

Gender and «docile bodies». An overview of diet representation in Italian as a foreign language textbooks

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Abstract

In line with critical approaches to foreign language education the paper examines the representation of diet in Italian as a foreign language textbooks in relation to gender stereotypes. In order to identify and interpret ideological mechanisms that shape body politics in textbooks we employ quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. To illustrate how the power of ideologically shaped sociocultural norms produces gendered body politics we introduce the Foucauldian concept of «docile bodies». This concept is furthermore interpreted from the feminist perspective, according to which female bodies are culturally subject to a more intense discipline and surveillance. The results confirm that diet discourse is characterized by a pronounced contrast between the docile bodies of women and the free of constraints bodies of men – unlike the female body that is subject to continuous surveillance and control, the male body is accepted in its natural form and furthermore embraced as a symbol of hedonism.

In linea con l'approccio critico all'insegnamento delle lingue straniere, questo contributo mira a esaminare l'impatto degli stereotipi di genere sulla rappresentazione della dieta nei manuali di italiano LS. Al fine di individuare e interpretare i meccanismi ideologici che plasmano le dominanti politiche del corpo nel discorso dei manuali, verranno impiegate l'analisi quantitativa del contenuto e l'analisi critica del discorso. Per illustrare come le norme socioculturali che producono le politiche del corpo intersecano con genere e potere, ci avvarremo del concetto di «corpi docili» (*docile bodies*), elaborato da Foucault. Il suddetto concetto verrà reinterpretato secondo un'ottica femminista, partendo dalla premessa che i corpi femminili sono sottoposti a un maggiore livello di disciplina e sorveglianza rispetto a quelli maschili. I risultati confermano che la rappresentazione della dieta è caratterizzata da un forte contrasto tra i corpi docili delle donne e i corpi degli uomini, liberi da ogni costrizione. Emerge che, a differenza del corpo femminile, sottoposto a costante controllo e sorveglianza, il corpo maschile è accettato nella sua forma naturale nonché esaltato come simbolo di edonismo.

Parole chiave: Italian as a foreign language textbooks; gender; ideology; power; body politics

Keywords: manuali di Italiano LS; genere; ideologia; potere; politiche del corpo

1. Introduction

The central role attributed to the positivist paradigm in the 19th and the 20th century science reinforced the common assumptions about education as ideologically neutral and textbooks as sources of indisputable, objective facts about the world (Altbach et al., 1991, p. 179). The essential idea behind the critical shift that occurred in the education theory in the 1970s can be summarized in the following question raised by the influential education theorist Michael Apple: “What knowledge and whose knowledge should be included and excluded in schooling?” (Curdt-Christiansen, 2017, p. 3). The critical examination of the nature of institutional knowledge draws on Foucault’s understanding of power as a key element of knowledge and vice versa (Foucault, 1998, p. 63). In this view power is based on knowledge, while knowledge itself can be seen as a materialisation of power (Foucault, 1991, p. 94). More precisely, according to Foucault (Rainbow, 1984, p. 61), every society has its regimes of truth or the types of discourse that are commonly accepted as true, universal, and objective. Acceptable notions of truth in modern Western societies are not imposed by force, instead they are defined, reinforced, and legitimized through the relevant institutions, including the education system, which constitutes a mechanism through which dynamics of power are enacted. However, as emphasized by Foucault (1991, p. 194), the effects of power are not always negative – power represses, censors, and excludes, but as a productive force, it can also be used to transform previously established narratives and produce alternative forms of knowledge. In line with this, textbooks, as main sources of institutional knowledge, can play a pivotal role in (re)defining sociocultural norms.

