UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA
del Sacro Cuore

Vademecum
to Inclusive Language

Sexism, Ageism, Ableism, Racism

How to avoid replicating stereotypes
through the words we use
at our University

As well known, language is essential to social life; however, precisely because it performs this most fundamental function, it is also a powerful vehicle for stereotypes and prejudices.

This vademecum, produced by a multidisciplinary team, is part of a work promoted by the Equal Opportunities Committee at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

It explored, in particular, how the words we adopt every day can activate stereotypes related to **gender**, **age**, **disability** and **ethnicity**, and has aimed to propose ways to avoid propagating them, in the hope that the university community can increasingly become an environment where people feel comfortable, regardless of their characteristics, backgrounds, orientations.

Inspired by the extensive thinking that has matured on these issues and leading best practices nationally and internationally, the rules outlined are intended to provide the basis for a review and revision of the University's communication customs, consistently with the provisions of the Gender Equality Plan.

Moreover, having as the object of investigation such a living and therefore changeable subject as linguistic expressions, the following notes should be understood as suggestions, and will be subject to change based on the cultural changes to which language is constantly subjected.

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Table of Contents

1. SEXISM

1.1. PROFESSIONAL TITLES

One of the most typical mechanisms through which gender stereotypes are reiterated is the systematic use of grammatical and semantic dissimilarities, i.e., differentiated expressions depending on whether one refers to men or women.

Among these dissimilarities, the most classic example concerns the use of the masculine for professional titles and institutional roles for which a feminine form did not exist in Italian for a long time, for the simple reason that women did not hold those offices due to custom or explicit prohibitions.

To avoid this problem, it is sufficient to **decline the professional title in the feminine when it refers to a woman**, following the now-codified rules according to which:

● masculine nouns ending in **-o, -aio/-ario** correspond to feminine nouns ending in
   -a, -aia/-aria

So for example,

male	female
architett**o**	architett**a**
avvocat**o**	avvocat**a**
chirurg**o**	chirurg**a**
deputat**o**	deputat**a**
impiegat**o**	impiegat**a**
magistrat**o**	magistrat**a**
ministr**o**	ministr**a**
sindac**o**	sindac**a**
not**aio**	not**aia**
prim**ario**	prim**aria**
segret**ario** generale	segret**aria** generale

● masculine nouns ending in *-iere* correspond to feminine nouns ending in *-iera*

So for example,

male	female
consigl**iere**	consigl**iera**
inferm**iere**	inferm**iera**
pion**iere**	pion**iera**
port**iere**	port**iera**

● masculine nouns ending in *-sore* correspond to feminine nouns ending in *-sora*

So for example,

male	female
assess**ore**	assess**ora**
difens**ore**	defens**ora**
revis**ore**	revis**ora**

● masculine nouns ending in *-tore* correspond to feminine nouns ending in *-trice*

So for example,

male	female
ambascia**tore**	ambascia**trice**
amministra**tore**	amministra**trice**
ispet**tore**	ispet**trice**
redat**tore**	redat**trice**
sena**tore**	sena**trice**
ret**tore**	ret**trice**
diret**tore**	diret**trice**

1.1.a. Nouns ending in -essa

For the feminine declension of professional titles, the form in *-essa* should generally be avoided as it sometimes has an ironic or derogatory overtone (e.g., *medichessa*), or in cases when, though lacking this overtone, it would give rise to a feminine noun that is not symmetrical to the masculine (*avvocatessa* is not symmetrical to avvocato).

However, it should be born in mind that there are female nouns in **-essa** that have become very common and do not seem to have negative connotations, such as *studentessa, professoressa, dottoressa*. These forms can, therefore, be accepted.

When declining a professional title in the feminine, any adjective related to it will obviously have to agree with the former.

So in the case of a*ssociate professor* and similar constructions, these formulas are recommended:

male	female
professore associato	*professoressa associata*
professore emerito	*professoressa emerita*
professore ordinario	*professoressa ordinaria*
professore straordinario	*professoressa straordinaria*
professore visitatore	*professoressa visitatrice*

1.2. Nouns of Greek origin

Some nouns of Greek origin end in **-a** in the singular, in both the masculine and feminine forms. Nouns such as atleta, *maratoneta* fall into this category.

