

AMSTERDAM STUDIES IN THE THEORY AND  
HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

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Volume 212

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*Phonological Theory and the Dialects of Italy*

PHONOLOGICAL THEORY  
AND THE DIALECTS OF ITALY

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JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA

2000

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## PHONOLOGICAL THEORY AND THE DIALECTS OF ITALY

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### 0. *Introduction*

The linguistic situation in Italy is quite complex. In addition to the standard language, scores of minor languages or 'dialects' are spoken. The Italian 'dialects' are not dialects of Italian in the usual sense of the term. They are daughter languages of Latin and sister languages of each other, of standard Italian, and of other Romance languages, and they may be as different from each other and from standard Italian as French is from Portuguese. Standard Italian is just one of the many languages spoken in Italy: it is derived from a Florentine variety of Tuscan which achieved literary and cultural prestige in the Fourteenth Century, but only in the Twentieth Century did it become a widespread spoken language.

This book is part of an ongoing effort to present to a wider (English speaking) group of linguists a taste of the linguistic wealth that Italy has to offer, and the essays contained in this collection examine various aspects of the phonology of the minor languages of Italy.

### 1. *The Minor Languages of Italy*

Italy is unique within Europe in that there is so much linguistic variation concentrated in so small a geographic area. Why has so much linguistic variety survived in Italy? The answer has to do with Italy's political history: Italy was politically united only in the late Nineteenth Century. At the time of unification in 1861 it is estimated that only 2.5-10% of the citizens of the newly formed nation spoke Italian (Castellani 1982, De Mauro 1970). That means that the vast majority of Italians were monolingual (or polylingual) speakers of a 'dialect' or 'dialects', and for them 'Italian' was, for all intents and purposes, a foreign language. What happened in Italy over the next century is unprecedented in modern Europe: a language that had been foreign for about 90% of the Italians became a living and

national language. Today nearly all Italians understand the national language, the vast majority can speak some variety of Italian, and many use it regularly both in and out of the home. According to a survey conducted in 1988, 34.4% of the population speaks Italian within the family (an additional 26% uses both Italian and a 'dialect'), and 47% usually speaks Italian outside of the home (an additional 19.5% uses both Italian and a 'dialect') (DOXA 1988).

The study of the minor languages of Italy has now entered a period of unprecedented urgency. The socio-economic forces in effect in Italy have led many 'dialect' speakers to emigrate from small villages to larger towns and cities. There, the diverse local languages are replaced by local varieties of Italian and then by the standard language. It is very possible that within a few generations most of the 'dialects' will be so Italianized that very little will be left of their unique grammatical structure. With their loss, we are deprived of an invaluable and irreplaceable font of information on Romance languages and language itself.

There are many reasons that linguists in general and phonologists in particular should be interested in the minor languages of Italy. Italy provides a remarkable laboratory for the study of synchronic and diachronic variation, and there are empirical and theoretical reasons that these languages are particularly significant.

First, by examining minor variation in closely related languages, we can better understand the ways in which languages work. The in-depth study of the grammar of a particular language may help us to understand certain patterns attested in that language, but can not improve our understanding of other patterns. By comparing languages which look very different from one another we are not able to control the variables and thereby understand what the variation means. However, by examining minor variation among closely related languages we can keep the variables to a minimum and thereby better understand the variation itself. Since the goal of linguistic theory is not just to describe but to explain the fundamental properties of natural languages, it is critical that we understand the way variation is encoded into the system.

Empirically, we have a unique situation in Italy since we find massive amounts of data that scientists have been collecting over the past century and a half. In addition, we have a very detailed knowledge of the history of these languages since most of the work done in Italian dialectology has been in the area of historical phonology. The 'dialects' of Italy offer a unique case study of what happens when a single language (Latin, in this case) evolves unchecked by a national norm for millennia. The many minor Romance languages spoken on the Italian peninsula can provide insight into how languages change and evolve across time and space.

