

---

# Gender agreement in Italian compounds with *capo-*

Irene Lami<sup>1</sup>, M. Silvia Micheli<sup>2</sup>, Jan Radimský<sup>3</sup> & Joost van de Weijer<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Lund, <sup>2</sup>University of Milano – Bicocca, <sup>3</sup>University of South Bohemia

---

## 1 Introduction

This study aims to investigate the gender and number inflection of a particularly productive compound type in Italian, namely the Noun Noun compounds made up of the word *capo* (literally 'head', see below on semantics) as the left-hand constituent and head of the compound (e.g., *capostazione*, chief.station 'station master'). Based on an experimental test, we will provide an overview on the strategies that native speakers employ in gender and number inflection, focusing on the formation of the feminine.

The history of this type of compound already begins in Latin, but it is only in more recent stages of the language that this pattern acquires remarkable productivity. As shown in the diachronic analysis by Micheli (2020: 130-140), already in Medieval Latin, the word *caput* occurred together with another noun in combinations where it referred to 'beginning' (as in *caput anni* 'early part of the year') but more frequently 'chief, person in a leading position' (as in *caput castris* 'chief of the military camp'). While in Old Italian *capo-* occurs within compounds expressing a wide range of meanings (e.g., 'head', 'initial part', 'leader'), from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, it specialises in the creation of agentive compound nouns, indicating persons in positions of leadership or power (Micheli 2020: 149).

In present-day Italian, agentive compounds with *capo-* represent a well-established pattern, which includes a not entirely homogeneous set of words. Following the classification proposed by Bisetto & Scalise (2005), within this category we can identify compounds in which *capo-* is linked by a subordinative relationship to a second element that is a noun referring to a place, an institution, or a human group (e.g., *caposquadra*, chief.team 'foreman') and compounds where the second constituent is an agentive noun (e.g., *caporedattore*, chief.editor 'editor-in-chief'). The relationship between the two constituents in the latter type of compounds can be interpreted in three ways: i) as a coordinative relationship (i.e., *caporedattore* is the one who is both the editor and the chief); ii) as a subordinative relationship (i.e., *caporedattore* refers to the chief of the editors); iii) as an attributive relationship (i.e., *capo* represents the modifier of the noun *redattore*, which represents the head of the compound).

However, the interest in this type of compounds is not only a matter of semantics: indeed, they represent a highly interesting category for observing inflectional phenomena within Italian compound words. As shown by Micheli (2016: 25-28), the number inflection of compounds with *capo-* displays numerous instances of overabundance (i.e., «the situation in which two or more inflectional forms are available to realize the same cell in an inflectional paradigm» according to Thornton 2019), especially within the subtype where the second constituent is an agent noun (e.g., the plural form of *caporedattore* 'editor-in-chief' can be *capipLredattoreSG*, *capoSGredattoriPL*, and *capipLredattoriPL*).

In contrast, the gender inflection of compounds with *capo-* has not been systematically investigated so far. The issue of gender in this type of compound words is relevant for two reasons: on the one hand, the presence of more than one plural form suggests that gender may also be an irregular phenomenon; on the other hand, the gender inflection of the word *capo* as free form appears problematic, as it is generally considered by dictionaries to be a masculine noun (based on its use with the meaning 'head') which should not be inflected according to feminine gender.

Moreover, compounds with *capo-* fall into the category of occupational titles, which in Italian have been the matter of debate (both among specialists and in the general public) from a

sociolinguistic point of view. More specifically, since the seminal works by Sabatini (1985; 1986), it has been observed that they represent a crucial aspect of the use of sexist language, being many nouns indicating prestigious professions traditionally performed by men (e.g., *ministro*<sub>M</sub> ‘minister’) still often inflected only in the masculine form even when referring to a female subject (see, among others, Gheno 2019; Thornton 2012; Zarra 2017). Although this issue also concerns occupational nouns expressed through a compound with *capo-*, these forms are often neglected. Interestingly, when they are mentioned in the guidelines advocating a non-sexist use of language, they are treated as invariable nouns, where therefore the feminine form should not be used (e.g., Telve 2011; Robustelli 2012; Gheno, 2018).

Our study aims at filling this gap and focusing on the gender inflection of *capo-* compounds. Particularly, this research aims to answer the following questions: are there differences in the gender inflection between compounds with *capo-* and other occupational titles? What strategies do speakers implement when they decide to inflect for gender a compound with *capo-*? Is there a difference between the inflection of *capo-* in isolation and *capo-* within a compound? We will investigate the agreement strategies adopted by speakers and correlate them with both morphological and sociolinguistic parameters.

