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Evaluating regional variation in Italian: towards a change in standard language ideology?

Abstract: This chapter investigates native speakers' attitudes towards accent variation in regionally flavored neo-standard Italian. Literary standard Italian has undergone a process of downward convergence towards spoken, regional and stylistically informal varieties, eventually leading to the emergence of a composite new standard, the so-called 'neo-standard Italian'. Up to now, neo-standard Italian has been investigated predominantly from a descriptive perspective. Our aim is to further our understanding of the social meaning of that new standard, by investigating whether the restandardization process, and thus the progressive acceptance of regional varieties of the new standard, is visible in the attitudes of southern Italian speakers. We set up a verbal guise experiment, where we asked a sample of 209 listeners to rate nine speech samples. One speech sample was in standard Italian, while the remaining eight samples were representative of the main regional varieties (viz. two for the varieties of Lombardy, Tuscany, Lazio, and Campania). The results clearly pattern along generational cohorts, potentially pointing out to a change in standard language ideology. The data show a trend in decreasing dissatisfaction with the Milanese variety, clearing the way for acceptance as "best language", but also a decreasing appreciation of Neapolitan Italian, the variety closest to the participants of the verbal guise experiment and nowadays notably the most stigmatized of the varieties taken into account.

Keywords: standard language ideology, verbal guise experiment, regional pronunciation, language attitudes, prestige

1 Introduction

From previous research (e.g. (Sabatini 1985; Berruto 2012 [1987])) it is known that since the eighties, literary standard Italian has undergone a process of "downward

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convergence” (Auer & Hinskens 1996) towards spoken, regional and stylistic varieties. Italian scholars have pointed out a series of linguistic traits that represented these trends in contemporary Italian (Lepschy 2002; Berruto 2012 [1987]; Renzi 2012). On the stylistic continuum, typical spoken features (viz. coming from informal low varieties) have entered the “higher” levels of formality (e.g. in written language), whereas the traditional grammars that set the standard, had originally discarded them (Antonelli 2011; D’Achille 1990). Rather than being truly new phenomena, the presence of these features was to be interpreted as a change in the sociolinguistic value of these features, since they already occurred in other varieties of Italian and lost their markedness as elements of “low”, “spoken”, “social” or “informal” varieties. On the geographical continuum, typical dialectal features widespread in Romance dialects have been transferred to standard Italian by the former dialect speakers, thus giving rise to different regional varieties of Italian and in some regions, to “regional standards” (Cerruti 2011). As shown by Crocco (this volume), everyday spoken Italian is therefore strongly regionalized, even in formal or institutional contexts. However, regional accents do not all enjoy the same overt prestige, indeed particularly the southern Italian varieties are often associated with negative stereotypes (see also Baroni 1983; Galli de’ Paratesi 1984).

Italian scholars recently claimed that after decades of variability, contemporary Italian is now undergoing a process of restandardization (Berruto 2012 [1987]; Cerruti and Regis 2014). It is argued that the literary standard norm currently coexists (even in formal contexts) with the so-called neo-standard Italian (*italiano neo-standard*, Berruto 2012 [1987]), viz. a composite variety characterized by features coming from the above-mentioned regional and informal varieties (see also Cerruti, Crocco and Marzo, this volume).

However, the presence of this regional and stylistic variation in the use of standard Italian does not imply in itself a change in standard language ideology. As it is fundamental to take into account the Italian speakers’ assessment which determines what is standard and what is not, the question to be asked here is to what extent this regional and stylistic variation in the use of Italian is perceived, evaluated, and constructed by Italian speakers. Hence, in this paper, we argue that the study of attitudes towards this variation will help to gain a better understanding of the standardization dynamics in Italian. Moreover, since intrapersonal attitudes can develop into “socially derived, intellectualized or behavioral ideology” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 61–62), the aim of this study is also to acquire deeper knowledge of the prevailing standard language ideology in Italy.

In this chapter, we will deal with regional variation in contemporary Italian and investigate native speakers’ attitudes towards accent variation in regional

and standard Italian. By studying the way native speakers evaluate regionally flavored spoken Italian on the one hand and standard Italian on the other, we want to analyze to what extent there is a change in the standard language ideology in Italy, a change that may relate to the ongoing process of restandardization.

More specifically, we will address the following two questions. First, we want to find out if the attitudes of Italian speakers vis-à-vis standard Italian and regionally flavored varieties show a progressive acceptance of these varieties. Second, we will investigate what these attitudes reveal about standard language ideology in contemporary Italy. In order to answer these questions, we set up a speaker evaluation experiment. We asked a demographically controlled sample of listeners to rate five speech samples. One speech sample was in standard Italian, while the remaining four samples were representative of the main regional varieties (viz. the varieties of Lombardy, Tuscany, Lazio, and Campania).

The paper is organized as follows. In the section below, we outline previous studies on perception and attitudes towards regional variation in Italy (section 2). In the next sections, we present the design (section 3) and the results of the study, together with a discussion (section 4). In section 5, we will interpret the results in the light of the abovementioned theoretical insights.

2 Research on attitudes toward regiolects in Italian sociolinguistics

The debate on the sociocognitive implications of the regional differentiation of Italian starts as early as the recognition of those varieties, although assessments of their status were rarely supported by empirical evidence. De Mauro (1970 [1963]) is the first sociolinguist who has mapped the diatopic variation of Italian, at the same time reporting the prestige and stigma of those regiolects. De Mauro (1970 [1963]) distinguished four regional varieties on a macroregional level: a northern variety, with Milan as epicenter, a central Florentine and central Roman variety (also known as *romanesco*) and a southern variety, whose radiant center corresponds to Naples. It is clear that this mapping does not reflect the administrative divisions of the peninsula, but is instead motivated by sociological criteria, that is, for instance, the size of the population oriented towards those varieties and the prestige emanating from the larger urban agglomerations. De Mauro's categorization, based on a precocious socioperceptual perspective on spatial diffusion involved in new dialect formation, has gained popularity among Italian sociolinguists and, therefore, we will rely on his classification for the design of the experimental study as well.

