



DeepL

Subscribe to DeepL Pro to translate larger documents
Visit www.DeepL.com/pro for more information.

MAURA TRIPI

Don't call them children

An introduction to
childism

FOREWORD BY TANU BISWAS



EDUCATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

STUDIES / 1

S
D
N
A
I

Ledizioni The Ledizioni logo, which consists of three stylized, overlapping geometric shapes.

IANUS

Education and social transformation
STUDIES / 1

Series edited by Antonio Vigilante SCIENTIFIC

COMMITTEE

Roberto Alessandrini, Salesian Pontifical University; Daniel Buraschi, University of La Laguna (Spain); Cristina Breuza, educator and pedagogue; Irene Culcasi, Lumsa University, European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE); Maria D'Ambrosio, Suor Orsola Benincasa University; Paolo Landri, National Research Council; Giuseppina Rita Mangione, Indire; Mariateresa Muraca, Federal University of Pará (Brazil); Vincenzo Schirripa, Lumsa University; Claudia Secci, University of Cagliari; Tiziana Tarsia, University of Messina; Maura Tripi, Lumsa University, Educational Cooperation Movement (MCE); Paolo Vittoria, Federico II University of Naples

MAURA TRIPI

Don't call them children

An introduction to childism

Foreword by Tanu Biswas

Ledizioni

Cover image: Petralia Sottana, summer 1960.

2025 Ledizioni LediPublishing
Via Boselli 10, 20136 Milan – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

ISBN print edition: 9791256004416

Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.



Table of contents

9	<i>A transformative shift for childism in Italy</i> Tanu Biswas
19	Introduction
23	1. <i>From childhood studies to childism</i>
23	I. Human beings or human becomings? Childhood according to childhood studies
29	II. Conducting research with children
35	III. Critical childhood studies: towards childism
39	2. <i>The prism of the term "childism"</i>
39	I. That minor violence
43	II. Between psychoanalysis and children's literature
47	III. Childist criticism
53	3. <i>The anatomy of prejudice</i>
53	I. The banality of prejudice
57	II. Prejudices against children: a case study in the United States
60	III. Projections and characters
63	IV. Misopedia
67	4. <i>Rights, global citizenship, democracy</i>
67	I. Towards a reconstructionist theory
70	II. An interdependent political space
75	III. The philosophical challenge
81	5. <i>On the other hand: adultism and adult-centrism</i>
81	I. Adults are never wrong
85	II. The adult-centered view

89	6. <i>Don't call them children</i>
89	I. The logocentric principle
92	II. Childhood "in chains"
96	III. Barbarians, children, and other beasts
100	IV. Exceptional purity
103	V. In the middle of the ford
105	VI. Changing words that hurt
113	7. <i>What kind of education?</i>
113	I. The poison and the antidote
119	II. White pedagogy, black pedagogy
124	III. Can the children speak?
129	<i>Bibliography</i>

G. Don't call them children

A change in language can transform our appreciation of the Cosmos.

B.L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, 1956

I. *The logocentric principle*

"Man is only human through language, but in order to invent language, he had to already be human" (von Humboldt, 1820/1989, p. 123): the paradox stated by von Humboldt, considered the precursor of linguistic relativism, explains the indissoluble circularity between humanity and language, but also between language and thought. Language, in fact, is not an instrument of pre-existing thought, nor is it a passive object, but rather *enérgeia*, an organ of thought, the device that mediates thought, influences it, and transforms it (Di Cesare, 1991). Different languages represent prisms that reflect and reconstruct parts of reality in thought, structuring them into linguistic and cultural categories:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe meanings as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language (Whorf, 1956, p. 213).

But this agreement is never immutable. Language is never neutral or static, but transient, changing form as it intertwines its paths with changes in thought and manner.

to look at and recognize what gives meaning¹. Categorization has multiple ramifications (Bruner, 2009), leading us to discern even things or events that we have not directly perceived, but also limiting and restricting our field of perception and interpretation of reality. Therefore, while linguistic categories are essential for knowing and orienting ourselves in the world, their boundaries are not rigid and immutable, and the mechanisms of language allow for reinterpretation. Words change, thoughts change. If our way of relating to reality and describing it is conditioned by how we name it and by the meanings condensed in the terms, then investigating the terms related to childhood can bring out elements that are useful for our analysis of childism and adult-centrism.

