

A Multilingual Analysis of the Terminology of Sexual Identity

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Abstract

The terminology of sexual identity has been shown growing interest for a while now, however, due to its highly politicised state, it remains somewhat fluid and inconsistent. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates how different structurally and culturally distinct languages – English, Russian, and Italian – verbalise the concepts related to sexual identity. This exploration is carried out through a multilingual analysis of the terminology of sexual identity in the three languages, highlighting the challenges related to cross-linguistic equivalence. The terminological data resulting from said analysis is then showcased in the SIT (Sexual Identity Terminology) terminology resource.

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1 Introduction

In the past decades, the concept of sexual identity has progressively become a central topic of discussion across various fields of study, including psychology, sociology, gender studies, linguistics, and medicine (Zosuls et al., 2011). This tendency reflects a wider societal shift towards understanding the complexities of identity and the ways in which individuals experience, express, and define the sexual aspects of their being.

However, due to the interdisciplinary nature of this focus, sexual identity remains a concept marked by profound fluidity and instability. Not only do scholars, researchers, and practitioners of different fields often use distinct frameworks, definitions, and terminologies to approach sexual identity and its related concepts (Eliason, 2014), but even within the scope of the same domain there is no consensus on how to define sexual identity and on how to use the terminology associated with it (Campo-Arias, 2010). The main reason behind this phenomenon is the divisive political discourse around sexual identity, gender identity, sex, and sexual and romantic orientations: different political views lead to different definitions of sexual identity in all fields of study. This is true of fields that are more closely related to politics, such as law, but also of fields that are generally thought of as unbiased and removed from the sphere of politics, such as medicine or biology (Ainsworth, 2015; DuBois & Shattuck-Heidorn,

2021; Elliot, 2023). Proof of this last statement can be found in the debate around womanhood, transsexuality, and individuals with intersex traits, which has been brought to the forefront of political discourse increasingly often in recent years, with one recent example being the controversy around the biological sex of the Algerian athlete Imane Khelif at the 2024 Olympics in Paris (James, 2024).

Therefore, the study outlined in this paper is placed against this backdrop of the ontological debate regarding the concept of sexual identity and aims to analyse its terminology in different languages, mainly in the domain of Queer and Gender Studies, as it also has somewhat of an influence on the terminology adopted in the other specialised domains previously mentioned. The main point of interest is to observe how and to what extent languages that structurally and typologically differ from one another and belong to distinct cultures designate those concepts related to ‘sexual identity’ and what equivalence issues may arise when comparing the terminology of said languages. To explore this aspect, the languages chosen for this study are English, Russian, and Italian. These three languages are all part of the Indo-European language family and originate from the same socio-cultural macro-area, namely the European continent; however, each of them possesses a structure distinct enough to qualify them for this type of analysis. Most relevant to this study is how these languages approach grammatical gender, i.e. their typology. In terms of typology, languages can be divided into: (1) genderless languages; (2) natural gender languages, where most grammatical classes are genderless and gender is mainly expressed by pronouns; and (3) grammatical gender languages, where parts of speech have two or more grammatical genders and agree with each other in accordance to it (European Parliament, 2008; Stahlberg et al., 2007). The three languages chosen for this study belong to different groups, as English is a natural gender language while Russian and Italian are two grammatical gender languages. Furthermore, the differences in the socio-cultural points of view towards the subject matter embedded in these languages are noticeable enough to add a further layer of complexity to a cross-lingual analysis involving them (Garstenauer, 2018; Moreno et al., 2020; Zanola, 2015).

The questions that this study aims to answer with its multilingual analysis of the terminology of sexual identity are therefore the following: Are there notable differences in how and the extent to which these languages verbalise the concepts of sexual identity? Is there any kind of variation? Are there differences in connotations between term variants in one language and/or equivalents in different languages? Are there any taboos tied to these terms?

Thus, to thoroughly answer these questions, the remainder of the paper will focus on (1) the state of the art, outlining previous studies on the terminology of sexual identity in the three languages of study; (2) the methodology adopted to carry out the study described in this paper; (3) the findings and remarks on the terminology of sexual identity resulting from the cross-lingual analysis; (4) the presentation of the SIT (Sexual Identity Terminology) resource, which acts as a final product of said analysis, and finally on (5) the future works and studies that could further the knowledge and exploration of the terminology of sexual identity in the domain of Queer and Gender Studies.

2 State of the Art

The majority of works that focus on the terminology of sexual identity, regardless of the language considered, tend to address, in some form, the instability and presence of multiple differing definitions mentioned previously, although it is rarely framed with these exact words (or even explicitly), as the approach with which it is explored is most often rooted in linguistics/lexicology rather than terminology science and specialised language. Hence, to the best of our knowledge, there is no study which tackles the issue of conceptual instability as a whole as of yet, however, there is no scarcity of research which recognises that single terms in this domain can designate multiple concepts, and those concepts may have multiple definitions. One such example would be the study of Jenkins (2018) on the definitions of gender identity,¹ which she divides into three different groups: (1) The dispositional account, which follows the definition proposed by McKittrick (2015), according to which gender identity is the disposition of an

¹ As it will be illustrated afterwards, gender identity is considered to fall under the general umbrella of sexual identity for the purposes of this paper, hence its relevance in this context.

individual to behave and act in manners that are considered to be typical of one gender in the specific context they are in. (2) The self-identification account, which follows perhaps the most well-known definition of gender identity, which describes it as the gender an individual self-identifies with and is willing to claim as their own (Bettcher, 2009). (3) The norm-relevancy account, which follows the definition proposed by Jenkins herself, by which gender identity is defined as an individual's experience or perception of the norms associated with one gender as relevant to them in the social context they find themselves in (Jenkins, 2016; Jenkins, 2018).

Other works, on the other hand, despite recognising in some form the conceptual complexity of the terminology of sexual identity mentioned above, do not explore the different existing definitions for its concepts, opting to formulate or choose just one, sometimes asserting that that definition pertains to a specific specialised domain, be that Medicine, Psychology, etc. Works that follow this pattern are the studies of Shively and De Cecco (1977) *Components of Sexual Identity*, and Campo-Arias's (2010) *Essential aspects and practical implications of sexual identity*.

Also, it is worth noting that ontological studies that embrace the broad scope of sexual identity as a whole are actually in the minority, with the majority of works focusing on more finite aspects or components that can always be considered to fall under the greater scope of sexual identity. These tend to focus on aspects such as sexual orientations and romantic orientations (Li, Sham, & Wong, 2023), non-binary gender identities (Losty & O'Connor, 2018), or even just specific identifications, such as pansexuality or asexuality (Tessler & Winer, 2023; Pismenny, 2023).