Following the epistemological stances of critical approaches to education, textbooks are defined as sociocultural materials, which as such are «products of complex selective processes reflecting political decisions, educational beliefs and priorities, cultural realities and language policies» (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, it is important to emphasize the practical implications of textbooks, as they contain not only subject knowledge but also social norms, cultural values, and ideologies (Curdt-Christiansen, 2017, p. 2), through which stereotypical and limitative conceptions and beliefs about different social groups can be normalized and reinforced. In this paper we examine how cultural values regarding nutrition and diet in Italian as a foreign language textbooks are co-constructed and shaped in relation to gender stereotypes. The depiction of everyday activities, behaviours, and habits of female and male characters in foreign language textbooks reflect cultural values that can be, even without the conscient intentions of authors, closely related to and support gender stereotypes.

This can be particularly detrimental in societies such as Bosnian, where naturalized patriarchal values are still deeply rooted. As documented in USAID Gender Analysis Report (2016, p. 22), textbooks in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes and traditional roles of women and men that children and young people already encounter in their homes. In Bosnia gender stereotypes play a significant role in political, economic, and private life. For instance, stereotypical masculine roles, at times expressed through violent behaviours and extreme attitudes, are seen as central to the protection of family, faith, ethnic group, and “true” values, which are by default associated with those of patriarchal culture (USAID Gender Analysis Report, 2016: 24). In line with this, young girls are expected to be more composed, while even those women engaged in leadership and politics are expected to adapt patriarchal norms and patterns of behaviour in order to gain more influence (ibidem, p. 37). One of the key issues on this matter is the fact that children and young people are often socialized in their family nucleus to conform to gender stereotypes. Education in predominantly traditionalist sociocultural contexts such as Bosnian can have a determining role in challenging or reinforcing stereotypical conceptions. If not deconstructed and challenged through education, gender stereotypes can be furthermore consolidated into common sense.

The presence of gender stereotypes is documented in a vast body of research conducted in the last couple of decades on foreign language textbooks, most of which, due to the status of *lingua franca* ascribed to English language in a global culture, dealt with this issue by focusing on English as a foreign language teaching materials (see Hartman & Judd, 1978; Hellinger, 1980; Porreca, 1984; Poulou, 1997; Rifkin, 1998; Evans & Davies, 2000; Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Gupta & Lee Su Yin, 2009; Lee & Collins, 2010; Lewandowski, 2010; Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012). On the other hand, Italian as a foreign language textbooks only recently started getting some attention on this matter¹. Nonetheless, to our knowledge this study is the first extensive analysis that deals with the representation of diet in foreign language textbooks from the perspective of gender and power relations, and the ideologies that shape them.

Following Foucault's work about intersections of body and power elaborated in *Discipline and Punish*, diet will be interpreted as a practice of self-regulation and discipline, and moreover as a phenomenon that illustrates how power operates on the female body, by naturalizing the permanent need for its modification and transformation. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA), mechanisms of power that determine discourse are rendered invisible through ideologies, delineated as common-sense assumptions that naturalize and legitimize the existing relations of power in modern societies (see Fairclough, 1989). In this vein, the naturalization of social practices through which power produces «docile bodies» will be analysed employing the CDA approach, with the aim to identify and explain the complex relations between gender, power and cultural norms that are perpetuated through textbooks.

2. Foucault's "docile bodies" through feminist lens

Within his theoretical considerations on body and power, Foucault completely overlooks the issue of gender, and even more, it seems that the «genderless» body he reflects upon is modelled upon the male image, which is the main reason why he was criticized by feminist scholars as «the privileged, white European male intellectual that has silenced women's voices». (Morris, 2019, p. 60) However, as Morris (2019, pp. 60-61) points out, despite his «gender-blindness», Foucault's work was widely considered and applied in post-structural feminist theory, in fact, his ideas were shown to be «extremely useful to many feminists in analysing constructions of the female body, which has historically been subject to intense surveillance» (Morris, 2019, p. 61). Foucault and feminism without doubt intersect, hence, taking into account gendered power structures in the analysis of discipline and power is not only essential, but it can also complement the omissions of Foucault's theories on body, power and discipline (Morris, 2019, p. 61).

