

**WHY “LA MANO” BUT “IL PROBLEMA”? THE HISTORICAL LOGIC OF GENDER  
EXCEPTIONS IN ITALIAN GRAMMAR**

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the systemic logic behind grammatical gender exceptions in Italian nouns such as la mano and il problema. Examining about fifty cases, it identifies four main types—Greek -ma borrowings, Latin feminine survivals, truncated forms, and semantically fixed genders. The study shows that these irregularities reflect historical continuity and cognitive mechanisms of gender storage rather than random deviation.

**Keywords:** Italian language, grammatical gender, exceptions, morphology, etymology.

**INTRODUCTION**

Grammatical gender is a fundamental category of the Italian language and one of its most distinctive morphological features. Normally, the gender of nouns can be predicted by their endings: -o typically marks the masculine (il libro), and -a the feminine (la casa). Yet a considerable number of nouns deviate from this rule, forming well-known exceptions such as la mano and il problema.

These anomalies, often treated as irregularities in grammar books, actually follow deeper historical and morphological regularities. Many derive from Greek and Latin borrowings (il problema, il sistema, il teorema) or from shortened feminine forms (la foto ← fotografia, la moto ← motocicletta). Such words preserve the gender of their original paradigms rather than adopting the expected pattern of modern Italian.

Psycholinguistic research shows that native speakers process these forms as fixed lexical units: grammatical gender is stored in memory and not solely inferred from morphology. For learners of Italian, however, these exceptions are a persistent source of difficulty because transparent endings dominate their acquisition strategies.

The present study seeks to identify the logic of gender exceptions in Italian nouns through etymological and cognitive analysis. Rather than listing anomalies, it aims to explain why such exceptions exist and how they reflect the historical development and internal organization of the Italian lexicon.

**METHODS**

The present research is based on a qualitative linguistic analysis combining morphological, etymological, and cognitive approaches. The material of the study includes about fifty Italian nouns traditionally considered grammatical gender exceptions, among them such forms as la mano, il problema, il sistema, la foto, la moto, and la vittima. The selection was made to represent the main structural and historical types of anomalies — Greek borrowings ending in -

ma, Latin feminine survivals, shortened forms that preserve the gender of their full version, and semantically fixed gender nouns.

Each lexical item was examined in terms of its morphological form, historical origin, and current grammatical usage. The etymological information was drawn primarily from Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana by Pianigiani (1907), Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana by Colonna (2002), and the morphological reference La formazione delle parole in italiano edited by Grossmann and Rainer (2013). These sources were supplemented with contemporary online dictionaries such as Treccani and Garzanti to verify the modern normative status of each word.

To interpret how these gender irregularities are processed by native speakers, the study also refers to psycholinguistic findings of Vigliocco and Franck (1999) and De Martino et al. (2011), which show that grammatical gender in Italian is often stored as part of the lexical entry rather than deduced from morphology. Pedagogical implications for Italian as a foreign language were derived from the acquisition research of Oliphant (1998).

Through this combination of historical and cognitive analysis, the study aims to uncover the systemic logic underlying gender exceptions in Italian nouns — explaining why such irregularities exist, how they persist, and what role they play in the evolution of Italian grammar and lexicon.

## RESULTS

The analysis of approximately fifty Italian nouns that deviate from the traditional gender pattern (-o → masculine, -a → feminine) allowed to identify four major types of exceptions. Each group follows its own linguistic logic related to the word's origin, structure, or meaning.

### ➤ **Greek-origin masculine nouns ending in -ma.**

A considerable group of exceptions originates from Greek neuter nouns with the suffix -ma (e.g. problema, sistema, teorema, dramma, clima, schema). These words entered Italian through Latin, where the neuter declension was reinterpreted as masculine. As a result, they maintain the masculine article (il problema, il sistema) despite their final -a. This group demonstrates the influence of classical morphology on modern Italian.

### ➤ **Historical feminine nouns inherited from Latin.**

Some nouns preserve the gender of their Latin prototypes regardless of their current endings. For instance, la mano (from manus, f.) and la tribù (from tribus, f.) are feminine in Italian, although their endings suggest otherwise. This continuity indicates a direct historical retention of gender rather than morphological analogy.

