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Sociolinguistic variation in spoken Italian: An introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2023-0004>

1 Language varieties in Italo-Romance

In Italo-Romance, as well as in most European scenarios, the current language space between base dialects and standard results from a previous situation of ‘spoken diglossia’ (cf. Auer 2005). In fact, until at least the second half of the nineteenth century, Italian was used by a small minority of the population and almost exclusively in writing and formal speech; the vast majority of the population was composed of nearly monolingual dialect speakers, and local dialects were basically the sole languages for daily use.

This situation evolved when socio-economic changes (such as the rise of industrial and post-industrial societies, the growing rates of people entering compulsory and post-compulsory education, the increase in internal and external mobility, and the development of mass media) brought about the massive spread of the standard language across speakers and domains of use. As a result, Italian came to be used by the majority of the population both in writing and formal speech as well as in everyday conversations (see, *inter alia*, De Mauro 2014; Berruto 2018).

This led to the progressive conventionalization of (co-occurring) linguistic features which could meet the communicative needs of the daily activity of speaking. Such features arose partly from the well-known processes naturally appearing in many sub-standard spoken varieties across languages (cf. Chambers 2004) and partly from the retention of dialect features; contact between local dialects and standard essentially gave rise to different regional varieties of Italian, each possessing its own social and situational varieties (the distinction between inherent and contact-induced features is, however, far from clear-cut in Italo-Romance). Regional, social, and situational varieties thus emerged, and the standard language ended up becoming a ‘multi-functional’ language (in the sense of Mattheier 1997; cf. Coupland and Kristiansen 2011).

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The range of varieties of Italian, as well as of most other European languages (cf. Auer, Hinskens and Kerswill 2005; Britain, Vandekerckhove and Jongenburger 2009), then began to experience substantial processes of convergence, most of which are still under way. On the vertical dimension, two main processes can be singled out: the ‘downward’ convergence of the standard usage towards sub-standard varieties, which bears some resemblance to the well-known “changes from below” (cf. Labov 1994), and the ‘upward’ convergence of sub-standard varieties towards standard usage. On the horizontal dimension, one process in particular can be observed: the supra-regional spread of linguistic features originally confined to distinct areas.

More specifically, ‘downward’ convergence has resulted in the development of a new standard variety of Italian. In fact, the massive spread of the standard language across speakers and domains of use has been accompanied by an unprecedented positive valorization of traditionally sub-standard usage. A bottom-up process has thus led informal spoken features, as well as low-status and regional features, to be used and accepted even in formal and educated speech, and to a certain extent in formal and educated writing. This process, which has been termed “restandardization” (*ristandardizzazione*; Berruto 2012: 67 ff.), has steered the emergence of a new standard variety including previously sub-standard features, the so-called neo-standard Italian (*italiano neo-standard*; Berruto 2012; Cerruti, Crocco and Marzo 2017; Moretti et al. 2019; Ballarè 2020a).

Neo-standard Italian differs slightly across regions. It consists of both a nation-wide shared core of originally sub-standard features that have come to be used and accepted even in formal and educated speech (such as pragmatically-marked word orders and the over-extension of the complementizer *che*; cf. Berruto 2017) and a number of regionally-marked features that have become part of the standard usage in distinct geographic areas. The latter, which can be referred to as “regional standard” features (cf. Berruto 2012: 24; Regis 2017), are particularly noticeable in phonetics/phonology (cf. Crocco 2017) and lexis (cf. Nesi 2013), but they can also be found in morphology and syntax (cf. Cerruti 2009). It should be added that most neo-standard features are uncoded and can, therefore, be considered as standard “by mere usage” (Ammon 2003).