The Western logocentric principle and its "metaphysics of presence" ²(Derrida, 1967/2024) value the signifier—the spoken word—more than the signified. In this sense, the main distinction between humans and animals is emphasized through the criterion of *logos*, the ca-

¹ The extremes of the relationship between linguistic and cognitive categories are defined by Bruner as "habitus theories," according to which language adapts to common categories of thought, and "mold theories," according to which language shapes categories of thought through terms (Bruner, 2009, p. 27). We will not delve into the theoretical controversy surrounding this relationship, but we would like to emphasize that in both positions, and in the various reconciliations formulated, language and thought are interdependent, so that changing one categorization also changes the other.

²Derrida criticizes the preeminence of the Western logocentric principle and its inextricable link with metaphysics. In the volume, he focuses part of his attention on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose philosophical reflection and relationship with writing mark a significant moment of transition within the Western metaphysical tradition.

The ability not only to emit sounds, but to articulate codes of thought through shared linguistic codes. As a discriminating category that separates what is human from what is not human, language implements a mechanism of self-representation that designates a "us" in relation to a "other" that is defective or lacking in *logos*. The logo-centric principle represents the discriminating factor par excellence between adults and non-adults, between human beings and non-humans: childhood is a world without verbal reasoning, without culture, inasmuch as *infans* is one 'who cannot speak, who does not speak according to a rule, but stammers or whispers or complains because he is not yet included and does not want to be included in the agreed code' (Marchetti, 1996, p. 33). This does not only mean that the language of childhood is the parameter of its definition, but that the perimeter of children's verbal expression lies in an adult-centric view that does not recognize it, because it does not follow adult order and logic, nor does it create recognizable connections between signifiers and meanings. Children's verbal expressions are not attributed any interpretation of the world; they are considered a non-existent code, a 'non-language'.

Although the Western idea of civilizational progress would take many forms over time (e.g., Christian, cultural, national, and scientific), each instantiation features the same defining central logic: human beings, as individuals and as a species, progress out of a bestial state into a fully human state through education. This central logic embodies a veneration of *logos*, language, and reason, as the definitively human form of relating to the world and others, always and explicitly understood in contradistinction to the animalian or *feral* child's rational deficiency (Rollo, 2018, p. 64).

The goal of educational actions *on infants* is to transform them into *foot soldiers*, capable of language and thought that are orderly and shared, allowing communication with others—who are primarily adults—and giving adults the ability to understand messages.

While the term "infant" may seem obscure to us, as it has not been used in the Italian language for some time, the word "childhood," which is very commonly used, refers to a specific and precise period, culturally defined, that goes well beyond the transition to learning the family language code. This broadening seems to point out that, ultimately, learning the language of adults is not enough to be considered capable of communicating and relating to them on an equal footing. If we extend the examples to other European languages, we discover that "the French still consider the term *enfance* in the manner of Rousseau, that is, the period that lasts until adolescence" (Postman, 1982/2005, p. 9), just as '*child*, *Kinder*, *niño* can refer to both a baby and a young person with a beard, with a broader meaning than in Italian' (Santoni Rugiu, 1995, p. 256).

II. *Childhood "in chains"*

The term "childhood" is the main category of reference in everyday use as well as in scientific discourse. Despite the cultural and historical differences that cross the shifting boundaries referred to above, the use of this term has never been questioned.

However, if we delve deeper into the connections and ramifications associated with this term, it becomes clear that the word translates into a codified product and tool arising from a systemic vision.

adult-centric. Returning to the word "infant," which we had temporarily set aside because it had fallen into disuse to refer to newborn children, it brings to mind the Hispanic image of *the Infanta*: in the monarchies of Spain and Portugal, *the Infante* and *the Infanta* were respectively the prince and princess who were not the firstborn and did not inherit the throne from their father. Although it was an honorary title, linked to a high social status, it nevertheless marked an internal hierarchy among children and was linked to the impossibility of achieving the highest status, the *telos* of rulers. An *infans* destined to remain lacking and incomplete for life, since the title was not lost even upon reaching adulthood.

The term 'infante' is accompanied by the apheretic form 'fante', which referred to young servants or apprentices, pages or foot soldiers:

Since in the Middle Ages nobles fought on horseback followed by their servants, who formed the militia on foot, the word came to mean soldier on foot, and in a broader sense, a man who serves in the military (Pianigiani, 1907).

