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Modern Italy's Changing Language and Its Role in Nationalism

Language makes a people. Or, at least, for centuries that has been seen as the case. European nationalists have consciously employed language as a tool and a means for creating a national identity for centuries. They believed that within a nation a common religion or common customs did not matter so much in defining them as a people as having a common language. While certainly flaws can be found with this definition, it does make some sense. How can people be said to belong to the same group if they cannot communicate with each other? Likewise, having a separate language from the whole, even if they consider themselves at least in some ways a part of the whole, will still form a sense of *us* and *them*, an identity separate from the larger society.¹

In the case of Italy this reality of language has often been used by those in power as a tool to purposefully create or shape society and to try to create a sense of identity or homogeneity. Since the unification of the Italian state in the 1860s the *questione della lingua*, or language question, has been seen as a problem but also as an instrument towards the realization of a “true” nation. Or, in the end of the twentieth century until the present day, a backlash against the national language has been encouraged in an attempt to foster regional identity in the face of a larger society that they do not feel

¹Patrick J. Geary. *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*. Princeton, N. J. : Princeton University Press, 2002. pp. 15-40.

reflects their values. However, the awareness of language as a means of creating a sense of culture is a recurring theme in the history of Italy and has been purposefully and overtly utilized at various periods.

Before diving straight into how the Italian language has been used as a unifying element, it is best to describe the linguistic situation of Italy around the time of unification. According to a leading Italian linguist Tullio De Mauro, “Between the Roman conquest in the fourth and third centuries B.C. and the political unification in 1861, there was not a force capable of increasing or at least maintaining the linguistic homogeneity of the different regions.”² This implies that for hundreds of years various dialects developed independently of each other, coming into contact with different peoples, acquiring new words, making different grammatical alterations, and morphing their pronunciations until they had become so diverse that most were no longer mutually intelligible, especially among languages that were more geographically distant.³

In fact, when speaking about the Italian dialects it is often more accurate to think of them as distinct languages because “in each of which it is possible to study the linguistic background, the cultural and political history and other factors which may have been important in shaping the development of the vernacular.” The sociolinguist Gianrenzo Clivio even goes

² Tullio De Mauro. *Storia Linguistica Dell'Italia Unita*. Bari: Laterza, 1963. p. 22.

³ To show the differences between the dialects the words for “I” can be compared: North *orp*, Sicilian *orbu*, Piedmontese *eborgno*, Tuscan *cieco*, South *hecato*, Sardinian *zurpu*. (Hermann Haller. *The Teaching of Italian Dialects and Dialect Literature* *Italica* 57, no. 3 (1980): 196).

so far as to say, "Dialects, as distinct from languages lack the authority of the nation-state: 'from a strictly linguistic point of view... a language is a dialect that has an army and a navy and an air force; that is the only difference really from a linguistic point of view.'"⁴ All of this to say, it is important to make clear that the word dialect here does not merely refer to different regional accents or pronunciations of the same language, but separate language systems.⁵

For the Italian dialects⁶, most scholars divide them into three main groups⁷: the *settentrionale* or northern group which is found from the northern border to the Spezia-Rimini Line that runs just north of Tuscany⁸ and corresponds closely to the Apennine mountains⁹, the Central group which is located in the middle and forms a transition zone between the other dialect groups¹⁰, and the *meridionale* or southern group that makes up the lower part of the country¹¹. Beyond these there are two more that seem to have developed mostly isolated from the others, Ladin in the north and Sardinian

⁴Daniel P. Resnik. Historical Perspectives on Literacy and Schooling. "Deadalus 119, no. 2, Literacy in America (Spring, 1990), 24.

⁵Vaughan, H. H. "Studies in Italian Linguistics." *Italica* 13, no. 3 (1936): 74-78.

⁶See Map 1.

⁷Some linguists will also divide the dialects into four groups: Gallo-Italian, Central Italian, the Neapolitan group, and Calabro-Sicilian. (Vaughan 76) As with almost every instance of language classification, there is disagreement about what level of difference is necessary for separate categorization.

⁸Includes Piedmontese, Ligurian, Lombard, Romagnol, Emilian, and the Venetian dialects. (Haller 196)

⁹Italian. "In *The World's Major Languages*, edited by Bernard Comrie by Nigel Vincent. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 234.

¹⁰Includes Tuscan, Umbrian, Northern Mar di gi ano, and Romanesco. (Haller 196)

¹¹Includes Southern Mar di gi ano, Campanian, Abruzzese, Calabrese, Lucanian, Neapolitan, Pugliese, and Sicilian. (Haller 196, and Italian 234)

to the west.¹² However, these are just the major divisions which are then broken into individual dialects.

Up until the 20th Century, the common people have been almost exclusively dialect speakers. If someone were participating in mainly local trade and did not have far-reaching political or social relations there would seem to be no need for a means of intercommunication. For those who did need it, however – the upper class and political leaders – there developed several systems of conversing between dialects. Many regions used Latin for judicial purposes, and the Church, also, adopted Latin as its official language. For other types of interaction, though, several languages at different times and places were used (Venetian, Roman, Neapolitan). But by the 16th Century Tuscan was the most commonly used because it was the language of the most celebrated writers of Italian literature: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio – *Le Tre Corone* – who wrote in the medieval dialect of Florence.¹³

However, even for the educated class, this was not necessarily the language of everyday life (except for Tuscans of course¹⁴). From the very

¹² Tullio De Mauro. *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*, 26-27.

