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Femicide in the Italian Language: Which Words to Describe Gender-based Violence?*

Abstract I: La parola può dare forma all'esperienza raccontandola ovvero manipolandola; la scelta che facciamo delle parole è un atto decisivo che ha delle ripercussioni nel nostro agire poiché può costituire la premessa di pratiche discriminatorie. A partire da tali presupposti intendiamo proporre qualche riflessione sull'uso di talune parole ed espressioni e sulla consapevolezza del significato che proprio quelle parole ed espressioni manifestano quando trattiamo e valutiamo certi argomenti sensibili; inizieremo facendo qualche considerazione sul termine *femminicidio* per poi osservare come la violenza di genere appaia da un lato in un contesto della codificazione linguistica come un dizionario della lingua italiana e dall'altro nella stampa quotidiana nazionale.

Abstract II: Words can shape experience by narrating it or manipulating it. How we choose words is a decisive act which has important effects on our behavior since it can lead to discriminating practices. On the basis of these considerations, this article analyses the use of some words and expressions and focuses on how aware we are of their meaning when they are employed to tackle and judge delicate topics. We shall begin with some considerations on the term *femicide* and then move on to examining how gender violence is, on one hand, linguistically coded in Italian dictionaries and, on the other, in the national press.

Introduction

According to statistics released by ISTAT, about seven million women in Italy have suffered some kind of abuse during their lives and more than a hundred are killed every year by a man who is often an intimate partner. They are victims of behaviors, gestures and episodes of violence which journalists are often compelled to comment on. Besides being merely compelled by their right and duty to report facts, they are also called to contribute to a cultural turn by investigating the contexts in which violence emerges. Reporting a brutal aggression can, indeed, either nourish further aversion or promote a culture of respect for the most vulnerable, be they women, children or the elderly. How, then, can one spin an objective, accurate and precise narrative without promoting sensationalism? How can one narrate a dramatic episode while protecting the victim? Which words and expressions should

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be used and which avoided? These are some of the questions raised by Loredana Lipperini and Michela Murgia in their promising book on femicide which takes up the challenge of changing the narrative of the phenomenon by focusing on the role played by the media in spreading the issue and on the lexical choices used (Lipperini & Murgia 2013)¹.

Our lives are fraught with a peculiar contradiction, namely our scarce perception of how powerful language really is. Our unique communication system is distinguished by extraordinary experiences, such as being able to talk and to talk to each other without misunderstandings and consents or to calibrate words according to the situation and our emotions. Words can thus shape experience by narrating it or manipulating it. How we choose words is a decisive act which has important effects on our behavior since it can lead to discriminating practices. On the basis of these considerations, this article analyses the use of some words and expressions and focuses on how aware we are of their meaning when they are employed to tackle and judge delicate topics. We shall begin with some considerations on the term *femicide* and then move on to examining how gender violence is, on one hand, linguistically coded in Italian dictionaries and, on the other, in the national press.

The Term *Femminicidio* (Femicide)

Over the past few years we have increasingly witnessed a daily crescendo of women being reported killed by their (ex-)husbands or partners on the news. The phenomenon is described as dramatic but unprecedented. Yet, the above-mentioned data and the numerous surveys carried out in many countries both in Europe and beyond suggest, instead, that these facts are both widely spread across the globe and rooted in history. They thus represent the tragic epilogue of a chain of violence which is as articulated in its manifestations as it is unitary in its origin. What seems new is, instead, the term used to describe these events, that is, *femminicidio*, which has circulated in the Italian lexicon (amidst some resistance and adaptations) for just about two decades. In her detailed reconstruction of the origin of the term and its use in newspapers, Della Valle (undated) points out that the term is documented from 2001 onwards and was preceded by *uxoricidio* (*uxoricide*), in the meaning of “the killing of a woman”, even if the Latin root *uxor*, meaning ‘wife’, alludes to the killing of a wife. The latter term was also used to include men and hence all partners in general. Della Valle (undated) laments the lexical void present in the Italian language, which lacked a term to refer to the killing of a woman as such, unlike in English where *femicide* has been attested since 1801 and *femicide* since 1992. The former term, made popular by the criminologist Diana Russell, was the model for other languages, among which the Italian term *fem(m)icidio*. The latter, instead, seems to derive from the word *femminicidio*, theorized and spread by Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde to remember the homicides of many women that were committed on the border between Mexico and the United States. It is easy to understand that there was a proliferous intersection of points of view that originated in distant places and followed different paths but, nonetheless, met thanks to cultural movements that spread across many parts of the western world, including Italy.

¹ The volume, which incorporates numerous examples from the daily press, offers the interpretative lens which has inspired the comments presented herein.

Della Valle (undated) also points out that the term *femminicidio*, inspired by the Hispanic-American term, has gathered a great deal of consensus since 2008, following the publication of Barbara Spinelli's convincing essay which favored the use of term first in the daily and periodical press and then in current use (Spinelli 2008). To counter the harsh and corrosive judgements put forward against the term and its sociopolitical and ideological content² Della Valle (undated) aptly states:

Contrariamente a quanto si sente ripetere spesso, *femminicidio* non è una brutta parola. È una parola formata del tutto regolarmente, unendo e componendo insieme la parola *femmina*, con quella parte finale *-cidio*, che ha il significato appunto di uccisione. Uccisione di una donna. Non è la parola ad essere brutta e spesso si ha paura delle parole non per il loro aspetto esterno, ma per il significato e per l'avvenimento che evocano.

Contrary to what we often hear, femminicidio is not an ugly word. It is a word formed regularly by uniting and compounding the word femmina with the suffix -cidio, which means killing. Killing of a woman. It is not the word that is ugly. Often we fear words not because of their external aspect but because of their meaning and the event they evoke³.

Rosario Coluccia (2013) offers a further interpretation of the term *femminicidio* and, starting his analysis from dictionaries, contributes to its use and dissemination.

