Dialectology in Fifteen Italian Languages

A sociolinguistic analysis of Italy could not be considered adequate without particular attention paid to the use of dialect within that society. The use of regional and local dialects is a major distinguishing feature of Italy, and supports a range of cultural and social differences according to geographic locations. Since Italy is essentially made up of several smaller, former countries, the implementation of a universal or pan-Italian language faces unexpected difficulties. The variety and regional placement of such dialects has long been the focus of linguists both native and foreign to Italy. Recent years have brought renewed discussion about the importance of a pan-Italian language and the implications this has for teaching new students. (Danesi 187) Consideration of ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds has become essential to teachers trying to balance a standard language approach for diverse student populations, both in Italy and abroad. In total, Ethnologue, an organization which catalogues world languages, lists a recognized 33 languages in Italy, among which are those traditionally considered to be dialects such as Sicilian and Lombard (see attached map). Of these, some are imported languages such as German and Greek, but fifteen are indigenous to Italy but are separately given their own status as individual languages. (Ethnologue) – the ordering of this paragraph makes it abstruse…
In many languages, the use of regional dialects is not a hindrance to communication to most speakers of the language. In English for example, the use of the British dialect in conversation with an American may exhibit a sense of novelty at phrases and terms being used, but the overall communication is not impaired to a great degree. Among Italian dialects, however, the variation between two speakers is often so severe that communication is frequently impeded. Entailed in the definition of “distinct languages” This is especially true for those Italians using their regional dialects, but is also true when using the standard Italian. The influence on pronunciation and vocabulary carried over from dialects is such that at times, many speakers cannot separate the two. Though the basis for most of Italy’s dialects lies in ancient Latin, the changes which have taken place in the last millennium have resulted in vastly different linguistic characteristics. The effect is that, even between interlocutors speaking standard Italian, the conversation may face rhetorical difficulties.

Of course, this leads the linguist to examine the use of code switching within the Italian population. Researchers have noted that the use of code switching occurs often in Italian as spoken and as written. (Berruto 395) CS stuff never materializes... The use of standard Italian in plays and creative endeavors has risen dramatically following World War II and the advent of mass communications, effectively connecting the whole peninsula. The ability of this form of Italian to reach a larger audience is linked to this rise in use. Likewise standard Italian had taken hold in written correspondence though the writers are often seen to revert to their dialect when their mastery of standard Italian fails them. (396) In most of these situations, the use of the standard has taken the form of the “high” language of Italy, meaning it is the recognized language of institutions and the
upper classes. And while the preservation of the regional dialects within the creative forms is relegated to a “common” form, it also serves to preserve the historical nationalism of each region and its natives.

A brief history of the Italian language is necessary to explain and identify the difficulties of dialect in Italian society. After the fall of the original Roman Empire, and partially due to its existence, the region now known as Italy was left in a state of disorganization and essentially consisted of several regions maintained and governed by powerful families without centralized language. Regional dialects and influences remained and were altered at small local levels as new invaders or rulers took power. Arabic impacted language in the south, as did Greek, and Saracen, while Germanic and French influence pervaded the north. Latin existed as well, though its influence was seen little outside the regions of Rome. The difficulty presented by so many languages was lack of control and commercial complexity. When Frederick II took the throne of the Holy Roman Empire in 1220 CE, he decided to put an end to the difficulty and differences in the wide variety of languages in use. His goal was to implement a standard version which would be used by all citizens throughout Italy. His choice as the basis for the language was not Latin, but rather an amalgam of a dialect used by popular writers and poets in the region of Tuscany. These writers had so much appeal that it was felt that through their work, the language could take hold and spread. Surprisingly astute… In 1224, Frederick established the University of Naples, in the hope that the influence of this university would shape future writers and speakers. Historians have since noted that although Frederick implemented the Italian language, he himself failed to pronounce according to its conventions, instead relying on his native Sicilian when corresponding or...
composing poetry. Ah... back to the norm... The motivation to unite Italy through
language was not completely realized however, and Frederick never achieved total
control, but centuries later, well known writers, such as Dante Alighieri, began producing
works in this new language thus cementing its place as the national language. (Vaughan 56-58)

The implementation of this new “universal” Italian brought with it the smattering
of local dialects which still infuse present Italian speech. In Sicily particularly, there
remains a constant tie to the traditional patterns of speech and an almost nationalistic
devotion to that dialect. The distinct differences of this dialect are not simply matters of
intonation or pronunciation, however. Herbert Vaughan comments of the complexities of
differences when discussing Verga’s Cavalleria Rusticana, saying, “the unfortunate fact
that translation from the dialect into Italian is impossible without the loss of much of the
spirit of a production...anyone who has heard both versions will agree that the Italian
form falls short of the Sicilian.”(Vaughan 60) The rhetorical value of dialect should not
be underestimated. The choice between using a less familiar and possibly less descriptive
language certainly has meaningful implications, and for this reason, regional and local
dialects survive in modern Italy.