Also some nouns that derive only a few elements from Greek have only one singular form for both masculine and feminine. Nouns with the suffix **-ista** (*e.g., assegnista, borsista, contrattista, linguista, tributarista*) and those with the suffix **-iatra** (*e.g., fisiatra, foniatra, geriatra, psichiatra*) belong to this category.

In these cases, to provide more equal gender visibility, the masculine or feminine forms of the article should be used.

instead of	it is advisable
Al borsista si richiede di presentarsi …	*Alla/al borsista si richiede di presentarsi …*

Poeta and profeta pertain to the category of nouns of Greek origin, too.

Although nothing would prevent the use of the same word for the singular feminine -- thus la *poeta* and la *profeta*, just as l'*apologeta* or l'*asceta* are used indistinctly -- today the forms *poetessa* and *profetessa* are common without any disparaging connotation, and are therefore advisable.

1.3. OTHER CASES OF DISSYMMETRY:
La Rossi, gentile collega

A further phenomenon of grammatical dissimilarity is found in the use of the definite article before the surname when referring to a person of female gender. One can easily avoid this disparity by always using the first and last name.

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
Lo ha comunicato **la Rossi**	*Lo ha comunicato* **la professoressa Maria Rossi**

thus following the same convention we would use to refer to professor Mario Rossi, for whom in the same situation we would not say *Lo ha detto* **il Rossi**.

But there are also other more subtle forms of gender inequality in the ways we express ourselves to which we often do not pay attention.

It is not uncommon to still come across greeting formulas such as *Egregi colleghi e gentili college.* Are we really sure that the different adjectivisation arises only from the need to avoid repetition? If so, why is it so much more common for men rather than women to be addressed as egregi? It would be better at this point to avoid different adjectivisation.

So for example

instead of	it is advisable
Egregi *colleghi e* **gentili** *colleghe*	**Gentili** *colleghe e colleghi*

1.4. BEYOND THE OVER-EXTENDED MASCULINE FORM

Italian, like other Romance languages, is characterised by two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine. In the evolution from Latin, the neuter gender faded till it disappeared, but a neuter use of the masculine still survives.

This occurs in the singular form when referring to an abstract concept, as when, for example, the word *uomo* is employed for mankind or, in the plural when referring to a mixed group, as, for example, when the Constitution of the Italian Republic establishes the rights of citizens, without, by using this form, intending, however, to exclude female citizens.

This neutral use of the masculine is less and less accepted by the speech community today. To overcome the so-called over-extended masculine form, Italian offers a wide range of options. All these strategies can be grouped into two families defined by the goal they pursue: gender visibility or obfuscation.

1.4.a. Visibility strategies

In addition to the feminisation of professional titles, another way to achieve gender visibility is through duplication.

This is a strategy that can easily be adopted in greeting formulas.

So for example,

instead of	**it is advisable**
*Buongiorno a **tutti***	*Buongiorno a **tutte** e a **tutti***

Similarly, we can remember to mention female students along with male students if we send them an e-mail.

So for example,

instead of	**it is advisable**
*Invitiamo **gli studenti** a presentarsi alle ore 10.30 per la consegna degli attestati*	*Invitiamo **le studentesse e gli studenti** a presentarsi alle ore10.30 per la consegna degli attestati*

In a written text, in some cases, it may be appropriate to resort to duplication through abbreviations.

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
I colleghi sono pregati di …	*Le/i colleghe/ghi sono pregate/i* di …

But how can we make an expression like ***Ai rappresentanti degli studenti*** *segnaliamo che…* more inclusive? If we wanted to apply the duplication rule, we should formulate it as follows: ***Alle/ai rappresentanti delle/gli studentesse/ studenti*** *segnaliamo che…*

Rather complicated. Fortunately, we have alternatives.

1.4.b. Obfuscation strategies

When indicating the double form would overburden the sentence, it is in fact preferable to employ the opposite strategy to visibility: obfuscation. Some examples of obfuscating strategies are listed below.