The first attempts to conceptualize the so-called dominance configuration (Weinreich 1953) of the regiolects were in the form of rather unidimensional prestige rankings. De Mauro (1970 [1963]) situates *romanesco* on the highest level, thanks to its popularity in the movie and television industry. The northern and Florentine-based varieties occupy intermediate levels, prompting the observation from De Mauro that the latter variety has lost almost definitely its age-old leading role in the standardization debate. Finally, the southern variety occupies the lowest level in the ranking, being the most stigmatized, even by the Southerners themselves. According to Sgroi (1981), who respects the same ladder configuration, the only change can be observed in the higher prestige of the Milanese variety compared to the Florentine variety.

However, these approaches towards studying linguistic attitudes suffer from several shortcomings. In the first place, the classifications tacitly adopt one state-of-the-art that is accepted by all speakers, whereas large differences exist between regions and communities. Second, they regard prestige and stigma as rather inflexible and mutually exclusive categories that can be attributed to one variety on its own, whereas research has shown that they are connected to specific social or functional dimensions of the same variety (Lambert et al. 1960; Ryan, Giles and Sebastian 1982).

It is not until Baroni (1983) and Galli de' Paratesi (1984) came along that attitudes towards Italian regiolects were studied with more systematic and empirical approaches. Having conducted a survey in different parts of Italy, Galli de' Paratesi (1984) comes up with radically different results: her discourse-analytic approach reveals that the Milanese-based regiolect is the most valued variety by all groups of participants. Her interpretation of the findings are framed in hypotheses concerning standardization dynamics: Milan and the north-west in general, can be advanced as potential standardization centers for the whole country (*polo standardizzante*). Furthermore, the region can rightfully claim that role, according to Italian speakers, due to the fact that it is also the most standardized area (*polo standardizzato*). According to Galli de' Paratesi, the degree of anchoring of the standard language in a particular region will determine to a large extent the success of the subsequent spreading of a new model of standard language, based on the previous norm, from that region.

In her research, Galli de' Paratesi adopts a direct technique to elicit the language attitudes, that is, by asking questions of the type "Do you like the accent in which Italian is spoken in Rome?". Although drawing the attention to the object of investigation *per se*, i.e. varieties of a language, does not pose a serious threat to the validity of the collected attitudes (Grondelaers and Van Hout 2010), the use of such type of direct phrasing might nevertheless prove problematic if it is language attitudes and ideologies we are dealing with. Within the family of direct

methods, one can still discern types that place different degrees of cognitive load on the participants as well as temporal gaps in the experiment, which might, as a consequence, trigger distinct stereotypes among participants. Baroni's (1983) can be deemed the first study conducted according to the methodological standards observed in social psychology, in that she uses the indirect technique *par excellence*, namely the *matched guise test* (cf. below). Her findings showed that regional varieties of Italian are hybrids which are not appreciated by anyone and which are, unequivocally, the single mark of inferiority (Baroni 1983: 114). Standard Italian ranked high on socioeconomic status, while dialect speakers were found pleasant and trustworthy. In spite of having acquired a certain status in sociolinguistic research, only lately do matched guise experiments seem to have gained popularity in the Italian linguistic scene (Calamai and Ricci 2005; Calamai, this volume; Di Ferrante 2008).

Although Di Ferrante's (2008) study adopts an experimental design that in many respects resembles ours, the theoretical framework in which we embed the results will be rather different. Moreover, as we want to do justice to the complexity of the data, we are convinced that a more advanced exploration of the results should be pursued.

3 Method

3.1 Indirect measurement of attitudes

The literature on language attitude research traditionally distinguishes two groups of attitude-experimental techniques: direct methods and indirect methods. The verbal guise test (Cooper and Fishman 1974), which is a more realistic refinement of the better known *matched guise test* (Lambert et al. 1960), is an example of the latter group. The aforementioned distinction is mainly based on the presentation of the attitude stimuli. Measuring language attitudes directly, roughly implies that respondents not only know that they are giving away attitudes, but they also know very well what the precise object is of the attitude they have been questioned about. Usually, direct techniques make use of questionnaires or interviews which contain questions that explicitly refer to specific aspects of language (Ryan, Giles and Hewstone 1988). In an indirect elicitation of attitudes, participants are actually not aware what exactly they are evaluating. More than that, the researcher presents the whole experimental task without mentioning to any extent the features that are, in fact, the ones he wants to investigate. This is done because one would like to turn participants' conscious attention away from those features (e.g.

regional accents, as in our case). A way to do this is by pretending, when introducing the experiments to the audience, that the survey aims to find the best voice for a radio program. However, it is crucial that all other, potentially harmful vocal characteristics, like pitch or loudness, are kept constant across the different audio samples. This guarantees that, when the analysis shows distinct attitudes for the audio samples, these differences are simply and solely due to the single variable feature of the samples. The general assumption, which partially explains the success of indirect measurements, is that people will reveal more hidden, sincere and fundamental attitudes about a particular attitude object when they are not aware that they are actually revealing their attitudes towards that specific object. While matched guise experiments involve only one speaker for all stimuli, in order to have full control over paralinguistic speech characteristics, verbal guise experiments work with different speakers, since finding one speaker that knows or perfectly imitates several accents without appearing affected, is a difficult task.

3.2 Design of the case study

The stimuli battery consisted in nine audio clips, which included specifically two 20 seconds samples of each of the four main regional Italian varieties (Milanese, Florentine, Roman and Neapolitan flavored Italian) and one sample of standard Italian. The fragments of the regional varieties were all extracted from the spoken component of the CLIPS corpus (*Corpora e Lessici di Italiano Parlato e Scritto*, Albano Leoni, Cutugno and Savy 2006). The male¹ speakers in our CLIPS-fragments are involved in so-called map tasks, that is, conversational events where the first participant explains how to get from A to B, but using a map that contains reference points that are completely different, or differently positioned, from the map given to the other participant.