However, neo-standard Italian is also apt to include linguistic features originating from ‘supra-standard’ varieties (cf. Cerruti 2017a), i.e. bureaucratic, technical-scientific, refined formal, and educated varieties, which are ‘higher’ than standard in Berruto’s (2012: 24) multidimensional model of Italian’s *Architektur der Sprache* (examples are the over-extension of the relative pronoun *il quale*, cf. Cerruti 2017a, and the use of Anglicisms related to the field of information technology, cf. Bombi 2017; see also Mauri and Giacalone Ramat 2015; Renzi 2019). Some supra-standard features are indeed moving ‘downwards’ into standard usage, in a way that resembles the Labovian “changes from above” (cf. Labov 1994).

Moreover, it is worth noting that neo-standard Italian has not replaced the traditional, codified literary standard variety of Italian (*italiano standard letterario*, Berruto 2012: 24–27). The former has come to coexist with the latter. In fact, each standard variety now occurs more in some public domains of use and less in others. For example, neo-standard Italian appears to predominate in modern media but still seems to be outcompeted by the traditional literary standard in school education (cf. Antonelli 2011). The coexistence of these two standard varieties is also empirically supported by the detection of two corresponding clusters of features in speakers' usage, one occurring in some communicative situations and the other in others (cf. Cerruti and Vietti 2022). Such a “double-standard situation” (Cerruti and Tsipaloku 2020: 6) is nowadays widespread in Europe, although in some cases the two coexisting standard varieties have a low degree of coherence (cf. Hinsken and Guy 2016; Beaman and Guy 2022).

On the other hand, the ‘upward’ convergence of sub-standard varieties towards standard usage has been leading to the obsolescence of several socially – and regionally – marked features of Italian (cf. Berruto 2012: 59–60). This process, which has been referred to as “de-dialectalization” (Cerruti 2017b), is more advanced among highly educated young speakers and less advanced among poorly educated elderly speakers. In fact, several socially – and regionally – marked sub-standard features are becoming increasingly disused among highly educated young speakers (partly because they no longer tend to be transmitted across generations) and are losing ground even among poorly educated elderly speakers. On the whole, the social and regional differentiation of Italian is therefore becoming significantly less pronounced.

‘Upward’ convergence especially affects the so-called *italiano popolare*, that is, the social variety of Italian used by poorly educated individuals, most of them being elderly dialect speakers. In fact, *italiano popolare* consists of a core set of both regionally-unmarked and region-specific unique features (i.e. linguistic features exclusive to *italiano popolare*) that are nowadays in the process of being lost and/or replaced by features appearing in multiple sub-standard varieties, as well as by standard features (cf. Berruto 2014; Guerini 2016). Contemporary Italian is indeed undergoing the same process that affects many European languages, which consists in the obsolescence of social varieties used by poorly educated elderly dialect speakers (cf. Auer and Hinsken 1997: 8–9; Auer 2005: 19).

On the horizontal dimension, recent years have seen an increase in the supra-regional use of originally region-specific features. In fact, many regional varieties of Italian increasingly consist of both autochthonous and allochthonous linguistic features, the latter originating from different geographic areas. Such a phenomenon is mostly the result of internal migration and is especially noticeable in Northern Italy (as south-to-north migration flows have always been the most

significant) and among the younger generations, regardless of whether they were born to immigrant parents. Moreover, it is especially widespread among less educated speakers and in casual speech, and it is often accompanied by changes in the indexicalities of these features; in other words, linguistic features that spread beyond their borders frequently shift from being markers of geographic provenance to being markers of social identity (see, e.g. Celata, Meluzzi and Ricci 2016; Cortinovis and Miola 2009; Boario 2017). This is particularly evident in pronunciation, but it can also be observed in lexis, morphology, and syntax.

Finally, south-to-north processes of feature diffusion (and ‘reallocation’, in Kerswill and Trudgill’s 2005 terminology) occur alongside a north-to-south spread of linguistic features. Whereas the former mainly result from internal migration flows, the latter is driven to a greater extent by factors other than migration, including speakers’ attitudes. In fact, a significant number of features, and in particular pronunciation features, of northern varieties of Italian (e.g. the generalized use of /z/ in intervocalic position, cf. Vietti 2019) have been gaining prestige and functioning as indexicals of standardness (cf. Galli de’ Paratesi 1984; De Pascale et al. 2017), which fosters the spread of such features across the country.