Studies that strictly focus on the linguistic aspect of the terminology of sexual identity are also common (perhaps even more so) for each of the languages explored in this paper. For the English language, in this context we can identify works that are structured as accounts of terms' history concerning their etymology, usage, and connotation. Among these, Thelwall et al. (2022), Baucom (2018) and Shi and Lei (2019) explore the process of emergence and shifts in denotations and connotations of a selection of the most common terms to designate sexual identities, i.e. 'gay', 'homosexual', 'queer', etc., while other works, such as Armstrong (2012), Boswell (1994), and Brown (2011) strictly focus on terms that have been historically used or can be used in specific contexts as insults or slurs. Furthermore, other studies, such as Fogarty and Walker (2022) and Vytņiorgu (2024), push beyond a purely linguistic analysis, focusing not only on the origins and evolution of socio-sexual identities, i.e. labels that originated in the LGBTQIA+ community which express a combination of characteristics that relate to an individual's performance in socio-sexual relations, their physicality and how the latter influences and informs the former (Downing 2013), but also focusing on the sociological and psychological impact of these labels on the individuals that self-identify with them or that are identified with them by others. Other more comprehensive works are mainly structured as monolingual dictionaries or glossaries that focus on defining the concept designated by each term or the meaning of expressions used in a typically LGBTQIA+ context or to refer to LGBTQIA+ identities (Green & Peterson, 2006; LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2023).

Research that explores the Russian and Italian terminologies of sexual identity follows similar patterns with slight differences. Thus, for Russian we can identify the works of Garstenauer (2018) and Šilin and Šimanovič (2018), who explore the origin of the Russian terminology of sexual identity and its perception in Russian society; Goroško (2004), who analyses both the Russian terminology of sexual identity and the speech and jargon of queer individuals; and Ševčenko (2016), who focuses on the creation of two monolingual glossaries – one in Russian and the other in Ukrainian – of the terminology of sexual identity; etc. For Italian, we can identify the works of Valerio, Amodeo and Scandurra (2013), who analyse the Italian terminology of sexual identity and its usage, outlining deprecated forms and expressions; Lombardi Vallauri (2020), who focuses mainly on the stigma and negative connotations tied to terms that designate sexual identities and other (more or less) taboo realities for Italian culture, such as sex workers; and Pepponi (2024), who carries out a lexicographic analysis of Italian words that belong to the broad semantic field of LGBTQIA+ identities in the scope of lexicographic dictionaries published between 2003 and 2009.

All the works mentioned have the common feature of exploring the terminology of sexual

identity in the context of one language (although Russian and Italian studies tend to reference English terms at least in some capacity, as there are many borrowings that come from it). Therefore, it can be assessed that there is a lack of multilingual studies that explore the terminology of sexual identity analysing cross-lingual equivalence and its issues, the only other work (to our knowledge) in this realm being the dissertation of Michaela Čudová (2021), *Translating Queer Identities: A Glossary of Terms* which focuses on English and Czech. Thus, the present paper would fill this gap in the literature by exploring the terminology of sexual identity from this angle, also analysing a trio of languages that are largely different in terms of their structure, typology and the cultures they belong to.

3 Methodology

The method adopted in this study to research the different ways in which English, Russian, and Italian verbalise the concepts related to sexual identity is rooted in the approach to terminology and terminological analysis outlined in Costa (2013). According to the author's approach, it is necessary to combine both the conceptual and linguistic dimensions to thoroughly and effectively represent the knowledge of a given subject (Costa, 2013; Santos & Costa, 2015). However, due to the focus of this study on cross-linguistic equivalence issues between the three chosen languages, this paper will showcase only the work done on the linguistic dimension. As touched upon in the previous section, the exploration of the conceptual issues tied to the terminology of sexual identity is a vast and complex matter of its own deserving of much care and depth, hence its exclusion from the limited scope of this paper. However, the aim is to explore it in greater detail in future works.

Thus, we will now outline the steps taken to explore the linguistic dimension of the terminology of sexual identity. The research was articulated into four main steps: (1) corpus building, (2) term extraction, (3) designation networks building, and (4) resource development.

3.1 Corpus Building

To extract the terminological data needed for this study, it was necessary to rely on three different corpora of specialised texts, one for each of the languages considered, which were compiled with the *Sketch Engine* software (SkE)² specifically for this research. The three corpora were all built by compiling specialised texts discussing LGBTQIA+ and queer terminology, incorporating a total of 135 documents. Concrete examples of these texts are: (1) the glossaries mentioned previously, Green and Peterson (2006), LGBTQIA Resource Center (2023), Ševčenko (2016), Valerio et al. (2013), etc.; (2) English articles such as Clark and Zimmerman (2022), Copulsky (2016), Griffiths (2018), Hille, Simmons and Sanders (2019), etc.; (3) English books such as Hayfield (2020), Whitesel (2014) etc.; (4) Russian articles such as Kirey-Sitnikova (2022), Kirilina (2019), Kozlova and Carëva (2021), etc.; (5) Italian articles such as Alfaro, Acampora and Converti (2021), Dettore (2007), Sassatelli (2006), etc. These and all other texts used were retrieved online and were manually chosen and submitted to SkE to compile their respective corpus.³

Regarding the corpora's volume, the aim was to compile corpora with similar volume so that the data extracted from them could be more reliably compared. Therefore, the English corpus amounts to 420,524 tokens and 312,522 words, the Russian corpus amounts to 412,947 tokens and 300,751 words, and the Italian corpus amounts to 409,434 tokens and 319,437 words. However, as summarised in Table 1, there are some slight differences in the corpora and their texts, which is important to take note of, as they already give a glimpse of the different attitudes toward the subject matter that the culture tied to these languages showcase. The English corpus is the one with most variety in terms of type, length, and publishing date of the texts used, with a balanced presence of journal articles, glossaries, and contributions in edited books, that were all published between the 1970s and the 2020s and have an average length of 15,000 words per text. The texts used for the Russian corpus, on the other hand, are mostly shorter journal articles of an average length of 8,000 words per text that were published more recently, from the year 2000 onwards. Differently from both the previous corpora the texts used for the

²<https://www.sketchengine.eu>

³<https://www.sketchengine.eu/guide/create-corpus-from-files/>

Table 1: Corpus building data summary

<i>Corpus</i>	<i>Tokens</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>Avg. words per text</i>	<i>General timeframe</i>	<i>Documents</i>
<i>English corpus</i>	420,524	312,522	15,000	1970s - onwards	40
<i>Russian corpus</i>	412,947	300,751	8,000	2000s – onwards	78
<i>Italian corpus</i>	409,434	319,437	20,000	2010s - onwards	17

Italian corpus are mostly journal articles and academic texts published after the 2010s, which are longer and reach the highest word count average of the three corpora, amounting to an average of 20,000 words per text.

