



# Gender Issues and “Promiscuo” Nouns in Italian: Possible Non-Grammatical Explanation<sup>1</sup> of Some Grammar Problems in Italian Language Teaching in China

ZANG Yu<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Faculty of European Languages and Cultures, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 4 April 2016; accepted 5 June 2016

Published online 26 July 2016

## Abstract

“Promiscuo” nouns are a particular grammatical phenomenon in Italian. They cannot be explained from a purely grammatical perspective. In this case, any traditional teaching method will hit a bottleneck as it restricts Chinese learners’ thinking and understanding about Italian language and culture. This paper explores the formative causes of “promiscuo” nouns from the non-grammatical perspectives of nature, society, history, culture and other aspects and draws up a series of practical analytic methods that may help to find the non-grammatical interpretation of some grammar problems in Italian language teaching in China. It also serves as a different avenue or platform for Chinese students to have a comprehensive and dynamic view on Italian language, culture and society.

**Key words:** Italian language teaching; China; Non-grammatical interpretation of grammar; “Promiscuo” nouns

Zang, Y. (2016). Gender Issues and “Promiscuo” Nouns in Italian: Possible Non-Grammatical Explanation of Some Grammar Problems in Italian Language Teaching in China. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 13(1), 1-7. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8535> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8535>

<sup>1</sup> The non-grammatical here does not mean violating grammatical rules but beyond grammar. Because this paper explains a special grammatical phenomenon from the perspective and approaches that are beyond grammar.

## INTRODUCTION

In the new century, Italian language teaching in China is experiencing unprecedented changes owing to the influences of western theories such as communicative approaches and functionalist theories. However, in the classes of Italian major, the traditional language teaching methods, though facing challenges, reforms and even bottlenecks, remain at the dominant position in interpreting pure grammar problems. Generally speaking, current second language acquisition theories do not apply well to Chinese learners of Italian language and have not shown sufficient significant advantages in their classes. Grammatical phenomena, especially in foreign language classes, tend to be regarded as “things in themselves” and “will be what they are”. Scholars admit that grammatical forms and changes must have their own reasons. However, as time goes by and the world changes, they may become unknown and intangible. Most Chinese grammar books on Italian only follow the examples of Italian classic works on grammar, using the same framework, thinking mode or interpreting ways. Such books neglect the interculturality of foreign language teaching and the great difference between China and Italy, and overly emphasized the right (the most used or the most suggested by statistics) form. Nevertheless, they cannot give clear explanations to many WHYS. For example, slices of bread are obviously countable, but why is “pane” an uncountable noun? Why are sette (seven), otto (eight), nove (nine), dieci (ten) seen in the following month names: Settembre (September), ottobre (October), novembre (November) and dicembre (December)? And why does the difference between the month number and the contained number always equal two? Why does the noun “zoo” have the same singular and plural forms? In class, many similar problems are simply put away— “Leave it alone” or “Just memorize it”. However, avoiding such problems finally will affect the necessary depth of our understanding of the language, culture and the nation of Italy

It is not efficient to interpret grammar issues just within a grammatical framework. If we agree on the basic statement in sociolinguistics that language is the product of society, we should further explore the background information of society, culture, history, geography, and customs, and provide reasonable explanation to grammar problems from a non-grammatical perspective (Williams, 1983). That will not only deepen our understanding of grammar, but make it possible to know Italy in a comprehensive way.

With the formative causes of “promiscuo” nouns as the research goal, this paper first gives a brief introduction on the problems in Italian language teaching brought by this special grammar phenomenon. Next, a possible explanation is given by analyzing a most representative example. Various information and approaches on nature, history, society and culture are applied to specific examples to explain this grammar phenomenon and a basic analytic framework will be proposed.

## 1. “PROMISCUO” NOUNS AND GRAMMATICAL DIFFICULTIES

In Italian books on grammar, the adjective “promiscuo” is used to describe a common phenomenon in Romance languages. Garzanti is an Italian authoritative dictionary-seller, in whose Italian dictionary—Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana, the nouns which have only one gender but can refer to both the male and the female are called “sostantivi promiscui” which means “promiscuo” nouns or common gender nouns (Garzanti, 2014). Similar phenomenon also exists in Spanish and linguists call such nouns “nombres promiscuos” and give them a same definition.