● ***Use of collective terms***

This technique consists in using collective terms such as corpo studentesco or corpo docente instead of the over-extended masculine term: *gli studenti, i professori, i tecnici, gli amministrativi.*

So for example

instead of	it is advisable
Ai rappresentanti ***degli studenti*** segnaliamo che…	*Alla* **rappresentanza studentesca** segnaliamo che…

Or for example,

instead of	**it is advisable**
Invitiamo **i professori** e **gli impiegati** dell'Ateneo…	Invitiamo il **corpo docente** e il **personale tecnico-amministrativo**…

● *__Use of epicenes and opaque nouns with respect to gender__*

In Italian the neuter survives in epicenes (nouns that have a single invariable form for masculine and feminine), often derived from the present participle. Words such as referente, presidente, dirigente belong to this category. In these cases, we can achieve a more inclusive effect by using these nouns and duplicating only articles, adjectives, prepositions and past participles.

So for example,

instead of	**it is advisable**
I referenti del comitato valuteranno il progetto sulla base dei seguenti criteri …	**Le/i referenti** del comitato valuteranno il progetto sulla base dei seguenti criteri …

In addition, applying an obfuscating strategy for the sake of brevity, one can generically use words such as persona, risorsa, figura which are still very effective despite being feminine and thus requiring agreeing feminine articles, adjectives and past participles.

So for example

instead of	**it is advisable**
Il candidato che stiamo cercando per questa posizione…	**La persona/risorsa/figura** che stiamo cercando per questa posizione…

Among other things, this strategy would provide the opportunity to make the most appropriate lexical choice, selecting the most suitable synonym, among the three, depending on context.

Persona is, moreover, a valuable term because it can be used instead of the now obsolete uomini with neutral value in the construction of many sentences.

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
*In presenza di un pericolo imminente, generalmente **gli uomini**…*	*In presenza di un pericolo imminente, generalmente **le persone**…*

● *Sentence rephrasing*

Rephrasing sentences is another possibility. This is certainly the most strenuous path but, in many cases, also the most effective. In this case, a vast array of solutions is available: pronouns, impersonal forms, substitution of past participles, use of the passive voice.

• *Through the use of the pronoun*

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
***I vincitori** del concorso*	***Coloro che hanno vinto** il concorso*

• *Through the use of the impersonal form*

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
***I vincitori** del bando dovranno presentarsi in segreteria per ottenere l'attestato*	*Per ritirare l'attestato occorre presentarsi in segreteria*

- *_Through the substitution of the past participle_*

  So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
Siete i **benvenuti**	*Vi diamo il bevenuto*

● *_Elimination of gender suffixes_*

In addition to the strategies outlined and recommended above, another neutralisation technique is to omit gender suffixes replacing them with other characters such as, for example, *schwa* or asterisk. The implications of these forms are, however, too controversial to be considered effective.

A recent study compared three forms of gender-neutral language: double masculine and feminine declension, traditional neuter words, and new words such as the Swedish hen. The analysis found that double declension decreases the perception of gender inequality, whereas this is not the case with the neutral form. In addition, double masculine and feminine declension is suggested for languages characterised by grammatical gender, such as precisely Italian.

In light of this, the exclusive use of masculine and feminine forms in accordance with the most commonly accepted usages of Italian is recommended in this context, and the use of graphic elements such as the above mentioned is discouraged.

2. AGEISMO

2.1. A VERY YOUNG WORD

What is ageism? *Ageismo* is an admittedly not too appropriate Italianisation of the English term ageism. The word was coined in 1969, deriving it from "age," by U.S. psychiatrist and geriatrician Robert Neil Butler to refer to discrimination affecting the elderly in particular. Thirty years later, the expression was translated into *âgisme* in French and it has only recently entered the Italian lexicon.

Although scarce attention is devoted to the phenomenon in Italy, it has been the focus of attention of international agencies. For example, the United Nations has decided to dedicate the current decade to *Healthy Ageing* (translated into Italian as "*invecchiamento attivo*") and integrate it among the Sustainable Development Goals set for 2030. The World Health Organization too promotes campaigns against age-related stereotyping, the serious negative impact of which it recognises in relation to both individuals and societies.