In order to achieve maximum reliability of the experimental set-up, we have subjected each stage in the construction of the experiment to pilot tests. As regards the stimuli choice, the aforementioned eight fragments have been retained after a first pilot study was conducted to check whether the audio sample indexed sufficiently the speaker's regional provenance, without at the same time being deemed too markedly dialectal. The standard Italian fragment was obtained by

¹ The deliberate choice to include only male speakers is based on the finding that female speakers in general are evaluated less favorably than males, independently from their speech tracts (Wilson and Bayard 1992: 51–53). However, the base of evidence for this fact is rather scarce and further investigation in this matter is certainly needed.

recording an Italian diction teacher and professional actor speaking the text of a discarded audio sample in this first pilot study.

The selected auditory stimuli were evaluated by means of a set of statements and the respective rating scales. For each of the nine speech clips, we came up with 21 evaluative statements. Three different types of resource provided inspiration in the construction of those assertions: a previous attitudinal study on regional Italian varieties (De Pascale 2013), significant publications on language attitude research (Grondelaers, Van Hout and Steegs 2010; Grondelaers and Van Hout 2010; Van Bezooijen 2002; Zahn and Hopper 1985) and, finally, our own specific hypothesis about the standard language dynamics in Italy. The above papers agree that most language attitudes can, in fact, be divided into at least two components, namely *Speaker Status* and *Speaker Attractiveness*. In those two main categories, one can further discern subcomponents: *Superiority*, *Competence* and *Dynamism* can be subsumed under the status component, while *Integrity* and *Solidarity* are considered more specific instances of the personal traits of the speaker. Therefore, the statements should be phrased in a way that each of them refers unambiguously to only one component, so that the participant can easily infer that particular attitude component and evaluate it. Conversely, it is best practice to supply a minimum of 3 statements for each component which one supposes will correspond to the actual dimension emerging from the participants' evaluations (cf. *infra*).

Grondelaers and Van Hout (2010) have countered with convincing evidence the persistent assumption that matched, or verbal guise experiments should only contain speaker-related statements. It has long been taken for granted that the introduction of speech-related assertions would probably have compromised the effort of keeping the attention away from the language of the audio sample, resulting in more conscious – and, therefore, less interesting – language attitudes. Since the aforementioned authors have proven that guise experiments with both speech- and speaker-related scales yield results that are almost identical to those containing just speaker-related ones, we have added a few statements that are more directly linked to the language heard in the audio fragment (see statements 14 and 17, 18, 19 and 20). In the following table, we sum the different definitive revised statements,² classifying them under their respective attitude components (Table 1).

² The revisions were undertaken after we had carried out a second pilot experiment in order to check if the evaluations of the variables (i.e. the statements) showed similar normal frequency distributions. That allowed us to detect those statements that would need to be phrased differently, because of their formulations that were either too strong (too much skewness in evaluation) or too weak (too little variation).

Table 1: A priori attitudinal dimensions, with evaluative statements and respective concept

Attitudes components and statements	Variables
A. Speaker Competence	
(1) <i>Questa persona ha un grado di istruzione elevato.</i> This person holds a high education level.	ISTRUZIONE EDUCATION
(2) <i>Questa persona è educata.</i> This person is well-mannered.	EDUCAZIONE GOOD MANNERS
(3) <i>Questa persona ci tiene al proprio aspetto.</i> This person takes care of his looks.	ASPETTO APPEARANCE
B. Speaker Superiority	
(4) <i>Questa persona occupa un ruolo di prestigio.</i> This person holds a prestigious position.	PRESTIGIO PRESTIGE
C. Speaker Dynamism	
(5) <i>Questa persona ha una mentalità aperta.</i> This person has an open mentality.	MENTALITÀ MENTALITY
(6) <i>Questa persona ha un ingegno perspicace.</i> This person has a shrewd mind.	INVENTIVITÀ INVENTIVITY
D. Speaker Integrity	
(7) <i>Su questa persona puoi contare.</i> One can count on this person.	FIDUCIA TRUST
(8) <i>Questa persona è innocua.</i> This person is innocuous.	CONDISCENDENZA INDULGENCE
(9) <i>A questa persona sta a cuore l'onestà.</i> This person is concerned with honesty.	ONESTÀ ONESTY
E. Speaker Solidarity	
(10) <i>Questa persona si comporta con modestia.</i> This person behaves modestly.	MODESTIA MODESTY
(11) <i>Questa persona trasmette simpatia.</i> This person stirs up sympathy.	SIMPATIA SYMPATHY
(12) <i>Questa persona ama scherzare.</i> This person likes joking.	INTRATTENIMENTO ENTERTAINMENT
(13) <i>Diventerei amico di questa persona.</i> I could become friend with this person.	AMICIZIA FRIENDSHIP
G. Speech Norm	
(14) <i>Questa persona si esprime in modo corretto.</i> This person speaks in a proper way.	CORRETTEZZA CORRECTNESS
(15) <i>Durante una riunione di lavoro parleresti come questa persona.</i> You would speak like this person in a work meeting.	FORMALITÀ FORMALITY
(16) <i>Questa persona è adatta a fare il corrispondente estero della Rai.</i> This person is an appropriate foreign correspondent of the Rai.	ESEMPLARITÀ EXEMPLARINESS
F. Speech Familiarity/Similarity/Intelligibility	
(17) <i>Questa persona verrebbe compresa in tutta Italia.</i> This person would be understood in whole Italy.	DIFFUSIONE DIFFUSION

Table 1: (Continued)

