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Where did all the dialects go? Aspects of the influence of Italian on dialects

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Abstract

The influence of standard Italian on the minor Romance languages spoken in Italy (i.e. the Italian dialects) permeates all aspects of their grammar. In this article, I provide an example of the way in which Italian prosody can affect dialects, a poorly studied type of influence. I show that a speaker may have a range of options available when speaking ‘dialect,’ including forms that are influenced by Italian to a greater or lesser degree.

Keywords

Italian dialects, language contact, prosody

Introduction

Italians are known for their entrenched *campanilismo*, identifying closely and passionately with their local town or city. In this age of globalization, one of the last unique markers of a local group is their language variety. What happens if the dialects die off, as predicted by many? Is that the death toll of *campanilismo* and local identity as well?

It has been argued that the dialects are not necessarily disappearing and being replaced by Italian, but are changing under the influence of the national language, while still retaining their unique characteristics. In this article I provide an example of the way Italian prosody is affecting dialects, a type of influence that has not been discussed in the literature.

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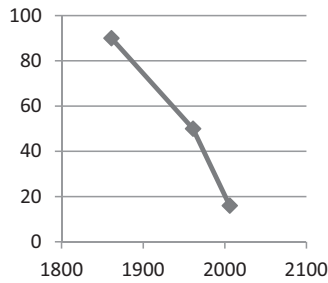


Figure 1. Dialect use in Italy.

Background

The fear of impending ‘dialect death’ in Italy is decades old,¹ and the statistics seem to support this view, as shown in Figure 1. De Mauro (1963) estimates that in 1861 when Italy was unified, a mere 2.5% of the population of Italy could speak Italian.² More recent polls show that the use of Italian has continually increased at the expense of the dialects. About half of Italians (51.3%) used dialect as the usual means of communication with family members a little over a century later in 1974 (DOXA poll reported in Berruto, 2006), and by 2006 that number had dropped to 16% (ISTAT, 2006).³

The trend forebodes the inevitable and imminent death of the dialects, but there is widespread agreement that this is an unlikely scenario (Berruto, 1994; Grassi et al., 1997). Evidence suggesting that the dialects will not disappear any time soon includes the fact that, while indeed few Italians use the dialect exclusively, more and more report an increased use of both Italian and dialect. A more complex bilingual situation is emerging with various factors influencing language choice, including the level of education and regional origin of the speaker and the topic of discussion (Grassi et al., 1997). Hence, the dialects are indeed still used, albeit alongside an increased use of Italian. However, the structure of the dialects is changing under the continued influence of Italian (Berruto, 1984, 1993; Grassi, 1993; Grassi et al., 1997; Radtke, 1995). In fact, linguists now talk about loss of grammatical traits, dialect ‘regression’ or Italianization of the dialects, rather than dialect death.

In this article, I show that a speaker can produce various dialect utterances with equivalent meaning – some more heavily influenced by Italian and some more indigenous – illustrating the fact that the speaker has a range of options available when speaking dialect. In particular, I provide data showing how Italian prosody can affect the dialects, an issue not yet sufficiently investigated (Grassi, 1993). Furthermore, we will see that while the prosody of the dialect utterance may be influenced by Italian, the morpho-syntax of the same phrase may not, supporting the claim that the latter is key to a dialect’s identity (Berruto, 1993; Grassi, 1993; Ricca, 2006).