2 Primary dialects as *Abstand* languages

From the above, it can be observed that the Italo-Romance scenario has several characteristics in common with most European situations. However, it also presents some distinctive features. One of the most important is that the majority of ‘primary dialects’ (to use Coseriu’s 1980 terminology) in Italy are still to be deemed *Abstand* languages; indeed, they show a structural distance from both one another and standard Italian, to such an extent that they can be considered as languages in their own right (cf. Maiden and Parry 1997; Berruto 2018).

In fact, in most European situations a transition took place from ‘spoken diglossia’ (cf. Section 1) to diaglossia (cf. Bellmann 1998), whereas in most of the Italo-Romance area ‘spoken diglossia’ evolved into ‘dialalia’ (cf. Berruto 1989), a type of repertoire that has many resemblances to Auer’s (2005) ‘attenuated forms of diglossia’. Diaglossia is characterized by a continuum of intermediate language varieties between base dialects and standard; the former and the latter are hence part of the same diasystem, i.e. they belong to the range of varieties of a single language. On the contrary, the range of intermediate language varieties between base dialects and standard in ‘dialalia’ is divided into two separate continua: the dialect continuum (i.e. the continuum of varieties of each Italo-Romance dialect) and the standard language continuum (i.e. the continuum of varieties of Italian);

see, e.g., Ballarè (2020b), Berruto (2016), Cerruti and Regis (2014), Mendicino and Prantera (2020).

In most areas, therefore, the co-existence of Italian and Italo-Romance dialects results in a situation of bilingualism. Italian is generally used in both formal and informal situations, while dialects are mostly drawn on in informal and in-group interactions, especially within the family (cf. Dal Negro and Vietti 2011; Berruto 2018: 498–506). In particular, the majority of the population consists of native speakers of Italian, or, more precisely, of a certain regional variety of Italian¹ and uses such a variety in both informal and formal situations (occasionally switching to and from an Italo-Romance dialect, especially in the latter). Most regional features of Italian are, therefore, insensitive to socio-stylistic variation, as they are used regularly even by educated speakers in writing and formal speech. Only a few regional features show both social and stylistic markedness, as they are restricted to uneducated varieties and casual speech.

On the other hand, Italo-Romance dialects are subject to a process of language shift. They are used less and less even in informal and in-group interactions and tend to be transmitted less and less across generations. They are also subject to the increasing loss of structural features, albeit to a lesser extent. Over the past decades, in fact, the substitution of dialect features with Italian features has mainly concerned lexis, while it has been much less noticeable in phonetics/phonology, morphology, and syntax (cf. Berruto 2008; Scivoletto 2014). As a result, a significant number of structural peculiarities of Italo-Romance dialects are still preserved (cf. Berruto 2018: 513–514). Moreover, Italian and dialects have proved to change independently of one another (see, e.g., Amenta 2020).

Dialect loss will of course differ, depending on the configuration of the language space between base dialect and standard. In *diaglossia*, in which dialect and standard are part of the same diasystem, dialect loss essentially appears as the loss of the basilectal layer of a given dialect-standard continuum (although it can be more extensive, thus affecting increasingly higher portions of such a continuum). In *dilalia*, in which dialects and standard are not part of the same diasystem, dialect loss essentially appears as the loss of the low varieties of the repertoire; being languages in their own right, the latter can fail to keep speakers, domains of use, and structural features to different extents (cf. Cerruti and Tsiprakou 2020: 3–4).

¹ With the possible exception of single individuals, there are no native speakers of standard Italian (especially with regard to phonetics and phonology; see, e.g., Bertinetto & Loporcaro 2005).