From 'fante' comes 'lestofante', which indicates a 'person of few scruples, skilled in deceiving others with words; a swindler' (Treccani online dictionary). And even today, a diminutive form with a southern ending (-ullo) is still widely used: 'fanciullo' (boy). Just as 'fante' meant 'garzone' (boy), the feminine form 'fantasca' was used in the past to refer to a young servant girl (Santoni Rugiu, 1995).

If we compare these latter terms with other words belonging to different European languages, we can identify similar attributions and meanings in the cases of the English "boy," the French "garçon," and the German "Magd."

In the English language, the distinction by sex that in Italy...

It does not exist in the pair "boy-girl" and is not found in the neutral "child," which indicates "the boy, the girl, the son, the daughter," but rather in the terms "boy" and "girl." As with the Italian "infanzia" (childhood), in English there is also a root that is neither visible, transparent, nor explicit, which has been forgotten over time but remains in the historical and cultural significance of the term "boy." In fact, "the primary meaning would be 'man in fetters', hence 'slave', 'serf'" (Hoad, 1996, p. 48). In the 13th century, there is already evidence of the use of this word to refer to male servants, young men belonging to a lower social class. At the same time, the term referred to "the rascal," "the jester," "the scoundrel," someone who did not follow social rules and caused disorder. A century later, the term already referred to a child, but in the 17th century, there is evidence of its parallel use to refer to both "native servants" and "black slaves."

"Garçon" is a very common word in French that has retained both of its main meanings over the years: it can be translated literally as "boy," but also as "waiter." Although it has lost its explicit negative connotation, it is still associated with a type of humble work and, more obviously in certain contexts, with being at the beck and call of those being served. In Italian, it was adopted in the word "garzone," which also referred to a young man responsible for performing certain services, such as carrying luggage and heavy objects.

To refer to girls, young women, and maidens, the word initially used in German was "Magd,"

has undergone a negative semantic narrowing to mean "servant girl," "maid" [...], while the ancient meaning has been taken over by the diminutive *Mädchen* (17th century), still *Mädchen* in Lessing. As we have seen, a semantic shift of this kind is common with regard to young people; see also *Dirne* in our semantic field, a very positive Old High German term, also referring to the Virgin Mary, as indeed does *Magdalen*.

semantic shift of this kind with regard to young people; see also *Dirne* in our semantic field, a very positive Old High German term also referring to the Virgin Mary, as well as *Magd*, now a negative term meaning "prostitute or similar" (Bosco Coletsos, 1993, pp. 82-83).

These examples reveal how the semantic field linked to these categories is negatively connoted by the disadvantaged social level to which they refer, subject to those who hold greater power and prestige and who define themselves on a higher value scale.

Even in the case of linguistic terms, childhood constitutes a category in which to circumscribe a difference, falling within power relations that are based not on "differently-equality," as Moosa-Mitha proposes for political and social configurations, but rather as a form of otherness from which to distinguish oneself. A relationship according to which 'difference becomes inequality, equality becomes identity; these are the two great figures of the relationship with the other, which define its inevitable space' (Todorov, 1982/1992, p. 176).

Equality and difference are, in this case, coupled with identification and devaluation, produced by a gaze that is repeated every time a child or young person is encountered. Despite having overcome the infantile period of linguistic incapacity, young boys and girls *Infante* and *garzoni* inherit a status *that is different* from that of *high* culture, in that children, like "slaves, combine two qualities (they are 'people' and they are 'things') and therefore do not seem to belong to the human species, but rather to that genus of irrational animals that fall into the category of legitimate possession" (Burgio, 1998, p. 58). They are not recognized as having the right to speak, nor is it given to them; on the contrary, it is often

removed. The logocentric principle that characterizes the West is based on the inseparable link between the linguistic and rational dimensions, between speech and thought. And on this is based the paradigmatic distinction between a fully human *us* and *another* animalistic, incomplete, defective, chaotic *us*.

III. *Barbarians, children, and other beasts*

In the Italian language, the terms 'childhood' and 'children' are not used in the same contexts; there is a difference and a connection between them:

the individual child is observed both for his or her autonomous actions and as a member of the general category of 'children', and in the collective defined as childhood, for being in a particular stage of life. The general category of children and the collective defined as childhood determine the conception of the specific child and place them in a particular social position (Baraldi, 2008, pp. 30-31).