In Chinese, nouns have no difference in gender, and therefore, it is difficult to translate this concept. Even in English, such phenomenon can only be explained in an indirect way. The imprudent use of “promiscuous” or “promiscuity” would only remind people of someone who has sex with many different people. In Worldreference, an Italian-English and English-Italian dictionary, such nouns are named as “common gender nouns” (Worldreference, 2016). Although it is not a mistake, it is difficult to understand what “common gender” really indicates.

Most nouns which refer to a person or an animal in Italian exist in pairs. Nouns in masculine form refer to the male, while nouns in feminine form refer to the female (Treccani, 2016). For example, words like *studente/studentessa* which means boy student or girl student, *gallo/gallina* which refers to a rooster or hen, *toro/vacca* meaning bull or cow have the same function division of waiter/waitress in English. However, there are a few nouns referring to a person or an animal but used in only

one form<sup>2</sup>. Nouns only in feminine form: *pantera* (panther), *foca* (seal), *rana* (frog) and etc. Nouns only in masculine form: *corvo* (crow), *medico* (doctor), *branzino* (sea bass) etc.. Then does it mean all the panthers are female and all the crows are male? Obviously this is a wrong assumption. In a traditional class, a scientific and accurate explanation is given: Such nouns’ feminine or masculine forms do not refer to the physiological sex of a person or an animal (Zhang et al., 2008). But this cannot explain the issue. The process of learning will end when the learners are told that it is a convention. But if an attempt is made to explore at the non-grammatical level, new perspectives and methods may be discovered and our understanding about this grammar issue may be developed.

## 2. TIGRE (TIGER) AS AN EXAMPLE

To learn a language is to learn a worldview (Yao, 2005). A specific language not only reflects the observed world of a specific group of people, but also represents a number of characteristics of the observers. The perspective, method and purpose of different groups of people could be various and the “world” where they stay may also differ from each other. So there are inevitably some language phenomena that are specific and difficult for other groups of people to understand.

To discover the cause of “promiscuo” nouns, here two aspects will be considered. The first is to proceed from the environment where the referred people and animals live, to summarize the background information in every aspect. The second is to start with the group of persons who observe and describe those people and animals, to understand their characteristics, attitude, method, perspective and possible clues, and to give a reasonable explanation to the grammatical phenomenon. Among all of the “promiscuo” nouns collected, “tigre” is a typical representative in many aspects. Next, analysis will be conducted by taking it as an example, and comparison will be made between *tigre* and other animal nouns with distinct gender divisions (gender of nouns and physiology), hoping to see greatness in triviality. The conclusion is a summary of some analytic perspectives with possible universal meaning, so that they can be verified and amended in the following chapters.

After the studies of information about tiger, it has been discovered:

First, from the point of view of physiological recognizability, it is not easy to tell the biological sex of a tiger without close observation from specific angles. And,

<sup>2</sup> In consideration of comprehensive historical documents, such nouns in voluminous dictionaries like Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana will be collected in pairs. But it will be noted that in most cases, such nouns are only in feminine or masculine form. In *Italian-Chinese Dictionary*, the most authoritative dictionary published by Commercial Press, such nouns have only one form.

to spot a tiger is a hard work due to the fact that it lives in dense forests and disguises itself under its special hair and coat. So the gender of a tiger is difficult to ascertain. If anybody encounters by chance with a tiger, he or she will only desperately run for survival rather than identify the tiger's sex. So, the difficulty of gender recognition weakened the necessity to indicate their physiological sex with a corresponding grammatical form. In the same logic, it is reasonable that lion in Italian has a masculine form "leone" and a feminine form "leonessa" which refer to male and female lions respectively. Although a close relative of the tiger, lions have very clear differences between male and female individuals in the build and figure (e.g. body size and mane). In addition, its gender differences that can be easily distinguished are also noticeable because lions live in groups in savanna regions and they always stay in families.

