrambi licenziato i loro capicuochi</i>
	'The new master builder decided to add two columns to the original design'	'During the last Armani fashion show they awarded the editor-in-chief of Vogue'	'The new head wardens had a confrontation with the inmate'	'The two downtown restaurants both fired their head chefs'
capo- in attributive compounds	<i>Il capocomico si rivolgeva al pubblico per coinvolgerlo nello spettacolo</i>	<i>Hanno licenziato il capocameriere della nuova pizzeria in centro</i>	<i>Per trovare un accordo i sindacati hanno ascoltato i capioperai</i>	<i>Stamattina in redazione ho incontrato i due nuovi capicronisti</i>
	'The chief comedian addressed the audience to involve them in the show'	'They fired the head waiter of the new pizzeria in the city center'	'To find an agreement, the unions listened to the worker leaders'	'This morning in the editorial office I met the two new chief reporters'

2. Questions regarding awareness, use and attitude on gender-fair language:

Are you aware of the ongoing debate on inclusive language?

– No

– Maybe, I might have heard about it

(continued)

-
- A bit
 - Yes, pretty much aware
 - Yes, very aware
- Do you seek to make use of inclusive language?
- Never
 - Very rarely
 - Sometimes
 - Most of the time
 - Yes, almost always
- Do you agree on the importance of using inclusive language?
- No, I don't agree at all
 - I don't particularly agree
 - Neutral
 - I pretty much agree
 - I very much agree
-

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