The pervasiveness of the logocentric principle is reflected in the link between language and thought that also emerges in the term 'child'. Although the ending has a diminutive connotation, 'bambino' is the diminutive of 'bambo', a 12th-century masculine adjective that has remained in some dialects in the forms 'babbu, bambu', meaning 'foolish, stupid, silly'. The child is a little fool.

In turn, the word "bambo" derives from the ancient Greek *βαμβάινω*, meaning "to babble, to stammer," and through Late Latin *bambalio-bambalionis* it became "stammerer" (Pancera, 1982, p. 191). The Indo-European root from which the Greek word derives is the same as that from which the term *βάρβαρος*, "barbarian," derives: this word was used to refer to foreigners, recognizable by their incomprehensible language.

stilted, disordered language. But they were also distinguished from the Greeks by their coarseness, lack of logical thinking and knowledge, and brutality. Both 'child' and 'barbarian' are words formed by the hesitant repetition of the root **ba-*. In English, the term 'baby' has the same root. Foreign, strange, alien to the culture because they stammer.

The body, its functions, and acquisitions are also involved in a similar process, in which the deficits that emerged in relation *to infans* reappear: children who are beginning to walk are called "toddlers" in English, beings who are unsteady in the world, destined to walk on foot—and not on horseback—for many years to come. They are therefore defined not by their initiative, their aspiration for autonomy – often interpreted as an escape from adult control – but on the basis of their precariousness and weakness. Because once again they lose out in comparison with adults, who are sure of their steps and skilled in their language. Words, thoughts, and bodies correspond to the elements of a portrait of 'non-humans' who, as they do not belong to that '*us*', are 'almost animals', not normal. The body is not just a metaphor, it is an index, a visible sign of what children are not:

In *Historia animalium* (588a, 38), we discover that children are similar to dwarfs in their physical structure and, like dwarfs, have abnormally weak memories. Their memory is weak due to the weight of their upper bodies in relation to the rest of their bodies (Boas, 1966/1973, p. 3).

Further deficiencies are attributed to the bodies of children: boys and girls are not masters of their bodies, nor of their thoughts and language. They are '*pi-sciuocoli*' in Neapolitan dialect, because they do not perform their physiological functions autonomously. Precisely because

physicality is a device of thought and an instrument of language, bodies need to be controlled: parallel to the process that will lead to independence and autonomy through movement, the pressing shaping of bodies through homologation and forced physicality takes place.

In *The Great Migration*, Enzensberger lists a series of other examples of how the other is often characterized as deficient and brutal:

The Nashua Indians called the neighboring tribes *popolaca*, meaning "those who stammer," and *mezahua*, meaning "those who bellow like deer." A German in Russian is called *nemec*; this word originates from *nemoj* (= "mute"); it therefore refers to someone who cannot speak. The Greek word *barbaros*, used for non-Greeks, originally meant "stammering, stuttering" and often implies "uncultured, crude, vile, cruel, savage, violent, greedy, unfaithful." The *Hottentots*, a word that means "stammerer" in Afrikaans, call themselves k'oi-n = "men." For the Ainu, too, the name of their tribe is identical to the word for men, while the Japanese call them *emishi* = "barbarians." The same applies to the Kamchadals, who call themselves *itelmen* = "men," surpassed in this sense only by the Chukchi, who firmly believe themselves to be the *luorawetlan* = "true men" (Enzensberger, 1993, pp. 11-12).

Logocentrism thus goes hand in hand with ethnocentrism, insofar as those who cannot speak well and cannot reason well are not considered fully human beings, compared to an endogroup in which language, thought, and humanity are fully recognized. Starting with the words that define it.

Rollo (2018) reconstructs a further line of analysis through the historical development of a 'civilizing homology'

between indigenous peoples and children, both considered simple, natural, primitive, and lacking in awareness or self-consciousness. These characteristics do not represent an analogy, but rather a homology in that they are codified as *essential* to these categories of subjects. Uday Singh Mehta (1999), observing how almost all non-Western populations have been subject to this parallelism, identifies it as the fixed point that has motivated and underpinned education, government, and alignment with progress. The mechanism of constructing a 'less than human' otherness described by Livingstone Smith (2011) focuses on terms that support a dehumanization that takes an explicitly animalistic form: in one of the many examples given by the scholar, reference is made to the argument of the Spaniard Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda who, in the 16th century, to justify the use of force against Native Americans,

he insisted that there is almost as great a difference between Indians and Spaniards as between monkeys and men, and assured the jury that "you will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity" in them, and that, although the natives are not "monkeys and bears," their mental abilities are like those of "bees and spiders" (Livingstone Smith, 2011, pp. 77-78).