A word on terminology is useful at this point. ‘Language’ and ‘dialect’ are politically charged terms, and their meanings vary in different political contexts (for example, the United States versus China), and even within the same political context (for example, within Italy, Tuscany versus Friuli).⁴ For some Italians, a marked regional variation of Italian with a smattering of local non-standard words may be sufficient for it to be classified as a ‘dialect’. For others, fluency in the most archaic variety of the local idiom is necessary. Linguists often use ‘mutual intelligibility’ as the metric for distinguishing between the two: if two varieties are mutually intelligible, they are ‘dialects’ of the same language, and if they are not mutually intelligible, they are different ‘languages’ (O’Grady et al., 2010: 298). In Italy, ‘Italian’ refers to a variety of the national language, and ‘dialect’ refers to any of the non-standard Romance varieties spoken in Italy. With full awareness of the complexities of the linguistic situation and the limitations of this simplistic bipartition, I will use these terms in this way, although a more accurate way to describe language use in Italy may be as a spectrum of language varieties, with ‘Italian’ and ‘dialect’ at the two ends, and the forms resulting from mutual interference in between.⁵ The linguistic changes that we are observing in Italy today can be described as a shift in the spectrum: the ‘dialect’ end is shrinking, leading to a smaller distance between the two extremes (Berruto, 1993).

Italian influence on the dialects

The reciprocal influence of Italian and dialect (i.e. dialect influence on Italian and Italian influence on dialect) has been well documented and is widely discussed in the literature. This article is concerned with Italian influence on dialect (Berruto, 1984, 1993; Grassi et al., 1997; Miglietta, 2003; Parry, 1990; Ricca, 2006; Sanga, 1985; Sobrero, 1997; Sornicola, 2006a, 2006b).

The most visible, accessible, and well-documented influence of Italian on dialects is in the lexicon (Grassi, 1993), in particular the replacement of dialect words that superficially do not appear to have an Italian cognate, with Italian(ized) ones: Emilian /lybja/ ‘landslide’ replaced by /frana/ (It. *frana*), Piedmontese /eva/ ‘water’ replaced by /akwa/ (It. *acqua*). Similarly, new words entering the dialect lexicon are borrowed directly from the standard language, such as It. *treno* ‘train’ adapted as /trenu/, /tren/, etc., and It. *sito* ‘(internet) site’ borrowed as /situ/, /fitu/, /sit/, etc.

The parts of dialect grammar that are the most resistant to Italian influence include morphology and syntax, which are at the core of the identity of a variety (Berruto, 1993; Grassi, 1993). The inflectional morphology of the verbal system remains most resistant to change (Ricca, 2006), but other aspects of a dialect’s morpho-syntax may succumb to Italian influence. For example, noun morphology may change to conform to Italian grammatical structures by generalizing final /a/ to feminine nouns and /o/ to masculine nouns, as in the dialect of Procida, Campania: *crocia* (fem.) ‘cross’, *patroo* (mas.) ‘father’ (Sornicola, 2006a), or by eliminating metaphoric plurals, as in the dialect of Biella, Piedmont: *gat/get* > *gat/gat* ‘cat/cats’ (Berruto, 1984).

Both forms (the autochthonous dialect form and the more Italianized form) can be available in an individual speaker's repertoire. For example, in the dialect of Luras, Sardinia, the modal verb 'I must' (It. *devo*) can be expressed as /devo/ or as /appo e/. In an Italian-to-dialect translation task reported in Repetti and Ordóñez (2011), the same speaker produced both forms: the first response showed an Italian influence (clearly suggested by the nature of the task), and the second translation was more conservative, employing the periphrastic modal construction 'have' + preposition + infinitive (Repetti and Ordóñez, 2011, speaker 10, utterances 94a and 94b; see also Sobrero, 1997). Crucially both utterances were intended to be in dialect.⁶

Example 1: *devo comprare* ... 'I must buy ...'

(a) /devo komporáre/

(b) /appo e komporáre/

Another example comes from the dialect of Massa di Maratea, Basilicata (Repetti and Ordóñez, 2011, speaker 31, utterances 180a and 180b). The Italian prompt, *vieni con me!* ('come with me!'), was translated with a syntactically identical form as the Italian prompt: /veni kum me/. The informant then added another option, /veni kum meku/, with the comitative form of the pronoun /meku/.⁷ As with Example 1, the informant had a series of dialect options available, including a form more similar to Italian, and a more indigenous form.

Example 2: *vieni con me!* 'come with me!'