3.2 Term Extraction

Following the creation of the three different corpora, it was possible to extract English, Russian, and Italian terms from their respective corpus by using the SkE Keywords tool for term extraction.⁴ The system uses statistical and linguistic filters to identify candidate terms. One of the main algorithms behind this process relies on comparing frequencies of phrases in a domain-specific corpus with those in a reference or general-language corpus. This contrastive approach highlights terms that are significantly more frequent in the specialized domain than in general usage. Thus, by relying on this feature of SkE, it was possible to automatically generate three different lists of candidate terms (both single- and multi-word), one for each language, which were then examined and from which a final term selection was made. Each list encompassed a total of 2000 candidate terms, from which were selected a total of 197 terms (80 English terms, 60 Russian terms, and 57 Italian terms). Through this process it was possible to ignore non-pertinent terms and terms with a low degree of termhood (ISO 5078, 2025).⁵ The selected terms were then organised in designation networks and were the main object of the current study.⁶

3.3 Designation Networks

We define designation networks as a graphic representation of all the terms included in this study outlining the lexical relationships that exist between them. In these networks (see Figure 2 in Annex 1, Figure 3 in Annex 2, and Figure 4 in Annex 3), each term included is enclosed in a box which connects to the other with arrows that function as a visual representation for a type of lexical relationship. The arrows that represent hierarchical relationships of hyponymy-hypernymy showcase the label ‘hyponym’ and connect each hyponym to its hypernym. Similarly, arrows that represent hierarchical relationships of meronymy-holonymy showcase the label ‘meronym’ and connect each meronym to their holonym. On the other hand, the arrows that represent synonymy are slightly different as they are double-headed, showing how the relationship between the terms is equal both ways. However, despite the representative value of these networks, there is a limitation in the pieces of information conveyed. Indeed, there is no distinction between the synonyms showcased in terms of term status (preferred, accepted, or deprecated terms)⁷ or connotation. Hence, these graphic representations do not account for diachronic linguistic variation, intended as the variation of the terms used by experts to designate the same concept over time

⁴ <https://www.sketchengine.eu/guide/keywords-and-term-extraction/>

⁵ <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/en/#iso:std:iso:5078:ed-1:v1:en>

⁶ <https://www.sketchengine.eu/user-guide/terminologists-terminology-extraction/>

⁷ <https://datcatinfo.termweb.net/en/dict/202/497112/1954337?lang=eng&target=0§ion=0&domain=0&term=deprecated>

(Vezzani & Costa 2024), diaphasic variation, intended as the variation of terms used depending on style and register (Freixa, 2022), their connotation, etc. However, all of these elements are explored in concept entries that have been compiled as part of the next step (see Section 3.4) and in the scope of the cross-lingual analysis of Section 4.

3.4 FAIRterm 2.0

All the terms displayed in the designation networks were also included in concept entries created with the FAIRterm 2.0 Web application⁸ to further the comparative analysis between the three languages' terminologies (Di Nunzio & Vezzani, in press). This web application represents the first terminological tool specifically designed to adhere to the FAIR terminology paradigm of findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reusability, made possible by following the ISO standards for terminology resources management (Vezzani, 2021; Vezzani, 2022; Vezzani & Di Nunzio, 2022). Before exploring the application itself, we will give a brief outline of the structure of this type of terminological database, which is based on the TMF (Terminological Markup Framework) standard defined by ISO 16642 (2017),⁹ as outlined in Vezzani (2022). The core of a terminology database consists of a hierarchical metamodel with seven main components:

- (1) Terminological data collection: it represents the top-level container grouping all terminological entries within a specific resource.
- (2) Global information: this section contains metadata about the collection, such as its title and its last update date.
- (3) Complementary information: this section contains additional metadata such as bibliographic references.
- (4) Concept entry: this is the core unit of the database, containing information that describes a single concept.
- (5) Language section: a container for the term sections that designate the concept of the concept entry. There is a distinct language section for each working language in the database that verbalises the concept.
- (6) Term section: it contains one or more terms (including synonyms) in each language that designates the concept. It includes attributes such as part of speech, gender, or number.
- (7) Term component section: it is used for providing information about individual components of complex/multi-word terms.

While the metamodel defines the structural framework, the content and semantics of the entries are dictated by data categories, as outlined in ISO 12620 (2019).¹⁰ A data category is a class of related information items (e.g., /part of speech/, /definition/, /concept identifier/) which has a formal specification (name, definition, examples, comments, and a persistent identifier) and can be found in repositories such as DatCatInfo.¹¹

Shown in Figure 1 is the 'Data Entry' interface of FAIRterm 2.0, which is where users are directly taken after authentication and where they can create new concept entries. To create a new entry, it is necessary to first choose a specialised domain by clicking on the 'subject field' bar and selecting one from the list that subsequently appears. All the domains and sub-domains present in the list are taken from EuroVoc,¹² the EU's multilingual and multidisciplinary thesaurus, which contains keywords, organised in 21 domains and 127 sub-domains, which are used to describe the content of documents in EUR-Lex. Therefore, all 21 domains and 127 sub-domains are included in the list for the 'subject field' bar present on FAIRterm 2.0; however, it is also possible to type a sub-domain, if those included are not suitable. After choosing the appropriate domain, it is possible to create a new concept entry by clicking the 'add concept

⁸ <https://shiny.dei.unipd.it/fairterm/compilation20.html>

⁹ <https://www.iso.org/standard/56063.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.iso.org/standard/69550.html>

¹¹ <https://datcatinfo.net/>

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/browse/eurovoc.html?locale=en>

Fig 1: FAIRterm 2.0 Data Entry Interface

entry’ button; this will automatically generate a randomised number in the ‘concept’ bar, which will become the concept entry’s unique identifier. Then, by clicking on the ‘show/hide’ icon beside the ‘subject field’ bar, it is possible to add information related to the concept level, i.e. indicate the logical relationships (superordination, subordination, etc.) between the concept entry being compiled and the concept entries already in the system. From this section, it is then possible to add language sections by clicking on the ‘select language to add’ bar and choosing a language from the list that appears underneath the bar. The possible language options are all languages included in the ISO standard for language codes (ISO 639, 2023). Here it is possible to input terminological data at the language level, such as the definition of the concept in the language selected. It is worth noting that thanks to the vertically expanding structure of FAIRterm 2.0 there is no limit to the number of languages that can be included in a single concept entry. For each language section, it is then possible to add as many term sections as needed (again, the expanding nature of the concept entries in FAIRterm 2.0 does not limit how many terms can be implemented in a single entry). Each term section has twelve data categories that need to be filled, which detail the terms’ morphosyntactic and phraseological behaviour. Furthermore, by using the second interface of the application, the ‘Data Consultation’ interface, it is possible to quickly search and consult the concept entries compiled in a more compact and succinct layout. Thus, thanks to the structure of FAIRterm 2.0, it was possible to carry out a quicker and more insightful comparison between equivalents in the three different languages as the concept entries were being compiled.

4 Comparing English, Russian, and Italian Terminologies

While comparing the terminologies of the three languages from an equivalence standpoint, there can be identified several different issues that can be organised in different groups. However, before delving into the exploration of these equivalence issues, it is important to explain the graphical notations adopted in this paper. Terms are always in lowercase and in between double quotation marks (“”).