La voce "femmina" viene spiegata così: 'essere umano di sesso femminile, spesso con valore spregiativo'. Badate all'aggettivo "spregiativo", la soluzione è lì. Il "femminicidio" indica l'assassinio legato a un atteggiamento culturale ributtante, di chi considera la moglie, la compagna, l'amica, la donna incontrata casualmente, non un essere umano di pari dignità e di pari diritti, ma un oggetto di cui si è proprietari; se la proprietà viene negata, se un altro maschio si avvicina all'oggetto che si ritiene proprio, scatta la violenza cieca.

Io non so se questo atteggiamento sia generato da alcune abitudini della società in cui viviamo: una società che, insieme, esibisce sfacciatamente il corpo femminile visto come una merce e preferisce ascoltare chi urla e offende invece di riflettere sulla ragionevolezza delle argomentazioni. [...] Se una società genera forme mostruose di sopraffazione e di violenza, bisogna inventare un termine che esprima quella violenza e quella sopraffazione. E quindi è giusto usare "femminicidio", per denunciare la brutalità dell'atto e per indicare che si è contro la violenza e la sopraffazione. Bene ha fatto la lingua italiana a mettere in circolo la parola "femminicidio"; il generico "omicidio" risulterebbe troppo blando.

The definition for the entry "femmina" reads as follows: 'human being of female sex, often pejorative'. Attention should be focused on the adjective 'pejorative' as the so-

² See also Cantoni (2016: 41-54), who analyses the criticism put forward against the use of the neologism, as well as possible alternatives in use in journalistic communication.

³ All translations are mine.

lution lies therein. “Femminicidio” indicates an assassination based on the disgusting cultural attitude of someone who considers their wife, partner, friend or any randomly met woman not as a human being with equal dignity and rights but as a possessed object; if that property is denied, if another male approaches the object that one thinks his, then blind violence breaks out.

I do not know if this behavior is generated by certain customs of the society in which we live – a society which both shamelessly shows off the female body as if it were merchandise and prefers to listen to those who yell and offend, instead of reflecting on the sensibleness of the arguments. (...) If a society generates monstrous forms of oppression and violence, then it is necessary to invent a term that can express that violence and oppression. It is, thus, right to use “femminicidio” to denounce the brutality of the act and show that we are against violence and oppression. The Italian language was right to introduce the word “femminicidio” because the more generic term “omicidio” (homicide) is too bland.

These worthy linguistic considerations shed light on and actualize what would otherwise be discarded as a discussion not against the crime, but against the neologism used to describe it. Nevertheless, the insistence on the efficacy of the word, which is, no doubt, semantically powerful, reinforces, on one hand, the idea that the reality described is tangible and authentic, and on the other, associates the phenomenon with “una malattia cronica della cultura di buona parte del nostro pianeta basata sulla visione della donna come essere ‘naturalmente’ inferiore. Con essa sempre fanno i conti quotidianamente le donne di tutto il mondo e contro di essa lottano i movimenti femminili occidentali da oltre trenta anni” [*a chronic disease of the culture that is shared by most of the planet and which is based on an envisioning of women as ‘naturally’ inferior beings. Women all over the world have to deal with it every day and western feminist movements have been fighting against it for over 30 years*] (Paoli 2014: 52; see also Violi 2015: 141-143). Such an awareness is also confirmed by lexicographical evidences (*Neologismi* Treccani 2008 and *Devoto Oli* 2009) which list the term with the following meanings:

Uccisione diretta o provocata, eliminazione fisica o annientamento morale della donna e del suo ruolo sociale.

Direct or provoked killing, physical elimination or moral annihilation of women and their social role.

Qualsiasi forma di violenza esercitata sistematicamente sulle donne in nome di una sovrastruttura ideologica di matrice patriarcale, allo scopo di perpetuarne la subordinazione e di annientarne l'identità attraverso l'assoggettamento fisico o psicologico, fino alla schiavitù o alla morte.

Any form of systematic violence against women in name of an ideological superstructure of patriarchal matrix, in order to perpetuate subordination and annihilate identity through physical and psychological subjection including slavery or death.

Obviously, these statements refer to an ample context of reference which is not merely restricted to the domestic arena – that of “systematic violence against women in name of an ideological superstructure of patriarchal matrix”. Femicide cannot, therefore, be considered as a phenomenon linked to the personal histories of single individuals, because it is a political problem which is rooted in the “patriarchal matrix” and its culture. It is an interpretative category of reality which considers every kind of gender violence against women, in which women cannot claim or exercise their rights because they are women.

The adoption of a new term thus reflects the urgency for a discontinuity from the dominant culture which ‘inspired’, so to say, and justified crimes against women. We must, however, always be careful not to focus only on the semantics of the neologism, since this could lead us to neglect the issue in its full complexity, that is, its cultural implications and its repercussions on the development of a distorted idea of man-woman relationships. For this reason, it is necessary to continue monitoring the vocabulary of and on femicide in its various contexts of use. In the following sections, we will, thus, consider some examples from two points of view: the lexicographic and that of journalistic usage.

Gender Violence in Dictionaries

The meanings associated with the ‘feminine’ have over time contributed to non-neutrally spreading and mediating a series of well-established portraits, values, categories, judgements and prejudices. Through their communicative acts, women and men play out their social roles and thereby also describe the worldview they are part of. For this reason, studying words is a peculiar way of understanding cultural dynamics since it allows us to single out expressions with implicit value-judgements clearly conveyed in everyday speech. Even a dictionary, which is just apparently an impersonal compendium of words, can thus be analyzed as the symbolic reconstruction of a more complex world. As feminist scholars have often pointed out, the definition of *woman* as ‘the female of man’ is not rare in Italian lexicography (perhaps somewhat idly it is still found in many repertoires) and it says a lot about the masculinist ideology that underlies many dictionaries.