In accordance with feminist scholars who embraced Foucault's concepts of body and power, and positioned them within a feminist epistemological framework, the imagery of diet constructed through IFL textbooks will be interpreted as a discursive practice that reflects how power inscribed in cultural norms and beliefs produces «docile bodies». In Foucault's view bodies are rendered docile through social practices that include discipline and surveillance (Foucault, 1991, p. 138). All these practices constitute instruments through which power operates and masters the body. However, it is important to point out that according to Foucault power itself cannot be associated and limited to one particular source, such as for instance a person or an institution, instead, power constitutes a decentralized force that «works through everyone via practices such as self-discipline and following the dominant rules for living within modern society» (Morris, 2019, p. 57). In line with the feminist standpoint we argue that through the discourse of IFL textbooks diet is standardized as a cultural norm that applies exclusively to women. From this perspective body modification, uniformity to conventional beauty standards and discipline are established as commonly acknowledged components of female identity. This

furthermore implies that textbooks themselves can act as instruments of power that normalize the disciplining of female bodies.

3. Methodological framework

The present study relies on the hypothesis according to which cultural norms replicated through IFL textbooks reveal the presence of gender stereotypes and inequalities, whose impact is noticeable in the opposite attitudes of male and female characters in relation to diet and body image. Apart from being a question of nutrition choice, diet is also a sociocultural norm, and as such, if applied only in reference to one gender, it can point to asymmetric power relations that underlie the discursive practices by means of which seemingly neutral societal norms are constructed.

A methodological tool commonly used in social sciences to disclose different types of social inequalities that underlie discourses is critical discourse analysis (CDA), that «focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society» (van Dijk, 2015, p. 353). The main objective of CDA is demystifying hidden ideological mechanisms incorporated in discursive practices, in order to expose and challenge unequal relations of power that are at the basis of some of the commonly shared sociocultural norms (van Dijk 2015, p. 355; Fairclough, 1989, p. 107).

From the perspective of CDA power is not exercised by means of coercion or force, but through appropriation and naturalization of discourses (Fairclough, 1992, p. 67). Power is thereby exercised through sociocultural norms that lead to the «formation of dominant discourses, or texts whose authority permits their passing as knowledge, truth, immutable law, or ‘common sense’» (Williamson et al., 2018).

One of the questions that CDA encourages researchers to pose is «what rules, codes, and ideologies dictate the way we engage in discourse – that is, how we speak, behave, interact, and perceive?» (Williamson et al., 2018). This critical question is in line with the objectives of the present study, which aims to explore sociocultural norms and ideologies that underlie the discourse of diet in IFL textbooks. The presumption that female and male characters would display opposite behaviours and attitudes in relation to diet inevitably raises further questions such as: what the type of behaviours/attitudes is they exhibit; if they are in opposition, to which social factors these oppositions can be attributable to, that is, which social/ideological mechanisms produce and reinforce differences and disparities.

Prior to the data interpretation from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, we will conduct a quantitative content analysis, that will include the following steps: 1) a) the overall number of tokens containing references to diet, b) the number of tokens referring to male characters, c) the number of tokens referring to female characters; 2) the overall number of tokens per every textbook.

4. Corpus

The corpus contains 6 Italian as a foreign language textbooks employed in teaching and learning Italian FL in the post-secondary education setting in Bosnia and Herzegovina: *Qui Italia* (2002), *Nuovo Progetto Italiano* (2006), *Chiaro A1* (2010), *Domani A1* (2010), *Facilissimo A1* (2014), *Via del Corso* (2018).

The selected textbooks share the following common traits:

- (1) They are designed for beginner and pre-intermediate learners (A1-A2).
- (2) They are used as referential textbooks for the courses of Italian language held during the first two academic years at the University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- (3) They are published by the most notable publishing houses in the domain of Italian as a foreign language: Alma Edizioni and Edizioni Edilingua. The only exception is *Qui Italia*, published by Le Monnier, once known

as a prominent publisher of educational materials, and now a part of the largest publishing company in Italy – Mondadori.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Quantitative content analysis

The total number of textual sequences involving diet practices is 11. Out of these, 2 examples contain no reference to a concrete agent, 5 are referred to a male agent and 4 to a female agent. The results are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. The overall number of tokens; the number of tokens without agent reference; the number of tokens referring to men; the number of tokens referring to women.