4.1 Non-Equivalence

From the analysis of the three designation systems, it has emerged that some concepts do not have a designation in one or two of the languages. Thus, a number of source terms in one of the languages do not have a direct equivalent in the others, meaning that there is a terminological gap, i.e. non-equivalence (Léon-Araúz, 2022). This issue is present with the following terms:

The term “erotic identity”. This English term has no equivalent in either the Russian or Italian designation network, as neither Russian nor Italian verbalise the corresponding concept. For this reason,

both languages sometimes resort to using their equivalent designation for “sexual orientation”, a meronym of “erotic identity” in the English network, to cover this case of inclusion. However, adopting this strategy may lead to confusion and lack of clarity, especially given the plethora of definitions that already exist for the concepts designated by these terms. Therefore, a good option to circumvent this issue would be to take advantage of the status of “erotic identity” as a holonym. Thus, resorting to extensional equivalence (Léon-Araúz, 2022), and listing the equivalent terms to its meronyms, “сексуальная ориентация” (*seksual'naja orientacija*) and “романтическая ориентация” (*romantičeskaja orientacija*) for Russian, and “orientamento sessuale” and “orientamento romantico” for Italian, rather than looking for an exact equivalent of the English term “erotic identity”.

The term “allosexual”. This English term lacks a Russian equivalent. However, it could be argued that this state of things may just be temporary, given the strong influence that English terminology in this field has had and continues to have on Russian terminology. Therefore, it is very likely that eventually a Russian term *аллосексуал* (*alloseksual*) will emerge as an English loanword. However, before this process takes place, there is no real way to bridge this gap in terminology, other than perhaps descriptive equivalence, i.e. making explicit the semantic features that distinguish the concept, or non-translation equivalence, i.e. using the English equivalent with no changes (even in terms of alphabet), as it would be understood by experts familiar with the domain (Léon-Araúz, 2022).

The term “alloromantic”. Much like the previous entry, this English term lacks a Russian equivalent. Similarly, the emergence of a hypothetical term *аллоромантик* (*alloromantik*) can be expected in the future. However, as this process is yet to take place, there is no real Russian equivalent of the English “alloromantic” and the Italian “alloromantico”. Therefore, the two viable options would be resorting to descriptive equivalence or non-translation equivalence.

The term “socio-sexual identity”. This English term has no Russian nor Italian equivalent. However, differently from the two previous cases, it is rather difficult to make a prediction on the direction that Russian and Italian terminologies will take. The reason for this is that the concept designated by the term “socio-sexual identity” was conceptualised relatively recently. Thus, not only is there little consensus on its characteristics/definition, but there is also a limited usage of the term “socio-sexual identity” itself. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the existing English term could have any real impact on other languages before becoming more widespread in an English context. Among the terms that have no equivalent in one or two of the languages considered in this project, we can distinguish those terms that have equivalents, which, however, do not enjoy term status. These are the English terms that designate socio-sexual identities. The Italian and Russian equivalents of these terms have not been included in their respective designation networks because they are not terms; however, they are still worth mentioning in this context.¹³

As shown in Table 2, most of these equivalents are English loanwords, again proving the great influence that the English language has when it comes to the sphere of gender and sexual identity. Considering this, it might be possible that eventually there will be a shift to term status, as that is what happened in English. However, there are at least two major factors that could be of hindrance to this process: (1) the status of their hypernym “socio-sexual identity”, and (2) the more conservative attitudes that both Russian and Italian culture have towards members of the LGBTQIA+ community and their sexual lives (Prearo, Trastulli, & Pansardi, 2024; Smyslova, 2018).

4.2 Grammatical Class Issues

All the terms considered in this project, regardless of the language, are either nouns or adjectives, most of them belonging to the latter class. However, there are many cases in which the grammatical class of equivalent terms does not match and can pose a challenge:

¹³The following table of translation equivalents has been compiled with data taken from websites such as ru.wikipedia.org, it.wikipedia.org, www.grindr.com (the website of the widespread gay dating app Grindr), reddit.com (social news aggregation, content rating, and forum social network), and www.quora.com (a social question-answer website). Due to the non-technical nature of these words, these were among the most reputable sources available.

Table 2 Russian and Italian equivalents of socio-sexual identities

English term	Russian equivalent	Italian equivalent	Note
“twink”	‘твинк’ (<i>tvink</i>)	‘twink’	
“bear”	‘медведь’ (<i>medved</i>)	‘orso’	
“cub”	‘куб’ (<i>kub</i>) or ‘медвежонок’ (<i>medvežonok</i>)	‘cub’	
“otter”	‘оттер’ (<i>otter</i>) or ‘выдра’ (<i>vydra</i>)	‘lontra’	The usage of these Russian words is very limited even in LGBTQIA+ communities and denotes people very in tune with Western culture.
“chub”	n/a	n/a	
“jock”	‘качок’ (<i>kačok</i>)	‘jock’	
“hunk”	n/a	‘hunk’	For Russian, the word ‘качок’ (<i>kačok</i>) could be used; however, it is not an exact equivalent.
“butch”	‘буч’ (<i>buč</i>)	‘butch’	
“femme”	‘фэм’ (<i>fem</i>)	‘femme’	The Italian word is sometimes abbreviated to ‘fem’.
“masculine”	‘маскулинный’ (<i>masculinnyj</i>)	‘masc’	The Italian word comes from the abbreviated English form “masc”.
“androgynous”	‘андрогинный’ (<i>androginnyj</i>)	‘androgino’	

English terms with the ‘-sexual’ root. These terms correspond to Italian terms with the analogous root ‘-sessuale’, however, their points in common do not end there. English and Italian terms with these roots can be classified as either nouns or adjectives and have no inherent morphological distinction between their noun and adjective forms. For the purposes of this project, terms that share this feature have been considered as adjectives by default. Although not in line with terminological principles, this generalisation was needed because considering noun forms and adjective forms as distinct terms would have been redundant and not representative of speakers’ perceptions. Realistically, speakers of English and Italian do not realise what grammatical class they are using, when identifying themselves with phrases like ‘I am gay’ and ‘sono gay’. This leaves these terms in an ambiguous state between classes that calls for an arbitrary decision to be made in order to analyse them and create concept entries for them. Therefore, given that the dimension considered for this project is identity/identification, which is usually expressed through descriptors, i.e. mostly adjectives, the choice was to consider all of them as adjectives rather than nouns. However, the real issues arise when comparing ‘-sexual’ and ‘-sessuale’ terms with their Russian equivalents, which also each have a noun form and an adjective form. However, for these Russian terms it is not possible to apply the same reasoning used for English and Italian. This is due to the starker division between grammatical classes in the Russian language, which does not allow for

ambiguity, as there are entirely different declensions between adjectives and nouns. Meaning that, not only adjective and noun forms are noticeably different on a morphological level, but Russian speakers are always keenly aware of what is the class of the term they are using. These two elements prompted the decision to consider noun and adjective forms as terms that are distinct, albeit synonymous, for the Russian designation network. In conclusion, given what outlined so far, it is especially important to focus on grammatical class when comparing this group of terms and their Russian equivalents.

English terms with the ‘-romantic’ root. These terms correspond to Italian terms with the analogous ‘-romantico’ root and Russian terms with the analogous ‘-романтик’ (-romantik) root. However, while English and Italian terms are all adjectives, Russian terms are all nouns, leading to a scenario in which the grammatical class of these terms does not match. Meaning that the Russian equivalents can be used in different contexts of use and collocate with different structures.