Genovese (2003) also pointed out that

There are many metaphors used to negatively describe others: monkeys, lice eggs, children of a monkey and a pig, human worms, rats, viruses, bacilli, tapeworms, solitary worms, etc. Consequently, even (violent) actions directed (or thought) against others are always identified as gestures of cleansing and acts of purification; the verbs used to define the action (hypothetical or real) are eloquent testimony to this: disinfect, clean up,

rehabilitate, purify, eliminate, depollute, exterminate, disinfect, purify, sterilize, decontaminate, reclaim, etc. (Genovese, 2003, pp. 78-79).

The concept of *childhood animality*, the 'feral children' described by Rollo, creates a further bridge of representation, but also of dehumanization. The connection between the animal world and the world of childhood further highlights the multifaceted nature of the adult-centric relationship with childhood: 'children's essential animality has sometimes been viewed as problematic; at other times the animal nature of children has been idealized. The equation of child with animal remains' (Melson, 2005, p. 35).

The native is temporarily deficient, and his maturity can be achieved through the civilizing intervention of Westerners. Similarly, the child is temporarily lacking in language and thought until he reaches adulthood. Rollo considers the categorization of childhood as the key to the conceptualization of natives, who, like children, are disqualified from their role as political agents capable of managing territories and exercising rights and duties, as in cases of settlement colonialism, in which the indigenous population is progressively "erased" and replaced by the group that permanently occupies a territory. Similarly, adult intervention is intended to replace traits considered 'childish', those that an adult should never assume, in order to colonize child culture (Ginzburg, 1979).

IV. *Exceptional purity*

Over time, childhood has maintained an ambiguity that, by emphasizing its characteristics as defects and anomalies

attributed to it, on the one hand makes it dangerous – potentially or actually in various projections – and on the other hand idealizes it, starting from a naturally innocent state. The processes of signification linked to the Latin term 'puer' are an excellent example of this attribution. The etymological hypothesis that in the past referred to the term 'puer' was attested by Isidore of Seville, who in his work *Etymologiae* (XI, 2) stated that children are called *pueri* because they are pure, i.e., prepubescent. The *puer* was thus considered intrinsically connected to the concept of *purus*, since children were recognized as having a sacredness given by their purity, "implicitly linked to their prepubescent condition" (Néraudau, 1996, p. 35). For the Romans, purity was initially a physical quality, indicating not "sexual innocence, but the lack of hair on the cheeks" (Cunningham, 1997, p. 33). Later, in the multiple semantic levels linked to childhood that reached the medieval world and continued into the modern era, the association between *puer* and *purus*, reinforced by the correlation between body and spirit, made physical quality implicit in moral quality.

What is even more interesting is that, despite this etymology has been proven false and erroneous, it has left its mark on a common perception of childhood: although invalid from a philological point of view, it shows even more clearly how attributions relating to language are a means of motivating, constructing, and reinforcing concepts that are not natural, but rather social and cultural.

Even the person who possesses this exceptional purity takes on a form of otherness and difference, a departure from the ordinary and a violation of the usual reality. From the Latin 'puer', the adjective 'puerile' remains in the Italian language today, referring not to boys and girls, but loaded with a negative judgement of an adult who 'behaves like a child', who has attitudes characterized by a lack of awareness, excessive emotionality, and non-conformity to social norms, associated with the sphere of childhood. From expressions such as this, we can see that

behaves like a child', who has attitudes characterized by a lack of awareness, excessive emotionality, and non-conformity to social norms, associated with the sphere of childhood. Expressions such as this reveal the underlying categorization:

The way we perceive children and, consequently, our attitudes towards them depend greatly on how we interpret their activities; in other words, on the meaning we assign to their activities. [...] There is no doubt that children are generally viewed as belonging to the spontaneous category. This is illustrated when we speak derogatorily of "childish" adults and, more appreciatively, use the phrase "childlike." There is a plethora of these denigrating expressions, which unfortunately are unwittingly supported by the scientific treatment of childhood. But we need not deny children their affective traits to understand that they also perform instrumental functions in and for society, and we need not jettison psychological wisdom to hold the view that children have important sociological attributes (Qvortrup, 1985, pp. 129-130).