## 2 Methods

The test was administered through the Sogolytics platform. Informants should be asked to listen to ten sentences with masculine referents, and then to inflect the whole sentence asking to change the referent(s) from a masculine one to a feminine one, both in singular and plural. The following five categories of target nouns were investigated: 1) occupational titles traditionally linked to women; 2) occupational titles traditionally linked to men; 3) *capo* in isolation; 4) subordinate compounds with *capo-*; 5) compounds with *capo-* and an agentive noun. Each category was represented by eight nouns, shown in Table 1. The occupational titles traditionally linked to women were selected based on their acknowledged ‘unproblematicity’ regarding feminine inflection in the literature (see among many others Sabatini, 1987; Proudfoot & Cardo, 2005; Cortelazzo, 2017; Giusti & Iannàccaro, 2020; Ricci 2021; Sulis & Gheno, 2022). In the selection, we aimed to find words similar in frequency when inflected for feminine. The occupational titles traditionally linked to men were selected on the basis of their acknowledged resistance of accepting a feminine inflection. These words were previously pointed out by Zarra (2017) in his analysis of gender inflection for titles and professions to which women historically have had limited access (see also Miglietta, 2022). Professional titles with a possible double ending (e.g., *avvocatessa*, *avvocata*, lawyer.F) were not included in this category because of theoretical considerations and the fact that experimental studies have suggested that a gender bias is linked to the traditional affix *-essa* but not to the modern one *-a* (Mucchi Faina & Baino 2006; Merkel et al. 2012; Merkel 2013). The compounds containing *capo-* were extracted from the Zingarelli dictionary (online version, 2022).

Traditionally women	Traditionally men	Subordinate compound	Coordinate compound
<i>infermiere</i> “nurse”	<i>chirurgo</i> “surgeon”	<i>capotreno</i> “train conductor”	<i>caporedattore</i> “editor in chief”
<i>maestro</i> “teacher”	<i>architetto</i> “architect”	<i>caporeparto</i> “department head”	<i>capocarceriere</i> “head of prison”
<i>commesso</i> “shop assistant”	<i>sindaco</i> “mayor”	<i>capoclasse</i> “class monitor”	<i>capocameriere</i> “headwaiter”
<i>cassiere</i> “cashier”	<i>deputato</i> “member of parliament”	<i>capogruppo</i> “group leader”	<i>capocronista</i> “news editor”
<i>segretario</i> “secretary”	<i>ministro</i> “minister”	<i>capogabinetto</i> “head of the cabinet”	<i>capomaestro</i> “master builder”
<i>ballerino</i> “dancer”	<i>magistrato</i> “magistrate”	<i>capobranco</i> “pack leader”	<i>capocomico</i> “lead comic”

<i>portiere</i> “conciierge” <i>cameriere</i> “waitress”	<i>ingegnere</i> “engineer” <i>assessore</i> “assessor”	<i>caposezione</i> “head of the section” <i>caposquadra</i> “foreman”	<i>capocuoco</i> “chef” <i>capooperaio</i> “head laborer”
-------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------

**Table 1:** Target nouns

### 3 Preliminary results

The test was completed by 192 respondents. Of these, 134 were women, 57 were men, and 1 did not identify as either male or female. All were native speakers of Italian, but six of them reported 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, that of the remaining 160 respondents had obtained some form of university degree. The participants’ responses towards gender-fair language were generally favourable. More than 97% of them indicated that they had 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 participant age (the younger participants had a somewhat more favourable attitude towards gender-fair language than the older ones), with participant gender (female participants’ had a somewhat more favourable attitude towards gender-fair language male participants) and academic degree (attitude towards gender-fair language was somewhat more favourable in participants with a university degree than in those without it). Table 2 shows the distribution of the grammatical categories of the nouns.

	Traditionally women		Traditionally men		Isolation		Subord. comp.		Coord. comp.	
	Sing	Plur	Sing	Plur	Sing	Plur	Sing	Plur	Sing	Plur
Feminine	0.97	0.92	0.86	0.83	0.62	0.69	0.10	0.18	0.06	0.31
Masculine	0.02	0.03	0.14	0.17	0.33	0.26	0.84	0.81	0.94	0.68
Other	0.01	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.01	0.00	0.02

**Table 2:** Preliminary results

The table shows that the proportions of feminine responses varied considerably across the five compound types. Within the first three types, the feminine responses dominate, while in the last two types the masculine responses dominate. In addition, the numbers suggest that the effect of compound number is not the same for each compound type. The proportion of feminine responses is *lower* in the plural forms than in the singular forms for female and male dominated professions, and *higher* in the plural forms for the remaining three compound types.