4.3 Grammatical Gender Issues

As mentioned before, grammatical gender is to be considered carefully when dealing with the terminology of sexual identity, as the discrepancy between how the languages deal with this grammatical feature may have deeper implications. Here are the most notable issues tied to grammatical gender:

English terms with no gender. In general, apart from a handful of words, English words have no inherent grammatical gender and most English terms in this project are no exception (“man”, “transgender woman, etc. are the only ones that have inherent gender). This feature of the English language is in stark contrast with both Russian and Italian, in which grammatical gender plays an important role across classes (nouns, adjectives and even verbs are influenced by grammatical gender).

Italian terms with the ‘-sessuale’ and ‘-romantico’ roots. These two groups of terms have features that make them closer to either their English or Russian equivalents in terms of grammatical gender. Terms ending with ‘-sessuale’ are Italian adjectives that do not have a specific masculine or feminine form, making them closer to their English equivalents, which share the same feature, and further apart from their Russian equivalents, which always make their grammatical gender explicit. On the other hand, terms ending with ‘-romantico’ are adjectives with a different masculine and feminine form, which generate the opposite result. However, it is worth noting that, at least in writing, there are ways in which a gender-inclusive form of these terms can be achieved. The most widespread of them are: (1) using both the masculine and feminine form at the same time,¹⁴ i.e. “alloromantico/a” or more explicitly “alloromantico/alloromantica”; (2) using an asterisk in place of the morpheme that carries information tied to grammatical gender, i.e. “alloromantic*”; and (3) using the schwa phonetic symbol in place of the morpheme that carries information tied to grammatical gender, i.e. “alloromantica” (D’Achille, 2021). Although these more gender-neutral and inclusive forms are becoming increasingly popular among the younger generations, their usage is still somewhat controversial and unrecognised by linguistic authorities on the Italian language, with the Accademia della Crusca outright disavowing using asterisks and schwa phonetic symbols, as they do not correspond to any existing sound in Italian phonetics (Accademia della Crusca, 2023; D’Achille, 2021).

Russian terms with distinct gendered forms. In the entire Russian designation system, the only terms that do not have an inherent gendered form are English loanwords that have remained unchanged while crossing over to Russian, for example, the terms “трансгендер” (*transgender*), “гендерфлюид” (*genderfluid*) etc. All other Russian terms, whether they are nouns or adjectives, have two distinct forms, one masculine and one feminine. Much like in Italian, there are ways to achieve more inclusive gender-neutral forms. The most common for these terms are the following: (1) using both the masculine and feminine form at the same time, i.e. “гомосексуалы/гомосексуалки” (*gomoseksualy/gomoseksualki*); (2) using an underscore to unite the two gendered forms, i.e. “гомосексуал_ки” (*gomoseksual_ki*) or (3) even just using a single underscore “гомосексуал_”

¹⁴ Whether this strategy can be considered a legitimate way of achieving gender inclusive language is a subject of debate, as it still results in a binary representation. Some see it as a simple general language use, while others see it as a strategy to be more inclusive of individuals who identify as women specifically (Nodari, 2024).

(*gomoseksual*) (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2021). However, these forms – especially the last two options – are not recognised by society at large or by linguistic authorities (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2021).

4.4 Connotation Issues

These issues are particularly important for the terminology of sexual identity, as many of its terms (across languages) have historically acquired and lost various connotations, some of which still have lingering effects (Baucom, 2018). Most of the connotations that will be explored in this section are more closely tied to general language, as opposed to specialised language, however, in the context of equivalence it is important to be aware of the socio-cultural background and baggage that the following terms may have:

The term “homosexual”. This English term appeared in verb form around the 1920s, and, over the first two decades of its attested use, it acquired an increasingly negative connotation of sexual deviancy and illegality, becoming akin to incest and rape (Baucom, 2018; Shi & Lei, 2020). Later, in 1952 homosexuality was recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association as a ‘sociopathic personality disturbance’ (Drescher, 2010), which caused a further shift in the connotation of the term “homosexual”. Between the 1950s and the 2000s, the term became more common in noun form, and given it designated a concept with different characteristics compared to its modern iteration, e.g. being a mental disorder, it acquired new connotations tied to them (Baucom, 2018). In particular, in this phase, the term came to be associated with all the negative stigma that surrounds mental illness and addictive disorders, such as alcoholism, which enhanced the negative connotations it already possessed (Baucom, 2018; Shi & Lei, 2020). However, a final shift in the term’s connotation occurred from the 2000s onwards (Shi & Lei, 2020), probably due to the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973 (Drescher, 2010) and a general societal change. The term “homosexual” became more widespread in its adjective form and gradually lost its negative connotations, becoming more neutral (Shi & Lei, 2020). However, the long history of negative connotations of the term still has its lingering effects, causing individuals to prefer its hyponyms “gay” or “lesbian” and making the usage of the noun form, e.g. ‘I am a homosexual’ essentially a deprecated form (Baucom, 2018). Thus, it is highly likely that this background is what caused the term “gay” to become used as a synonym of its hypernym in English. In short, the English term “homosexual”, despite having lost its negative connotations, is still somewhat avoided because of them or their memory. This aspect, however, creates a stark contrast between the English term and its equivalents. Indeed, the Italian “omosessuale” and the Russian “гомосексуальный” (*gomoseksual’nyj*) and “гомосексуал” (*gomoseksual*) are terms that not only have a neutral connotation, but their usage implies a conscious choice by the addresser to distance themselves from the negative connotations that are tied to more common and offensive words (or at least, it did during the first inception of the terms) (Šilin & Šimanovič, 2018; Lombardi Vallauri, 2020). Thus, in both Italian and Russian there is a direct opposition between the neutral connotation of the specialised term and the negative connotation of common words, e.g. ‘checca’ for Italian (Lombardi Vallauri, 2020) and ‘фея’ (*feja*, literal meaning: fae, fairy) for Russian (Šilin & Šimanovič, 2018). In conclusion, given the history of the term “homosexual”, it might be more appropriate, depending on the context, to consider “гомосексуальный” (*gomoseksual’nyj*) and “гомосексуал” (*gomoseksual*) in Russian and “omosessuale” in Italian as equivalents of its hyponyms.

The term “homo”. This English term is the abbreviated form of the term “homosexual”, created by the process of omitting the root ‘-sexual’ as can be observed in other similar abbreviated forms of sexual orientations, such as “pansexual” → “pan”. However, in contrast to other abbreviated forms of English terms, which differ from their full counterparts merely in terms of register, “homo” carries with it a decidedly negative connotation that makes it akin to a slur (Armstrong, 2012). The fact that this term is an abbreviated form of a term, which, as just explored, is itself somewhat controversial probably plays a role. In confirmation of that, the term “homo” emerged around the 1950s, when the connotation of its full form “homosexual” historically had probably the most negative undertone it ever had (Baucom, 2018; Boswell, 1994; Shi & Lei, 2020). However, it is important to note that at the time, despite its negative connotation, “homosexual” was still a medical term and the polite way of referring to gay men and lesbians. Terms like “gay” were still slang words used almost exclusively by the LGBTQ+ community,

while the most widespread words were slurs, such as “faggot” (Boswell, 1994). Thus, the abbreviation “homo” was born with intent of being offensive, like the abbreviation ‘commie’ for ‘communist’, but not as offensive as the slurs that already existed to refer to gays and lesbians (Boswell, 1994). Its origin as an insult, prevented the term “homo” to ever enter the sphere of academia, however, it was sporadically used in journalism, confirming its status as a term, or at least on the cusp between term and word (Boswell, 1994). However, nowadays, the term is both obsolete and deprecated, with only some remnants in everyday speech, most notably in ‘no homo’ jokes, which are themselves somewhat controversial in their connotations and implications (Boswell, 1994; Brown, 2011).