Secondly, tiger is not a common animal for Italian people (Zang, 2008), since it does not exist in Europe (Sundarbans Tiger Project, 2010). The people of Apennine Peninsula began to know this creature in the Colosseum of Ancient Rome. For centuries, the powerful Roman Empire, with the purpose of pleasing the public, had brought ferocious beasts to Rome from all over the world for gladiatorial games. The Bengal tiger from Asia was one of them. For the people of Apennine Peninsula, nevertheless, tiger was far from a familiar animal compared with those local ones like cattle, sheep or wolf<sup>3</sup>, etc.. Thereafter, with the collapse of Western Roman Empire, tiger transportation with large quantity disappeared. The familiarity of Italian people with tiger was much less than today's lion, also an "imported goods". Although the European lion was extinct long ago, Italy was once one of their major living areas. According to the deduction of biological archaeologists, the extinction of European lion was around 20 BC (Burger et al., 2004). So it still provided sufficient chances to the people of Apennine Peninsula to know the beast. Moreover, the distribution of lion can be found in North Africa which is very close to Italy and which is a frequently visited place by all the peoples from the Italian Peninsula during the last 3,000 years. In addition, the repeatedly appearing images of lion in western classical literature have also contributed to its "popularity." For example, there was a story about the Nemean Lion amongst "the Twelve Labors of Hercules." "Lion" also comes on the stage in "Iliad" many times: Agamemnon has a cloak made of lion hide. The metaphor "a lion rushes into a flock of sheep" is always used in describing the scene when enemies flee before the heroes (Omero, 2006). By contrast, a tiger has a clear difference from a lion: with less frequency to be seen, it is difficult to become familiar. That explains why

<sup>3</sup> The nouns of the three animals are all available in pairs: The masculine form refers to males; the feminine form refers to females.

the word "tigre" can only be used as a common gender noun.

Thirdly, from the view of the necessity of distinguishing biological gender, it is unnecessary to identify tigers' sex and further refer to their male and female individuals respectively with the corresponding masculine and feminine forms. From the end of 12<sup>th</sup> century to 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most important hundreds of years for Italian language's shaping and development, tiger never reached any significant connection with the life of Italian people or became an important target discussed in daily life, literary creation, fields of agriculture, animal husbandry and later industries, and thus, nobody cared about their genders accordingly. But for common animals like chicken (gallo/gallina) and cattle (toro/vacca) which have close connections with humans and possess certain significance in daily work and life (rooster crows, cow milks), it is logical to divide and stress on their genders by different linguistic forms.

According to the numbered summaries, the formation of "promiscuo" nouns may relate to the following three facts (partly or wholly):

a) The differences between the referred male and female individuals of the nouns are not clear and hard to be distinguished.

b) The referred individuals of the nouns are rarely seen in that area and are not familiar to the local people.

c) The referred individuals of the nouns have few connections with the local social life and it is of little significance to divide their genders by linguistic forms.

### 3. FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

The task of this part is to discuss and analyze the above proposed hypothesis by presenting more examples<sup>4</sup>, and to provide a proper observing angle and explaining instruments for finding the causes of "promiscuo" nouns.

#### 3.1 Recognizability of Gender Differences

The clearer differences in appearance and feature between male and female genders are, the easier it is to recognize their biological genders. This encourages people to elaborate and use different grammatical forms to indicate separately male and female individuals. On the contrary, if their genders are hard to be recognized<sup>5</sup>, the noun referring to the object can become one of the "promiscuo" nouns with larger probability. By contrast, it is easy to distinguish sheep's sex, but it requires more experience and knowledge or specialized learning to identify turtle's gender. The noun of the former creature has masculine and feminine forms—montone/pecora—in

<sup>4</sup> The example may support more than one hypothesis at the same time, but in this part we only stress one specified hypothesis

<sup>5</sup> It only applies to ordinary people rather than professionals.

Italian, corresponding to ram and ewe; while the latter has only a feminine noun “tartaruga” to refer to both genders. Both large birds, pavone/pavona (peacock/peahen) have clear gender differences, but gru (crane) has not, so the nouns referring to the former are in pairs while the word indicating the latter belongs to the category of “promiscuo” nouns. Fish and snake, difficult in gender recognition, are also reflected in Italian by “il pesce” and “il serpente” respectively. Although they have a definite article with masculine form, it still cannot prove that the referred fish and snake are male individuals.

Many animals with small build are hard to be recognized by gender without certain training or careful observation, so many of them are referred to by “promiscuo” nouns. “Rana (frog)” mentioned above belongs to this category. The common insects are almost under this condition and referred to by feminine nouns, such as zanzara (mosquito), mosca (fly), farfalla (butterfly), libellula (dragonfly), lucciola (firefly), cavalletta (grasshopper), ape (bee), cicala (cicada), blatta (cockroach) etc.. However, it is not only so because a few of them are with masculine form only, such as grillo (cricket) and scarafaggio (another name of cockroach).