Starting from this data, in the presentation we will discuss in more detail the strategies adopted by speakers and offer some reflections on the relationship between number inflection and gender.

### References

- Bisetto, Antonietta & Sergio Scalise. 2005. The classification of compounds. *Lingue e Linguaggio* 4(2). 319-332
- Cortelazzo, Michele. 2017. “Il presidente, la presidente, la capra”. Web blogpost, Michele Cortelazzo *Parole. Opinioni, riflessioni, dati sulla lingua*. <https://cortmic.myblog.it/presidente/>.
- Gheno, Vera. 2018. Tutti i modi dell’hate speech sui social media: quando la lingua separa e ferisce. *Agenda Digitale*, 3.5.2018.
- Gheno, Vera. 2019. *Femminili singolari. Il femminismo è nelle parole*. Firenze: Effequ.

- Giusti, Giuliana & Gabriele Iannàccaro. 2020. Can gender-fair language combat gendered hate speech? Some reflections on language, gender and hate speech. In Giuliana Giusti & Gabriele Iannàccaro (eds.), *Language, Gender and Hate Speech. A Multidisciplinary Approach*, 9-20. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing.
- Merkel, Elisa. 2013. *The two faces of gender-fair language*. Doctoral thesis. University of Padua.
- Merkel, E.; Maass, Anne, & Laura Frommelt. 2012. Shielding women against status loss: The masculine form and its alternatives in the Italian language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 31(3). 311-320.
- Micheli, M. Silvia. 2016. Limiti e potenzialità dell'uso di dati empirici in lessicografia. Il caso del plurale delle parole composte. *Ricognizioni* 6(2). 15-33.
- Micheli, M. Silvia. 2020. *Composizione italiana in diacronia. Le parole composte dell'italiano nel quadro della Morfologia delle costruzioni*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.
- Miglietta, Annarita. 2022. Morfologia diacronica e parità di genere. *Italiano LinguaDue* 14(1). 861-878.
- Mucchi Faina, Angelica, & Martina Barro. 2006. Il caso di "professoressa": espressioni marcate per genere e persuasione. *Psicologia sociale* 1(3). 517-530.
- Proudfoot, Anna, & Francesco Cardo. 2005. *Modern Italian Grammar: A practical guide*. Second edition. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ricci, Sara. 2021. *Stereotypes, prestige and grammar: occupational job titles in Italian*. Master Thesis. Ca' Foscari University of Venice.
- Robustelli, Cecilia. 2012. Linee guida per l'uso del «genere» nel linguaggio amministrativo. Progetto genere e linguaggio. Parole e immagini della comunicazione, svolto in collaborazione con l'Accademia della Crusca, Comune di Firenze, Comitato Pari Opportunità: [www.accademiadellacrusca.it](http://www.accademiadellacrusca.it).
- Sabatini, Alma 1985. Occupational Titles in Italian: Changing the Sexist Usage. In M. Hellinger, (ed.) *Sprachwandel und feministische Sprachpolitik: Internationale Perspektiven*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Sabatini, Alma. 1986. *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana. Per la scuola e l'editoria scolastica*. Roma: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.
- Sabatini, Alma. 1987. *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*. Commissione nazionale per la realizzazione della parità tra uomo e donna. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato.
- Sulis, Gigliola & Vera Gheno. 2022. The Debate on Language and Gender in Italy, from the Visibility of Women to Inclusive Language (1980s–2020s), *The Italianist* 42(1). 153-183.
- Telve, Stefano. 2011. Maschile e femminile nei nomi di professione. In *Enciclopedia Treccani*: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/maschile-e-femminile-nei-nomi-di-professione-prontuario\\_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/maschile-e-femminile-nei-nomi-di-professione-prontuario_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/).
- Thornton, Anna M. 2012. Quando parlare delle donne è un problema. In Anna M. Thornton & Miriam Voghera (eds.), *Per Tullio De Mauro. Studi offerti dalle allieve in occasione del suo 80° compleanno*, 301-316. Roma: Aracne.
- Thornton, Anna M. 2019. Overabundance: a canonical typology. In Franz Rainer, Francesco Gardani, Wolfgang U. Dressler & Hans Christian Luschützky (eds.), *Competition in inflection and word-formation*. Cham: Springer.
- Zarra, Giuseppe. 2017. I titoli di professioni e cariche pubbliche esercitate da donne in Italia e all'estero. In Yorick Gomez Gane (ed.), «Quasi una rivoluzione». *I femminili di professioni e cariche in Italia e all'estero*, 19-104. Florence: Accademia della Crusca.
- Zingarelli, Nicola. 2022. *Lo Zingarelli 2022. Vocabolario della lingua italiana*. Bologna: Zanichelli.