

Regional standards in contemporary Italian.

Perceptions and attitudes towards northern sibilants among southern Italian speakers.

Standard regionali in italiano contemporaneo.

Percezioni e atteggiamenti verso le sibilanti settentrionali tra parlanti meridionali.

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The lecture will be held in Italian!

In this presentation, we want to contribute to the current debate on the acceptance of northern Italian pronunciation features as prestige variants in southern Italian speech, by focusing on the perceptions and attitudes towards northern sibilants among southern Italian speakers. This study is part of a larger investigation - conducted in collaboration with Claudia Crocco (UGhent) - which attempts to gain new insights into the emergence and spread of regional standards in contemporary Italian.

Italian linguists have amply documented the slow and complex spread of Italian as a spoken language after the political unification of the country in 1861. During this process, the prolonged situation of dialect/standard contact has led to the rise of regional varieties (Berruto 2012 [1987]). Nowadays the regionalization of the national language manifests itself mainly in speech as a coexistence of several regional pronunciations. Broadly speaking, these region-specific pronunciations are characterized by the retention of phonetic/phonological features from the dialectal substratum. Not all regional features are also socio-stylistically marked, as several of them are also used in formal or official registers as well. They are therefore said to be part of a regional standard.

A main feature of regional variation concerns the geographical distribution of sibilants, i.e., /z/ and /s/. In the standard pronunciation and in Tuscan, both /z/ and /s/ may occur in intervocalic position, such as in *asino* ('donkey') ['asino] and *sposo* ('groom') ['sposo]. In non-Tuscan varieties, however, this contrast is neutralized and only one of the two variants ([s] or [z]) is generalized: [s] is generalized in southern Italian regions (['asino] and ['sposo]), while [z] recurs in the same context in northern Italy (['azino] and ['sposo]). Previous studies have shown that the northern variant [z] is spreading outside its area of origin. Recently, Nocchi & Filipponio (2010) have shown that the voiced variant is gaining terrain in north-western Tuscany.

In this presentation, we investigate to what extent the northern variant [z] is further spreading in southern Italian regions and whether this diffusion might be socio-stylistically constraint. We focus on the region of Campania and we compare the perceptions and attitudes towards the variation between intervocalic [s] and [z]. We set up a perception and attitude experiment whereby 200 listeners were presented two 20 second samples with voiceless [s] and voiced [z] and were then asked:

- a) to situate geographically the speakers of the samples
- b) to evaluate the speakers based on a series of predefined dimensions (prestige, attractiveness and dynamism)
- c) to give three adjectives they freely associate with both of the samples

We will show that the northern Italian voiced [z] is perceived as the speech style of an upcoming generation of rich and fashionable yuppie Neapolitans living in the upscale neighborhoods of Naples. The variant is however not associated with prestige or authority values typically associated to standard Italian.