Since language is the most common way through which stereotypes spread, one of the ways to combat ageism is to choose well the words we use when referring to people's age.

2.2. 2.2. EXPRESSIONS TO AVOID

Communication expert Alexa Pantanella has demonstrated to great effect the sense of ageism implicit in many expressions commonly used in the business world. Let us borrow an emblematic case from her studies.

for example

*Il progetto non decolla. Abbiamo bisogno di un colpo d'ala. Servono maggiore creatività ed energia: inseriamo talenti **più giovani.***

It seems an innocuous sentence at first glance. Yet again, if we pay attention, we are conveying a stereotype. Why should a young person be - merely because of their age and not because of their aptitudes - even more dynamic and creative than an elder one? Moreover, are we sure that investing the new figure to be included in the team with these expectations will enable them to develop their full potential? What are we implicitly saying to elder colleagues? Are we not communicating that we no longer expect much from them, that we consider them already out of the picture, that the time has come for them to step aside? What effect does this have on their self-esteem and motivation?

Avoiding reinforcing stereotypes through the way we express ourselves would only take a little effort and rephrasing.

for example

*Il progetto non decolla. Abbiamo bisogno di un colpo d'ala. Servono **talenti dinamici e creativi.***

This simple strategy eliminates any unnecessary reference to incongruous age associations (young = dynamic and creative). In short, as the example shows, when dealing with ageist stereotypes, more often than not the difficulty lies in becoming aware of the problem rather than in finding a solution.

2.3. VECCHIO, ANZIANO, OTHER

A general rule to counter ageism in language is to avoid using the words young and old as umbrella terms when they are unnecessary, or to convey meanings that have no actual relation to age. But, what to do when age is indeed a key part of the information?

According to some studies, people react better in such cases if one refers to them by making their age explicit rather than using the term *anziano*.

So for example,

instead of	**it is advisable**
*Questo progetto coinvolge **gli anziani***	*Questo progetto coinvolge **le persone con più di 70 anni***

The last expression, by containing a precise demographic reference, prevents people with different ages from being identified via a single word: anziano may indicate a 65-year-old as well as an 85-year-old, thus two individuals who are going through very different periods in their lives and therefore may be in very different psycho-physical conditions.

Moreover, making the term persona/e visible shows what age actually is: a simple characteristic that, along with others, defines an individual. But a person is never just their age, just as they are never only their eye or hair colour, their weight and so on. These are all characteristics that are expressed, precisely, by introducing the qualifying noun by way of a preposition: la persona **con** gli occhi blu, **dai** capelli biondi, **di** 80 kg. Why shouldn't we also use the same construction to express age?

3. ABLEISM

3.1. THE WORDS AND THE THING

As disability is an ever-changing concept, the verbal expressions to define it also age prematurely. Terms considered real insults today were used in the scientific literature between the 1700s and 1800s to define different forms of mental illness. Today the word *handicappato* itself is considered offensive, a word derived from the English, handicap, which was in use until not so long ago, not only in common language but also in specialised and institutional language, so much so that in the Framework Law 104 of February 5, 1992, the Italian Parliament defines the criteria for the assistance, social integration and rights of people who are precisely *"handicappate."*

The word is currently replaced by two locutions which look similar but imply two different approaches.

The first is *persone con disabilità*. By placing the emphasis on the person, this expression focuses on what disability actually is: a characteristic of the individual. This expression, indicated as *person-first language*, is adopted by the 2006 U.N. Convention, and is used by those who want to emphasise the process of dehumanisation endured by people with pathologies and deficits over the centuries.

The second expression is *persone disabili*. In this case, disability becomes an adjective. The phrase, indicated as *identity-first language*, is generally preferred by disability rights activists, who in this way want to proudly claim their diversity, stripping it of negative connotations, and to prompt society to recognise it and, therefore, change in order to become more inclusive.

Whenever possible, it would be good to always ask the person with which of the two formulas they prefer to be referred to. When this verification cannot be carried out and lacking an explicit indication expressed by the person concerned, it seems appropriate for the University to adopt, preferably, the *person-first* option, thus *persone* con *disabilità*, accepting the indications of international institutions.