Attitudes components and statements	Variables
(18) <i>Sento spesso quest'accento sulle TV nazionali.</i> I often hear this accent on the national television channels.	FAMILIARITÀ FAMILIARITY
(19) <i>Questa persona si esprime in modo chiaro.</i> This person speaks clearly.	CHIAREZZA CLARITY
(20) <i>Questa persona ha una cadenza.</i> This person has an accent.	TIPICITÀ TYPICALITY
H. Speech Attractiveness	
(21) <i>Questa persona ha una voce piacevole.</i> This person's voice is agreeable.	PIACEVOLEZZA AGREEABLENESS

Finally, the experiment was carried out on three different occasions and two locations (Pagani and Salerno, in the Campania region) in order to assure a sample that was as diverse and balanced as possible. We recruited mainly southern Italian speakers from the province of Salerno and we conducted our analyses on data from 208 participants, ranging from 18 to 76 years. The limited areal scope of our sample bears an important consequence, namely that every following consideration on the change of standard language ideology can only be generalized for other speakers from Campania (or at the most the whole southern part of the peninsula), since this is the only common denominator shared by all our participants. It would not make sense to generalize for the entire population of “the Italians”, as the regional membership would probably be the principal dimension on which language attitudes would differ. At the end of the experiment, we asked the participants to provide some basic sociodemographic facts (apart from their age, also their gender, the province in which they resided and the television broadcasters, RAI or Mediaset, they most often watched).

4 Results

4.1 Revealing attitudinal dimension: exploratory factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis is conducted to verify whether our theoretical association of the statements with the clearly distinguished attitudinal components corresponds with the real attitudinal architecture of our respondents, as provided by the data. (Baayen 2008; Rietveld and Van Hout 1993). This particular type of dimensionality reduction technique allows us to discover which variables, c.q.

our statements, according to their numerical value attributed by the participants, can be grouped together in order to obtain a reduced set of underlying dimensions, the so-called factors, that model as best they can the variability in those numerical evaluations. Translated in “attitudinal” terms, our factor analysis will try to uncover some basic attitudinal components, ideally the ones that we schematized above, and aggregate the statements in those components.

The factor analysis (with selection criterion eigenvalue > 1) yielded a three components solution that accounted for 54.6% of the variance, which is a moderately satisfactory proportion. The table below presents some detailed numerical output (Table 2).

Table 2: Eigenvalues and proportions of explained variation by the factors

	Eigenvalue	Proportion explained variation	Cumulative proportion
Factor 1	8.9402827	0.211	0.211
Factor 2	2.2687596	0.197	0.408
Factor 3	1.1574069	0.138	0.546
Factor 4	0.8980228		

The identification of those factors (or components) has to be determined by inspecting the original variables that can be grouped in each factor. This procedure can be carried out by looking at the factor loadings (which are listed in the first three columns in Table 3, under the three factors). These are the correlation coefficients between the original, manifest variables and their score for a certain factor. Those factor scores are, in turn, the distances between the observations, c.q. the evaluations of a variable, and their perpendicular projection on the axis of the factor (Rietveld and Van Hout 1993). Variables that load high on a factor, whether positive or negative loadings, usually tend to be useful to interpret and name the factor. We chose 0.4 as cut-off value to claim that a variable loads high enough on a factor.

As shown in Table 3, not all initial variables have been retained by the analysis, and not all of our predictions concerning the components of the attitudinal profile have proved to be correct. First, the main reason to discard the problematic variables (TIPICITÀ, ESEMPLARITÀ, FORMALITÀ and PRESTIGIO) is to increase the interpretative power of the factor analysis. The dark lines in the table divide the original variables according to the a priori distinctions and groupings described above: *Speaker Status*, *Speaker Integrity*, *Speaker Solidarity*, *Speech Status*, *Speech Attractiveness*. Inversely, vertical groupings of dark grey-colored factor loadings identify the a posteriori created dimensions. Notice that after the elimination of

the hindering variables *TIPICITÀ*, *ESEMPLARITÀ* and *FORMALITÀ*, it is no longer possible to distinguish the subdimensions *Speech Norm* and *Speech Intelligibility*. Secondly, a rather surprising outcome can be observed as regards to the treatment of the *Speaker Integrity* variables (*FIDUCIA*, *CONDISCENDENZA* and *ONESTÀ*), which load as high on the second factor as the variables that pertain more generally to speaker status dimensions, in contrast with our assumptions that opinions about honesty and trustworthiness (integrity) are more closely connected with a friendly and funny personality (solidarity). In other words, our Southern Italian participants associate values related to integrity to the status of a speaker, in terms of their competence and social position, rather than to their individual personal traits.

Table 3: Factor loadings per variable per factor (variables with factor loadings between 0.3 and 0.4 are deemed moderately high [light grey]; factor loadings higher than 0.4 are considered high [dark grey]).

Original dimensions	Manifest variables	Obtained dimensions (factors)		
		Factor 1: <i>Speech Status</i>	Factor 2: <i>Speaker Status</i>	Factor 3: <i>Speaker Solidarity</i>
<i>Speaker Status</i>	ISTRUZIONE	0.649	0.435	0.007
	EDUCAZIONE	0.332	0.587	0.138
	ASPETTO	0.337	0.457	0.189
	MENTALITÀ	0.406	0.496	0.338
<i>Speaker Integrity</i>	FIDUCIA	0.312	0.621	0.308
	CONDISCENDENZA	0.155	0.582	0.226
	ONESTÀ	0.281	0.666	0.245
<i>Speaker Solidarity</i>	MODESTIA	0.198	0.542	0.345
	SIMPATIA	0.109	0.258	0.787
	INTRATTENIMENTO	0.007	0.205	0.718
	AMICIZIA	0.224	0.503	0.515
<i>Speech Status</i>	CORRETTEZZA	0.758	0.320	0.011
	DIFFUSIONE	0.737	0.186	0.080
	FAMILIARITÀ	0.516	0.162	0.218
	CHIAREZZA	0.817	0.211	0.152
<i>Speech Attractiveness</i>	PIACEVOLEZZA	0.429	0.364	0.485