(a) /veni kum me/

(b) /veni kum meku/

Italian influence on dialect phonology is most visible at the segmental level. We find changes, for example, to individual segments ([θ] replaced by [ts] in Veneto), changes to segmental processes (elimination of nasal + stop voicing assimilation in central and southern dialects), changes to phonotactics (vowel epenthesis between non-Italian sequences of consonants, such as /mt/ in Emilian /zɡumt^é/ > /zɡum^íté/ 'to elbow'; cf. It. *sgomitare*). Studies on the influence of Italian prosody and intonation on the dialects are lacking (Grassi, 1993), while the opposite influence, i.e. the role of dialect prosody and intonation on regional Italian, is well known. In fact, the most salient characteristics of regional Italian include intonation and other aspects of prosody adopted from the local dialects (Canepari, 1980; Sobrero and Miglietta, 2011). The following examples of changes to dialect prosody under the influence of Italian are intended as a contribution to filling this gap in the literature.

In some dialects of Imperia, Liguria, imperative phrases consisting of a verb plus enclitic pronoun(s) can be pronounced with stress in various positions: on the verb, or on the penultimate or final syllable of the phrase. In Pigna, the phrase 'give it to me!' is realized in two ways, as shown in Example 3: (a) /dá u me/, with stress on the verb; and (b) /da u mé/, with stress on the final syllable (Repetti and Ordóñez, 2011,

speaker 93, utterances 1a and 1b).⁸ Forms with penultimate stress (c) are ungrammatical. (NB. * marks an ungrammatical utterance).

Example 3: *dammelo!* ‘give it to me!’

- (a) /dá u me/
- (b) /da u mé/
- (c) */da ú me/

The form with stress on the verb (a) is influenced by Italian prosody (cf. It. /dá mme lo/) and considered to be more modern and Italianized by the speakers themselves. The form with stress on the final clitic pronoun (b) is the original Ligurian form and identified by speakers as archaic or ‘genuine.’ In fact, many speakers report that young people no longer use the latter prosody with imperatives when speaking dialect, supporting Grassi’s (1993) assertion that innovations in the dialect (a) are more readily embraced by young people.

These data show that a speaker can map two different prosodic structures (stress retained on the imperative verb even when enclitic pronouns are added (a), and stress on the final clitic pronoun (b)) onto the same non-Italian syntactic structure (imperative verb + accusative clitic + dative clitic). Crucially, none of the informants produced these phrases with Italian syntax, i.e. with imperative verb + dative enclitic + accusative enclitic order: */da me (r)u/. The highly marked accusative + dative enclitic ordering remains intact even when the prosody is changed. In other words, the Ligurian informants produced a dialect utterance with an innovation to the prosody, but not to the order of elements.

In other imperative phrases in the Pigna dialect, three stress patterns are possible: stress can be realized on the verb, or on the final or penultimate syllable (Repetti and Ordóñez, 2011, speaker 93, utterances 15a, 15b, and 15c).

Example 4: *vendilo!* ‘sell it!’

- (a) /véŋdi ru/
- (b) /veŋdi rú/
- (c) /veŋdi ru/

Note that the phrases in Examples 3 and 4 are trisyllabic and can be uttered with prominence on the verb (i.e. on the antepenultimate syllable of the phrase) or on the final syllable. Penultimate stress is acceptable in Example 4, but it is ungrammatical in Example 3. In other words, in both phrases, stress can be retained on the verb, as in Italian (3(a) and 4(a)), or stress can be realized on the final syllable (3(b) and 4(b)), the autochthonous form. But there is an asymmetry in the realization of stress on the penultimate syllable. This asymmetry can be analyzed as follows: final and penultimate stress shift in imperative phrases is part of the indigenous grammar of the dialect, but this stress pattern is constrained by morpho-syntactic considerations, such as the number and form of enclitics. For example, while the accusative enclitic used in isolation /ru/ can be stressed (4(b)), the accusative enclitic used in a clitic

cluster /u/ cannot (3(c)).⁹ This very detailed grammatical knowledge is not lost when a speaker Italianizes his/her dialect. In other words, a dialect speaker may borrow an Italian prosodic structure (3(a) and 4(a)), but the original dialect prosodic rules and constraints remain intact as an alternative, producing forms like 3(b), 4(b), and 4(c), and avoiding forms like 3(c).