3.2. THE BIG FIVE

The Preamble to the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Italy through Law No. 18 of March 3, 2009, states that disability "results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

This definition can be the source of some general criteria from which some expressive rules can be derived.

1. *It is not a disease*

Since disability has been recognised to be always the result of a relationship between a person's deficit and the physical or psychological environment, disability cannot in any way be considered a disease.

Verbal formulas that refer to pathology are, therefore, to be avoided.

> **for example, the following should not be used**
>
> ***affetto da*** *disabilità*
> ***soffre di*** *disabilità*

2. *The person is more than their limitation*

Since it is a trait of the person, but not their sole characteristic, it is good to substitute the verb *essere* with *avere*.

So for example,

instead of	**it is advisable**
Paolo è disabile	*Paolo ha una disabilità*

For this same reason, it would be best never to use disabile as a noun.

Instead of **disabile**, it is better to say **persona disabile o persona con disabilità**

(as mentioned earlier, we lean toward the second option, *person-first language*).

3. _Calling things by their name_

Even resorting to privative formulas (non- followed by the name of the faculty that is lacking or absent) is only apparently a more respectful way of expressing oneself. In fact, by doing so, the deficit that one would like to minimise is rather highlighted.

So for example

instead of	it is advisable
non-udente	_persona sorda_
non-vedente	_persona cieca_

For the same reason, the expression diversamente abile, coined in the early 1980s in the United States (_differently abled_) with the provocative aim of presenting people with disabilities under a different light, has been challenged. Despite its excellent intentions, today it is a formula considered outdated and would be best avoided.

Likewise, the word _sordomuto_ is also to be avoided. Deafness and mutism are different disabilities. Most deaf people have no impairment of the phono-articulatory apparatus and can therefore learn to speak if they receive proper teaching. The Parliament stipulated by Law No. 95 of Feb. 20, 2006 that the term _sordo_ replace _sordomuto_ in all legislative devices. Therefore, it would be better not to use this term loosely.

4. _Up close no one is normal_

Normality is a statistical concept; it applies in relation to a context; we can think of it as an imaginary line shifting depending on the situation we are in. It is certainly not a criterion for constructing categories within which to include some and exclude others. Therefore, terms such as _normale, normodotato_ o _abile_ are to be avoided.

One might ask at this point, what is the opposite of disability? No term has yet been found that avoids evoking a supposed normality. When one has to refer to both groups, the best solution at the moment seems to be a symmetrical construction: _persone senza disabilità_ and _persone con disabilità_.

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
L'iniziativa ha coinvolto 10 studenti disabili e 150 studenti normodotati	*L'iniziativa ha coinvolto 10 studentesse/i con disabilità e 150 studentesse/i senza disabilità*

5. *Avoid pietism*

Expressions portraying people with disabilities as victims are not helpful to them, as these end up emphasising their difficulties, helping to reinforce an image of weakness, inability, minority. Therefore, terms of endearment that always have a childish connotation should also be avoided.

So for example,

instead of	it is advisable
una persona costretta sulla carrozzina	*una persona che usa la sedia a ruote*

4. RACISM

4.1. USEFUL WORDS …

The fight against racism is enacted also through the language used by institutions, the media, and individuals. Even in the university community, therefore, it is important to promote language that is inclusive with respect to different national, ethnic and religious affiliations. This means paying attention to the way people belonging to different groups are named, keeping in mind some broad guidelines.

The first and most obvious concerns the need not to use terms that are offensive or that reproduce degrading stereotypes based on somatic traits, such as skin colour, or national, ethnic, or religious affiliations. Also prohibited are disparaging epithets, which act partially differently from offensive expressions. Indeed, disparaging epithets communicate hatred and contempt towards the person to whom they are addressed, identifying them as belonging to a certain group, and to the group itself as a whole, and they have this negative effect even when the person using them does not intend to offend but, for example, is reporting an altercation they witnessed and is citing the epithets they heard in that context.

It is also necessary to keep in mind that words used to name ethnic groups can change over time, either by taking on a pejorative meaning or - conversely – being normalised.