3 Using corpora in Italian sociolinguistics

So far, scholarly attention regarding these issues has mostly resulted in theoretical dissertations, qualitative studies conducted on small ad hoc-collected datasets, and analyses based on written corpora. Italian research has indeed long suffered from the lack of publicly available corpora that could be used for sociolinguistic research. Many scholars have been working primarily on the creation of written corpora (see, for example, CoLFIS², CORIS³, and LaRepubblica⁴), sometimes including or consisting of texts collected from the Internet (e.g. itTenTen⁵ and NUNC⁶), that present large volumes but are not (or scarcely) equipped with the speakers' metadata⁷ and thus are not always suitable for sociolinguistic analysis.

As far as spoken data are concerned, some pioneering resources have been created since the early Nineties (see, for example, LIP⁸, CLIPS⁹, and C-ORAL ROM¹⁰). These corpora consist of spoken data collected in different geographic areas (LIP and CLIPS) or in one specific city (C-ORAL-ROM) and in diverse types of interaction. However, they do not provide the speakers' metadata and thus do not allow for any form of analysis that contemplates social variation. Furthermore, they are smaller in size than written corpora and not always easily accessible. For a number of reasons, therefore, scholars who were interested in studying spoken Italian were often compelled to collect their own data, which, due in part to the lack of infrastructure, were never turned into publicly available resources (see, for example, the data on which the studies conducted in Bernini 1991 and Alfonzetti 2002 are based).

Corpora of spoken Italian allowing variationist analyses, with the latter being based on quantitative methodologies and statistical modeling, have only very recently been compiled (see, for example, DIA – Dialogic ItAlian¹¹ and KONTATTO¹²). Among them, it is worth mentioning the KIParla corpus (Mauri et al. 2019), on which some of the studies collected in this special issue are based (see Section 4). The

2 Laudanna et al. 1995.

3 Tamburini 2022; see also Rossini Favretti et al. 2002.

4 Baroni et al. 2004.

5 Jakubíček et al. 2013.

6 Barbera 2013.

7 An innovative resource in this scenario is the UniverS-Ita corpus (www.site.unibo.it/univers-ita), which consists of formal texts written by university students and provides access to a large set of metadata. The corpus will be published in late 2023.

8 De Mauro et al. 1993.

9 Sobrero & Tempesta 2007.

10 Cresti & Moneglia 2005.

11 Mereu & Vietti 2021.

12 Ciccolone & Dal Negro 2021.

KIParla corpus is a new resource for the study of spoken Italian; it is freely available and provides access to a wide range of metadata that characterize both the participants and the settings in which the interactions take place. One of its main features is its modular structure and thus its ability to include new subcorpora over time within the same infrastructure. At the moment, it consists of two modules: KIP, which includes interactions in the academic setting, and ParlaTO, containing semi-structured interviews with speakers from different socio-educational backgrounds. Others of a similar nature are in the process of being collected and coded (e.g. Celata, Meluzzi and Ricci 2016, WhAP¹³). Moreover, recent years have witnessed the improvement of already-existing corpora (e.g. VoLIP corpus¹⁴, Voghera et al. 2014) and the publication of collections of texts (e.g. Pandolfi 2010; Guerini 2016), as well as the structuring of oral archives (e.g. Sornicola et al. 2019; Calamai et al. 2020).

The creation of these resources is breathing new life into Italian sociolinguistics, allowing for further studies and the adoption of (quantitative) approaches that, until recently, could hardly be employed in the study of Italian variation. The papers collected in this special issue are some of the results of this change.

4 The papers in this issue

This thematic issue is a collection of original research papers focusing on sociolinguistic variation in spoken Italian. Taking advantage of the unprecedented availability of spoken corpora, the studies aim to yield a firmer understanding of some sociolinguistic dynamics in Italo-Romance through the analysis of a range of linguistic phenomena in a qualitative and quantitative perspective. More specifically, the following points will be addressed:

- are emerging varieties, such as the so-called neo-standard, coherent varieties?
- which (internal, external, or extra-linguistic) factors facilitate or, on the contrary, constrain the inclusion of traditionally non-standard features into the standard norm?
- are the current regional varieties still patterned after their related primary dialects?
- are the ongoing changes more noticeable in pronunciation and lexicon than in morphology and syntax?
- which of these changes can be understood as ‘from below’ and which ones ‘from above’?