In order to test this idea, we shall consider the authoritative *Grande dizionario italiano dell’uso* (henceforth GRADIT) which, simply put, is a lexicographic tool that witnesses the ‘movements’ of the Italian language. As such, it documents contemporary Italian language and culture and carefully and rigorously reveals the threat of prejudice inscribed in language by amply signaling (albeit not systematically) ironic, playful and stereotypical uses. In particular we shall observe how Italian expresses the asymmetry between the MOGLIE (WIFE) and MARITO (HUSBAND) binary, by analysing the examples provided for these entries⁴.

The analysis shows that there are 233 attestations for MOGLIE and 134 for MARITO. What needs to be evaluated at this point is if the ‘immobile’ construction of the examples quoted can suggest an interesting split in everyday linguistic uses often tending towards the colloquial and simultaneously denounce certain ideological resistances. Let us begin by analysing the two main entries:

⁴ The theoretical and methodological framework for these considerations is inspired by the survey I carried out on the lexicographic corpora of the Italian language: see Fusco (2012 and 2016).

moglie: donna sposata, considerata rispetto al marito: *Maria è la m. di Franco*; *essere marito e m.*, essere sposati; *cercare, trovare m.*; *avere per m.*; *dividersi, separarsi dalla m.*; *prendere m.*, sposarsi; *chiedere in m.*, avanzare formale richiesta di avere in sposa; *promettere in m.*, sancire una promessa di matrimonio; [...].

wife: *married woman, considered in relation to husband*: *Mary is Frank's wife*; *to be husband and wife*: *to be married*; *to look for/find a wife*; *to have s.o. as one's wife*; *to leave, separate from one's wife*; *to take s.o. as one's wife*: *to marry (s.o.)*; *to ask s.o. to be one's wife*: *to formally propose, to ask for s.o.'s hand*; *to promise s.o. in marriage*.

marito: uomo sposato, considerato rispetto alla moglie: *Franco è il m. di Maria*, **ha un m. gentilissimo**; *essere m. e moglie*, essere sposati; *cercare, trovare m.*; *dividersi, separarsi dal m.*; *prendere m.*, sposarsi; *è in vacanza col m., con suo m.*; [...].

marito: *married man, considered in relation to wife*: *Frank is Mary's husband*; **she has a very kind husband**; *to be husband and wife*: *to be married*; *to look for/find a husband*; *to leave, separate from one's husband*; *to take as one's husband*: *to marry s.o.*; *she is on holiday with her husband*.

As we can notice, for the entry *MARITO* a benevolent example (*she has a very kind husband*) is provided, whereas for *MOGLIE* not only is there no such comment, but all the examples also emphasize her being dependent on her husband⁵.

Let us now verify if the positive allusion found under the entry *MARITO* also recurs and is reinforced in other contexts:

<i>appetibile</i>	piacente: <i>ha ancora un marito a.</i>
<i>desirable</i>	pleasing: <i>she has a desirable husband</i>
<i>devoto</i>	affezionato, sottomesso e fedele: <i>marito d., d. servitore</i>
<i>devoted</i>	attached/loving, compliant and faithful: <i>devoted husband; devoted servant</i>
<i>disperato</i>	che, chi è in preda alla disperazione: <i>era d. per la morte della moglie</i>
<i>desperate</i>	sth. that/sb. who is in a state of despair: <i>he was desperate after the death of his wife</i>
<i>gentiluomo</i>	uomo dal comportamento corretto e dai modi signorili e raffinati: <i>tuo marito è un vero g.</i>
<i>gentleman</i>	a man who behaves correctly and whose conduct is noble and refined: <i>your husband is a true gentleman</i>
<i>meraviglioso</i>	di qcn., degno di lode, ammirevole per le sue doti, qualità morali e sim.: <i>avere un marito m., essere una madre meravigliosa</i>
<i>marvellous</i>	of sb: praiseworthy, admirable for one's abilities, moral qualities and the like: <i>to have a marvellous husband; to be a marvellous mother</i>

⁵ Literary citations and terms referring to being someone's wife (i.e., *ambasciatrice* = the ambassador's wife, *capitana* = the captain's wife, *giudicessa* = the judge's wife, etc. whose ironic innuendoes are still badly recorded) have been excluded from the above analysis.

<i>santo</i>	che, chi è giusto, onesto, virtuoso; che chi, ha un animo buono, si distingue per altruismo e tolleranza: <i>una santa donna, tuo marito è un s.</i>
<i>saint</i>	sth. that/sb. who is just, honest, virtuous; whoever has a good heart, is altruist and tolerant: <i>a saint of a woman; your husband is a saint</i>
<i>splendido</i>	che si distingue per singolari qualità, capacità, virtù: <i>un marito s.</i>
<i>splendid</i>	sb. who stands out for their peculiar qualities, abilities and virtues: <i>a splendid husband</i>
<i>tesoro</i>	persona cui si riconoscono simpatia, grazia, ricchezza di doti: <i>che t. di marito!</i>
<i>treasure</i>	a person esteemed as nice, gracious and having many good qualities: <i>what a treasure of a husband!</i>

These praiseworthy peculiarities are, however, counterpoised to a number of negative behaviors which are embedded in the examples and highlight deep contempt for the partner:

