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Language Ideologies and Language Criticism in Italian

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Abstract. In present-day Italy, alongside Italian as the official language, French, German, Ladinian and Slovenian all have co-official status at the local level. A total of twelve minority languages enjoy special status. Since the latter days of the Middle Ages, there has been a keen awareness that natural languages manifest themselves in the form of multiple variations. The gradual process by which the various dialects were overtaken by the Florentine vernacular was met with both positive and negative assessments. These can be divided into two complementary streams, one of which is committed to monolingualism and has adhered to literary-aesthetic or, later, ideological-political arguments, and another that is pluralistic in nature. The negotiations surrounding the diversity of the variations, as well as the competing glottonyms that have emerged over the centuries, the designations for linguistic minorities, the positioning vis-à-vis Anglo-American influence and the discussions concerning shifting norms in the spirit of ‘political correctness’ are all expressions and conveyances of linguistic ideologies that will be presented here as examples.

Keywords

language assessment, language reflection, standardisation, language ideal, purism, pluralistic language acquisition, monolingualism, national language ideology, glottonym/language designations, minority languages, *volgare illustre*, *antilingua*

General

Since the latter days of the Middle Ages, the recognition that natural languages manifest themselves in the form of multiple variations has been a consistent element of metalinguistic reflection (for the distinction between language awareness and language reflection, see the foundational article in this volume). Since as far back as the 15th century, the question of a suitable language model for the dialectally and politically fragmented Apennine Peninsula has been under discussion and the relationship between language and society has been extensively examined (cf. Michel 2012: 343). This perspective still persists, which is why, in the

preface to his *Enciclopedia dell'Italiano*, Simone (2011: VIIIf.) also refers to Italian as “amalgama” and “mosaico”. In keeping with Kroskirty (2010) (see the foundational article in this volume), the negotiations surrounding the diversity of variations are, like the various glottonyms, expressions and conveyances of linguistic ideologies.

The gradual process by which the various dialects were overtaken by the Florentine vernacular was met with both positive and negative reception. Krefeld (1988) distinguishes here between two central fundamental categories of assessment: the ‘exclusive’, which is committed to the ideal of monolingualism, and the ‘pluralistic’, which is dedicated to consolidating the broadest possible diasystematic competence. Within the ‘exclusive’ camp, two closely interwoven argumentation traditions have emerged for the Italian language: the literary-aesthetic and the ideological-political, the former of which was historically dominant until, at the beginning of the 19th century, it was replaced by political assessment standards (cf. Krefeld 1988: 312). Pluralistic language assessment, on the other hand, excludes the political and aesthetic absolutisation of individual variations. This recognition of the fundamental equality of the multiple variations has been documented since the beginning of Italian language reflection (cf. Krefeld 1988: 319).

The issue of language designations was also part of the discourse surrounding what was termed the *questione della lingua*, particularly throughout the 16th and 19th centuries. D’Achille (2011) describes the diversity of competing glottonyms that have existed over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, for example, we find such designations as *loquela italiana*, *italiana favella*, *italiano idioma* and *volgare italico*. In the 18th century, *italiano* and *lingua italiana* were used throughout all of Italy. Following national unification, *lingua d’Italia*, which had been documented as far back as in the 16th century, reappeared and reinforced the identity of the newly created state. Over the course of the 20th century, it became customary to more precisely identify the Italian glottonyms, e.g. *italiano standard*. Today, a pluralisation of the glottonyms has finally been achieved, reflected in designations such as *italiani scritti*, *italiani parlati*, *italiani trasmessi* (cf. D’Achille 2011: 173f.).

The designation *italiano standard*, or ‘standard Italian’, initially spread throughout Italy by means of Tullio de Mauro’s *Storia linguistica dell’Italia unita* (1963). However, the concept had been in existence since the 19th

century and had found expression in such designations as *italiano comune* ('common Italian') and *buon italiano* ('good Italian'), and, later, as *italiano letterario* ('literary Italian'), *italiano classico* ('classic Italian') and *italiano corretto* ('correct Italian'). *Italiano commune* long enjoyed the most popularity. Over the course of the 20th century, other designations began to circulate, including *italiano normale* ('normal Italian'), *italiano senz'aggettivi* ('Italian without adjectives') and *italiano normato* ('normative Italian') (cf. D'Achille 2011: 174ff.). Of particular significance are the designations characterised by the influence of the newly defined standards of the 1970s and 80s, *italiano neostandard* and *italiano dell'uso medio* (cf. Selig 2021: 38).