¹³ Fiorentini in press.

¹⁴ Voghera et al. 2014.

The paper by Daniela Mereu and Alessandro Vietti deals with the variety of Italian spoken in Bolzano, which represents quite a singular case in the Italo-Romance scenario. In fact, the development of Bolzano Italian is not the result of contact between a local primary dialect and Italian, as is generally the case with regional varieties of Italian (cf. Section 1). It is instead the result of the leveling and koineization of different regional varieties of Italian and/or Italo-Romance dialects which came into contact as a consequence of migration from different areas of Italy (cf. Vietti 2017). Moreover, Bolzano is characterized by the coexistence of two linguistic communities, i.e. German-speaking and Italian-speaking, each with its own variety of Italian. Based on speech data from the DIA corpus, the paper focuses on the phonological status and distribution of front mid vowels (/e ε/) and back mid vowels (/o ɔ/), which play a crucial role in distinguishing different regional varieties of Italian. It draws a comparison both between the Italian of the German community and the Italian of the Italian community, and between Bolzano Italian and the regional standards of other varieties of Italian, i.e. Rome-based central, Milan-based northern, and Veneto (and/or Trentino) varieties. The paper demonstrates that the distribution of mid vowels in Bolzano Italian is for the most part lexically-based (instead of being governed by phonological factors), without substantial differences between the German-speaking and the Italian-speaking communities, and is affected neither by the Milan-based northern variety nor by the Rome-based central variety. The model towards which speakers are oriented appears to be Veneto Italian (more than Trentino Italian), as it is the variety of the region from which most of the population comes.

The paper by Violetta Cataldo and Claudia Crocco investigates similarities and differences in question intonation between three geographically close varieties of Campania Italian, i.e. Neapolitan, Salerno, and Cilento Italian, which are spoken across the bundle of dialectal isoglosses composing the so-called Eboli-Lucera line. The study is based on a corpus of utterances collected by means of a discourse completion task and a reading task (according to the method of data collection and analysis used for the Italian section of the Interactive Atlas of Romance Intonation, cf. Gili Fivela et al. 2015) and focuses on yes-no, wh-, and disjunctive questions, with the aim of investigating the intonational transition from one language variety to another. Results show that the three neighboring varieties of Campania Italian present systemic, realizational, and phonotactic differences, as well as differences in the frequency of occurrence of tonal events, and reveal – at least for certain tonal features (such as boundary tone selection) – a smooth geographic cline from north to south. However, the observed intraregional variation is not linked to the dialectological areas demarcated by the Eboli-Lucera line. This corroborates the view that variation in Italian intonation is not patterned after the bundle of isoglosses that mark the boundaries between different Italo-Romance dialects (see, e.g., Gili

Fivela and Iraci 2017; Gili Fivela and Nicora 2018). More generally, results like these confirm that Italian and Italo-Romance dialects can sometimes proceed along differing development paths (cf. Section 2).

The paper by Massimo Cerruti and Silvia Ballarè is based on speech data coming from the KIParla corpus and addresses a phenomenon that is often at the center of the debate on the ‘state of health’ of traditional standard Italian, namely the use of the subjunctive. It is indeed well-known that subjunctive usage in non-factual contexts is undergoing lexical routinization and structural conventionalization (cf. Poplack et al. 2018) and is increasingly found to alternate with the indicative in informal styles and uneducated speech. Less attention has, however, been paid to mood selection in factual contexts, which is generally less affected by normative pressure than in non-factual ones. The paper focuses on a factual context, i.e. that of subordinate clauses depending on factive and semi-factive governors, and finds that the use of the subjunctive in such a context has some distinguishing features. In fact, it fulfills a specific set of functions (instead of being lexically routinized and structurally conventionalized) and appears to be hardly, if at all, conditioned by sociolinguistic variation. A socially shared pattern of variation therefore seems to have developed in the dearth of normative pressure. Moreover, it can be argued that the use of the subjunctive with factive and semi-factive governors has extended its reach beyond language varieties imbued with linguistic prestige, such as refined formal and educated varieties, thus resembling a change ‘from above’ (cf. Section 1).