<i>bastardo</i>	cattivo, spregevole: <i>quel b. del marito l'ha picchiata</i>
<i>bastard</i>	bad, despicable: <i>that bastard of her husband battered her</i>
<i>bistrattare</i>	trattare in malo modo, anche per disprezzo: <i>b. la moglie</i>
<i>ill-treat</i>	to mistreat also out of contempt: <i>to ill-treat one's wife</i>
<i>brontolio</i>	il brontolare in modo prolungato e noioso: <i>i continui brontolii della moglie lo esasperano</i>
<i>complaint</i>	prolonged and annoying grumbling: <i>the ongoing complaints of his wife exasperated him</i>
<i>cornificare</i>	tradire la persona cui si è legati da fidanzamento o matrimonio; essere infedele al proprio partner: <i>non perde occasione per c. la moglie</i>
<i>to cheat on, to cuckold</i>	to betray the person with whom one is engaged or married; to be unfaithful to one's partner: <i>he doesn't miss the chance to cheat on his wife</i>
<i>distrarsi</i>	cercare avventure amorose: <i>suo marito preferisce d. fuori casa!</i>
<i>to distract oneself</i>	to look for love affairs: <i>her husband prefers distracting himself out of the home!</i>
<i>picchiare</i>	percuotere, prendere a botte: <i>p. la moglie, i figli</i>
<i>to batter</i>	to hit, to beat up: <i>to batter one's wife, children</i>
<i>prostituire</i>	istigare o costringere alla prostituzione: <i>p. la moglie, p. un adolescente</i>
<i>to prostitute</i>	to instigate or oblige sb. to prostitution: <i>to prostitute one's wife; to prostitute an adolescent</i>
<i>schiaivizzare</i>	sottomettere alla propria autorità, al proprio volere in modo dispotico e intransigente: <i>ha schiaivizzato per anni la moglie</i>
<i>to enslave</i>	to subdue sb. to one's authority, to one's will in a despotic and uncompromising way: <i>he enslaved his wife for years</i>

<i>tuo</i>	può indicare altri tipi di relazione, come l'affetto, l'amicizia o la devozione: <i>il t. vecchio maestro, la tua amica, il t. compagno</i> può indicare anche relazioni di dipendenza, soggezione: <i>t. marito è il t. tiranno, il t. padrone</i>
<i>your</i>	can indicate other types of relationships, such as affection, friendship or devotion: <i>your old teacher; your friend; your mate</i> can indicate relationships of dependence and subjection: <i>your husband is your tyrant, your master</i>

The criticism we alluded to in the above-mentioned contexts is further confirmed by a group of entries which explicitly accuse the *wife* (or *woman* in general) of undertaking unedifying actions. Such examples call to mind a despotic and reprehensible wife:

<i>bruciare</i>	provocare fastidio, disappunto: <i>la sconfitta mi brucia, gli brucia che sua moglie guadagni più di lui</i>
<i>irritate</i>	to cause annoyance, disappointment: <i>the defeat irritates me; it irritates him that his wife earns more than him</i>
<i>carabiniere</i>	persona molto rigida e severa spec. nel sorvegliare e controllare gli altri: <i>sua moglie è un vero c.</i>
<i>dictator</i>	a very rigid and strict person especially when surveilling and controlling others: <i>his wife is a real dictator</i>
<i>colpevolizzare</i>	far sentire colpevole, caricare di sensi di colpa: <i>il marito la colpevolizza per le spese eccessive</i>
<i>to make sb. feel guilty</i>	to make sb. feel remorseful and regretful: <i>her husband makes her feel guilty for spending too much</i>
<i>dare di matto</i>	manifestare rabbia incontrollata: <i>quando ha saputo che la moglie lo tradiva ha dato di m.</i>
<i>to freak out</i>	to manifest uncontrolled rage: <i>when he found out that his wife was cheating on him he freaked out</i>
<i>micidiale</i>	di qcn. che provoca infelicità, tormenti': è una donna m., guarda come tratta il marito
<i>fatal</i>	of sb. who causes unhappiness, agony: <i>she is a fatal woman, look at how she treats her husband.</i>
<i>possessivo</i>	di qcn. che tende a dominare, a sopraffare, a pretendere una dedizione assoluta ed esclusiva nei rapporti affettivi: <i>un fidanzato p, una moglie p.</i>
<i>possessive</i>	of sb. who tries to dominate, to subdue, to impose absolute and exclusive devotion in intimate relationships: <i>a possessive boyfriend; a possessive wife</i>
<i>rigirare</i>	raggirare, indurre a fare ciò che si vuole: <i>la moglie lo rigira come vuole</i>
<i>to twist sb round one's little finger</i>	to get round sb, to induce sb to do what one wants: <i>his wife twists him round her little finger</i>

<i>rubare</i>	allontanare e separare una persona da qcn. o dalla famiglia per averne l'affetto o l'amore: <i>r. il marito all'amica</i>
<i>steal</i>	to separate or take sb away from sb or from their family to get their love or affection: <i>to steal her friend's husband</i>
<i>scappare</i>	abbandonare la famiglia, il tetto coniugale: <i>scappò di casa a sedici anni, sua moglie è scappata con il postino</i>
<i>elope, run off with sb.</i>	to abandon one's family, the marital home: <i>she eloped from her home at sixteen; his wife ran off with the mailman</i>
<i>schiaivo</i>	di qcn., soggetto alla volontà e all'autorità di un'altra persona, non libero di disporre liberamente di sé o, anche, soggiogato interamente da una passione, da un vizio, da una consuetudine e sim.: è s. della moglie; <i>essere s. del fumo, della droga, del potere, del consumismo</i> ; anche s.m.: <i>fa tutto ciò vuole lei, è il suo s.</i>
<i>slave</i>	of sb., subjected to the will and authority of another person, not free to freely dispose of oneself or, also, entirely subjugated by passion, by a vice, by a habit or the like: <i>he is a slave to his wife; to be a slave to smoking, drugs, power, consumerism; he does everything she wants; he is her slave.</i>
<i>sobillare</i>	istigare, incitare, spec. di nascosto, ad azioni o atteggiamenti ostili, o alla ribellione: s. <i>la folla contro le forze dell'ordine, cerca di s. la figlia contro il marito, lasciarsi s. da qcn.</i>
<i>stir up</i>	To instigate, incite, especially covertly, sb. towards actions and hostile behaviours or rebellions: <i>to stir up the crowd against the police; she tries to stir her daughter up against her husband; to let sb. stir you up</i>
<i>succubo</i>	che, chi soggiace alla volontà altrui: <i>un uomo s. della moglie;</i>
<i>dominated by</i>	sb who succumbs to sb. else's will: <i>a man dominated by his wife</i>
<i>tradire</i>	mancare alla fedeltà, compiere un'infedeltà nei confronti del proprio partner: <i>t. la persona amata, ha tradito il marito con un suo collega</i>
<i>to betray</i>	to be unfaithful, to cheat on one's partner: <i>to betray the loved one; she betrayed her husband with one of her colleagues</i>

