Poststructuralist approaches in the study of gender-neutral possibilities in Maltese

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The grammatical category of gender in Maltese has received increased attention in the past few decades with linguistic studies beyond its descriptions in Maltese grammars (namely the contributions of Farrugia, see 2003, 2018). With the binary categorisation of all nouns – including personal nouns – into the (generally) mutually exclusive masculine and feminine, and a correspondence between the biological sex of the noun's referent and its grammatical gender, the language poses challenges to speakers who do not identify within the dominant binary of gender identity. This study considers grammatical gender as only *one* of the structures available for the linguistic construction of gender, together with lexical gender, social gender, and referential gender. The relevance of these terms – previously discussed in detail by Hellinger and Buβmann (2001) in an introduction to a descriptive project of gender across diverse languages – for a poststructuralist perspective of gender and language is highlighted by Motschenbacher (2010). A poststructuralist approach holds that these four structural categories of linguistic gender representation are major mechanisms in the binary construction of gender. Apart from this, language in this approach is viewed as the result of discursive materialisation, and not as an abstract phenomenon which precedes its use, implying that linguistic categories are also unstable and capable of change. This is a new point of view for Maltese sociolinguistics, and it is indispensable for the present study which aims to present the main challenges in the language in terms of gender neutralisation as well as to give preliminary suggestions for linguistic alternatives that challenge the binary system while nevertheless existing within it. These aims are achieved by an analysis of how lexical, social, grammatical, and referential gender operate and interact with one another on the language's semantic, grammatical, and referential levels, wherein lies also the possibility for the discussion of the aforementioned challenges and alternatives.

Key words: gender binary; gender neutralisation; poststructuralism; structural gender categories; structural gender linguistics