The paper by Emanuele Miola deals with the overextension of the clitic *ne* and portrays an ongoing change in the clitic pronoun paradigm. In fact, it has been observed that while in standard Italian *ne* can only be employed to pronominalize prepositional phrases involving *di* (‘of’) and *da* (‘by’), in some varieties it is increasingly substituting prepositional phrases consisting of *a* (‘to’) + [noun phrase] when used as the second argument of an intransitive bivalent verb. This latter use is the subject of this paper. Considering data extracted from four corpora of spoken and written Italian (i.e., KIParla, CORIS, LaRepubblica, and RIDIRE), the author points out that these non-standard uses of *ne* are more frequent in authoritative varieties of language (and, conversely, absent in everyday conversations) and that in all the scrutinized cases the pronominalization with *ne* is in competition with that involving two other clitics, namely *vi* and *ci*. The analysis of the data leads the author to draw the conclusion that this ongoing change is an example of change ‘from above’ (Labov 1994: 78) favored by the sociolinguistic characterization of the two competing variants, which are considered to be either too obsolete (*vi*) or too low-prestige (*ci*).

The paper by Federica Guerini investigates the distribution of pragmatically marked negative structures in spoken Italian, i.e. those involving *mica* (< Latin ‘crumb’) and *non è che* (lit. ‘it is not that’). The author empirically tests a hypothesis

supported by Bernini (1992) and Berretta (1994), according to whom *non è che* was the strategy that most probably would spread because of its typological coherence with Italian structural characteristics. In the study, two sets of data are considered: the first consists of materials of the *Teche Rai* (i.e. spoken data from the Sixties to the Eighties), and the second one is the KIParla corpus (collected from 2018 to 2020). The distribution of these competing strategies over time indicates that in recent decades negative cleft constructions have gradually but steadily increased in frequency and appear to be favored over those involving *mica* for both functional and structural reasons (i.e. their high polyfunctionality and the fact that they must be placed right before the verb, as is the case with the standard negation marker *non*).

The paper by Stefano De Pascale and Stefania Marzo deals with the lectometric perspective on lexical coherence (Geeraerts et al. 1999) within and between different varieties of Italian. The aim of the study is to demonstrate that the functional specialization of the two co-existing standards (i.e. old Standard and Neo-standard) that has already been observed on the morpho-syntactic level (Cerruti & Vietti 2022) is also manifested on a lexical one. The analysis of data extracted from different spoken and written corpora (part of the KIParla and the CORIS corpora) reveals that the two varieties (i.e. *academic Italian* and the control variety, which the authors call *common Italian*) behave as different lects, since they show differences in terms of uniformity and lexical overlapping. Furthermore, the authors highlight the distance between spoken and written registers within each variety; thus, even if many scholars since the Eighties have been predicting a gradual rapprochement between spoken and written registers, the data indicates that – at least for now – such a phenomenon has not taken place.

The issues that are addressed in these papers fall within the line of research dealing with convergence and divergence of varieties in European languages, one of the main developments of dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics over the last twenty-five years. Nevertheless, many of the aforementioned issues have received relatively little specific attention until recently (see, e.g., Braunmüller, Höder and Köhl 2014; Hinskens and Guy 2016; Cerruti and Tsiplakou 2020; Beaman and Guy 2022) and are in fact still challenging from both a theoretical and a methodological point of view. Dedicated to the long-debated topic of convergence/divergence dynamics, this volume focuses on contemporary Italian, exploiting for the first time the possibilities offered by recently compiled spoken corpora. Thus, by collecting a selection of papers from scholars who have adopted a corpus-based approach, not only are we able to evaluate previous assumptions, but we can also reveal new trends and ongoing changes along the main dimensions of sociolinguistic variation, shedding light on a number of issues that to date have hardly been addressed empirically.

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