Other indirect allusions can be found in the following entries which, taken together, allude to the hardships and prostration that a cruel husband inflicts on his wife:

<i>manesco</i>	che viene facilmente alle mani; pronto a picchiare, a menare le mani: <i>odio le persone manesche, sono tipi maneschi che attaccano briga facilmente</i> ; anche s.m.: <i>il marito è un m.</i>
<i>quick to violence</i>	sb who easily raises his hands; ready to beat with one's hands: <i>I hate people who are quick to violence; they are violent guys who easily pick a fight; her husband is a person quick to violence</i>
<i>martoriare</i>	affliggere, tormentare: <i>i sensi di colpa lo martoriano; il marito la martoriava con la gelosia</i>
<i>to torture</i>	to afflict, torment: <i>the sense of guilt tortures him; her husband tortured her with his jealousy</i>

<i>martire</i>	chi è costretto a subire soprusi, maltrattamenti e sim.; anche scherz.: <i>è una m. del marito</i>
<i>martyr</i>	sb. who is obliged to undergo oppression, abuses and the like; also jokingly: <i>she is a martyr of her husband</i>
<i>riversare</i> <i>to lavish</i>	far ricadere: <i>riversa la sua frustrazione sulla m.</i> to dump onto sb.: <i>he lavishes all his frustration onto his wife</i>
<i>subire</i> <i>put up with</i>	sopportare, tollerare qcn. i cui comportamenti sono considerati fastidiosi, autoritari o violenti: <i>devo s. dei vicini rumorosi, s. un marito violento</i> to endure, tolerate sb whose behaviour is considered annoying, authoritative or violent: <i>I have to put up with noisy neighbours; to put up with a violent husband</i>
<i>tiranno</i> <i>tyrant</i>	tiranno che, chi abusa della propria autorità per imporre agli altri la propria volontà: <i>fare il t. con i propri dipendenti, in famiglia si comporta da t., un padrone, un marito t.</i> sb. who abuses of one's authority to impose his will on others: <i>to be a tyrant towards one's employees; he acts as a tyrant in the family; a tyrant husband, master.</i>

To conclude this section, let us now consider these other entries which do not present a transparent relationship with the examples provided. They thus keep the image of the woman/ wife confined within a socio-cultural context based on archaic and worn-out prejudices and convey a familiar image made up of betrayals, suspects, desperation and violence.

<i>incontrare</i> <i>to meet</i>	avere in sorte: <i>ha incontrato davvero un buon marito</i> to get sth. fortuitously: <i>she has truly met a good husband</i>
<i>incredibilmente</i> <i>incredibly</i>	in modo incredibile: <i>quella bisbetica è i. riuscita a trovare marito!</i> in an incredible way: <i>incredibly that shrew managed to find a husband!</i>
<i>insospettabilità</i> <i>blamelessness</i>	l'essere insospettabile, al di sopra di ogni sospetto: <i>l'i. della moglie è indiscutibile</i> <i>to be blameless, above suspicion: the blamelessness of his wife is unquestionable</i>
<i>interrogatorio</i> <i>interrogation</i>	successione incalzante di domande, spec. dal tono perentorio: <i>è rincasato tardi e la moglie gli ha fatto un bell'i.</i> prolonged questioning especially using a threatening tone: <i>he got home late and his wife gave him a hell of an interrogation!</i>
<i>mettersi in testa</i> <i>to become fixated</i>	Convincersi: <i>si è messo in testa che la moglie lo tradisce</i> To convince oneself of sth.: <i>he became fixated with the idea that his wife was cheating on him</i>
<i>perquisizione</i> <i>search</i>	ricerca in un luogo o su una persona, di oggetti o prove relativi ad una colpa o sim.: <i>la moglie ha fatto una p. della stanza per trovare quelle lettere</i> to look for things, evidence of guiltiness or the like in a place or on a person: <i>his wife searched the house to find those letters</i>

<i>qui</i>	locuzione q. lo dico e q. lo nego, per affermare qcs. senza assumersi responsabilità: <i>q. lo dico q. lo nego, ma sappi che la moglie lo tradisce</i>
<i>here</i>	expression: to deny what one has just said, to say something without taking responsibility: <i>your wife betrays you but I will deny it if you ask me to say it again.</i>
<i>quindi</i> <i>then</i>	dopo di ciò, poi, in seguito: <i>prima mise in ordine la casa, q. uscì col marito</i> after this, later on: <i>first she tidied the house and then she went out with her husband.</i>
<i>supporre</i> <i>to assume</i>	porre come ipotesi, ammettere che qualcosa si possa verificare o si sia verificata in un dato modo: <i>supponiamo che sia stato lui a uccidere la moglie</i> to hypothesize, to admit that sth may happen or happened in a certain way: <i>let's assume that he killed his wife</i>