## 2. *Italian Dialectology*

For decades 'Italian Linguistics' has been closely tied to the study of the minor languages of Italy, and 'Italian Dialectology' has been synonymous with historical phonology. This is due in large part to the history of linguistic studies in Italy. Italian (and Romance) Dialectology as a field of scientific investigation was established in the Nineteenth Century, unofficially with the publication of Ascoli's seminal paper, "Saggi ladini," in the first issue of his *Archivio Glottologico Italiano* (1873).<sup>1</sup> Crucially, Ascoli's work, as well as that of his predecessors, was written within the framework of comparative-historical phonology, and their work established the tradition of studying the minor languages from the perspective of historical phonology, a tradition which continues uninterrupted to this day. In their recent manual on *Fondamenti di Dialettologia Italiana*, Grassi, Sobrero, & Telmon (1997:91-126) dedicate §3.3 to "I dialetti in Italia: I principali fenomeni linguistici" with four subsections divided among "I sistemi vocalici," "Altri fenomeni vocalici," "Il consonantismo," "Qualche fenomeno morfologico." The heavy emphasis on phonology, specifically historical phonology, with only a brief mention of morphology and morphosyntax, is typical of the approach to the field even today.

The study of historical phonology encompasses many topics. Most frequently, scholars have examined the evolution of Latin vowels and consonants in different grammatical contexts, but their work has also included the study of the influence of the substratum on modern varieties (for example, whether the spirantization of intervocalic voiceless stops in Tuscan can be attributed to the influence of Etruscan), toponomastics (especially those place names that are of non-Latin origin), philology (the connection between the written, usually literary, form and grammatical structure), and lexicon (of note in this context is the proliferation of linguistic atlases in the Twentieth Century: *Atlante italo-svizzero*, *Atlante linguistico italiano*, *Atlante storico linguistico etnografico friulano*, *Atlante linguistico etnografico italiano della Corsica*, *Atlante linguistico dei laghi d'Italia*, etc.). These scholars have also worked on the classification of the 'dialects', categorizing them usually on the basis of historical phonology (for example, the northern Gallo-Romance varieties are distinguished from the other Italo-Romance varieties on the basis of degemination vs retention of Latin geminate consonants) and the lexicon (for example, one of the isoglosses distinguishing the northern 'dialects' from the central and southern 'dialects' is the one which divides the areas using a form of HINC HODIE from the areas using a form of HODIE for 'today').

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the history of dialectology in Italy, see Benincà (1996), Cortelazzo (1980), Grassi, Sobrero, & Telmon (1997: 33-69), and references therein.

The traditional approach to dialectology as a field of comparative-historical phonology has had some competition in the recent past. Structuralism represented a new approach to the study of language in that it shifted the focus of investigation to grammar as a synchronic, autonomous system. Perhaps the earliest application of Structuralism to an Italian 'dialect' is Soffietti (1949), but the first truly influential structuralist study of an Italian 'dialect' is Heilmann (1955). Structuralism was adopted by many dialectologists in the 1960s and into the 1970s, when another model was introduced: Sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics first received widespread attention in Italy with the publication of a special issue of the *Rassegna italiana di sociologia* (1968) dedicated to this topic, and has been perhaps the most fruitful approach to Italian dialectology in the past few decades. In viewing language as a social phenomenon, it represents an alternative model to the study of language, and it has broadened the field of investigation to include different social dimensions (such as class) and geographic areas (such as urban environments). Studying the phonetic structure of the minor languages has also recently gained favor in many research centers in Italy including Bologna, Padua, Pisa, and Naples, and the results have been significant and promising.

The development of Generative Grammar in the second half of the Twentieth Century has revolutionized the way we think about language, as well as about human cognition in general. In Italy, the introduction of Generative Grammar meant that, for the first time, syntax was the focus of intensive study, and the Italian 'dialects' have proved to be a particularly fertile field for these syntactic investigations. The study of the phonology of Italian 'dialects' has played a more subdued role in Generative Linguistics. Beginning with Saltarelli's pioneering work on Italian (Saltarelli 1970) many phonologists have studied Italian phonological processes within the framework of Generative Grammar; however, those working on the phonology of Italian 'dialects' have been, until very recently, few. Why have generative phonologists not ventured into the realm of Italian 'dialect' studies? There are a number of reasons. Phonologists (not specifically trained in Italian or Romance linguistics) may not be aware of the great linguistic variety found in Italy. And until quite recently no introductory manual was available in English. Fortunately, that lacuna is beginning to be filled (Maiden & Parry 1997, etc.). For those phonologists trained in Italian, the traditional approach to the study of the phonology and specifically the comparative-historical phonology of the minor languages of Italy has been so rich and so successful, that most students of Italian phonology are readily drawn to this area of investigation. However, Generative Phonology (and especially recent theories of Generative Phonology, such as Optimality Theory) can be particularly helpful in better

understanding precisely those areas that the traditional method has focused on, including language change, language variation, and language typology.