Total number of tokens	Number of tokens with generic references	Number of tokens referring to men	Number of tokens referring to women
11	2	5	4

Table 2. The overall number of tokens per textbook (m = male; f = female; u = unspecified).

<i>Qui Italia</i> (2002)			<i>Nuovo Progetto Italiano</i> (2006)			<i>Chiaro A1</i> (2010)			<i>Domani A1</i> (2010)			<i>Facilissimo</i> (2014)			<i>Via del Corso</i> (2018)		
M	F	U	M	F	U	M	F	U	M	F	U	M	F	U	M	F	U
4	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2

At first glance, the distribution seemingly reflects symmetric gender representations, as it implies that both men and women equally engage in weight control practices. However, a merely quantitative approach results to be not only incomplete, but also erroneous, as it fails to provide insights into the gender asymmetries that emerge from the different attitudes women and men exhibit with respect to diet. In this regard, the integration of a qualitative approach enables to identify three main aspects of diet representation, that reveal how the body discipline is perceived and practiced differently by male and female characters. Gendered differences regard three main aspects of body discipline representation: 1) the positive or the negative perception of one’s own body, 2) diet in terms of a future project or diet as a practice that is actually carried through, 3) diet as a practice connected to health improvement or to the improvement of physical appearance. The examples that illustrate the following aspects are summarized in Tables 3, 4, and 5 below.

Table 3. Positive/negative body perception.

Positive body perception		Negative body perception		Unspecified	
M	F	M	F	M	F
1	0	0	2	4	2



Table 4. Diet connected to health improvement/diet connected to physical appearance improvement.

Diet related to health		Diet related to physical appearance		Unspecified	
M	F	M	F	M	F
3	0	0	2	2	2

Table 5. Diet in terms of a future project/diet actually carried through.

Diet in terms of a future project		Diet actually carried through	
M	F	M	F
5	0	0	4

5.2. Critical discourse analysis

The depiction of behaviours, habits, and actions of female and male characters in relation to diet are characterized by conspicuous gender differences: firstly, it emerges that only female characters express negative attitude towards their body image and the outcomes of their diets, while, contrary to this, male characters express a rather positive attitude and seem to be very confident about the outcomes of the diet. Furthermore, it emerges that only female characters are actually carrying through their diets, while in reference to male characters, instead of being actually performed, diet is merely a plan and a possible activity scheduled for some future period. Lastly, the examples reveal different weight-loss motivations related to gender: whereas in case of male characters diet is in most examples a practice aimed to achieve health improvement, female characters don't manifest these impulses, instead, what prevails in their case is the concern with the improvement of physical appearance.

The authors' motivations behind these choices are most likely to be unintentional and unconscious, however, it is precisely the automatic and unintended nature underlying these choices to reveal how presumptions regarding appropriate roles of women and men in society are often interiorized as ideologically unconditioned cultural values. Regardless of whether the differences themselves emerge as a result of unconscious and unforeseen intentions by authors, they are not to be taken for granted, as they can point to the complex nature of discourse that shapes and determines gender identities. The observations on diet and gender expressed above are in line with the key principles of critical discourse analysis, since CDA, as Williamson et al. (2018) point out, not only captures something important about the social world, but it also plays a key role in revealing how social phenomena are discursively constituted, that is «it demonstrates how things come to be as they are, that they could be different, and thereby that they can be changed» (Williamson et al., 2018).

Below we will indicate the examples that illustrate how the diet discourse in textbooks reflects gendered body politics.