4.1.a. White is also a colour

Specifically, for some time the expression **di colore** was quite widespread, but it is now preferable not to use it because racialised people believe, and not wrongly, that this expression derives from the privilege conferred on white people by the colour of their skin: on closer inspection, they too are *di colore* although they are never referred to by this wording, as for centuries white skin was the norm and everything else was the difference. To refer to the two groups, it is therefore better to use the expression: **persone bianche** and **persone nere**.

4.1.b Beware of generic verbal labels

It is equally important to be careful not to use generic verbal labels. Rather than classifying people as Asian or Latino, it is preferable to use a more specific term related to their nation or country of origin.

Similarly, rather than using adjectives such as **African** or **South American**, it is better to use more specific terms, such as **Egyptian, Somali, Cameroonian, Argentinian**.

4.1.c. Immigrati, migranti, clandestini, richiedenti asilo...

Some caution is necessary also in relation to migration status.

The expression le/gli immigrate/i has taken on a negative connotation due to the progressive politicisation of the issue. It is preferable to use, in general terms, le/i migranti.

However, in other contexts this same wording may be ineffective or disrespectful.

In these cases, it is better to use **le/i richiedenti asilo, le/i rifugiate/i, le persone richiedenti o in possesso di protezione umanitaria**, considering that these are different cases according to national and international law.

Distinguishing them is a good way to show respect.

Even more than *immigrato*, the term *clandestino* has taken on a stigmatising meaning. The word seems to be used today more in the sense of *"illegal" than "secret"*, to which the Latin adverb from which it derives refers: *clam*, "in secret". So the expression **clandestine/i** should never be used; instead, it is better to use persone **con i documenti non in regola o prive di documenti**.

4.1.d. Arabo is not synonymous with Musulmano

Also, the use of *Arabo* and *Musulmano* as synonyms should be avoided, as it is incorrect: the two terms refer to different realities.

Indeed, **not all Muslim people are Arab and not all Arab people are Muslims**.

4.1.e. How to refer to migrants'offspring?

One may wonder about how to indicate offspring of foreign nationals. They cannot be referred to as *immigrate/i* since some have not experienced migration, having been born in Italy. Also inappropriate is the formula *figlie/i* di *immigrate/i* as it would tie the identified subjects to the experience of their parents, as if that of migrating were a permanent status, passed down from one generation to the next, and not a transitory experience.

How to proceed then? A definitive answer has not yet been found. Currently, the formula **seconde generazioni** is adopted. Rete "G2 Seconde Generazioni" is the name chosen by offspring of some immigrant or refugee parents who were born in Italy or arrived in our country in their wake.

However, those born to parents from one of the African countries generally prefer to be called **afroitaliana/o**: it is good to respect this choice according to the principle that it is always preferable to follow as closely as possible the modes of self-identification in use in different communities.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the words to identify cultural differences may also have different connotations as language contexts change, which is why care should be taken before borrowing expressions from other languages. For example, in English and American the notion of *Racial Identity* is normally used, but in Italian it would be perceived as a strongly disqualified expression.

In general, it is appropriate to enhance differences when they exist and, more importantly, when and only if it is necessary.

4.2. … AND USEFUL IMAGES

Various research studies show that media representations of racialised people perpetuate traditional negative stereotypes towards them. Large communication companies, especially in the Anglosphere, are very sensitive to the issue and promote initiatives and campaigns to counter distorted representations.

An interesting intervention was carried out recently by a BBC campaign to challenge stereotypes related to the portrayal of the racialised person as a potential criminal (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-47298111).

In its communication media (periodicals, website, social, institutional materials), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore is committed to fostering a fair media representation of the different identities that make up the academic, student and administrative community, recognising diversity, which manifests itself in skin colour and other somatic traits, as an element of the University's attractiveness.

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- 2021, Università di Siena, Generi e linguaggi. Linee Guida per un Linguaggio amministrativo e istituzionale inclusivo
- 2020, Anna M. Thornton, Università degli studi dell'Aquila, Per un uso della lingua italiana rispettoso dei generi
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7. Best practice

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- Harvard University
- University of Oxford
- Sorbonne Université
- Universidad Complutense de Madrid
- Università della Svizzera italiana

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