### 3. *Summary of Articles*

The goal of this book is both theoretical and empirical. First, we aim to provide information to non-Italianists on the phonological structures of the minor languages of Italy. Since most work on Italian dialectology has been written in Italian (and, to a lesser extent, German), most linguists have not even had the opportunity to investigate the riches that Italian 'dialects' hold for them. Second, the reader will find detailed analyses of phonological phenomena that provide important contributions to phonological theory. The richness of the empirical material and the sophistication of the theoretical analyses make this collection a particularly significant addition to the field of phonology.

The languages represented in this collection are nearly equally divided between northern and southern Italy, with five papers focusing almost exclusively on northern Gallo-Romance varieties (Baroni & Vanelli, Hajek, Montreuil, Prieto, Repetti), and three on southern varieties (Bullock, Calabrese, D'Introno & Weston), with one paper on a Francoprovençal variety spoken in southern Italy (Nagy), one paper on Tuscan (Marotta), and two papers in which data are gleaned from among many 'dialects' (Loporcaro, Maiden). Conspicuously absent is any detailed discussion of Sicilian and Sardinian (except for the Catalan dialects spoken on the island of Sardinia discussed in Loporcaro). Over half of the articles contain data collected by the authors, and most of the data have not been available in English language publications.

Some of the articles included in this volume deal with closely related topics. Syllable weight, and specifically vowel length, continues to occupy the attention of many phonologists, and Hajek, Baroni & Vanelli, and Prieto investigate this aspect of the northern Italian 'dialects'.

In his paper "How Many Moras? Overlength and Maximal Moraicity in Italy", Hajek questions the traditional wisdom that syllables are maximally bimoraic, and, therefore, may not be, for example, trimoraic. Early work on moraic structure, including Hayes (1989), noted that many languages (Old English, Farsi, German and Danish dialects, Estonian, etc.) are best described as having trimoraic syllables. By studying phonological patterns and phonetic evidence, Hajek argues that trimoraic syllables can also be found in standard Italian, Friulian, Lombard, and Bolognese.

The second paper dealing with syllable structure and vowel length is Baroni & Vanelli's "The Relationship Between Vowel Length and Consonantal Voicing in Friulian". The authors present the results of an acoustic study of Friulian

vowels and consonants which show that the relationship between vowel length and consonant voice is more complex than previously assumed (Hualde 1990; Repetti 1992, 1994; Vanelli 1979, 1986). They show that the burden of 'contrast' is not due to a single feature (consonant voice, vowel length), but to a group of features, (various degrees of consonant and vowel length, vowel quality, and tonal shape).

Prieto ("Vowel Lengthening in Milanese") reexamines Milanese data in which long vowels surface only in word-final stressed syllables, but not in (ante)penultimate stressed syllables or in unstressed syllables. She notes that previous (derivational) accounts of these facts do not explain this particular distribution, and she offers a principled motivation for the fact that vowels are lengthened only in this context. She couches her analysis in Optimality Theory and uses three well-attested constraints to account for the patterns: Foot Binariness (feet should be analyzable as binary), High-Sonority-Nucleus (favoring nuclei of higher sonority over those of lower sonority), and Fill (requiring input structure be respected).

Two other papers deal with metrical structure: Repetti's "Uneven or Moraic Trochees? Evidence from Emilian and Romagnol Dialects", and Marotta's "Oxytone Infinitives in the Dialect of Pisa".