Let us now proceed to an assessment of the definitive dimensions that were extracted from the data, namely *Speech Status*, *Speaker Status* and *Speaker Solidarity* (together with *Speech Attractiveness*). The variables *CORRETTEZZA*, *DIFFUSIONE*, *FAMILIARITÀ* and *CHIAREZZA*, load high for the first factor and are clearly

themes that can be associated with *Speech Status* (following the hypotheses of Van Bezooijen 2002). Since the ISTRUZIONE variable loads fairly high on the first factor, we decided to include that variable in the *Speech Status* as well, despite the fact that it loads moderately high for the second factor.³ As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the second factor clusters together variables from the *Speaker Status* and *Speaker Integrity*, giving rise to a general attitude dimension that we have called *Speaker Status*. This solution could raise some legitimate criticism, because it actually shows that we have not been able to convey to the audience a conceptual distinction that appeared straightforward during the set-up of the experiment. That is to say, our participants do not seem to consider the moral virtues of a person a source for evaluation that is to be addressed separately from the social status of that person – on the contrary, they highly correlate. Furthermore, we chose here to include the MODESTIA variable, but not the AMICIZIA variable, even if it loads quite high on this second factor. The main reason for this exclusion is that we need this variable to compose the third factor. As explained earlier, a factor will be only interpretable if it contains a sufficient number of variables, c.q. at least three. Moreover, the three variables AMICIZIA, SIMPATIA and INTRATTENIMENTO form a coherent group that allows us to interpret in an uncomplicated way the third factor, namely *Speaker Solidarity*.

Finally, the variable PIACEVOLEZZA shows a peculiar behavior, and will be dealt with accordingly. In the first instance, the statement associated with it was the only exponent of a postulated *Speech Attractiveness* dimension. Instead of aiming to form a separate factor, through the insertion of three or four variables, we chose to limit the quantity of statements for this dimension, convinced that too many variables linked to speech-related perceptions would harm the results of the research. Secondly, this variable loads moderately high for all three factors. This could imply that a multitude of factors (the status of the speaker, the correctness of his pronunciation and the sympathy he attracts) influence the degree of agreeability of someone's voice. Thus, we decided not to force this variable into one of the factors, but to analyze it in its own right next to the statistical investigation of the other factors.

³ However, our cut-off value of 0.4, in order to determine the association strength of a variable to a specific factor, is chosen arbitrarily and should, therefore, not be seen as a rigid rule. Besides that, there is also a more intuitive explanation for our allocation: as observed in other countries (Van de Velde and Houtermans 1999), it is plausible that in the collective imagination, people and institutions involved in (higher) education are still deemed the guards of 'good' pronunciation, which might explain why variables concerning the quality of speech are perceived to be associated with the degree of education level obtained.

4.2 Assessing the influence of sociolinguistic predictors: linear mixed-effects regression modelling

Instead of carrying out ANOVAs with repeated measures (Grondelaers and Van Hout 2010), we opted for less common mixed-effect regression analyses (Baayen 2008; Gries 2013, 2015) in order to overcome several issues related to imbalanced data and repeated measures. First, we did not subject the participants to the same number of recordings for each regional variety, since we let them hear only one fragment of standard Italian and two of the other regiolects. Second, as we carried out the matched guise test on groups whose composition and preferences we did not check in advance, unlike the majority of experimental settings, we did not expect to collect data characterized by equally distributed demographic features (such as 50 observations for females as well as for males). Third, regression modelling with mixed-effects allow us to cope with the fundamental conceptual distinction between what have been referred to as *fixed* and *random effects*, both present in our experimental set-up. The first type of effects are factors whose possible levels are fixed, in that they reflect presumably the whole range of levels present in the population. The second type, however, are factors that reflect a random sample of the population, and which can change every time an experiment is repeated. The demographic information collected at the end of the experiment is typically considered fixed factor material: gender (male or female), broadcaster preference (Rai or Mediaset), province and age. The participants, and specifically each participant, are considered the random factors, because they were sampled from the larger population and can, therefore, change in each experiment. As the individual audio stimuli represent only a particular subset of all possible speech fragments that we could have collected (and could, therefore, change if we wanted to carry out another verbal guise test), we treated them as random variables as well.

For the attitudinal dimension *Speech Status*, we ended up with a regression model which retained the following interactions of fixed effects: REGIOLECT X GENERATION ($F = 2.9585$; $df = 8$; $p < 0.01$) and TELEVISION CHANNEL X GENERATION ($F = 4.1096$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$).⁴ Also, it is important to note that both random variables, participants and audio stimuli, were not discarded by the automatic elimination procedure.⁵ This is not surprising, since we would not expect our

⁴ We will refrain from analyzing the latter interaction, since it obviously does not entail any relevant linguistic interpretation. It would tell us, for instance, whether the older generation gives different *Speech Status* scores depending on the television broadcasters it prefers, regardless of the regiolects.

⁵ Such a procedure consists in the fully automatic backward (i.e. starting from a maximal model with all predictors) elimination of the random effects first, followed by the fixed effects that do

listener-judges to behave as a homogenous group, but instead show idiosyncratic evaluation patterns – and, consequently, this variability has to be taken into account. Neither would we expect our audio fragments to prompt undifferentiated evaluation patterns, because that would also mean that regional differences do not matter, after all, in attitude research.

