

Women, Language and Grammar in Italy: 1550–1900
Helen Sanson (2011)

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Reviewed by Jolanda Guardi

The last page of *Women, Language and Grammar in Italy* (p. 351) shows Elena Vecchi sitting on a garden bank while looking at the reader in a thinking attitude, her elbow on her knee and one hand propping up her chin. Beside her lie four books. As Sanson remarks, Vecchi is an elegant, self-confident figure who symbolizes all women who had to overcome prejudices and difficulties to acquire education. But with her attitude she is also affirming that, once this education is acquired, she will not go back at any cost.

With clever use of images throughout the monograph, Sanson's excellent study proposes a different way of looking at the development of the Italian standard language according to women's perspective. In fact, the history of Italian and the problems related to the *Questione della lingua* is not a new subject in Italy; what is new is the collection, and the study of the 'Questione' from women's point of view. The volume covers a large span of time – from 1500 to 1900 – and investigates whether women had a role in developing thought on grammar in Italy.

The book is divided into three parts and six chapters. Part One begins by investigating the relationship between women and language in the Cinquecento (16th century). Although in this period Latin and dialects were still very much alive – and there was a huge gap between Latin (the language of the Church and of educated men) and vernacular (spoken by women and by the disadvantaged social classes) – the print market needed

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a larger reading public and therefore invested with women in mind. This phenomenon led to the production of a specific kind of narrative to be read by women and which used a special language, close to the dialect. This hybrid language was the first step to breaking the liaison between the Church and the patriarchal political power that aimed to maintain women in a state of subjugation. Sanson analyses in depth this period that led, despite all the criticism of this new kind of written language, to the production of a literature whose targeted public was a female one.

The subject is of interest *per se* but in particular when applied to other countries and languages outside of Europe as well. Sanson pays particular attention to the context in which both a female readership and female writers could develop in relation to grammar, texts and linguistics issues. In addition, by starting from the different dialects spoken in the Peninsula, the author also focuses her attention on the development of a language that eventually became known as 'Italian'. As a matter of fact, the formation of a national language is bound to the question of power and the spreading of the language throughout a country; in this view, the role of Italian women cannot be disregarded. Though kept apart and with no access to language, women spoke and wrote in dialect more than men. After the development of an Italian State that aimed to be Unitarian, the *Questione della lingua*, although debated in previous centuries, became central, and the mothers and angels of the home were asked to become the new Italian citizens' first teachers.

As the eighteenth century approached, a proliferation of grammars occurred: Part Two of the book is devoted to an in-depth analysis of this issue. There were grammars specifically written for 'Ladies' and therefore abridged or simplified, which helped to spread the future national language to the detriment of Latin. Sanson underlines this evolution of the language and its teaching in Italy and associates it with the country's political and historical development. She deals with the use of Italian grammar by way of a contrast with the diffusion of French and with the new modern State's need to spread education (though, in the case of women, only at a certain level and only in specific fields of knowledge); finally, the author compares it to the grammars 'for ladies' published in other European countries such as England and Germany.

Part Three of *Women, Language and Grammar in Italy* discusses the role that nineteenth-century school played in spreading Italian. In the Unitarian State, a major problem was the presence of a rich variety of dialects, which the nation-state could not patronize. The concept of a Unitarian language developed side by side with that of citizenship; besides, the intellectuals of the time focused on the relation between social development

and people's education. Naturally, women were part of the people, and the principle of primary schooling for everyone was crucial to women and their liberation from the inferior status; however, this principle was not sustained by all political parties – in particular, the Catholic Church. As Sanson approaches the different ideas on women and education (pp. 251– 261) one can see that women's education was hardly accepted and only between fixed boundaries – as long as it was necessary to their role as mothers and spouses.

For Italian, the path ahead was still a long one. The Church adopted Italian as the language of the ritual only in 1965 and until today little attention has been paid to the use of the Italian language in relation to women. Sanson's work opens the path for further research in this field.

A noteworthy bibliography, index and, as mentioned above, some images complete the monograph.

We wish this book could be translated into Italian. If Elena Vecchi's attitude is that of a confident woman, maybe Italian women who are living in this era of obscurantism of their education and role in Italian society could learn something from their own history.