Title | UCD Working Papers in Italian Studies
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Authors(s) | Acquaviva, Paolo; Cappellaro, Chiara; Casalicchio, Jan; Franco, Ludovico; Larrivée, Pierre; Lorusso, Paolo; Masutti, Vania; Passino, Diana; Pescarini, Diego; Poletto, Cecilia; Ursini, Fresesco-Alessio
Publication date | 2018-09
Series | Foundation for Italian Studies Working Papers
Publisher | University College Dublin. School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics
Link to online version | http://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/Foundation_for_Italian_Studies_%20Working_Papers2.pdf
Item record/more information | http://hdl.handle.net/10197/9519

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UCD Working Papers in Italian Studies: an introduction

Those working in Italian Studies know very well the clichés that surround their subject, both in popular perception (a musical language, pizza, works of art turned into icons of globalized consumerism) and to some extent also in academia (which in modern society is not so different from a facet of popular culture). This is not really a problem, although it may sometimes become tiresome, or, more seriously, drive curriculum choices. But this received view also has the less obvious effect of obscuring how diverse and multi-faceted the field of Italian studies really is. In literature, art, cinema, music, but also in philosophy, design, law, architecture, an immense wealth of cultural expressions is associated, down the centuries, with what we call ‘Italy’. In addition, and to anticipate the content of this volume, historical vicissitudes have preserved on Italian soil a dialectal diversity that is unparalleled in the modern Romance-speaking world, and indeed in Europe. And yet, the pressures of popular stereotyping and the practical constraints of teaching inevitably conspire to give a reductive impression of all this cultural and linguistic (and, actually, also geographic and biological) diversity.

The tradition of Italian scholarship at University College Dublin has always been keenly aware of this diversity. Since its inception in the 1970’s, what used to be the Italian Department and is now the section of Italian in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics has consistently offered a range of teaching and research topics as broad as practically possible. This was perhaps natural for an academic unit which traditionally teaches large number of students, having gradually become the largest centre in the state in this respect. An important reflection of this central role is the UCD Foundation for Italian Studies, which since it was originally established in 1980 has been promoting the discipline with a rich catalogue of publications and a constant flow of sponsored events (most notably the Dante series of lectures which ran annually from 1973 to 2010).

The UCD Foundation for Italian Studies is now giving a new impulse to this tradition with the launch of an online series of working papers. Each issue will make freely available on the Foundation’s site a collection of unpublished articles in non-peer-reviewed form. The goal, as in similar ventures, is to aid the circulation of ideas and the dissemination of preliminary research results without the delay caused by the reviewing and the publishing process. An online platform is particularly useful in this case, since it removes the geographical barrier between researchers in Ireland and in mainland UK (even though, evidently, the papers uploaded are freely available to a potentially global readership). In this respect the UCD Working Papers in Italian Studies thus aim at bolstering the close connection already existing between the research communities in Ireland and the UK, a connection that owes much to the work of the Society for Italian Studies.

This volume

Our first volume consists of a collection of papers on the linguistics of the Italian dialects, an eccentric choice which not only emphasizes the diversity of the field, but also opens up another dimension of relevance. For the papers presented here represent current research in theoretical grammar, and as such are relevant above all for the whole community of researchers interested in theoretical linguistics, not just those working on Italian and Romance languages. Importantly, linguists can find here analyses based on first-hand data, an extremely valuable empirical contribution which can be discussed from different perspectives, or indeed in different analytic frameworks.

The collection is made up of six papers: two on syntax, one on phonology, one on morphology, and one on semantics. If the subdisciplines are well balanced (even though these
labels only describe the privileged analytic viewpoint of the contributions, without pigeonholing them), the empirical domain spans the whole spectrum of dialects spoken in Italy but is not a balanced sample — nor could it be, with only six contributions. Rhaetoromance enjoys a lot of attention, with one paper dealing with Ladin, one with Friulian, and one that discusses Rhaetoromance within a comparison that also includes Italian, Venetian, English, and French; Abruzzese is discussed by two of the contributions (which focus on two different varieties, Aquilano and a variety of the Chietino group); and the Sicilian variety of Pantelleria provides the topic of the last contribution.

In her discussion of Ladin inflection, Cappellaro studies in detail the systematic lack of inflectional ending -es on modifiers and articles that agree with a feminine plural noun. She reaches the conclusion that this apparent irregular development is a symptom of a system-internal tendency to biuniquely match inflectional class endings and feature combinations: the feminine plural exponent is suppressed just in those varieties where the same exponent would otherwise be compatible with a masculine plural content. Effectively, the “irregular” lack of a feminine plural ending on noun modifiers eliminates what would otherwise be a syncretism between masculine and feminine plural. This solution represents an advance over current accounts, in that it explains why this type of suspended exponence concerns specifically the feminine, or rather, gender.