Table 4: *Speech status*. Least squares means per regiolect for each generation “*” = significantly positive/negative (i.e. different from zero)

REGIOLECT	GENERATION		
	old [46–76]	mid [24–45]	young [18–23]
Standard	0.2786 ①	0.3186 ①	0.1167 ①
Milanese	–0.1996 ⑤	0.2745 ②	–0.1104 ②
Florentine	–0.0002 ③	0.0751 ⑤	–0.2032 ③
Roman	–0.1180 ④	0.1213 ④	–0.2917 ⑤
Neapolitan	0.1784 ②	0.1525 ③	–0.2339 ④

The numerical output of the regression analysis, i.e. the least squares means (Lenth and Hervé 2015) (Table 4), clearly shows that standard Italian is the only variety that receives positive, although not significantly positive, scores across all generations. In addition, it holds the highest position in the ranking according to the three age groups. Furthermore, the regression model tells that the overall attitudinal pattern of the oldest cohort is significantly different from the two youngest groups. The most relevant difference lies in the oldest group’s evaluation of Milanese Italian and its ranking vis-à-vis the other regiolects, compared to the other age categories. Whereas this regiolect receives the lowest rating by the oldest participants, it is evaluated fairly high by the middle-aged category, being almost treated on an equal footing with standard Italian. The same pattern occurs with respect to the youngest group, where Milanese Italian occupies again the second position in their *Speech Status* ranking.

Regarding the dimension *Speaker Status*, we observe, as in the previous regression model, that the only predictors, or rather their interactions, that proved significant in explaining the overall variability, are REGIOLECT X GENERATION ($F = 4.8088$; $df = 8$; $p < 0.0001$) and TELEVISION CHANNEL X GENERATION ($F = 3.2748$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$). Again, the two random effects initially inserted in the model were retained after the automatic selection procedure, too.

not contribute enough, if at all, towards explaining the variability in the attitudinal component (Gries 2013).

Table 5: Dimension *Speaker Status*: least squares means per regiolect for each generation, “**” = significantly positive/negative (i.e. different from zero)

REGIOLECT	GENERATION		
	old [46–76]	mid [24–45]	young [18–23]
Standard	0.3198 ①	0.2680 ③	−0.1881 ③
Milanese	−0.130 ⑤	0.0676 ⑤	−0.2518 ④
Florentine	0.0592 ③	0.3084 (*) ②	−0.1530 ②
Roman	0.0092 ④	0.3323 (*) ①	−0.1418 ①
Neapolitan	0.2137 ②	0.2221 ④	−0.3686 (*) ⑤

Contrary to the model for *Speech Status*, we can now state that some regional varieties receive significantly good or bad scores by some age groups (Table 5). That is the case for the two central varieties, Florentine and Roman, whose speakers are deemed systematically educated, honest and competent when evaluated by the middle-aged listener-judges. On the other hand, the youngest cohort provides very strong negative evaluations for the speakers of their own variety, Neapolitan flavored Italian. It is worth remarking that the attitude patterns of this dimension and the *Speech Status* dimension match exactly those of the older participants, while they diverge consistently for those of the other two groups, which overlap to a great extent. When focusing on personal traits of the speakers from Milan, the younger groups tend to give lower ratings than when their attention is drawn to speech characteristics of those speakers. Also, a comparison between the oldest generation and the younger age group reveals other differences. While standard Italian speakers emerge as almost the only group endowed by prestige, and Florentines as well as Romans are rated rather low according to the oldest speakers, the situation changes radically for the middle-aged and youngest cohort. Florentine and Roman speakers are conferred with the highest social status (although still negative for the youngest generation), surpassing even the standard Italian speaker.

Unlike the models obtained in the preceding paragraphs, the regression analysis for the *Speaker Solidarity* dimension returns different interactions, namely REGIOLECT X GENERATION ($F = 8.432$; $df = 8$; $p < 0.001$) and REGIOLECT X TELEVISION CHANNEL ($F = 2.619$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.05$).

This time, the attitude patterns of the two older groups align more than they did in the previous analyses (Table 6). The only really significant divergence resides in the evaluation of the speakers of the Roman regiolect, who are considered funnier and friendlier by the middle-aged cohort – in fact, significantly friendly and funny in general – than by the oldest age category. In addition, the oldest group is the only one that gives significantly negative ratings to the

Milanese speakers, while it treats the central varieties and Neapolitan Italian uniformly on this dimension. The youngest participants display a specific attitude pattern. Standard Italian speakers and speakers of the Neapolitan regiolect are considered significantly unfriendly and too serious – probably a judgment more appropriate for the former variety. The other generations, however, showed only moderately negative attitudes towards the standard language speakers, or mildly positive ones towards the Neapolitans. What the table shows in general is a progressive declassification of the own community of speakers, i.e. Neapolitans,⁶ across generations in favor for the central varieties, as well as an increasing appreciation of Milanese Italian speakers at the expense of standard language speakers.

Table 6: Dimension *Speaker Solidarity*: least squares means per regiolect for each generation, “**” = significantly positive/negative (i.e. different from zero)

REGIOLECT	GENERATION		
	old [46–76]	mid [24–45]	young [18–23]
Standard	–0.1166 ④	–0.2368 ④	–0.7478 (*) ⑤
Milanese	–0.3406 (*) ⑤	–0.2636 ⑤	–0.1399 ③
Florentine	0.2238 ①	0.2199 ②	0.1632 ②
Roman	0.1282 ③	0.5403 (*) ①	0.2539 ①
Neapolitan	0.1481 ②	0.0739 ③	–0.3639 ④

As one would have expected from the only moderately significant p-value, the interaction TELEVISION CHANNEL x REGIOLECT yields only interesting results for the ratings of the Milanese speakers. Watching either the public stations, i.e. RAI, or the private channels, i.e. Mediaset, does not seem to entail different evaluations of the speakers’ personal characteristics, except in the case of the Milanese

⁶ Given that the vast majority of the participants resides in an area, the province of Salerno, whose variety has several features that distinguish it from Neapolitan Italian properly, one might say that that last variety is not really their “own”. However, the way the verbal guise experiment is set up, with the choice of four regional varieties indexing very different regions over the whole peninsula, makes that kind of microlevel and intraregional distinction less salient and less likely to be exploited for expressing an attitude. The frame of reference created during the experiment favors a categorization of the heard voices in which the interregional contrasts become perceptually more obvious and meaningful than the very local identities (see also Giles and Rakić 2014: 17). Although the identification of the participants with Neapolitan Italians, and the recognition that the Neapolitan variety is their “own” or at least very close to their own speech, might not hold in absolute terms, it is very likely that it does in the particular context of the experiment, that is, in relative terms to the other varieties.

speakers. Participants who report a preference for Mediaset programs are more likely to rate Milanese speakers higher on the solidarity dimension than the participants preferring the RAI.