The term “gay”. The origins of this English term, which eventually made its way into the other languages as a loanword, are marked by changes in both denotation and connotation (Shi & Lei, 2020). The word ‘gay’ was first borrowed from French in the 1300s with the meaning of ‘jolly’, ‘merry’ or ‘light-hearted’ (Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007). However, by the 1600s, through a process of pejoration, the word had taken on a second denotation associated with frivolity, lack of seriousness, and hedonism, hence the word came to be used as a euphemism for individuals that led immoral, wasteful lives, and it was occasionally extended to refer to male prostitutes and men that engaged in homosexual activities (Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007). Despite this, up until the 1860s the first meaning associated with the word ‘gay’ remained that of ‘jolly’, ‘joyous’ etc., meaning that it still had an overall positive connotation (Shi & Lei, 2020). However, around the 1970s, the word began to be used by the LGBTQIA+ community as a preferred alternative to the then recognised term “homosexual” (Baucom, 2018; Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007). In this phase, ‘gay’ began to transition from word to term, especially due to the campaign led by the LGBTQIA+ community itself for it to be recognised as such and to supplant the term “homosexual” (Baucom, 2018). Therefore, “gay” emerged as a term with a positive connotation in the LGBTQIA+ community; however, it took negative connotations for the rest of society, due to its association to the term “homosexual” and the taboo nature (for the time’s perspective) of the concept they both designated (it is important to remember that in English the term “gay” can be seen as both a synonym and a hyponym of the term “homosexual”) (Shi & Lei, 2020). However, from the 2000s onwards, much like the term “homosexual”, “gay” started to lose the negative connotations it had acquired in the previous decades (at least in adjective form, as using the noun forms of both “homosexual” and “gay” is still considered derogatory, especially in the plural, i.e. ‘the gays’) (Shi & Lei, 2020). Furthermore, the term “gay” retained a connotation that is more positive compared to that of “homosexual”, probably because it was a term that the LGBTQIA+ community had chosen for itself, rather than one that was imposed on it from the outside. This further outlines the reason why, in some cases, it would be better to consider the Russian “гомосексуальный” (*gomoseksual’nyi*) and “гомосексуал” (*gomoseksual*) and the Italian “omosessuale” as equivalents of “gay” in English. However, despite this being the current connotation of the term “gay”, there are further developments of the word ‘gay’ that may have an impact in the future. In more recent years, the word ‘gay’ has taken on a third denotation, that of stupid, boring or bad, which naturally carries a negative connotation (e.g. in phrases like ‘that’s so gay’) (Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007). This denotation seems to mainly pertain to the slang of the younger generations; however, it has already been accounted for in some reputable lexicographic dictionaries (Cambridge Dictionary, 2013; Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007). Whether this new denotation of the term and the negative connotation that it comes with will influence the term it is hard to predict, in any case, it is worth taking note of.

“Квир лингвистика” (*Kvir lingvistika*). Literally, ‘queer linguistics’, also known by other names, such as “гомосексуальная лексика” (*gomoseksual’naja leksika*, ‘homosexual lexicon’) is an umbrella term that encompasses most of the Russian terms analysed in this project (i.e. all of them except the terms that designate sex identities) (Garstenauer, 2018; Šilin & Šimanovič, 2018). All the terms that are part of “квир лингвистика” (*Kvir lingvistika*) have in common the perception that Russian society at large has of them, which is overall negative. Not only the terms themselves, but the entire discipline of gender and queer studies is seen as a Western import, which is not only seen as foreign, but even antithetical to Russian traditional values (Garstenauer, 2018). The natural consequence is that all the terms included in “квир лингвистика” (*Kvir lingvistika*) have at the very least a somewhat negative connotation in general Russian culture and are seen as alien by society at large.

The term “queer”. This English term and its Italian and Russian equivalents (which are non-translation equivalents) are not strictly part of the scope of this terminological project; however, given their general importance and close relation to many of the terms included, it is important to at least acknowledge them. Similarly to the term “gay”, “queer” started as a word with a different denotation from its current one: up until the 1960s, the word ‘queer’ was a synonym of ‘strange’, ‘weird’ or ‘freak’ (Shi & Lei, 2020). Between the 1970s and the 1990s, ‘queer’ came to be associated with offensive slurs such as ‘faggy’ or ‘lecher’ (Shi & Lei, 2020) and was used as an intentionally offensive word (Butler, 2020 [1997]). However, after the 2000s, the word experienced further changes: its denotation shifted to the current one, i.e. indicating any gender/sexual/romantic orientations or identities that fall outside of societal norms (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2023), its connotation became much more positive due to a process of word reclamation, and it became a term (Shi & Lei, 2020).

5 SIT Terminological Resource

To make the terminological data discussed in this study freely available and accessible to the public, we have developed an online multilingual terminological resource called SIT (Sexual Identity Terminology). This resource is a product of the concept entries compiled with the FAIRterm 2.0 software and thus it is available in the FAIRterm 2.0 Web Application consultation page.¹⁵

The resource encompasses a total of 197 terms (80 English terms, 60 Russian terms, and 57 Italian terms) included across 48 concept entries, which will be expanded upon over time. At this stage, therefore, we present a qualitative analysis of the compilation process of said concept entries. First and foremost, the scrutiny on equivalence issues regarding grammatical class and grammatical gender were partly prompted and further explored by the insightful and immediate multilingual comparison that the concept entries provided, highlighting the contrast that each equivalent term showcases in that regard. Furthermore, another productive aspect of the compilation process was the retrieval of contexts of use that could show terms used in their natural environment (i.e. a sentence in a specialised text). For terms indicating less well-known sexual orientations, such as “polysexual”, “omnisexual”, or generally romantic orientations, regardless of language, it was particularly rare to find contexts that were not just lists of terms or explanations of the terms themselves. Therefore, this process brought to the forefront that these terms, although established and recognised as such in specialised texts, are not as commonly used as their number of occurrences in the corpora might portray, especially compared to the other terms considered in the project.

6 Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Harkening back to the questions posed in the first part of this paper, we can assess the following regarding the terminologies analysed:

First, the differences in verbalisation found between the three languages is mostly morphological and structural; there are clear links between the terms of the three languages analysed, especially since multiple Russian and Italian terms originate as loans from English. However, even in these cases, it is possible to observe structural differences it is important to take note of, as exemplified by the English term “aromantic”, a genderless adjective or noun, which transposed into the Italian “aromantico” becomes a gendered adjective or noun and transposed into the Russian “аромантик” (*aromantik*) becomes exclusively a gendered noun. These misalignments in the morphology of the languages are important from a point of view purely focused on equivalence, however, in the context of identity, self-identification and gender it is even more pressing to pay particular attention to a grammatical feature such as grammatical gender due to the implication in terms of gender identity representation that it can carry in languages in which it is a prevalent feature.

