The social meaning of morpho-syntactic variation in contemporary Italian: on the role of mobility in language change

This presentation explores the development of new standard language norms in the context of migration. While sociolinguistic research has long focused on non-standard language use among working-class migrants, this study shifts the focus to variation within the standard language itself. More specifically, it investigates how standard language norms evolve in contexts of recent highly-educated migration and international mobility.

More specifically, this study examines the social meaning of morpho-syntactic features in neo-standard Italian, a contemporary variety resulting from modern use and diverging from traditional prescriptive and literary Italian (Cerruti & Vietti 2022; Author et al. 2017a; Berruto 2012). Neo-standard Italian incorporates spoken features that were once stigmatized or considered non-standard but are increasingly accepted in formal registers.

Particular attention is paid to how speakers associate these features with notions such as modernity, formality, and traditional prestige (Grondelaers et al. 2022; Author et al. 2017b). These social meanings provide important insights into how language ideologies are formed and negotiated in international contexts (Author et al. 2021). While such perspectives have been explored in other linguistic contexts, this kind of socially grounded analysis of morpho-syntactic variation is still largely new and unexplored in studies on Italian (Moore 2023).

To this end, a crowd-sourcing application *MovIT* was developed to investigate attitudes toward standard and neo-standard variants of Italian. The application combines a matched-guise experiment to explore implicit attitudes, alongside a more traditional explicit evaluation task, both designed to measure the social meaning and acceptance of morphosyntactic variation in spoken Italian. In the first case, guises containing sets of variables allowed for evaluation from a variety perspective (neo-standard and standard Italian); in the second, the explicit focus on individual features enabled a more detailed exploration from a single-variant perspective (single neo-standard or standard features). Participants were recruited from three groups: speakers residing in Italy, and Italian migrants living in Switzerland and Belgium, with varying lengths of time spent abroad.

This design allows us to examine how mobility and contact influence language perception and norm orientation (Britain 2013). In this presentation we focus on a first dataset of the explicit and implicit evaluation tests. Statistical analyses, including factor and regression analyses, are used to uncover underlying patterns in listeners' responses. The first results of the study shed light on changing standard language ideologies in mobile contexts, suggesting that speakers with longer durations of international mobility exhibit greater acceptance of neo-standard Italian features. This finding contributes to our understanding of shifting standards, language change, and the influence of both geographical and virtual mobility in shaping linguistic perception and normativity, highlighting increasing flexibility towards neo-standard forms.

Keywords: *re-standardization; language change; migration*

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