Finally, unlike the preceding attitude components, *Speech Attractiveness* has not been created through the aggregation of original variables to form a single factor (cf. supra), but is essentially equivalent to the only variable contained in the experiment (Table 7). Nevertheless, the same random and fixed effects as the first three regression models have been retained, namely, as for the interactions with fixed effects, REGIOLECT X GENERATION ($F = 5.5102$; $df = 8$; $p < 0.001$) and the less useful TELEVISION CHANNEL X GENERATION ($F = 3.7239$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$).

Table 7: Dimension *Speech Attractiveness*: least squares means per regiolect for each generation, “*” = significantly positive/negative (i.e. different from zero)

REGIOLECT	GENERATION		
	old [46–76]	mid [24–45]	young [18–23]
Standard	0.1726 ①	−0.0088 ④	−0.3486 ④
Milanese	−0.4475 (*) ⑤	−0.0443 ⑤	−0.2001 ③
Florentine	0.0209 ③	0.2751 ②	0.1656 ①
Roman	0.0185 ④	0.3810 ①	−0.0258 ②
Neapolitan	0.0771 ②	0.0923 ③	−0.4729 (*) ⑤

A quick glance at the tables of the *Speaker Solidarity* (Table 6) and *Speech Attractiveness* (Table 7) dimensions shows a higher overlap in attitude patterns, across generations and regiolects, than we could have expected considering the first “logic” coupling of dimensions, namely *Speaker Status* and *Speech Status*. There is even a perfect match between the middle-aged group’s rankings of the regiolects for those two dimensions. Moreover, this means that the findings concerning the previous regression model also apply to a great extent to this attitude component, except for the oldest cohort. We can say, for instance, that the oldest group considers Milanese Italian a truly disagreeable language to listen to, and the youngest group finds Neapolitan Italian a decidedly “unmelodic” language. The similarities between the two youngest groups consist in the top positions for the central Italian varieties, whereas a marked difference can be observed in the treatment of Neapolitan Italian and Milanese Italian, which switch position in the respective rankings. This higher stigmatization of the Neapolitan regiolect and the higher estimation for Milanese Italian by the youngest listener-judges is a pattern that has been consistent throughout all dimensions so far. The differences between the oldest cohort and the other two groups resides in the evaluation of

standard Italian, considered sweet-sounding by the former but not by the latter, while Roman and Florentine Italian do not occupy particularly low or high positions in the oldest group's ranking.

4.3 Discussion

Generational membership has been the most important explanatory variable throughout all of our regression models. This finding corroborates our hypotheses that a change in standard language ideology, that also involves the attitudes towards regiolects in a dynamic way, is probably taking place. What we are putting forward is, in fact, an apparent-time interpretation of our attitudinal data, which becomes an almost indispensable perspective in our aim to sketch the standardization dynamics through the analysis of language attitudes. If we take for granted that synchronic distinctions across generations reflect a change in progress, linear trends in decreasing or increasing prestige or stigma of certain varieties across age groups allow us to gain an insight into future developments of attitudes. This being the case, it is of great importance that we also assume that those trends do not represent attitudinal patterns that are specific to a certain generation, and that those attitudes would not change if a speaker entered a new life stage (what is called “age grading”; cf. (Boberg 2004; Sankoff 2006; Cukor-Avila and Bailey 2013).

What do the attested patterns then reveal about the attitudes of the different generations? The oldest respondents, i.e. those in the range between 46 and 76 years, display a marked attitude towards the standard language, the Milanese regiolect and their own variety, Neapolitan Italian. Standard Italian, as one would have expected, ranks high on dimensions regarding status, but rather low on the *Speaker Solidarity* dimension. It seems that this group still stands in awe of the standard language and its speakers, an observation that can be accounted by the fact that the oldest participants grew up and were an active workforce in the 60s, 70s and 80s, a time when local accents were underrepresented in the media, or even openly stigmatized in public discourse, following a language policy that favors the national and standard language. Nevertheless, since a standard Italian accent constituted, and still is, a nearly virtual and unattainable reality for the large majority of the speakers, it should come as no surprise that Neapolitan Italian represents a variety of Italian that is the only reachable norm in actual practice for the older speakers living in Campania. What contributes to this account is the role that Naples historically fulfilled as reference point for the region and Southern Italy as a whole. This means that for decades, there was no need to be guided by the prestigious language model that geographically was the

most distant, namely the Milanese variety and its speakers, which are, as a consequence, considered a completely alien social identity and a negligible language norm.

The middle-age category, which brings together participants between 24 and 45 years old, consistently ranks the central Roman and central Florentine varieties high and the Milanese variety low for the dimensions *Speaker Status*, *Speaker Solidarity* and *Speech Attractiveness*. However, this configuration changes completely when one observes the *Speech Status* dimension: the central varieties occupy the last positions and Milanese Italian is deemed almost as prestigious as standard Italian. A way to explain the first patterns is to assume that the increasing appreciation for the central varieties is the result of a compromise between the contrasting forces of loyalty to the own speech community and the desire to be part of culturally and economically dominant groups in the north (and consequently not to be stigmatized as a Southerner). The fact that those central varieties are also linguistically closer to the southern varieties of Italian than the northern regiolect can be seen as an advantage that could mitigate the accusations of distancing themselves too much from their regional background. From this perspective, the rather anomalous patterns of the *Speech Status* component should not surprise that much anymore. Being probably the most important dimension when changes in standard language perception are at stake, it reveals more clearly the linguistic struggles of this generation of Southern Italians, namely the rising acceptance of the northern regiolect as the norm. The exceptionality of this dimension stands out even more when compared to the completely different behavior of the *Speaker Status* dimension, which follows the same patterns as *Speaker Solidarity* and *Speech Attractiveness*. It seems, again, that this generation joins the overt hostile judgments of the Milanese citizens, but also recognizes, in a more covert way, that the future language norm lies in the north. Finally, we notice that this group presents itself as the most tolerant towards all varieties and for all dimensions in general, which could be a sign of the higher sensitiveness of this age cohort for the linguistic “marketplace” and the effort to reach compromises. It has been noted, indeed, that middle-aged speakers experience by and large a greater responsibility in social and civic life and become more aware of the differential values of varieties in their societies (Sankoff and Laberge 1978; Eckert 2000; Cheshire 2005).