A comparison with this attribution of exceptionality can be made with Foucault's figure of the madman,

whose discourse cannot circulate like that of others: it happens that his words are considered null and void, having neither truth nor importance [...]; it also happens, on the other hand, that they are attributed, unlike any other words, with strange powers, such as that of telling a hidden truth, of announcing the future, of seeing quite naively what the wisdom of others cannot perceive (Foucault, 1969/1971, pp. 5-6).

Children, like madmen, must adapt their language in order to be accepted into society, since

their language and behavior are not "normal." At the same time, they can express themselves in a "more than normal" way, conveying a truthful message and a magical or profound meaning: thus, we move from a lack of meaning to an excess of meaning, while maintaining that fundamental untranslatability that prevents adult understanding.

V. *In the middle of the ford*

In the course of this linear development, we encounter a hybrid form, *adulescens* (present participle of 'adolescere'), which is developing, progressing towards the final goal, towards the conclusive stage of *adultus* (past participle of 'adolescere'), in which disorder flows into order, conflict finds its place in conformity to norms: all life projected towards social integration implies preparation for a higher level, in which the achievement of presumed maturity completes the personal path of growth. Growth presupposes an evolutionary time, a linear movement.

Although anthropology has long questioned the univocal conception of adolescence as a period characterized by conflict and emotional tension—Mead's aforementioned work is a classic example—this representation is reiterated in the Western context. As early as the late 1920s, Mead herself hypothesized that changing the living conditions of American adolescents would promote a change in the cultural mechanisms that lead to the problematic transition through this stage of life. Today, however, we are confronted with a representation that confirms this conception and fuels prejudice against adolescents.

minato *teenism*, based on Young-Bruehl's interpretation of childism (Novick and Novick, 2022). This adult conception weakens the recognition of the generative capacities and tools of boys and girls. On the other hand, the binary distinction between childhood and *adulthood*, although still present, is beginning to show interesting gaps that should be further analyzed and explored: in the publishing world, for example, there is talk of *crossover* literature—a term popularized by the Harry Potter books (Beckett, 2011), the result of a blurring of the boundaries between different stages of life, linked to phenomena known as *tweenager* and *kiddultery*, which refer respectively to the "adultification" of children and the "infantilization" of adults (Falconer, 2009; Paruolo, 2014); in psychological studies, *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2004) has been defined as a phase characterized by uncertainty and precariousness, but also by exploration and openness to possibilities, born out of social changes in industrialized countries.

We need new words or new meanings recursively to renew those we already have. And in the meantime, we soon realize that the new words we have at our disposal quickly lose their ability to propel thought forward, because the phenomena and processes that we know, express, and describe thanks to them are always more dynamic than the meanings we are able to produce and codify; they always exceed the potential of language and therefore of thought itself. The only possibility we have, in order to remain in this fluid and perpetually changing relationship with the reality that we are and that we have within and around us, is to constantly find new ones and, at the same time, leave aside the old ones that are now obsolete (Macinai and Biemmi, 2023, p. 103).

New words emerge, old words change form, or are replaced by others, as our perspective shifts. The boundaries between categories become increasingly porous. The time seems ripe to focus attention on these processes and to activate new proposals that can be leveraged for fruitful transformations, moving towards a reconstruction of the socio-cultural frameworks that guide us.

VI. *Changing words that hurt*

No discursive practice can be read in a single way, but is traversed on multiple levels, within which "a twisted plurality of objects—overlapping and incomplete at the same time—is formed and deformed, appears and disappears" (Foucault, 1969/1971, p. 59). We can use this partial constellation of terms referring to childhood as a lens that invites us to observe the hidden folds of adult-centrism.

The Italian language, when referring to people at birth and in their early years, reveals an invisible and unconscious adult-centrism in our society. Yet the history of the Italian language provides us with numerous examples in which the intention of widespread cultural change originated from or involved the need to make linguistic changes. If we limit ourselves to the national dimension, two cases suffice. The first example is the work *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (Sexism in the Italian Language, 1987/1993) by linguist Alma Sabatini, entrusted to her in 1986 by the newly formed *National Commission for Equality and Equal Opportunities between Men and Women* of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

³ The work was carried out with the collaboration of Marcella Mariani and the participation of Edda Billi and Alda Santangelo in the research.