Repetti examines the status of (HL) trochaic feet. According to one model of trochaic feet (the 'moraic trochee' model) such a foot is not permitted, while according to the 'uneven trochee' model it is. Repetti finds evidence of (HL) feet in Emilian and Romagnol dialects. First, in some dialects phonotactic constraints apply to heterosyllabic consonants in the same foot, i. e., consonants found in the following context: (CVC.CV). A foot with this structure, namely (HL), is an uneven trochee. Second, some words have a metrical template which is part of the input. That template is a disyllabic trochaic foot — (ʔʔ) — which may be realized with an (HL) structure.

Marotta discusses the aberrant rhythmical pattern of the oxytone infinitives in the Tuscan dialects and their interaction in various phonological processes. She notes that an analysis of these structures and processes is problematic within a theory of metrical structure that includes the Principle of Uniformity (languages necessarily have only one type of foot structure). She suggests that Pisan can best be analyzed as having left-headed and right-headed feet, binary and ternary feet. By adopting this analysis, Extrametricality and Degenerate Feet are no longer necessary components of the theory, and we can provide a more natural analysis of words with final or antepenultimate stress, and of the metrical structure of the various prosodic levels.

The prosodic hierarchy is the topic of investigation of Loporcaro's "Stress Stability under Cliticization and the Prosodic Status of Romance Clitics". He

begins by noting the three different Romance stress patterns of verb + enclitic pronoun structures: (i) stress is never reassigned when enclitic pronouns are added to the verb, (ii) stress is reassigned only when two or more enclitics follow the verb, (iii) stress is reassigned whenever an enclitic pronoun is added to the verb. Previous accounts of the data are based on the assumption that clitics subcategorize for different prosodic categories (Prosodic Word, Phonological Phrase, or Clitic Group), but Loporcaro argues that there is no conclusive evidence of this. He instead proposes that Romance clitics are invariably adjoined to the Prosodic Word. The author focuses on varieties with stress stability under enclisis, type (i), and discusses segmental rules in these varieties that only apply within the domain of the Prosodic Word: *i*-epenthesis in Algarés, vowel raising in Romanesco and Friulian, vowel insertion and vowel harmony in two northern Italian 'dialects'. By showing that these rules do in fact apply to the verb + enclitic structures, he concludes that the clitics must be part of the Prosodic Word. Therefore, the three different types of stress patterns are not due to the different prosodic status of the clitics, but to a parametric option allowing or forbidding stress to be reassigned postlexically.

Montreuil's paper, "Sonority and Derived Clusters in Raeto-Romance and Gallo-Italic", accounts for the complex word-initial onsets found in five 'dialects' of Northern Italy and Eastern Switzerland. Montreuil shows that the properties of derived clusters is different from those of underlying clusters, and he argues that the sonority differential (and not absolute sonority) plays a central role in determining acceptability in clusters and in understanding dialect variation.

Three papers deal with the vowel quality of languages spoken in the Apulia region: Nagy ("Stress and Schwa in Faetar"), D'Introno & Weston ("Vowel Alternation, Vowel/Consonant Assimilation and OCP Effects in a Barese Dialect"), and Calabrese ("The Feature [Advanced Tongue Root] and Vowel Fronting in Romance").

In her paper on Faetar (a Francoprovençal dialect spoken in Faeto, in the province of Foggia), Nagy questions the phonemic status of schwa: is it predictable, or is it lexical? She considers various analyses according to which schwa is lexical and rejects them. She also considers the hypothesis that word stress is lexical: if word stress is marked in the lexicon, then the presence of schwa is predictable according to the following rules: stressed vowels are never schwa, pre- and post-tonic vowels may reduce to schwa. Evidence in support of this analysis (and against the other hypotheses) comes from the vowel alternations in verbal paradigms, Raddoppiamento Sintattico (gemination of a word-initial consonant following a word-final stressed vowel), the retention of historically motivated stress assignment, the alternation of vowel and schwa in pretonic

position, the absence of non-schwa vowels in post-tonic position, and the restriction of stress to one of the three final syllables.