The interesting aspect of this partial survey is that current usage or, some would say, our expectations, have made it customary for us to use (imagine) some of these words in combination with the term *MOGLIE*. We could even go as far as saying that some of these words, as they appear in the examples, tend to typically recur with *MOGLIE*, but not with *MARITO*, even if their meaning does not exclude other combinations. In this case, the limits to the distribution of the word would not depend on its meaning, but rather on purely contextual, that is, extra-linguistic elements. This asperity has been aptly pointed out by Alma Sabatini in her groundbreaking analysis of sexism in the Italian language, where she starts from the assumption that “la sedimentazione storica dei significati delle parole è codificata e fissata dai dizionari (la cui lettura è illuminante, per non dire edificante) e rivela inequivocabilmente quello che è il pensiero comune sulla donna” [*the historical sedimentation of the meanings of words is codified and fixed by dictionaries and unequivocally reveals the common ideas about women*] (Sabatini 1987: 32). Indeed, lexicographical repertoires are considered not only as indicators but also as privileged tools to promote a change in our habits and linguistic behavior. The image that emerges from dictionaries is not, however, completely innocent, since it provides us with a worldview influenced by the choices and value-judgement of the compilers. The female images portrayed (in our case) by the examples are more often than not devoid of perspective and movement. What we have are portraits described with words chosen by others and forged as we would like to forge the protagonists of the stories narrated.

Gender Violence in the National Press

As we have just seen, the words used in lexicography to describe attitudes which are traditionally considered female and male reveal a mindset that is reluctant towards changing perspective and, thus, also towards bringing about transformation. In order to test this hypothesis, let us now turn our attention to another context in which the choice of words is decisive, that is, the context of journalistic communication and the ways in which innumerable brutal acts against women are narrated. Even in this case it is necessary to start from the dominant cultural model and the role played by information media which can either sustain and echo that very model or, as many auspicate, transform the cultural reality in which they act. In order to counter feminicide, it is, thus, crucial to observe the language through

which male violence against women is narrated, because this is the first step towards transforming the culture of our society⁶.

The expression *delitto passionale* meaning *crime of passion* (as well as *pista passionale* and *movente passionale*, namely to consider the lead of a crime of passion and to consider passion as the motive for the crime), often used in association with expressions that hint at jealousy, a complicated love relationship and the surge of sudden rage, is the most widespread in the daily press to describe the death of women who are victims of male violence when the crime is committed by someone close to them: an (ex)-boyfriend, an (ex)-husband or a refused lover:

Roma, uccide a coltellate moglie e un altro uomo. L'assassino ai carabinieri: "Erano amanti". Delitto passionale in una sede dell'Inps in zona Cinecittà. Il killer ha avvertito i militari: "Non sopportavo il tradimento. Quando li ho visti insieme li ho ammazzati" (*La Stampa*, 26 settembre 2014);

Rome, man stabs his wife and another man to death. The killer tells the carabinieri: "They were lovers". A crime of passion in an Inps office at Cinecittà. The killer told the police: "I couldn't stand betrayal. When I saw them together I killed them." (*La Stampa*, 26 September 2014);

Uccide la moglie per gelosia, arrestato nel Siracusano. La donna, 36 anni, di origini romene, colpita dal marito con un piccone a Canicattini Bagni al culmine di una lite per gelosia (*La Repubblica*, 17 giugno 2014);

Man kills his wife out of jealousy and is arrested near Siracusa. The woman, aged 36, of Romanian origin, was hit by her husband with a pickaxe at Canicattini Bagni during a rage of jealousy. (*La Repubblica*, 17 June 2014);

"Ha ucciso Antonella". Convalidato il fermo del fidanzato (...). Il movente passionale. Una storia d'amore molto travagliata, quella tra i due ragazzi, fatta di incomprensioni, feroci litigate, minacce e abbandoni e ritorni di fiamma. Il motivo dell'assassinio starebbe proprio in questa difficile relazione (*La Repubblica*, 6 gennaio 2012);

"He killed Antonella". The boyfriend has been arrested (...). The motive of the crime is passion. The love relationship between the two teenagers was indeed a very troubled one, full of misunderstandings, furious fights, threats, break-ups and reconciliations. The motive of the murder is most probably this difficult relationship. (*La Repubblica*, 6 January 2012);

"Ho dovuto farlo". "Ma non so perché": dopo 20 ore il racconto alla polizia di Rovereto. "Non so perché ho ucciso Barbara, non so dire il motivo. All'improvviso ho sentito il bisogno irrefrenabile di ammazzarla e l'ho fatto". Alessandro Persico non ha una motivazione da spendere, non si giustifica, non si dispera. Alla polizia di Rovereto

⁶ Many of the considerations made here are inspired by the numerous examples and recommendations contained in Trasatti (2013), Gamberi (2015) and Abis, Orrù (2016); equally interesting and thought-provoking are Cretella, Mora Sánchez (2014) and Priulla (2014).

è apparso assolutamente tranquillo e distaccato e ha raccontato con dovizia di particolari il delitto compiuto. Di qui l'ipotesi, sulla quale gli inquirenti lavorano, che il suo stato mentale possa essere alterato e che il raptus omicida possa essere maturato proprio in questo contesto (*Gazzetta di Modena*, 21 giugno 2011);

"I had to do it" "But I don't know why": he tells the police of Rovereto 20 hours later. "I don't know why I killed Barbara, I don't know the reason. Suddenly I just felt the irrepressible need to kill her and I did". Alessandro Persico does not have a reason, he doesn't justify himself, he doesn't despair. He appeared completely calm and detached to the Rovereto police. He told them everything about the crime he committed in great detail. For this reason the police are investigating the hypothesis that his mental state may have been altered and that the killing spree may have matured in this context (Gazzetta di Modena, 21 June 2011).

Indeed, numerous are the articles on killings and aggressions which use the vague and inadequate words *amore* (love), *gelosia* (jealousy), and *folia* (folly), to narrate such tragic episodes⁷. These extracts also reveal how unequal the description between the victim and her killer are: the former is often introduced merely through references to her marital status and her relationship with the culprit (for ex. *the wife* or simply her first name), while a greater deal of attention is given to the latter and to explaining the reasons for his actions. Whereas the portrait of the woman is made barely visible (except for the information about her amorous relationship with the man), the portrait of the 'culprit' is more detailed and foregrounds features – including psychological ones – which mitigate his responsibility. By invoking spree killing, the assassination is reduced to mental instability and the pathological sphere and thus fail to disclose the real causes of violence.