In terms of variation, it can be observed that the terminology of sexual identity is mostly affected by diaphasic variation, with synonyms conveying different levels of formality. However, it is important to note that diaphasic variation is not present consistently in English, Russian, and Italian terminologies, as

¹⁵ <https://shiny.dei.unipd.it/fairterm/consultation.html>. At the time of writing this paper (June 2025), the resource is still in the process of being published.

it can mainly be observed in English. Here, diaphasic variation is found between synonyms that present themselves as a full-form and shortened-form pairs, i.e. “asexual” → “ace” or “pansexual” → “pan”, etc., with the shortened form conveying a lower level of formality.

Regarding connotation differences and taboos, it is clear that this is probably the most relevant aspect to take note of when dealing with the terminology of sexual identity in any capacity. Due to the history and background of these terms, issues with their connotations can be particularly nuanced whether they are being approached monolingually or cross-lingually. There are terms that are deprecated, such as the English “homo”, the Russian “гермафродит” (*germafrodit*), etc., terms that have replaced older ones, such as “transgender”, “cisgender”, etc., terms that change connotation depending on how they are used, such as “gay” (noun) vs “gay” (adjective), etc., and terms that have different connotations across languages, such as the English “homosexual” vs the Italian “omosessuale”, etc. All these issues need to be accounted for when dealing with cross-language equivalence.

To conclude, it is also important to recognise that the study presented in this paper is by no means exhaustive, and there are many areas in which the exploration of the terminology of sexual identity could be furthered. First, it would be interesting to widen the scope of this study by including more terms that were not considered, such as “gender non-conforming”, “autosexual”, etc., and by considering more languages that are even more different in terms of their structure and typology and the culture they represent, such as Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, and so on. However, one major aspect that would be important to address in future works is the conceptual instability that can be observed in different specialised domains when addressing concepts that pertain to the world of sexual identity, gender identity, biological sex, and sexual and romantic orientations. This instability has only been lightly touched upon in the present paper; however, the complexity and wide scope of the matter would require a much ampler space to properly delve into it. Overall, the hope is that this study could act as a first step in the analysis of the terminology of sexual identity in the framework of terminology, which is in its infancy, and as a gateway to further explore the various issues that surround this topic on all levels, be they linguistic, terminological, conceptual, or societal. In future work, it would also be fruitful to explore how data visualization techniques can be used to represent and critically interpret patterns in gender-related data. As Van Herck (2019) has shown in the context of gender balance in academic conferences, careful curation and dedicated visualizations can reveal underlying dynamics that might otherwise remain hidden, but they also demand methodological precision and interpretive caution.