Historical

From a historical perspective, the Florentine poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), metaphorically referred to as the *padre della lingua*, played an instrumental role in the emergence and development of language reflection and language assessment in Italy. It is thanks to him that the Italian dialects, which at the time were considered by the scribes to be culturally inferior, were recognised as being of cultural value. His philosophical and theoretical treatise *Convivio* (1303–1308), written in the vernacular, and his Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* (1303–1304), written around the same time are of core significance here (cf. Michel 2012: 344). In *Convivio*, Dante sets forth the task the vernacular should fulfil: the function of imparting knowledge to all those who do not know Latin or whose mastery of Latin is insufficient. In this work, Dante compares Latin to a setting sun, contrasting it with the vernacular as a rising sun (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 83). In his *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante for the first time prioritises the vernacular over Latin, arguing that the mother tongue is given to humans by God, and is not of human creation (cf. Krefeld 1988: 319). Dante also devotes himself to the question of which of the fourteen dialects is the best and most worthy and assesses them according to aesthetic criteria. He begins with the *Volgare* of the Romans, immediately repudiating its status as *Volgare*, and describing it as the most loathsome of all Italian vernaculars. Sardinian is also rejected because, according to Dante, Sardinians do not have their own vernacular, but instead imitate Latin "like monkeys imitate men". He characterises Romagna as being so

“feminine” that male speakers will be mistaken for women; in contrast, for Dante, Venetian is so “masculine” that female speakers are thereby disfigured. Dante comes to the conclusion that none of the Italian dialects represent the *volgare illustre* he is seeking. This *volgare illustre* would have to uphold the following standards: *illustre* (‘illustrious, noble’), *cardinale* (‘authoritative’), *aulicum* (‘cultivated’) and *curiale* (‘courtly, aristocratic’) (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 85f.). Dante thereby provides a framework for the ideal future Italian standard language, highlighting the wide range of functions it would have to fulfil (cf. Krefeld 1988: 320).

A fierce language dispute (the *questione della lingua*) broke out in the first half of the 16th century as three competing models (*fiorentino arcaizzante*, *fiorentino contemporaneo* and the courtly *lingua cortigiana*) vied for expansion as a standardised language. According to Krefeld (1988), ideological value judgements are fundamentally implied in linguistic exclusivism. This becomes particularly clear with the advocates of *lingua cortigiana*, the designation of which reveals the dominance of the diastratic and gives expression to the requirement for social delineation (cf. Krefeld 1988: 315f.). In this language debate, Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), a Venetian, in his three-volume work *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), provided the decisive theoretical and practical impetus for the implementation of the retrospective written-language-based normative concept of the *fiorentino arcaizzante* (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 120). This was decisive for further language reflection, in that speaking about language subsequently became equivalent to the use of writing for literature (cf. Lubello 2003: 210). The strong ideological character associated with Bembo is given expression in the deonymic derivation *bembismo* (cf. Marazzini 2016: 636). Contemporaneously, Machiavelli (1469–1527) advocated for a pluralistic conception of language, providing an early glimmer of what linguists would later grasp as the architecture of language, and which positions the *uso vivo* in opposition to 14th-century Florentine as a basis for standardisation (cf. Krefeld 1988: 320).

In 1582, as the 16th century drew to an end, the *Accademia della Crusca* was founded in Florence. This grew out of what had been a circle of friends, the *Brigata dei crusconi*, who met to informally debate language issues, with no official programme. The name of the group comes from *cruscata*, in plural, *cruscate*, for *discorsi senza capo né coda* (‘discussions with neither hand nor foot’). The academy’s eventual name and clearly defined

programme were provided by Leonardo Salviati (1539–1589), who also decided that the *crusconi* should become the *Accademia della Crusca*. Their declared aim was to ‘separate the wheat from the chaff’ (*di separare il fior di farina [la buona lingua] dalla crusca*) on the basis of 14th-century literature and thus to establish the ‘good vocabulary’. In 1590, the society chose the flour mill as their symbol; their motto became Petrarch’s verse *il più bel fior ne coglie* (‘she picks the most beautiful flower from it’ in the sense of ‘she chooses the most beautiful from among them’). The purity of the flour here metaphorically represents the purity of the language (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 129f.; for a discussion of the suitability of linguistic images for conveying language ideologies, see the foundational article in this volume). The first edition of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* was published in 1612, but heated disputes over the title led to the omission of a glottonym (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 133). The *Vocabolario* enabled the permanent establishment of purism in Italy, even if, over the following centuries, the purely aesthetic-literary motivation for establishing a 14th-century-based language ideal ultimately lost its persuasive power (cf. Krefeld 1988: 315).