By contrast, it is easy to recognize man and woman. During the key historical stage for shaping the Italian language, the influence was created not only by their inherent differences of figure and build, but also by the obviously diversified costumes between an Italian man and woman whose names also clearly differ from each other. In most cases, the gender can be estimated by their names. It to a certain extent explains why “promiscuo” nouns are more used to indicate animals than humans.

The recognizability for male and female individuals is also affected by observing distance and their living environment. To get a clear and perfect survey of the highly flying aquila (eagle) above the sky and deep hiding pantera (panther) in dense forest and grass is an “impossible mission” to normal people. It is more convenient to use “promiscuo” nouns to name those animals whose genders are hard to be distinguished. This conforms to the consistent utilitarianism of Italian people in term of language use.

### 3.2 Commonality of the Animal

The more common the referent is, the more possibility people can have, to become acquainted with it, in history and reality. This, in turn, on the one hand, facilitates the classification of gender, and on the other hand, possibly builds a close relationship between the people and the referent, increasing the necessity of gender classification. Some animals whose gender can be easily identified may not be common in Italy. Therefore, it influences the possibility and necessity of its gender classification.

In a given area, animals more commonly seen may have more possibility to be known by humans. Wolves living all over Apennine Peninsula for hundreds and

thousands of years have shared the bitter and sweet love with inhabitants here. Protecting live stocks from wolves is the daily work of local shepherds, but people there also have a more deep understanding about mother wolves’ aggression when they are protecting their cubs. The local inhabitants have more chance to see and classify wolves. It is very necessary for them to know these easily encountered friends. Because of long time of “intimate contact”, the wolves were even recorded into Italian myth, legend and history. Even Romulus and Remus, the ancestors of ancient Rome in their legends were said to be saved by a she wolf. Nowadays, a visit in Rome will show you here and there sculptures of a she wolf lactating two babies. This image has become the symbol of Rome on many occasions. That is the reason why such an animal familiar to all has been classified in gender and referred to clearly with specific language forms (lupo/lupa).

Wild monkeys (scimmie) are not found in Europe, and had no chance to be seen in natural environment by Italic peoples during the long history of civilization. (Fleagle, 2013) Therefore, in the history of the formation and evolution of Italian, Italian ancestors have not had many opportunities to contact scimmia in the natural environment. In a sense, scimmia is lack of certain visibility for Italian language and people, being not a commonly seen animal. So Italian people will not translate the Chinese idiom “no tiger in the mountain, monkey will be the king” (literal translation) to describe the phenomenon that when the most strongest one is not there, an incapable one will be in a high position (Xu & Ying, 2004), and they will say “Quando il gatto non c’è, i topi ballano (When the cat’s away, the mice will play)” instead. The noun “scimmia” has become “promiscuo” mainly due to its marginalized position.

Nouns referring to commonly seen live stocks exist in pairs, with two distinct forms separately for both sexes. But large quantities of foreign species such as foca (seal) and giraffa (giraffe) are expressed with one feminine gender, without any clues to its real sex. Although canguro/cangura (kangaroo) is recorded with both masculine and feminine forms in voluminous dictionaries, it is habitually called “canguro” without taking in consideration biological genders.

Suricates (scientific name: suricata suricatta, English name: suricate) from arid areas in Africa are real immigrants. They need a native name after being brought into Italian zoos. However, there is not any ready-made word for them. So these lovely mammal animals were named as suricata, a new made Italian word. The feminine gender of this word does not indicate the real gender of this animal.

It is the same with many words which refer to human beings. If a social role (e.g. occupation) is taken by male or female in most circumstances, then this referent of this role may belong to “promiscuo” nouns category. In the history, women were inferior to men, with limited

educational rights and were excluded from many professions. Engineer, a socially prestigious occupation, is always the monopolization of men. Even in nowadays when women share equality with men, there are absolutely few women engineers in Italy. Therefore, no specific word has been created to indicate women engineers. Although women engineers come into people's view, they are still called with the old masculine gender noun "ingegnere". The feminine word, "ingegnera" is only an ornament in the dictionary, as a proof that enough language phenomena are recorded in this dictionary.