5.2.1. Positive/negative body perception

As indicated in the quantitative analysis, the positive body perception is linked to the attitude of one of the male characters, while, contrary to this, two female characters express negative attitude about their body image. The

first example introduces conversation topics stereotypically associated with women diet and concern about physical appearance:

- 1) Laura, ti vedo un po' giù. Cosa c'è? (*Laura, you seem a bit down. What's going on?*)
Fra un paio di mesi saremo in estate e forse dovrei perdere qualche chilo." (*Summer begins in a few months and maybe I should lose a few pounds.*)
Secondo me, stai bene così. Ma se proprio vuoi dimagrire, perché non cominci una dieta? (*In my opinion you look good the way you are. But if you really want to lose weight why don't you start a diet?*)
Io sono sempre a dieta e senza risultati. (*I am always on a diet and without results.*) (Marin & Magnelli, 2006, p. 175).

The dialogue between two friends reveals how body image concerns influence and condition self-esteem and emotional state of one of the female characters. What also emerges from the dialogue is her persistent engagement in regulation and control of the body, which in the light of Foucault's theories on body and power indicates that ineffective body discipline leads to punishment, which in this particular case manifests in the form of pervasive negative emotions that overwhelm her.

To illustrate how the concept of docile bodies is directly related to and determined by gender we will indicate two conspicuous examples that reflect utterly opposite attitudes of male and female characters in regard to diet and body image. Both examples are followed by images representing diametrically opposed bodies, as well as opposed attitudes (Figures 1 and 2).

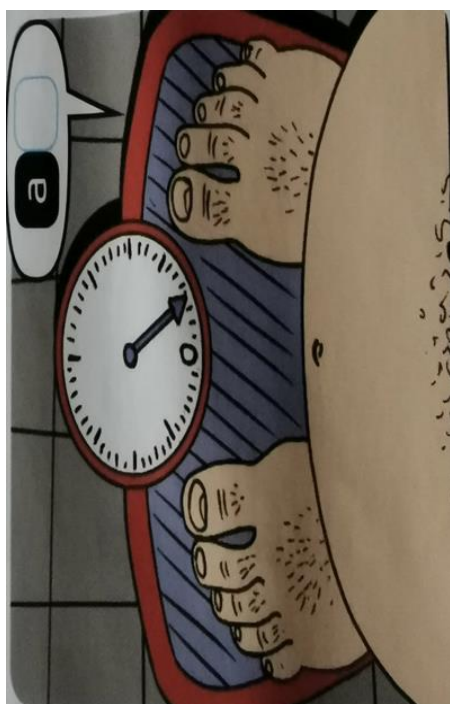


Figure 1. (Marin & Diadori, 2018, p. 174)

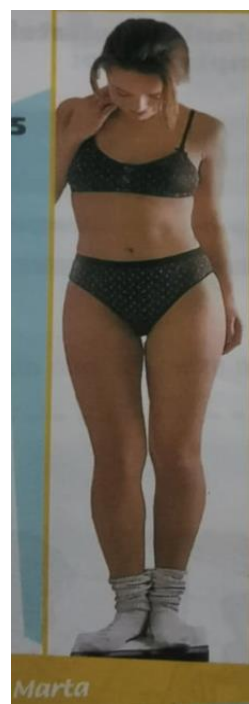


Figure 2. (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 275)

The image depicting a man on a weighing scale (Figure 1) is followed by a sentence:

- 2) Mi conosci...Questi chili li perdo quando voglio! È solo un po' di pancia! (*You know me...I can lose these pounds whenever I want! It's just a bit of belly!*) (Marin & Diadori, 2018, p. 174).

The second image (Figure 2) captures a young woman on a weighing scale who describes her eating habits in a following way:

- 3) Sono sempre a dieta, ma non perdo i chili che vorrei: molte volte mangio dolci e pastasciutta. (*I am always on a diet, but I don't lose pounds as I would like to: many times I eat pasta and sweets.*) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 275).