These are linguistic devices often used to avoid discussing issues like the fear of being abandoned or a partner's incapacity to deal with the woman's legitimate desire for freedom. This short circuit originates the recurring narrative pattern: "she threatens to leave him and he kills her"⁸. Gender violence is narrated as a crime which is scarcely threatening

⁷ It should be noticed that jealousy is no longer considered as an extenuating circumstance in trials. Art. 587 of the Penal Code disposed that: "Whoever causes the death of a spouse, a daughter or a sister, upon the act of discovering an illegitimate sexual relationship or in a state of rage caused by the offence against his or his family's honor, shall be condemned to prison for a period between three and seven years. The same punishment shall be applied to whoever, in the above-said circumstances, causes the death of the person who is in the illegitimate sexual relationship with the spouse, the daughter or the sister". These provisions on crimes of honor were, however, revoked by Law n. 442 of 5 August 1981.

⁸ Lipperini and Murgia comment: "la domanda del giornalista e del lettore davanti al delitto è: *perché l'ha uccisa?* Secondo la stragrande maggioranza degli articoli la risposta, se c'è, sarebbe da cercarsi nella volontà di abbandono da parte della donna morta. Che voleva lasciarlo e lui è impazzito. Che l'aveva già lasciato ed è scattata la follia. Che gli aveva messo contro i figli e lui era cieco di rabbia. Che forse lo tradiva e quindi lui ha perso la testa. Queste e altre affermazioni utili a colpevolizzare la vittima del delitto e assolvere il carnefice compaiono spesso già nel titolo degli articoli, come se fosse l'accertata ragione dei fatti; raramente vengono esplicitate per quello che davvero rappresentano, cioè la versione dell'assassino a fronte di una vittima che non può più fornire la propria" [*faced with the crime the journalist and the reader both ask: why did he kill her? According to the majority of the articles the answer, if any, is to be sought in the dead woman's desire to leave her partner. She wanted to leave him and he went crazy. She had left him and he went mad. She had turned his children against him and he was blind with rage. Maybe she cheated on him and he lost his mind*] (2013: 12).

from a social point of view and one which is almost random, fortuitous and fatal. Jealousy, passion, love, and folly become easy motives and extenuating circumstances. There is the risk that this type of communication may, on one hand, reduce, simplify and trivialise the responsibility of the person who murders the woman and, on the other, lower the audience's attention towards facts that are not anomalies, but rather a tangible and structural part of our country and the rest of the world. Femicide is also sensationalized by reporting it as crime news in which attention is focused on the brutality of the single act and on its (apparent) randomness and irrationality. The use of terms like *follia*, *gelosia*, *raptus* to explain the murdering of women signal instances of so-called linguistic avoidance and euphemistic trivialisation of the discourse on violence. These devices contribute to blur the seriousness of the facts narrated. As Patrizia Romito has pointed out: "l'evitamento linguistico è una tecnica, deliberata o inconsapevole, grazie alla quale i principali autori delle violenze su donne e minori, gli uomini, spariscono dai discorsi e dai testi sulla violenza maschile, che si tratti di documenti internazionali, lavori scientifici o stampa popolare. L'eufemizzazione è una tecnica parallela, che permette di etichettare un fenomeno in modo impreciso e fuorviante, tale da offuscarne la gravità o la responsabilità di chi l'ha compiuto" [*linguistic avoidance is a deliberate or unconscious technique thanks to which men, the main perpetrators of violence against women and minors, disappear from the discourse and texts on male violence, be they international documents, scientific texts or news articles. Euphemistic trivialization is a parallel technique which makes it possible to label a phenomenon in an imprecise and misleading way, so as to blur its seriousness or the responsibility of who committed it*] (Romito 2005: 58). These linguistic-communicative strategies consolidate a view in which violence against women is distorted, under-represented and, above all, obscured and 'silenced'.

The victims of violence are punished for a transgression, that of having abdicated the ideal role of woman imposed by tradition and taken the liberty to decide what to do with their lives on their own. Some of the above-quoted examples hint at complicated relationships, in which the narrative suggests that the motive lies in the representation of a 'violent' love affair: in these cases, affection is associated with femicide which is, instead, by definition the subjugation and negation of all relationships⁹. Journalistic information does, thus, not only spread a contradiction, that is the love-violence pair, but it also removes the cause from which the episodes originate, that is, the victim's gender: the woman is killed because she is a woman. When journalistic media focus their attention only on emotional behavior, psychological distress or the male aggressor's frustration and obscure the life and expectations of the female victim, the narrative will concentrate only on one point of view, that of the murderer, so as to legitimize it. This implicitly transmits the idea that the victim should be somehow blamed since she reacted, betrayed or made the man who then became her aggressor suffer.

It is thus clear that the crimes perpetuated by men both inside and outside the home,

⁹ Lipperini and Murgia explain that in newspapers: "certi uomini amano troppo, e questo li fa stare male fino a portarli ad uccidere; così certi altri stanno talmente male che questo ammala anche il loro amore, che poi diventa omicida" [Certain men love too much, and this makes them feel so bad to lead them to commit murder; other men feel so bad that this mars their love as well, which then becomes homicide] (2013: 4).

ought to be interpreted and communicated from a socio-cultural dimension. It is not the isolated act of a single individual, a random occurrence or the predictable epilogue of attitudes and behaviors of the victim. The cultural roots of the phenomenon are to be found in the unequal relations between men and women:

Detto altrimenti, gli episodi di violenza che affiorano nel discorso mediatico rientrano in un continuum di sopraffazione maschile sulle donne, non individuale, bensì collettivo, che non riguarda solo la famiglia o la relazione sentimentale, quanto le relazioni fra uomini e donne. Si tratta di una violenza che si ritrova per esempio nelle discriminazioni sui luoghi di lavoro, nella cultura intrisa di stereotipi sessisti, nell'uso di un linguaggio declinato solo al maschile, nelle rappresentazioni univoche delle donne, ma anche degli stessi uomini. Presi nel loro insieme, gli atti di violenza maschile contro le donne hanno un significato preciso: la riaffermazione di una supremazia di un ordine gerarchico fra i generi laddove il maschile è ritenuto ancora il luogo di una presunta superiorità e autorevolezza (Gamberi 2015: 151).