D'Introno & Weston discuss some interesting data from the Barese dialect of Corato in which unstressed vowels may be preserved, reduced to schwa, or changed in other ways: the non-low vowels generally reduce to [ə], while the low vowel /a/ is reduced to [ə] only when it is phrase final. The labial vowels present further complications: labial vowels adjacent to a labial or a velar consonant are retained, but /o/ is raised to [u] when adjacent to a velar consonant; and labial vowels reduce to [ə] when adjacent to a labial consonant and followed by a stressed back vowel. The authors claim that the behavior of unstressed vowels is determined by the place of articulation of the unstressed vowel, the place of articulation of the consonants adjacent to the unstressed vowel, the place of articulation of the stressed vowel that follows the unstressed vowel, and the position of the unstressed vowel within the phrase, and they provide a feature geometric account of the data.

Calabrese argues that the feature [ATR] plays a role in the vowel systems of Romance languages, and shows how this feature allows us to account for vowel fronting in the Barese dialect of Altamura. The vowels /o/ and /u/ (both [+ATR]) are fronted when in stressed syllables which are closed or in antepenultimate position. We do not find fronting in the following situations: the vowel /c/ is never fronted (because it is [-ATR]); no fronting takes place in open penultimate syllables (because the vowel is diphthongized); /o/ and /u/ do not front after a labial consonant, and /u/ does not front following a velar consonant (because of a secondary labiovelar articulation of the consonant). Calabrese analyzes the motivation for these processes within the constraint-and-repair model of phonology (Calabrese 1995, forthcoming).

It is interesting that the data analyzed in D'Introno & Weston and Calabrese are perfectly complementary. For example, in Corato unstressed /o/ and /u/ adjacent to a labial consonant do not reduce to schwa (as expected), but are retained. In Altamura stressed /o/ and /u/ adjacent to a labial consonant do not front (as expected), but are retained. While the theoretical models adopted are different, the two analyses of these patterns are similar in that they both rely on the notion (i) that a particular feature can be doubly linked to two positions, and (ii) that a doubly linked structure is resistant to certain changes.

Bullock ("Consonantal Gemination in Neapolitan") deals with a metrical phenomenon in Neapolitan which occurs at the intersection of syntax, morphology, and phonology: Raddoppiamento Sintattico. While standard Italian Raddoppiamento Sintattico is, in some cases, phonologically predictable (word initial consonants are geminated after words with final stress), Neapolitan

Raddoppiamento Sintattico is lexically determined: it is triggered by a class of function words that display a unique 'double' prosodic structure. Initial gemination is the compromise between two competing constraints: (i) that certain syllables be bimoraic, and (ii) that final vowels remain short. Bullock's analysis provides evidence of the notion of 'double prosody', and supports Selkirk's (1995) hypothesis that function words can have unique phonological properties. In Neapolitan, for example, lexical words and function words parsed as monomoraic syllables can produce different phonological effects. Interestingly, both Bullock and Repetti independently come to the same conclusion: that certain aspects of a language's prosodic structure (syllable weight and foot structure, respectively) can be represented as abstract phonological properties.

Finally, Maiden analyzes the complex and often ignored topic of phonological dissimilation in his article, "Phonological Dissimilation and Clitic Morphology in Italo-Romance". He shows that, diachronically, the existence of morphological and lexical variants is eliminated when speakers select the phonologically 'better' variant, such as the one which does not have successive identical segments. Crucially, the motivation for the variants themselves is not phonological. For example, the sequence of indirect object clitic /le/ + direct object clitic /lo/ results not in the expected \*[le lo], but in the following forms in various Italian 'dialects': [ʎe lo], [tʃe lo], [ne lo], [ve lo], [se lo]. The clitic variants [ʎe], [tʃe], [ne], [ve], [se] are existing pronouns which are selected over the non-dissimilated form [le]. This analysis suggests a close tie between morphological variation and a general phonological preference for dissimilated structures.

#### 4. Conclusion

The minor Romance languages spoken in Italy provide a wealth of resources for the linguist in general and the phonologist in particular. They are languages whose history is well documented and well studied, which exhibit a vast degree of variation concentrated in a restricted geographical area, and whose resources (native speakers) are still largely untapped. The articles contained in this collection describe complex and poorly understood and under-studied phonological phenomena attested in these languages, they provide a sophisticated analysis of the phenomena, and in doing so they help to refine our understanding of Romance phonology as well as the phonological component of grammar. I am hopeful that these papers will inspire further discussion and study of Italy's most precious resource and best kept secret: its linguistic heritage.

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