The youngest generation, in a way that is quite different from the previous group, gives the majority of the regiolects, across all dimensions, a negative score (Paltridge and Giles 1984, cited in Cheshire 2005). Their attitude is similar to the middle-age group regarding the valuing of the central varieties for all but the *Speech Status* dimension. They also share, to a great extent, the peculiar pattern of this latter dimension. What is systematically different in the behavior of those two generations, however, is the lower position of Neapolitan Italian vis-à-vis

Milanese Italian, regarding all dimensions (besides, it yields almost always significantly negative scores). In this respect, and bearing in mind what has been noticed in the oldest category, a comparison of the different positions of the Neapolitan and Milanese regiolects reveals a clear trend. The oldest respondents considered Neapolitan Italian the variety that approaches the official norm, i.e. the standard language, the middle category placed the regiolect most often in an intermediate position, surpassed by the central varieties and Milanese Italian, and finally the youngest participants totally reject the possibility of judging Neapolitan Italian close to the norm. It is plausible that the different perceptions of regional markedness has had a major influence on the evaluation of the regiolect: marked too highly by regionality for the younger generation to allow Neapolitan Italian to qualify as a regional standard variety and low enough according to the oldest generation for the same reason. An opposite trend can be observed for the Milanese regiolect: consistently stigmatized on all dimensions by the oldest group, gaining some covert prestige through the middle-age group and finally lifted up from its lowest ranks by the youngest generation, at the expense of standard and Neapolitan Italian.

5 Towards a change in standard language ideology?

In this paper we have reported on a speaker evaluation experiment designed to measure attitudes of Italians towards regional accent variation. The overall scope was to investigate signs of restandardization.

A sample of 208 speakers rated five guises (in Milanese, Florentine, Roman and Neapolitan flavored Italian and in standard Italian) on 21 evaluative scales. Ratings across these scales were found to cluster in three stable principal components, viz. *Speech Status*, *Speaker Status* and *Speaker Solidarity* (with the addition of the differently derived *Speech Attractiveness*). We found out that within each dimension, separate and rather homogenous attitude profiles could be uncovered for each age cohort. The oldest group seems still attached to a traditional configuration: the standard language is endowed by the greatest overt prestige, but rated low for the solidarity dimension, Neapolitan Italian scores relatively high for all dimensions (the most accessible variety in physical/geographical terms), while Milanese Italian holds the lowest positions in the ranking of each dimension (the least accessible variety). The middle-aged group ranks the central Italian varieties consistently high and Milanese Italian repeatedly low for most dimensions, except for *Speech Status*, where the positions are completely overturned. The

attitudes of the youngest generation largely match the ones of the middle-age cohort, apart from the greater stigma of Neapolitan Italian across dimensions, together with overall higher positions for Milanese Italian, compared to the two older generations.

Although we cannot formulate a final answer to the question whether spoken Italian is undergoing a change in standard language ideology, these results clearly point towards a change in valorization of regional accents. In this sense, we have found evidence for a dynamic of change, whereby the local regional form – which was initially “accepted” as the best norm (by the older generation) – is now discarded and replaced by a new regional norm, the Milanese. This might indicate that the Milanese regiolect is becoming indexical of professional perspectives, of mobility and future and is, hence, gaining more status as a reference variety. If it is true that language attitudes reflect “socially derived, intellectualized or behavioral ideology” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 61–62), then the data presented here might reflect this ideological change in progress.

In line with previous studies on regional accent variation, our data also suggest that regional accent variation is, and will remain, a fundamental characteristic of language, which gives speakers the opportunity to place themselves in society and to categorize others as members of particular communities. As pointed out by Grondelaers and Van Hout (2012), variation in human speech is needed in order to express social meaning or to characterize other persons “in terms of stereotypes associated with categories he or she allegedly belongs to” (Brewer 1996, cited in Grondelaers and Van Hout 2012: 234). In this sense, when it comes to regional variation in contemporary Italian, a change in standard language ideology needs to be interpreted as a change in the valorization of regional accents, because regional differentiation in Italy (as in other languages) is bound to persist (Milroy and Milroy 1985).

Inevitably, our results are also subject to a number of limitations. Firstly, although several studies have demonstrated the importance of working with natural speech samples (Kristiansen 2001; Garrett 2005; Grondelaers, Van Hout and Steegs 2010), we are convinced that our experiment would generate clearer results with slightly manipulated speech samples. To counterbalance the harmful influence of inevitable paralinguistic properties of natural speech, we included two speech samples per regiolect, taking for granted that conflating the slightly divergent measurements of each of them would level out those differences in the analysis. Post-hoc analyses of the scores per fragment, unfortunately, revealed that the discrepancies within some fragment pairs were larger than we had expected. In future research, we will, therefore, pay particular attention to a normalization of the pitches and the speech rhythms, as well as checking for linguistic variables. Secondly, we are aware of the fact that our listeners’ sample

is limited to the region of Campania and that an expansion of our sample to other regions and, ideally, to the other three main regional areas of Italy (viz. the northern area, the Tuscan area, the central area) would provide a more inclusive insight into the dynamics of standardization at issue in Italy.

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