### ➤ **Shortened or truncated forms preserving the original gender.**

A number of frequent words in Italian are abbreviations or reductions of longer feminine nouns, such as la foto (fotografia), la moto (motocicletta), la radio (radiotelefonìa), and la bici (bicicletta). Despite ending in -o or -i, these forms remain feminine, reflecting the grammatical gender of their source words. The data suggest that the gender feature is inherited lexically from the base form, not assigned by the visible suffix.

➤ **Semantically or culturally fixed gender nouns.**

Some exceptions are semantically motivated and reflect social or lexical conventions rather than morphology. Examples include *la vittima* and *la persona* (always feminine), and *il soprano* or *il boia* (always masculine). These nouns show that gender can become part of lexical identity rather than grammatical agreement.

In total, the classification reveals that the apparent irregularities of gender in Italian form a structured system of exceptions. Each subgroup can be traced to a specific linguistic process — etymological inheritance, morphological truncation, or semantic fixation — confirming that Italian grammatical gender is historically consistent and internally logical, even in its non-standard forms.

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this research demonstrate that grammatical gender exceptions in Italian are not arbitrary irregularities but reflections of deep linguistic and cognitive mechanisms. The observed patterns show that the Italian language preserves traces of its historical evolution, while at the same time maintaining a coherent internal structure that allows speakers to use these “irregular” nouns with remarkable consistency.

From a historical perspective, the persistence of masculine nouns ending in *-ma* and feminine forms such as *la mano* reveals how gender serves as a linguistic marker of etymological continuity. These words act as “linguistic fossils” — remnants of ancient declensional systems that have survived through centuries of morphological change. Their stability supports the idea that gender in Italian is not determined merely by surface morphology, but by an inherited grammatical memory that links modern usage to classical roots.

Morphologically, the data highlight the dominance of lexical inheritance over formal analogy. Truncated forms like *la foto* or *la moto* confirm that gender is transmitted through derivation rather than suffix shape. This suggests that speakers process gender not as a mechanical rule but as a property attached to lexical meaning. Such behavior aligns with psycholinguistic evidence that grammatical gender is stored as part of the word’s mental representation, allowing speakers to access it automatically, even when morphology gives conflicting cues.

On a cognitive level, the system of gender in Italian illustrates the balance between rule-based generalization and memory-based storage. Regular patterns (*-o* → masculine, *-a* → feminine) facilitate productivity, while exceptions remain entrenched through frequency and familiarity. Thus, linguistic competence operates on two parallel layers: one analytical, driven by form, and one associative, based on lexical experience. This dual mechanism explains why high-frequency exceptions rarely undergo change, while new borrowings tend to conform to general rules.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the results suggest that teaching Italian gender should move beyond memorizing lists of exceptions. Grouping anomalous nouns according to their etymological or morphological origin provides a clearer cognitive framework for learners. Understanding why a word behaves irregularly helps to integrate it more deeply into linguistic knowledge and reduces errors in gender agreement.

Finally, in the broader context of linguistic change, the persistence of gender anomalies reflects the conservative nature of the Italian grammatical system. While vocabulary and syntax evolve,

gender patterns retain the imprint of history. These findings contribute to the ongoing discussion of how morphological categories interact with cognition and language evolution, offering evidence that what appears to be irregularity on the surface often conceals a hidden structural logic within the language.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has demonstrated that gender exceptions in Italian nouns are not random irregularities but elements of a well-organized linguistic system shaped by history, morphology, and cognition. Through the analysis of approximately fifty nouns, four consistent patterns were identified — Greek-origin masculine nouns in -ma, Latin-based feminine survivals, truncated feminine forms, and semantically fixed gender nouns. Each of these types reflects a specific mechanism of linguistic preservation that connects modern Italian to its historical and cognitive roots.

The research confirms that grammatical gender in Italian operates on two complementary levels: morphological regularity and lexical memory. While endings often guide gender assignment, lexical inheritance and historical continuity play an equally decisive role. This dual nature explains why many exceptions remain stable across centuries and resist analogical change.

From a practical point of view, the results also hold pedagogical value. Grouping gender anomalies by origin and structure offers a more systematic way to teach Italian grammar, helping learners understand the logic behind exceptions rather than perceiving them as arbitrary rules.

Future research could expand this study by incorporating corpus-based frequency analysis, cross-linguistic comparison with other Romance languages, and experimental work on how native speakers process irregular gender forms. Such investigations would deepen our understanding of how linguistic memory and morphology interact in maintaining the balance between regularity and exception within the Italian grammatical system.

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