In other words, episodes of violence that crop up in media discourse are part of a continuum of male subjugation over women, which is not individual but collective; it does not involve just the family or the sentimental relationship, but rather the relationships between men and women. This violence can, for instance, be found in gender discrimination on the workplace, in a culture replete with sexist stereotypes, in the use of an exclusively male-centered language, in the univocal representation of women and also of men. Taken together, male acts of violence against women have a specific meaning: to reaffirm the supremacy of a hierarchical order between the sexes, wherein the male is still considered the locus of an assumed superiority and authoritativeness.

Some Final Remarks

It is now time to conclude, but not to close the discussion once and for all. We have not covered all the issues we would have liked to here, as the problems and cases to discuss are many. However, it is clear that the relation between discrimination and violence, on one hand, and linguistic representation, on the other, simultaneously involves different levels which go beyond the linguistic one. It is not our intention here to offer a peremptory and definitive reading of the phenomena. What is certain is that the traces we find in our language every day, the archaic linguistic stereotypes that filter through dictionaries and the distorted narratives offered by the press contribute to mirror our (linguistic) behaviors and reflect them back into reality modified, corroborated and ready for use. In synthesis, certain lexical choices employed in certain contexts may well be responsible for fixing – even unconsciously – certain patterns of behavior and gender role expectations. Indeed, Alma Sabatini, who is well-aware of the relevance that language has and of the extremely conservative view that users have of it, states that: “La lingua è una struttura dinamica che cambia in continuazione. Ciononostante la maggior parte della gente è conservatrice e mostra diffidenza – se non paura – nei confronti dei cambiamenti linguistici, che la offendono perché disturbano le sue abitudini o sembrano una violenza ‘contro natura’. Toccare la lingua è come toccare la persona stessa (...). Certo è che, posti davanti al problema se accettare o meno un

cambiamento, una nuova parola, si assume spesso un atteggiamento ‘moralistico’ in difesa della correttezza della lingua, vista come una specie di cosa sacra, intoccabile” [*Language is a dynamic structure that changes all the time. Nevertheless, most people are conservative and diffident towards – perhaps even afraid of – linguistic changes which are seen as offensive since they disrupt their habits and appear as ‘unnatural’ violence. To touch language is like touching a person (...). It is certain that, when faced with the problem of whether to accept a change, a new word, or not, we often adopt a ‘moralistic’ attitude in defense of the correctness of language, which is seen as something sacred, untouchable*] (Sabatini 1987: 101).

The examples that have been commented on here, thus, witness a persisting discrimination towards adopting certain linguistic behaviors. The effort to discuss these issues shows, however, that there are attempts to contain it and to suggest solutions that go in the direction of a more inclusive and less violent language¹⁰. We want to conclude this essay by stating both that linguistic and social change is necessary and that language has a crucial performative power not only to induce us to adopt changes already in act, but also to promote new ones. It is unacceptable that words continue to perpetrate discrimination with apparent and (presumed) neutrality and thereby uphold power hierarchies through stereotypes and prejudices as Sabatini suggests. It is necessary to insist wholeheartedly that words can be an efficient tool in the battle against gender-based inequalities and that their ‘correct’ use can bring on an authentic change in the way we express ourselves. The true challenge is, as we said at the beginning, to change the narrative. Our attention should therefore be projected onto education, which (as Law n. 119 of 15 October 2014 states)¹¹ has the aim of elaborating and providing the younger generations with a different lexicon, through which the narrative can really change. The educational environment is indeed one of the main channels through which it is possible to promote a culture that accepts difference. By discussing these issues in class so as to point out the inequalities between men and women

¹⁰ Media operators have done a great deal to provide adequate information on the contents and communicative modalities through which to deal with femicide: see, for example, the debate retrievable on the blog of the *Corriere della Sera* ‘La 27esima ora’ and the *Raccomandazioni della Federazione internazionale dei giornalisti* published in Lipperini & Murgia (2013: 77-80).

¹¹ Art 5. states that the “Piano d’azione straordinario contro la violenza sessuale e di genere” [Extraordinary plan of action against sexual and gender violence, adopted in 2015] aims at guaranteeing homogenous actions throughout the national territory by pursuing the following objectives: “a) to prevent the phenomenon of violence against women by informing and raising awareness in the public so as to make men and young boys conscious players in the process of eliminating violence against women and in solving interpersonal conflicts; b) to sensitize media operators towards communicating information, even for commercial purposes, in a manner that is respectful of gender representations and in particular of women, also through the adoption of self-regulating codes; c) to promote adequate training programs for educators on the issue and against violence and gender-based discrimination and to promote within the national guidelines for the curricula of nursery, elementary, secondary, technical and vocational schools and in the curricular and extracurricular didactic planning for schools of every type and form, information, awareness-raising activities and the tutoring of students so as to prevent violence against women and gender-based discrimination, even by adequately valorizing the topic in textbooks (...)”. See also the 2011 “Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence” (known also as the *Istanbul Convention*), in particular chapters 3.a and 3.12.

and critically analyze dominant roles, it is possible to develop the antidote necessary for the valorization of relations based on mutual respect already at a young age.

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