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Annex 1

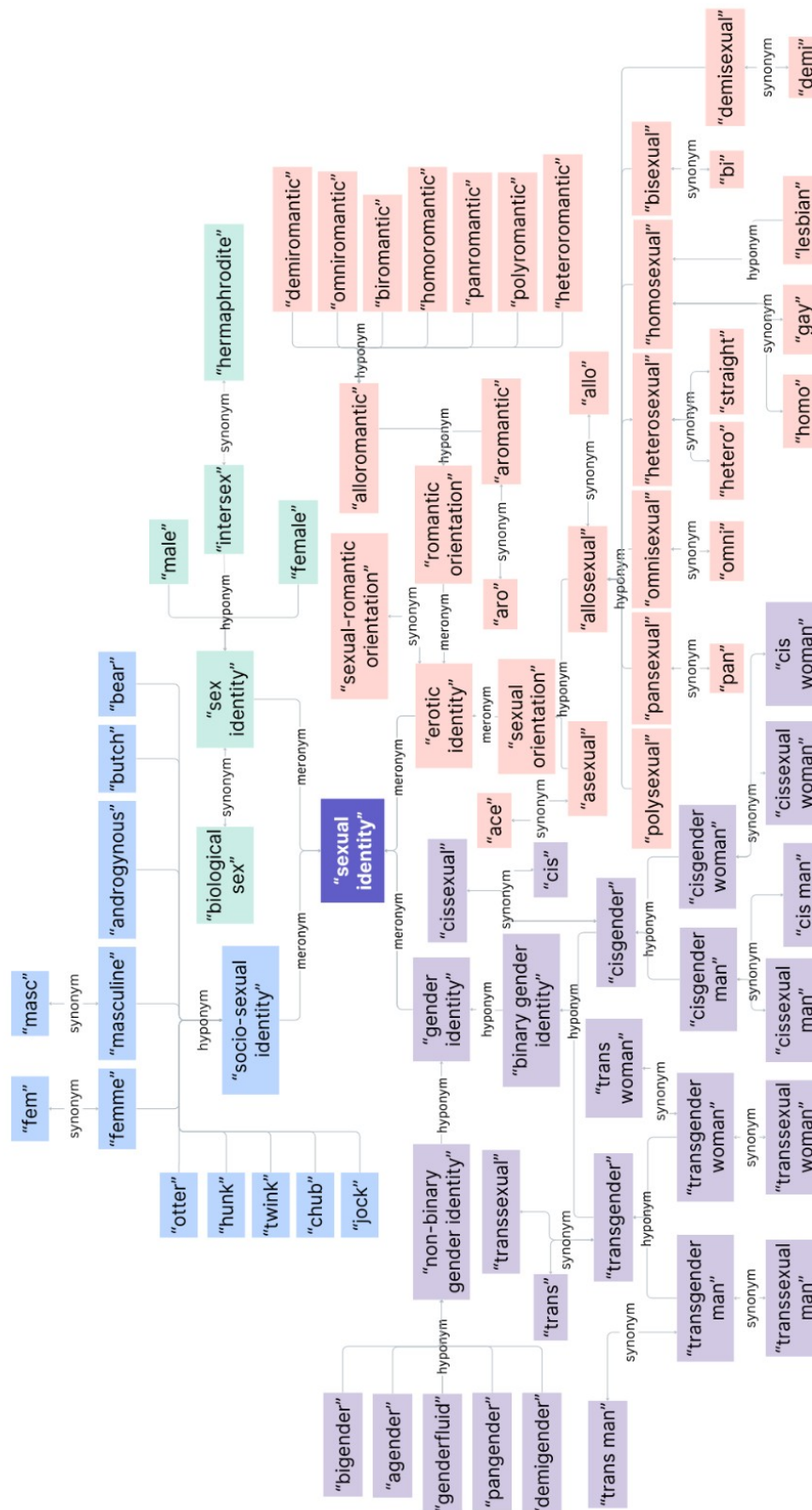


Fig. 2 English Designation Network

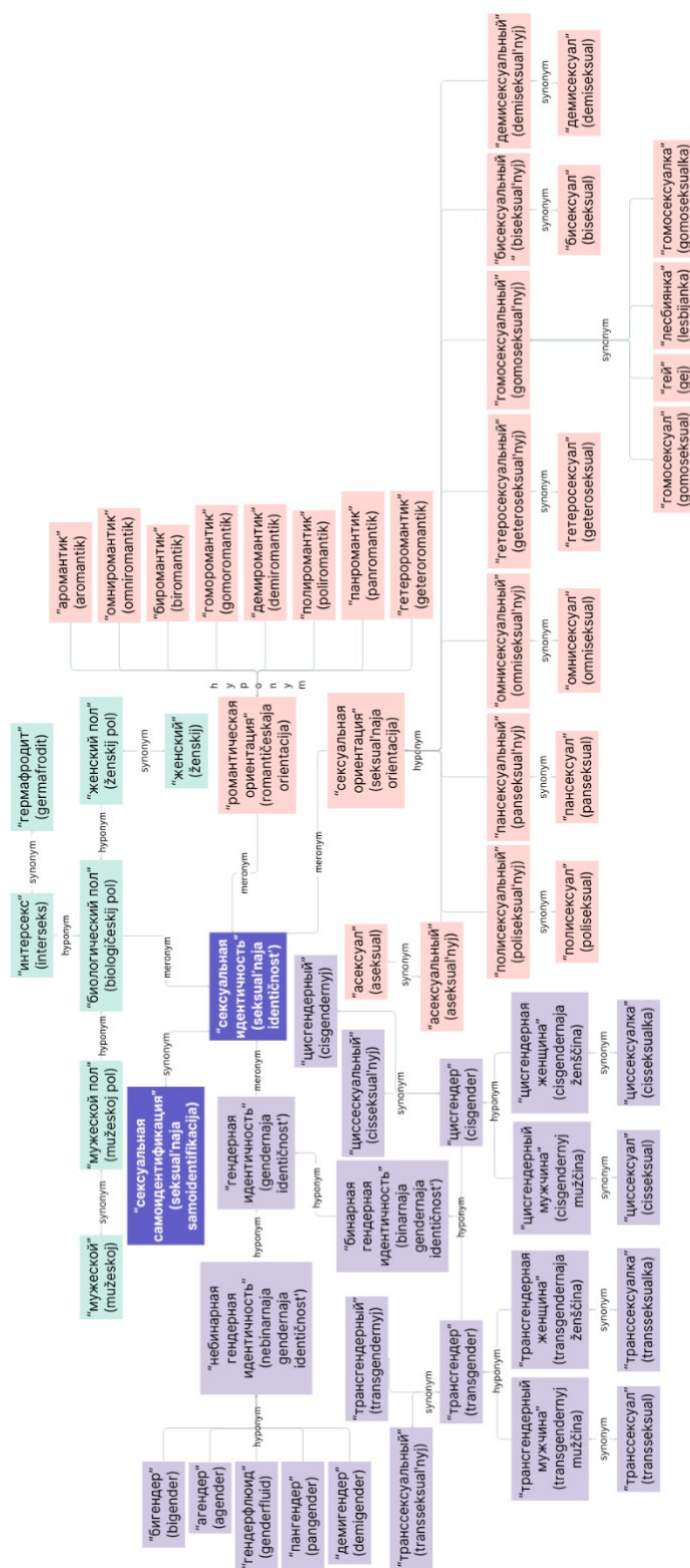


Fig. 3 Russian Designation Network

Annex 3

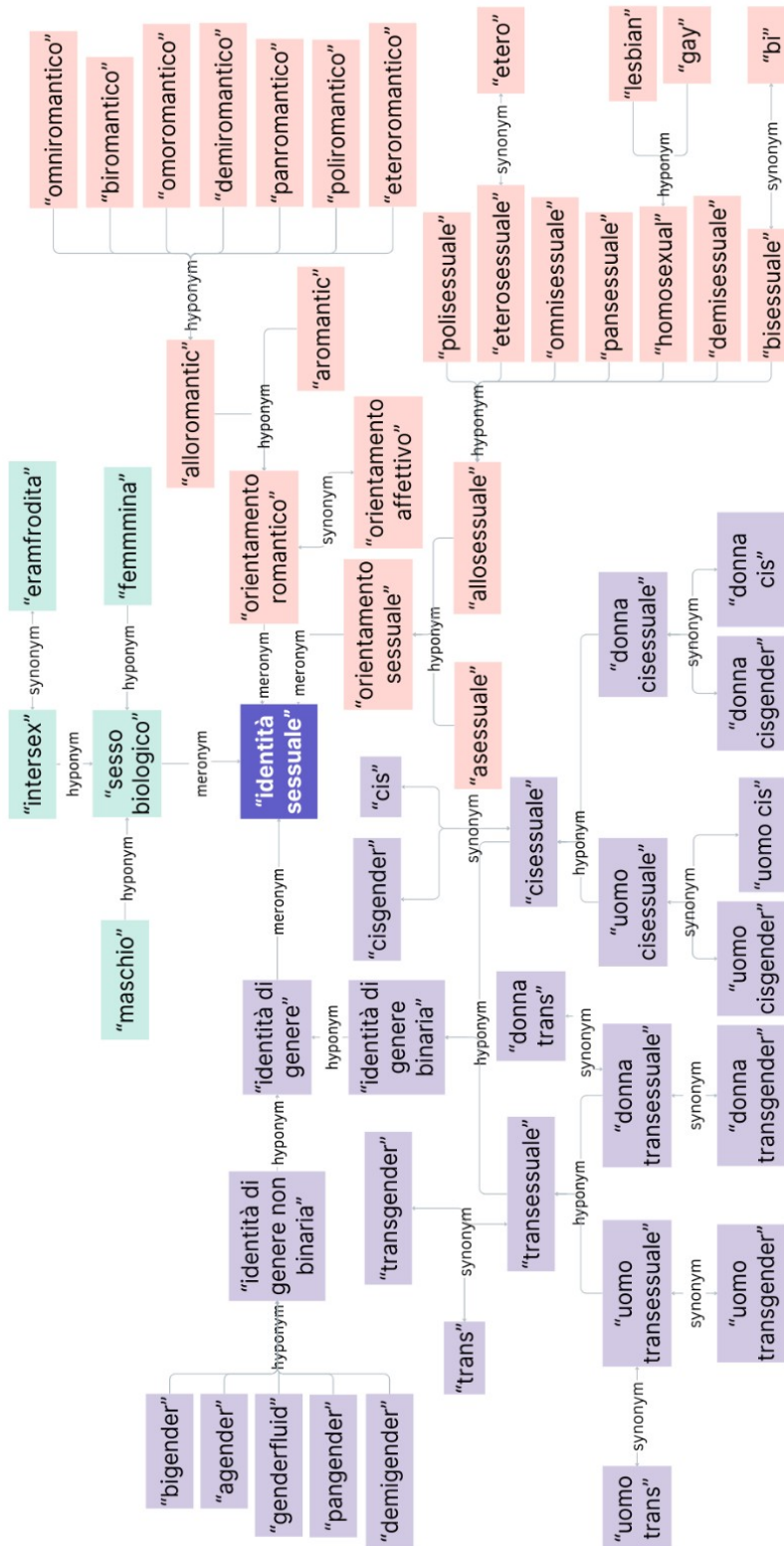


Fig. 4 Italian Designation Network