Casalicchio and Masutti deal instead with a syntactic question posed by the microvariation of the 3 sg. subject clitic al in Friulian; while there are good reasons for analyzing it as the merged realization of two separate clitics a- and -l in the western varieties, the evidence points to a monomorphemic interpretation for the central ones. Crucially this interpretation is supported by the interaction of al with other clitic elements — negation and direct/indirect objects — observed both at the syntactic and at the phonological level. A deeper investigation in the morphosyntactic behaviour of a clitic therefore leads to a stronger hypothesis about syntactic microvariation between neighbouring dialect areas.

Franco and Lorusso, working on the Pantiscu dialect of Pantelleria, also develop a syntactic analysis, but the relevant interface in this case is with semantics. Their point of departure is a puzzling phenomenon: in this dialect, a subject clitic, which double up the pronominal features of the subject, expresses a progressive reading of the verb. They offer a structural reinterpretation of Loporcaro’s recent analysis, based on two hypotheses: that the clitic forms with the lexical verb a sort of idiom, so that what expresses the progressive is the whole complex, neither the clitic nor the verb alone; and that it expresses pronominal features, despite lexicalizing an aspectual head, because the progressive value of the Aspect head is a target of syntactic agreement (carries a phi-probe) which agrees with the subject features. Again, a small localized phenomenon is analyzed in a way that has much broader and deeper implications.

Larrivée and Poletto’s contribution differs from those considered so far, as it includes Rhaeto-Romance and Venetian alongside Italian, English, and French, in a systematic comparison of sentential particles (a subclass of discourse markers) which highlights the variability of syntactic placement for elements that have an invariant (more or less) pragmatic content. Thanks to the evidence gathered from languages that are not national standards, they can uncover a general pattern in which discourse markers not specifically restricted to encoding types of speech act gradually turn into sentential particles with rigid distribution and obligatorily associated with the corresponding speech act. The process is more aptly termed syntactisation than grammaticalization, because it does not involve phonological reduction or semantic impoverishment, but just the fixation of syntactic position and biunique correlation with pragmatic value. Their approach showcases the importance of not limiting oneself to traditional standard languages for gleaning a full picture of the logic of linguistic variability.
With Passino and Pescarini’s contribution we move to phonology. They examine the vowel system of a dialect in eastern Abruzzo, and their detailed description (in itself a significant contribution) brings to light a puzzling pattern in the diachronic development that led from Proto-Romance *a to [ə] (in open tonic position), from *o to [u] (in open position), from *e to [ɑ], and from *i to [ɔ]. These rather surprising developments become more natural if, as the authors suggest, the modern vowels arose from earlier diphthongs, which were the immediate (and much more plausible) developments of the corresponding Proto-Romance segments. In addition, a series of apparently capricious irregularities receive a plausible explanation under the hypothesis that the phonetic outcomes deriving from metaphony and from the alternation between open- and closed syllable were morphologized to express paradigmatic alternations in gender. A remarkable component of this explanation is that word-final metaphony triggers *i and *u could effectively block, rather than trigger, the breaking of stem-internal *i and *u. To what extent this type of anti-metaphony can be a valid explanation tool elsewhere is one of the many insightful questions raised in this contribution.

The contribution by Ursini also studies an Abruzzese dialect, this time Aquilano, but it explores yet another dimension. It is centred on the semantics of so-called “chorophorics”, that is, spatial pronouns related to spatial prepositions (possibly complex) but incompatible with the separate expression of a ground argument: perrete ajju divano ‘behind the sofa’ takes ju divano as an argument just like the Italian dietro al divano, but arrete ‘behind [it/there]’ cannot be followed by it (cf. German dahinten). In fact, the in-depth analysis of such elements results in a detailed study of the morphology, syntax, and semantics of spatial prepositions, conducted with a rigorous formal methodology couched in the vocabulary of Discourse Representation Theory. The analysis derives the distributional and semantic properties of chorophorics by modelling them as anaphoric elements which require a suitable antecedent interpreted as a presupposed ground. Here too, but from a different perspective, we see how the analysis of non-standardized linguistic varieties can lead to insights not otherwise available from better-studied ones, which can and should inform linguistic research at large.

There is no need to dwell any further on the relevance of this type of investigation, especially when it is supported by first-hand data from an empirical domain that is quickly disappearing. Italianists and linguists need no convincing that research on dialects is indispensable for the scientific inquiry into natural language and for the scholarly investigation into the cultures that it expresses. Other readers may be pleasantly surprised at the wealth and depth of information that can be gleaned by the rigorous analysis of linguistic systems all too often misconceived as substandard varieties of Italian (the dominant view, reinforced by the label ‘Italian dialects’). It is my hope that this collection, deliberately devoted to a lesser-studied aspect of Italian studies, may usher in a varied and stimulating flow of research contributions on many aspects of Italian language(s) and culture(s). My thanks go to the authors, who made this volume possible by kindly sharing the results of their current projects; to the Head of Italian Studies at UCD and director of the UCD Foundation of Italian Studies, Dr Ursula Fanning, for leading and promoting this initiative; and to the head of the UCD School of Languages, Culture and Linguistics, Professor Bettina Migge, for welcoming it and hosting it as part of the Italian section of the School’s website. It seems an appropriate home for a research platform devoted to Italian Studies — a particularly fascinating aspect of the study of language, culture, and linguistics.

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