As the tenets of the Enlightenment spread throughout Italy in the 18th century, criticism of the *Accademia della Crusca*’s conservative view of language steadily rose. The last vigorous defence of this archaic language concept took place in the early 19th century. It was associated with the literary language purism movement, which had its roots in linguistic patriotism and was driven by ideological and political motivations. Gian-Francesco Galeani Napione (1748–1830) of Piedmont mounted a particularly sustained defence of *italianità della lingua* (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 152). During the Risorgimento and following political unification in 1861, *unitarietà*, or uniformity, became the key precept of ideologically motivated exclusive language assessment (cf. Krefeld 1988: 316f.). Evidence of this nationalised language ideology still exists in lexicography today, as the entries for the glottonym *italiano* show. For example, the entry s.v. *italiano* in Tommaseo/Bellini’s historical dictionary (1861–1879) reads: “*Lingua italiana, quella che è o vuolsi che sia comune a tutta la nazione*” (‘*Italian language; language that is or should be common to the entire nation*’; translation by C.D. based on the German translation by A.L.) In contrast, Battaglia’s historical dictionary (1961–2002) takes into account the geographical distribution of Italian. This is, however, not the case in

Zingarelli's digital edition (2020), although the preface does mention that one of the new features is the inclusion of regional language lemmas from Switzerland. Nevertheless, the definition of the lemma s.v. *italiano* merely reads "lingua del gruppo romanzo parlata in Italia" ('language of the Romance language group spoken in Italy'; translation by C. D. based on the German translation by A. L.).

The decisive turning point in Italian language reflection occurred in the mid-19th century, when Milan native Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) undertook a fundamental revision of the previous normative model (cf. the concepts of *manzonismo* (cf. Marazzini 2016: 647) and *ideologia manzoniana* (cf. Lubello 2003: 216)). Through his literary activity, developments in the language dispute can be traced. For instance, the successive versions of his historical novel *I Promessi Sposi* ('The Betrothed', 1821–1823; 1827; 1840) document the search for a language that can be understood by all, as opposed to a purely written language. In connection with the quest for a spoken modern Florentine, *fiorentino vivo e colto*, he coined the metaphor of *risciacquatura di panni o cenci in Arno*, the rinsing of clothes in the river Arno (cf. Marazzini 2016: 646). An ideological polarity is evident in the lexicography of this period, in that dictionaries were compiled according to purist or anti-purist dictates (cf. Lubello 2003: 214). At times, this is already obvious in the title, e.g. in the purist-oriented *Lessico della corrotta italianità* (1877) of Pietro Fanfani and Costantino Arlia.

The ideological and theoretical justification of the unified Italian language that emerged during the 19th century became particularly virulent under fascism. In addition to an antidialectal language policy, other draconian measures were taken, such as the forced Italianisation of town names and family names in southern Tyrol (cf. Krefeld 1988: 317). A distinction must be made between this fascist language policy and the intellectual language preservation movement running parallel to it, '*neopurismo*', which was supported by such leading Italian linguists as Bruno Migliorini and Giacomo Devoto (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 182f.). For Migliorini, the primary aim was to seek out the best and most appropriate linguistic form that would meet the needs of society and uphold tradition (cf. Marazzini 2016: 649).

The traditional ideal of monolingualism came under increasing pressure in the 1960s, leading to a revival in the form of a *nuova questione della lingua*. Author Italo Calvino (1923–1985) was one of the participants in this

debate. He criticised the excessive formality of public and official language, and saw them at risk of suffocating in the rhetorical-aestheticising tradition. He coined the term *antilingua* for this (cf. Reutner/Schwarze 2011: 197; cf. also the term *burocratese*, which emerged in the 1970s. The use of the suffix *-ese*, which indicates criticism of a particular use of language, is firmly established in modern Italian; cf. Rainer 2004: 255f.). The introduction of *educazione linguistica* should also be mentioned in this context, the declared aim of which is to deal with Italy's linguistically complex situation in a politically and socially just, i.e. pluralistic, manner (cf. Krefeld 1988: 323). In an additional development, within the framework of an *educazione plurilinguistica*, there are calls today for the unrestricted and equal recognition of all variations.