These Ligurian forms show how Italian can influence some aspects of a dialect's structure, while not affecting others. Even though Italian stress patterns can be adopted for imperative phrases, the dialect's original prosodic constraints are not violated in the alternative forms, and the dialect's morpho-syntax remains unaffected by Italian.

Conclusion

While the use of both Italian and dialect is on the rise, the variety of the dialect used is changing, with Italian influencing all aspects of the dialect's grammar, from lexicon and segmental phonology, to morphology and syntax, and, as shown here, to prosodic processes as well. Perhaps the most archaic, conservative varieties of dialect are not used as extensively as they once were, but a new breed of dialects is surviving alongside the national language.

In his attempt to outline some scenarios for the future of the dialects in Italy, Berruto (2006: 121–122) notes that the dialect is 'vivo e vegeto' as an additional linguistic system for particular uses, and that the current situation in which both Italian and dialect are used will most likely continue (see also Berruto, 1994). Even though the structure of the dialect will inevitably change, it remains distinct enough from Italian that its role as a marker of a group's identity is still intact.

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Notes

1. Nostalgic reference to 'la tragedia della perdita del dialetto' (Pasolini, 1977: 222) can be found in the 1960s and early 1970s in the popular press by intellectuals such as Giacomo Devoto (*Corriere della Sera*, 13 December 1968, in Parlangei, 1979) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Tempo*, 11 January 1974, in Pasolini, 1977). Even older predictions of imminent dialect death are found in the prefaces of many dialect dictionaries (Radtke, 1995).
2. Castellani (1982) reassesses the data and estimates that the figure is higher, in the range of 10% of the population.
3. Grassi et al. (1997) point out the many problems with the statistics, and emphasize the care that needs to be taken in interpreting them.
4. See the contributions by Cravens and Tortora in this volume for more on the use of the terms 'dialect' and 'language.'

5. Berruto (1993) points out problems with the image of the linguistic *continuum* (similar to a linguistic *spectrum*), and he cautions that there are no intermediate, hybrid or creolized languages formed from a mixture of Italian and dialect.
6. The data in Examples 1 to 4 are from recent field work involving Italian-to-dialect translation tasks. All data, including audio files, are available online at the *Clitics of Romance Languages* database (Repetti and Ordóñez, 2011).
7. The pronominal form /meku/ derives from the Latin preposition *cum* preceded by the personal pronoun *me* (*me cum* > /me ku/ 'with me'). In old Romance varieties and some modern varieties, forms such as *meco* and *teco* are found, although modern northern and southern Italian dialects, as well as Spanish and Portuguese, use the preposition *con* 'with' along with the special form of the pronoun: Spanish *conmigo* 'with me'; Massa di Maratea /kum meku/ (Penny, 1991; Rohlf, 1968).
8. While the analysis of 'stress shift' in imperative phrases with enclitic pronouns in Italian dialects is hotly debated, most discussions deal with stress shift to the penultimate syllable (Bafile, 1993; Kim and Repetti, 2013; Loporcaro, 2000; Monachesi, 1996; Nespor and Vogel, 1986; Ordóñez and Repetti, 2006, forthcoming; Peperkamp, 1997). The Ligurian data have stress realized on the final syllable, a topic that has been discussed with reference to Argentinian Spanish (Colantoni and Cuervo, 2012; Colantoni et al., 2010; Huidobro, 2005; Moyna, 1999), but not to Ligurian.
9. See Ordóñez and Repetti (2006, forthcoming) for phonological and morpho-syntactic constraints on stress shift in imperative phrases in Romance.

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