In Figure 1, the excessive body weight of a male character is emphasized through the depiction of his oversized stomach, while Figure 2 shows a woman whose body weight can be considered healthy and far from obese. The picture depicting a man (Figure 1) suggests that he is clearly obese, or at least very close to be considered as such, however, it seems that he shows no concern about neither his physical appearance nor possible health issues that can arise as a result of excessive weight. Furthermore, the man's attitude reveals that he does not consider his excessive weight to be a problem, as a matter of fact, he minimizes it by characterizing his oversized stomach as «just a bit of belly». What's more, it seems that the excessive weight has no effect whatsoever on his self-esteem, since he seems to be very relaxed and confident that he would be able to lose the extra pounds any time he wants. Losing weight is perceived as a spontaneous and casual process that requires minimal effort. The woman in Figure 2, on the other hand, displays a more rigid body attitude. She asserts that she continuously subjects herself to diets, and even though the picture shows a fit and healthy young woman, her shared experience reveals that her body is perceived to be in need of continuous control and discipline.

The comparison between these two examples sheds a light on how ideological mechanisms shape gendered body politics that normalize the idea of docile bodies as a constituent component of female identity. Gendered body politics could potentially reinforce the idea that male bodies are socially accepted in all shapes and dimensions, and that even in cases of objective weight problems, commonly accepted sociocultural norms imposing body discipline and control are not applicable to men.

5.2.2. Diet connected to health improvement/diet connected to physical appearance improvement

The two types of motivation that were possible to identify in regard to the diet habits of women and men reveal once again different patterns: whereas men are advised by experts to initiate a diet for the sake of health, women are practicing diet in order to modify their body shape. In regard to women, the above indicated examples (1) and (3) illustrate how the concern with body image generates negative emotions and self-esteem issues. On the other hand, diet in relation to men assumes once again ironic and humorous connotations, and it develops into the exaltation of hedonism and corporal pleasures, expressed through a very particular diet plan that a doctor advises to his male patient:

- 4a) Cominci subito una dieta: non mangi più verdura, frutta cotta, carni bianche, mangi invece salumi, selvaggina, molto pepe, molto sale. Non beva più latte, beva molto vino e molto whiskey. (*Start a diet immediately: stop eating vegetables, compote, white meat, instead eat cold cuts, venison, plenty of pepper*)

and salt. Don't drink milk anymore, drink a lot of wine and a lot of whiskey.) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 287).

The example is extracted from a text entitled *Il medico ideale* (*The ideal doctor*), an inverted ironic version of nutritional rhetoric typically advocated by doctors and experts. In a humorous manner the text exalts hedonism and encourages corporal pleasures, such as indulging in food and alcohol without restraints. This kind of view on body is a transgression of sociocultural norms that produce docile bodies and is associated with male body - contrary to the female body image determined by control, discipline and surveillance, the image of a male body emerges as an antithesis that evokes freedom and violation of social norms and ideologies. The homage to the corporal pleasures reaches its peak with the final advice suggested by the «ideal» doctor:

- 4b) E poi un'altra cosa è necessaria per stare bene: donne, donne, donne! Soltanto così Lei guarirà. Non ce ne saranno mai abbastanza. (*And one more thing is necessary to feel well: women, women, women! Only that way you will heal. There will never be enough of them.*) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 287).

Aside from implying that unlike women men are not expected to conform to sociocultural norms imposing body discipline, this example is problematic for the sexist connotations it contains, as it objectifies women and reduces them to «things» in service of pleasuring men.