Among these surviving complexities is the decision about which words or phrases
are to be included in the lexicon of Italian vocabulary. For decades each regional area of
Italy has maintained its own set of unique or characteristic words. The basis for many of
these is rooted in a particular linguistic heritage, for example, in Sicily, the influence of
Greek and Arabic language is often exhibited in word choice. Over time however, Italy
has seen the systematic degradation and disposal of colorful and often more accurate
terms. The use of one regional term often replaces others through common use, as can be seen with the Italian word for prawns, “scampi”. Originally the Anconitano region’s term was arganelli, due to the popularity of the food in Venice, however, that region’s term, scampi, has largely replaced the former term, for local and international use, in its namesake dish. (Sereno 109) The devaluing of vocabulary is quickly becoming a major concern among Italians who tend to see this as a destruction of culture and heritage.

Rightly so…

The counter argument is made just as poignantly from scholars and teachers of the language. Due to the stigma associated with particular dialect use, making all speech politically appropriate for all citizens and students becomes a key issue. No student’s individual heritage is to be shunned or disparaged, resulting in a conflict when teachers must prescribe a particular standard. For this reason, the teachers of Italian instill the basic sense that Italian and its dialects are really sister languages within the same Romance language group. This outwardly seems to be a case of prescriptivism, but the preference in standardizing one dialectal pattern over another does not come from the same arguments as prescriptivism. For example, the preference for the term scampi noted above does not stem from a logical difference or a recognized historical reference. Nor does the term originate from classical or foreign roots. Italian preferences in vocabulary, and indeed all dialectal decisions, stem from regional pride and historic nationalism for their heritage. Also true…

The social implications of a particular dialect’s use serves as a delineating factor used by Italians to subvert those of differing regional origins. For example, the use of a Sicilian dialect is seen by Northern Italians as uncultured. The national view of Sicily is
similar to views in the United States toward those from the southern states. According to Cris Jossan, an Italian language instructor, the stigma of uncultured language use extends from Tuscany toward the south. The further south from which one’s dialect originates, the more one is denigrated. The use of dialect stereotyping extends from the nationalistic view Italians hold for their language. The disparity is not due to “purity” but rather is a reflection of regional differences. It is also noteworthy that even though speakers from Milan may hold their language use to be more cultured, theirs is not a pure form and carries significant differences from the language originally prescribed by the University of Naples and King Frederick II, yet their linguistic pride continues. Again, human…

Given the complexity of Italian dialects and the dubious origins of standard Italian itself, the ability to facilitate any communication between speakers seems improbable. However, the continued advocacy for sociolinguistic understanding and tolerance by speakers and teachers alike, has allowed the language to integrate favorable and colorful characteristics that serve to intensify the linguistic and social culture of Italy.
Works Cited

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Attached map courtesy of Wikimedia. 26 Feb 2008
**455 Mid-term Project Grading Rubric**

**10 Awesome answer**
- Wows the reader…
- Deeply describes and explores key sociolinguistic issues
- Masterfully employs concepts and vocabulary from academic sources
- Synthesizes sources, experiences, and thoughts to bring new insights relevant to any reader of the “Introduction to Sociolinguistics” speech community

**9 Great answer**
- Addresses the assignment fully
- Discusses important and relevant sociolinguistic issues
- Demonstrates significant understanding of concepts from sources
- Establishes clear connections between everyday life, sources &/or experiences

**8 Good answer**
- Addresses the assignment but may be less than thorough
- Issues addressed are relevant, but may not be fundamental or crucial
- Incorporates sociolinguistic ideas & vocabulary with at least moderate success
- May lack clear synthesis of class/text discussion with new material

**7 An acceptable answer**
- Falls within the framework of the assignment
- Indicates at least basic understanding sociolinguistic concepts
- Employs at least basic sociolinguistic vocabulary and notions
- Some attempt to make the discussion meaningful to our lives

**6 An attempt to answer**
- Off target, misses the core expectations of the assignment, BUT
- Clearly attempts to incorporate relevant information and concepts
- May address non-sociolinguistic issues

<6 A paragraph (or more) on the general topic
- Has something to do with the topic AND
- Implies “I don’t really get it or don’t have time for this, but I’ve done some research or at least some serious thinking and tried to put together something that’s at least sorta related to the assignment”

Failure to comply with any of the general requirements (length, sources, response to peer review) will result in a 10% penalty for each missing component

Grade: 9.33 – 10% missing response to review… = 8.33
Dialect Map of Italy
Regions are given in their standard Italian form

- Tirolesi
- Ladino e Friulano
- Sloveno
- Lingua Veneta
- Gallo-italico
- Occitano
- Toscano
- Mediatico
- Corsico
- Sarde
- Meridionali Estremo