Ministers. The study analyzed not so much the language used by women, a field of study that has been widespread in the United States since the 1970s on the relationship between women and language, but rather

women in language — 'sexist' forms of language as a 'corpus' available to women and men: linguistic elements inherent in language at a grammatical and structural level that are asymmetrical and discriminatory towards women; the use of les-semi, stereotypical and reductive expressions and images of women (Sabatini, 1987/1993, p. 20).

The author's intention was to highlight 'the cultural assumptions that underlie them, revealing their impact on mental processes and their practical effects on the political and social development of individuals of both sexes' (ibid.).

Similarly, it seems that in the Italian language, terms referring to childhood—including the term "in-fanzia" itself—are still used as neutral, even affectionate terms (as in the case of "bambino"). The words remain in common and specialized use without being questioned, free from critical scrutiny. It seems that we are unable to escape the vicious mechanisms of a perspective that, through language, finds space to proclaim itself *adult*, that is, complete, having reached its goal, through a form of otherness to be denigrated.

The definition of "minor," referring to children in the Italian language, clarifies the meaning of this comparison. Minority status is a temporary condition linked to age: it indicates a regulatory framework that constrains the actions of children and the point of transition to adulthood. This framework indicates a difference with respect to the future, namely that children are "minors" compared to adults. The reference to the future

implies that they must overcome the condition that characterizes them and "develop," that is, progress toward adulthood (Baraldi, 2008, pp. 14-15).

A second Italian example that has marked a change in discursive practices through a desire for a change in thinking and behavior is the work of the *"Jo Cox" Commission on intolerance, xenophobia, racism, and hate phenomena*, established in 2016 and chaired by the President of the Chamber of Deputies. A small multidisciplinary committee, chaired by sociologist Chiara Saraceno, examined the definitions of hate speech and hate crimes at the national and international level and investigated the causes and forms of hate speech and actions. In particular, the relationship between language and negative behaviors, discrimination, and violence is highlighted in this way:

Hate speech is an extreme form of intolerance which, if not countered, can contribute to creating an environment conducive to hate crimes; on the other hand, it most often signals the entrenchment of real forms of discrimination against those affected. For this reason, reflecting on hate speech will inevitably lead to questions about both the interpretation and scope of the right to freedom of expression and the application of the principle of equality (Jo Cox Commission, 2017, p. 10).

The final report makes explicit reference to *General Policy Recommendation No. 15 of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe* (ECRI) of March 21, 2016. In this international document, the concept of *hate speech* is defined as

the incitement, promotion, or encouragement of denigration, hatred, or defamation against a person or group of persons, or the subjection of such a person or group to abuse, harassment, insults, negative stereotypes, stigmatization, or threats, and includes the justification of these various forms of expression, based on a number of grounds, such as 'race', color, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as ancestry, *age*, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and any other personal characteristic or situation (ECRI Commission, 2016, my italics).

Discrimination on the basis of age is therefore included in this concept, but in the Italian document it is associated exclusively with the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying, defined as aggressive behavior that manifests itself in peer relationships among school-age children. Other forms of aggression and psychological and physical violence are associated with other categories of people, in particular migrants, disabled people, homosexuals, and women, also in an intersectional context. Other forms of abuse against children appear only insofar as they are the daughters and sons of women who suffer violence, who witness or themselves suffer acts of violence, within what is defined as 'intergenerational transmission of violence':

women who witnessed violence between their parents as children or who suffered it themselves are more likely to be victims as adults; men who witnessed violence between their parents as children or who suffered it themselves are more likely to be violent partners as adults (*ibid.*, p. 50).

Childism offers a further level of analysis that is lacking even in the most sensitive and careful actions. In fact, according to Tullio De Mauro's interpretation in his contribution to the report, *Parole per ferire* (*Words to hurt*, *ibid.*, pp. 23-37), hate speech and actions are not limited to terms that are explicitly derogatory and openly disparaging (*derogatory words*). The definition of 'hate words' proposed by Peckman (2005), from which De Mauro starts his argument, includes not only insults and swear words, but also 'words that *political correctness* has brought to attention, insulting designations of weak categories or those considered as such' (*ibid.*, p. 25). Among the words that evoke negative stereotypes, we find the ethnic term 'barbarian'; 'porter', which indicates a profession that is socially negatively evaluated or despised; 'bam-berottolo', which emphasizes physical diversity, and 'babbao, babbaleo, babbalone, babbalucco', which refer to psychological, mental, and intellectual diversity and all come from the root **ba*, in its variants of meaning already analyzed. The list also includes "bambinesco" and "puerile," which explicitly refer to the world of childhood with a negative connotation. These terms, whose connections have been traced in this chapter, are defined by De Mauro as "'double-edged words,' in that they offend a person or an object or activity but also offensively evoke an entire category." (*ibid.*, p. 26).