Two more variations of the original text compare in the gap-filling grammar exercises:

- 5) Caro signore, cominci subito una dieta! Non mangi più verdura, frutta cotta, carni bianche. Mangia salumi, selvaggina, molto pepe, molto sale. Non beva più latte. Beva molto vino e molto whisky. Non vada mai a letto prima dell'una, le due di notte. Faccia le ore piccole più spesso possibile! Passi qualche notte in bianco! (*Dear Sir, start a diet immediately! Stop eating vegetables, compote, white meat. Eat cold cuts, venison, plenty of pepper and salt. Stop drinking milk. Drink a lot of wine and a lot of whiskey. Don't ever go to bed before one, two am. Stay up late as often as possible. Spend a few sleepless nights!*) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 288).
- 6) Caro Giorgio, comincia subito una dieta! Non mangiare più verdura, frutta cotta, carni bianche. Mangia salumi, selvaggina, molto pepe, molto sale. Non bere più latte. Bevi molto vino e molto whisky. Non andare mai a letto prima dell'una, le due di notte. Fai le ore piccole più spesso possibile! Passa qualche notte in bianco! (*Dear Giorgio, start a diet immediately! Stop eating vegetables, compote, white meat. Eat cold cuts, venison, plenty of pepper and salt. Stop drinking milk. Drink a lot of wine and a lot of whiskey. Don't ever go to bed before one, two am. Stay up late as often as possible. Spend a few sleepless nights!*) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 288).

Both in the original example (4) and its variations (5) and (6), there are no references to women's engagement in hedonism and corporal pleasures.

5.2.3. Diet in terms of a future project/diet actually carried through

Whereas diet in relation to female characters is acknowledged as a practice they commonly engage in as a part of direct personal experience, male characters on the other hand are not actively applying this social norm: they are either only contemplating the idea of diet, or diet is suggested to them, not for the purpose of conforming to

cultural norms, but to improve health. Apart from the already indicated examples that illustrate this tendency [(2) (4a) (4b) (5) (6)], we will indicate one more involving a man who shares his diet plans:

- 7) Mario Rossi fa progetti. “Da lunedì farò una dieta, smetterò di fumare, non berrò vino, non farò le ore piccole...” (*Mario Rossi makes plans. “Starting from Monday I will start a diet, I will quit smoking, won’t drink wine, won’t stay up late...”*) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 114).

As for examples involving female characters, aside from those already indicated above [(1) (3)], two more were identified:

- 8) Federica e Giorgio invece preferiscono bere un tè caldo e mangiano pane e marmellata. Federica però mangia il pane senza burro perché è a dieta. (*Federica and Giorgio on the other hand prefer drinking a warm tea and eating bread and jam. Federica however eats bread without butter because she’s on a diet.*) (De Savorgnani & Bergero, 2010, p. 140).
- 9) Che cosa prendi, Maria? (*What are you having, Maria?*)
Non prendo il primo, perché sono a dieta. Per secondo vorrei pollo arrosto e un’insalata mista! (*I’m not taking the first dish because I’m on a diet. For the main dish I would like roast chicken and a mixed salad!*) (Mazzetti et al., 2002, p. 104).

Example (8) is extracted from a short text about nutrition habits in Italy, summarized as a part of the experience of a mother who describes the nutrition practices of her two children. It appears that both children have almost identical nutrition habits, however unlike the son Giorgio, the daughter Federica controls her food intake as a part of a diet plan. The contrast between male and female nutrition choices reflects how self-discipline and self-surveillance are integrated as common traits of female identity, whereas men are free of this type of constraints. Similarly, in the example (9) diet is naturally associated with a female character.

6. Conclusion

In this paper the diet discourse in Italian as a foreign language textbooks was analysed in reference to the Foucauldian concept of «docile bodies». The gender void in Foucault’s theories on body and power was complemented by integrating the post-structuralist feminist theory according to which female body has historically and culturally been subject to a more intense (self)surveillance and (self)discipline, that involve weight-control practices (Morris, 2019, p. 161).