There is an interesting phenomenon when it comes to address a doctor in Italian: *Dottore/dottoressa* can tell male from female doctors; the masculine gender, *medico* refers to both men and women, and *medica* is hardly used to refer to women doctors. This difference can be explained from the perspective of history: The word, *medico* originated from Latin masculine gender, *medicu(m)* which means men doctors and used widely in ancient Rome. At that time, doctors were far from professional, with complex practitioners and considerably varied ability. It was not an occupation with high social prestige but included bath services, massage or even sex services (Robert, 1994). At that time, there was a feminine gender noun, *medica*, which referred to women practitioners. However, as the coming of Middle Age, women were constricted regarding to the freedom of their educational and engagement opportunities in an important occupation. Therefore, doctor became a more and more professional job and the patent of men. Before the modern women emancipation movement, without women doctors in Italy, "medica" was forgotten by people due to the disappearing of the referent. People are accustomed to use *medico* to refer to a doctor in a long history regardless of the practitioner's gender. (So far, it is men who take the majority of doctors). Even in modern times, although women doctor appears again, people still habitually insist their old tradition in language. For *dottore/dottoressa*, it has different historical trace, derived from Latin word, *docere*, and once meant "a learned person" originally and refers mainly to those who got college diploma, as a respectful address. As to being referred as "doctor", it is still a new usage, belonging to the category of "uso corrente (current use)". It is no wonder for this new usage to refer to women and men doctors by distinct grammatical forms, considering the reality of increasing women doctors.

In the old time when men worked outside while women dealt with household, housework was considered as the matter within women's duties with men's little participation. Therefore, in Italian, "casalinga" (housewife) rather than its masculine gender noun, "casalingo", is used to call those who did not get a job and stay at home to deal with housework. If it is necessary to call a "household man", only the masculine gender word, "massaio", can be used with a sense of banter and satire.

### 3.3 Necessity of Indicating Gender Difference

If the gender of a certain social role or animal have a close relationship with people's daily life, and the gender difference has a certain social meaning in the production and life and a relatively big influence on people's social practice, it is necessary for people to classify their gender and it is possible for them to use different language forms to indicate different genders. Otherwise, people tend to use "promiscuo" nouns to refer to them.

In the agricultural society, live stocks such as pig (*porco/scrofa*), horse (*cavallo/giumenta*), cow (*toro/vacca*), sheep (*montone/pecora*) are closely related to human life, so it was a big event and also a necessity for people to know their gender issues (such as sex ratio, fertility and pregnancy period, etc.) that are crucial to their reproduction, and classify them with different forms. In modern Italy, the most nouns that refer to live stocks exist in pairs, classifying different genders with masculine and feminine forms. Dogs are deemed by Italian people as "il migliore amico dell'uomo (man's best friend)" and taken care of by their owners. How could they seek for partners for their dogs if they did not distinguish their gender clearly? Hence, "cane" is not in the nature of things in the category of "promiscuo" nouns. But the feminine gender form "cagna" shares the same extensive meaning with "bitch", so Italians are afraid of insulting their dogs. As a result, they invented the word "cagnolina", which literally means "little lovely female dog", to refer to a female one of "our good friends."

In most historical times, it is of little significance for most people to distinguish the gender of a ladybug (*coccinella*), a snail (*lumaca*), an earthworm (*lombrico*) or a lizard (*lucertola*) and indicate their gender differences in different language forms. And it is a natural thing to call them with "promiscuo" nouns.

The language form will also vary with the changes of the social reality, although the change of the former may be later than that of the latter. The gender of some nouns used to be of great significance for Italians so that they distinguished them in different language forms. As the ways of production and life change, people are no longer concerned with such gender differences; or in a given context, it will not exert practical effects. Therefore, there is no need to indicate them in special language forms. In such a case, these nouns have actually become "promiscuo" nouns. Taking the horse mentioned above as an example, when people say "A horse runs away fast", we do not need to care the gender but use its masculine form—"un cavallo". But it is an essential job for a vet or an expert in horse breeding to distinguish "un cavallo" and "una giumenta".

Bufalo/bufala may become a "promiscuo" noun when they are mentioned by people who know little about animal husbandry, while breeders will definitely distinguish bufalo/bufala by different ending letters.

For Italian gastronomes, “bufala”, the feminine form can never be replaced by “bufalo”, the masculine form; because it is bufalas’ hard working that helps them make delicious Mozzarella di Bufala.