Present

In the present-day Republic of Italy, alongside Italian as the official language, French, German, Ladinian and Slovenian all have co-official status at the local level. In addition, twelve minority languages, including Albanian, Greek and Catalan, have been granted special status by Law No. 482, which was passed on 15 December 1999 and governs the protection and promotion of historical minority languages. The first article of this law establishes Italian as the official language. The designations assigned to linguistic minorities are often also ideologically influenced, conveying attitudes and positions. Fusco (2006) describes the historical development of terms commonly used in the 19th and 20th centuries that were geared towards an isolationist situation (e.g. *colonia*, *isola linguistica* and *oasi*). Over time, these have been replaced by more semantically charged expressions, such as *lingue tagliate* ('cut-off languages'), *lingue minacciate* ('endangered languages'), which carry the risk of confining these languages to their own linguistic and cultural regions and isolating them in a closed, idealised world, as well as by more neutral terms that have emerged in connection with the institutions of the European Union (e.g. *lingue e culture regional* 'regional languages and cultures', *lingue di minoranza* 'minority languages' and *lingue meno diffuse* 'less diffuse languages'), which are intended to avoid any ideological overtones (cf. Fusco 2006: 97–107).

The notion of linguistic colonisation is also currently emerging in the context of Anglo-American influence, one of the key issues being debated in connection with the Italian language (cf. Trifone 2009: 15). Trifone draws on the Old Testament story of the battle between David and Goliath to describe the relationship between an Anglo-American monopoly on one side of the issue and the strengthening of local and regional traditions on the other (cf. Trifone 2009: 15). Castellani (1987: 137) employs a very telling metaphor in connection with this influence of Anglo-American on Italian: He portrays the Italian language as a patient and the Anglo-American influence as a virus. His depiction, in turn, is in the form of a medical record:

Nome del paziente: Italiano. Professione: lingua letteraria. Età: quattordici secoli, o sette, secondo i punti di vista. Carriera scolastica: ritardata, ma con risultati particolarmente brillanti fin dall'inizio.

Diagnosi: sintomi chiarissimi di *morbus anglicus* (con complicazioni), fase acuta.

Prognosi: favorevole [...]. Un medico prudente parlerebbe piuttosto di prognosi riservata.

Serianni (1988: VI) also expresses this physicality of the Italian language, speaking of the “fisionomia” of Italian in the introduction to his book on grammar. The expression “torso tridimensionale della lingua” used by Simone (2011: VIII) points in a similar direction. Pietrini (2021) also uses a medical reference in employing the image of the *lingua infetta*, the infected language, thereby creating an association with the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Another central debate surrounding the Italian language is the issue of politically correct language, which began in Italy in the context of gender-neutral language. From the start of this debate (Sabatini 1987) to the present day (e.g. Gheno 2022), there has been an argument in favour of exploiting the inherent linguistic potential for gender representation. Over time, the notion of ‘political correctness’ has spread to other areas. Arcangeli (2005) views the defence of politically correct language as an insidious and highly hypocritical form of totalitarianism, describing its advocates as modern-day crusaders (cf. Arcangeli 2005: 125, 135).

In conclusion, this is less a depiction of the language and more a description of the means of language assessment, which is equally revealing.

It is about the analogy that can be drawn between a dictionary and a volcano (Zingarelli 1998: 3):

Perché un vulcano sulla copertina di un vocabolario? [...] perché, proprio come un vulcano, il vocabolario fa emergere da strati profondi e indistinti del lessico le singole parole, le aggregazioni in frasi e locuzioni, le derivazioni etimologiche, i nessi di sinonimia e analogia, gli usi fonetici, grammaticali e sintattici. (Why put a volcano on the cover of a dictionary? [...] because, like a volcano, the dictionary brings forth from the deep and unbounded layers of vocabulary the individual words, the connections between syntagms and phrases, the etymological origins, the relationships between synonymy and analogy, the phonetic, grammatical and syntactic usages.; translation by C.D. based on the German translation by A.L.)

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