In turn, the linguist chooses a broader selection criterion, expanding the repertoire of "words to hurt" to "a vast category of words that are not in themselves vulgar insults nor are they words attributable to ethnic and social stereotypes" (*ibid.*, p. 25), including

not only words that convey stereotypes (*baluba, homo*), but also words with a predominantly neutral meaning that nevertheless have derogatory connotations and are excellent insults in those connotations (*academy, pig, pappagallo, professore*), as is often revealed by certain derivatives that select and highlight the negative meaning (*accademismo, maialata, papagallismo, professorale*) (*ibid.*).

Words that have a predominantly neutral and descriptive value, but "in the folds of their meaning have connotations that arise from derogatory uses and allow them to be used in this function" (*ibid.*, p. 29).

Among these appears, for example, "*pure* as a noun 'naive', as an adjective 'limited, devoted to a single specific activity with little understanding of the rest of the world' (already Latin: *purus grammaticus purus asinus*)" (*ibid.*, p. 33), confirming the distortions that purity and innocence attributed to early childhood take on in the adult world. But we also find "birbante" (rascal), "poppante" (suckling), "sbarbatello" (beardless), often used when addressing boys and girls, and "scarabocchiare" (scribble) and "scarabocchio" (scribble), which refer to the negative connotation of a childish activity.

Some words referring to the world of children have been included in an initial list of *hate words*, but it is clear that childism adds a further level of analysis to be explored.

A first proposal is to highlight the need for some new hypotheses that focus on

reflection and awareness of the values and effects of the language we speak; the practical aim is to encourage the use of language that more closely represents women and opens the way to new ideas that have remained unexpressed until now. The aim here is to discuss what is possible and necessary

necessary, which will lead to the proposal of only "possible" and "necessary" linguistic variants.

The *corpus* examined is the everyday language we all speak, where conscious choices are rarely made, not only at the grammatical level, but also at the lexical level. We have not sought only the exceptional, the astonishing, the particularly 'offensive', but above all the obvious, the redundant, the predictable, which for this very reason appears 'natural' and 'inevitable'. It is precisely through these forms that women continue to be perceived as inferior to men, thus contributing to the maintenance of this social order (Sabatini, 1987/1993, p. 20).

The same reasoning could be applied by replacing the word "woman" with the term "child" – to be considered, at this point, provisional – and the word "man" with the term "adult" – also to be replaced. It would be essential to establish a multidisciplinary commission that focuses not only on identifying adult-centric linguistic forms, but also on drafting *recommendations for non-adult-centric use of the Italian language* – as was done in the 1980s in Sabatini's work – and a specific update of *the recommendations for the prevention and combating of hate speech at the social, cultural, informational, and institutional levels. cultural, informational, and institutional levels*. These should be supported by a subsequent impact assessment based on a defined and monitored corpus.

Furthermore, based on the contribution of the 'Jo Cox' Commission, a second proposal is to include 'child' and 'childhood'⁴, as well as 'adolescent' and 'adult', in the

⁴ An initial exploratory survey is currently being conducted by the author, which has so far involved university students and teachers at the national level, to analyze the terms "child"

repertoire of *hate words*, as obvious, banal and, therefore, naturalized and apparently neutral terms, which are loaded with a history of denigration and exclusion, but which are used in different situations ("Don't be a child!", "He's just a child, he doesn't understand anything") to perpetuate adult-centric actions.

Historical and linguistic analysis of terms relating to childhood, with particular attention to the Italian language, shows the adult-centric connotations with which these words are imbued. This clear awareness, and the tools being developed in the scientific community, are leading to joint research focused not on differences as obstacles to be overcome or eliminated, but on the stereotypical, reductive, and restrictive values conveyed through linguistic processes of meaning.

These suggestions do not claim to be definitive or exhaustive: the aspects discussed are only the tip of the iceberg, which is yet to be investigated. What we are seeking is a profound reform of our political, cultural, aesthetic, and ethical symbolism, which is reflected in that apparent surface or emerging part of the iceberg that is language (Sabatini, 1987/1993, p. 122).

bino" and "infanzia" and the search for possible lexical alternatives.