The quantitative analysis provided significant insights into gender asymmetries in the depiction of diet habits of male and female characters. What emerged was the complete absence of examples depicting men who actually carry out their diet plan, in fact, in reference to male characters diet is merely a project for the future, whereas in all the examples involving female characters diet is a practice that is actually carried out. Furthermore, it was disclosed that men and women are driven by different motivating factors in relation to diet: to men diet is associated with health improvement, whereas women diet to improve their physical appearance. It emerges also that only female characters express negative attitude towards their body image, even when their body weight falls within the normal and healthy body range, while, contrary to this, male characters express a rather positive attitude and seem to be very confident with their body, even when they seem to experience problems with obesity.

Identifying body discipline as a basic trait of female identity reveals how stereotypical beliefs about expected gender roles acquire the status of common sense, which thereby makes them opaque and no longer visible as ideologies. What furthermore confirms the ideological representation underlying the diet discourse in textbooks is the pronounced contrast between the docile bodies of women and the free of constraints bodies of men that are not expected to conform to any sociocultural norms that prescribe their appropriate shape and dimension – unlike the female body that is subject to continuous modification, surveillance and control, the male body is accepted in its natural form and furthermore embraced as a symbol of hedonism and material pleasure. The ideologically shaped diet discourse implies that the power of social norms that produce docile bodies applies only to women, whereas men are not obligated to fit into socially constructed body measures.

As already emphasized, the power of ideologies embedded in gender stereotypes derives from their ability to assume the forms of commonly shared social norms and values, which facilitates their infiltration in all social structures, including the education discourse. Even when gender stereotypes integrated in textbooks do not appear to be a result of conscient intentions by authors, but rather a consequence of the internalization of ideologically based assumptions about the expected roles of women and men in society, the fact remains that the lack of critical approach in regard to the issues of gender leads to reproduction and legitimization of unequal power relations which are at the core of every ideologically shaped construction.

Furthermore, the ideological discourse simplifies and censors the complex and multifaceted realities of women and men, which is another important aspect that should be considered in the process of creating textbook contents. In simpler terms, there are women who resist to the ideological conventions that produce docile bodies, as well as men who subject themselves to body-discipline and control in order to satisfy the aesthetic standards of the culture they are shaped by. Instead of reducing all these realities to one uniformed model, textbooks should be able to offer alternative images of women and men in regard to body and identity, but also criticize the pervasive obsession with beauty standards that the contemporary culture encourages through media and social networks. In the light of the scientific findings that illustrate how beauty standards can produce serious consequences on physical and mental health of women, but also men (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020), it becomes even more important for education to act as an instrument of liberation and emancipation and to construct a discourse that challenges stereotypical and superficial roles attributed to women and men. It is important to emphasize that teachers, if committed to raising critical consciousness, can have a key role in challenging the ideological premises of education materials and encouraging students to critique structures of power and oppression.

In closing, we will draw attention to another important aspect that regards the specific nature of foreign language textbooks, which are not only a reflection of language practices of different countries, but also a gate to their culture and its peculiarities. Hence, including gender perspective in the process of foreign language textbooks creation is important, given that ideologically shaped forms of education produce and reinforce representations that are often outdated and obsolete and that furthermore fail to reflect the transformation of traditional gender roles that occurred in the last decades.

ⁱ According to our current knowledge only a few studies have until now addressed different aspects of gender stereotypes in IFL textbooks; in this regard, we will point to the following studies: *Differenze di genere nella didattica per persone alloglotte* (Arianna Carta 2003; journal *Linguistica*); *La rappresentazione dell'immagine di genere (maschile e femminile) nei manuali di italiano L2* (Elena Angelini and Silvia Tarantola 2020; journal *Bollettino Itals*); 'His story' - the exclusion of women in the depiction of nonfiction characters in Italian as a foreign language textbooks: a case study (Nataša Vučenović 2022; journal *AG About Gender*); *Grammaticalmente o ideologicamente corretto?*

L'impiego del maschile generico nei manuali di italiano per stranieri (Nataša Vučenović 2022; journal Italiano Lingua Due); Chi fa che? Stereotipi di genere nelle immagini dei libri di testo di italiano come lingua straniera (Simona Frabotta, 2002; journal Italiano Lingua Due).

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