The alien species like panda, yak do not belong to “promiscuo” nouns in voluminous dictionaries because in theory, they belong to nouns whose masculine gender and feminine gender share the same form and people can use *il panda/la panda*, *il yak/la yak* to refer to the male and the female respectively by adding to an article indicating its gender. However, for most Italians, unless it is out of curiosity, it is not necessary to distinguish the male and the female which are hardly related to people’s life. Therefore, in most cases, people will only use the masculine form to refer to pandas and yaks no matter they are male or female. Thus both the words “panda” and “yak” have become “promiscuo” nouns as a matter of fact. But it is quite necessary to distinguish and indicate the gender for zoologists in order to effectively protect and utilize animal resources.

The need of distinguishing and indicating the gender of a person is often influenced by the social changes and the person’s willingness. The vigorous feminist movement aroused women’s liberation awareness and women who were engaged in social positions with a high reputation began to strive for occupational titles only for women practitioners in order to show their independence, dignity and values. With their unremitting struggles and growing teams, some feminine nouns indicating career women such as “*sindaca*”, “*ingegnera*”, “*ambasciatrice*” etc. have been used for a short period. But women soon realized that the senses of banter, irony and belittle were shown in words when they were called with feminine terms, just like the “women football fans” in the eyes of Chinese male football fans. It indicated that women were not competent for such important jobs, and they held their positions just because they had received special treatment as women. Especially for nouns suffixed with “*essa*”, they are mostly used by men to jeer at career women, such as “*presidentessa*” and “*avvocatessa*”. Therefore, many career females gradually gave up the feminine appellation and require calling them by the masculine term instead to emphasize their professionalism and legality. Thus, the female mayors nowadays tend to be called “*sindaco*” and the female consuls are called “*console*”. It is rude to call them by feminine terms. This matter has ever made misunderstandings in the communications between China and Italy in modern times (Zang, 2013). Therefore, a series of nouns referring to occupations with high social reputation have become “promiscuo” nouns finally.

## CONCLUSION

As a kind of special phenomenon, “promiscuo” nouns are difficult for both teachers and students in Italian

teaching in China nowadays. We cannot explain it only in grammatical angle. A bottleneck appears in traditional teaching method, which has restricted learners’ thinking and limited their understanding of Italy and Italian language and culture.

This paper has studied the formation of “promiscuo” nouns from the non-grammatical perspectives in the aspects of nature, society, history, culture etc.. Three assumptions have been made by observing, studying and comparing the representative example—“*tigre*” and more examples have been taken to prove and revise such assumptions.

Finally, it is found that “promiscuo” nouns are not static and “being as they are”, but are the product of a given nature and society. The main factors of their formation are basically identified and the process and mechanism have also been deduced subsequently.

If the gender difference of nouns referring to people or animals is hard to tell, there is little chance that different language forms are used to distinguish and indicate their genders. Therefore, “promiscuo” nouns are more possible to come into being.

If nouns referring to animals and special social roles are not common and familiar or closely related with people’s life, it is impossible and unnecessary to distinguish their gender. Little possibility of indicating their gender in a given language form means a greater possibility of forming “promiscuo” nouns.

It is of little importance to distinguish their genders by using different language forms if the gender difference of nouns indicating people or animals has little significance for people’s production and life. This creates greater possibility of forming “promiscuo” nouns. But the importance of gender difference may differ sharply in different contexts and for different people. Thus, nouns may appear more frequently in both masculine and feminine forms in contexts where the gender difference is very important in order to distinguish, indicate and emphasize the gender in physiology for special purposes. While in a context where the gender difference is understated or even neglected, the nouns whose gender is distinguished in two forms in other contexts may become “promiscuo” nouns in fact.

Some one or two factors or even three factors mentioned above may work when it comes to the formation of a certain “promiscuo” noun. Besides such three factors, other factors may also exist.

This paper attempts to give an explanation to a specific grammatical phenomenon. It is expected to provide ideas and references for Italian teaching in China to explore an interpretation of grammatical issues by using non-grammatical perspectives and methods. It is also expected to call on more peers to emancipate their thinking, explain the grammatical problems in a more acceptable way and construct more diversified channels and platforms to study

Italy and Italian language, culture and society in an all-round way.

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