¹³ Tullio De Mauro, *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*, 27.

¹⁴ It should be noted though that at some (indeterminate) point this could be said of Tuscans as well. The language eventually was considered too archaic compared with the normal vernacular of the people. Languages (and especially the language of a mostly non-literate people, as Italians were until the mid 19th Century) are always changing, and after enough time has passed the language used by the hearer owns "sounded quite distinct. Enough that Claude Fauriel in 1806 referred to the language of Italian literature as a dead language (Michele Colombo and John J. Kinder. *Italian as a Language of Communication in Nineteenth Century Italy and Abroad* "Italica 89, no. 1 (2012): 109).

beginning it was established as “an elitist language”¹⁵ that was almost exclusively used for literature and was reserved for only the grandest of circumstances.¹⁶, and even those who learned Tuscan still used and were fluent in the dialect of their region. De Mauro refers to the situation as “ the paradox of a language celebrated but not used and, so to speak, foreign in its own land.”¹⁷ It is at this point, while still only a tiny percentage of the entire population was capable of communicating in anything resembling a national language, when unification occurs.

The many states and kingdoms that were scattered across the peninsula were finally united politically in 1861 under the monarch King Vittorio Emanuele II. But even though the Italian people were now under the same government, that did not mean they were, or even considered themselves, yet, the same people.

The Italian leaders were following in the footsteps of other nations like France, who during their politically formative periods focused on language as the main element for creating cohesion among their citizens.¹⁸ (see Geary 30-32) The linguistic environment in France traditionally was very similar to Italy’s, with many regional languages spoken and very little knowledge of a national language. However, after their Revolution in the last years of the

¹⁵ Hermann Haller 196.

¹⁶ Jillian R. Cavanaugh “A Modern Questione della Lingua: The Incomplete Standardization of Italian in a Northern Italian Town.” *The Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe* 8, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2008), 19-20.

¹⁷ Tullio De Mauro, *Storia Linguistica dell’Italia Unita*, 19.

¹⁸ Patrick J. Geary, . 15-40.

eighteenth Century, language became the main tool for uniting their new society and driving out any regionalist sentiments that might damage the desired cohesiveness of the new nation. National programs were launched, a regulatory academy was created, and regional dialects suddenly found themselves considered minorities and stigmatized as being in opposition to the new French identity.¹⁹

With examples like this on hand, the new leaders of the Italian state saw a national language as one of their main responsibilities while creating the first modern Italian nation. They had to choose a language in which the government would operate, but more than that they felt they must choose a language in which everyday life could operate. The leaders did not necessarily want to drive out dialect use from the peninsula, but they did want to introduce a more uniform way of speaking, even if it were at the expense of dialect.²⁰ This made the decision about the *questione della lingua* a complicated one; there were many viable options for the language that would foster the new national identity. They could choose one of the dominant regional dialects such as Venetian or Neapolitan, it would seem to make sense to choose Roman, the language of the capital, or it was even suggested that they create a new language that took pieces from all the dialects. However, but while these other options were presented there was never really much question that the eventual decision would be some form of

¹⁹ Aviy Amit. *Regional Language Policies in France during World War II*. 1. Publ. ed. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan (2014): 1-2.

²⁰ Jillian R. Cavanaugh 22.

the Tuscan dialect which had already worked for centuries as a de facto lingua franca.²¹

Nonetheless, even within this choice there was still debate. Should the modern Florentine vernacular be used, or should the archaic, fourteenth-century literary form be chosen? Some felt that the older version was not adaptable to modern life while others claimed that the present day speech was not grand enough for so noble a cause as the joining together of Italy. The supporters of the language of *le tre corone* won out, however, claiming that “the older, literary Tuscan” was the better choice “because it was already familiar to the elite.” and because, according to the analysis of Graziadio Ascoli, Tuscan was the closest descendant of Latin that remained from the linguistic unity that supposedly existed during that time. Also, in response to critics who stressed the language’s rigidity, it was suggested that “as this variety became more widely spoken and written in different genres (such as in newspapers), it would adapt to the everyday demands of speakers and become the unifying language of the emerging state.”²² Tuscan, or Italian, then, was chosen to speak for all the people and to be the foundation of the new unified culture.

Even though the decision was now made, this did not change the fact that the majority of the population still did not speak Standard Italian. Tullio De Mauro estimates that at the time of unification only 2.5% of the

²¹ Jillian R. Cavanaugh20.

²² Jillian R. Cavanaugh20.

population could speak the standard Italian language. This very small percentage, furthermore, was not distributed evenly throughout the social strata, but was concentrated in the upper class. It was “a possession reserved... for those who had attended school.”²³, meaning access to the language was almost synonymous with access to education.

But in Italy, until very recently, education was definitely a privilege only for the wealthy. Few would deny the correlation between literacy or education and the spread of Italian, and at the time of unification around 78% of Italians were illiterate²⁴, but in certain regions²⁵ (Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia) the rate of illiteracy was over 90%.²⁶ In the 90 and 94 years after unification literacy increased by 65.1% and the number of Italian speakers increased 33.5%, showing greater access to education meant greater access to the national and official language. So much so that it can be said that “the history of standardization is essentially the history of increased literacy.”²⁷

However, the education system was not perfect, and as Manlio Cortelazzo points out in his book *Avviamento critico allo studio della dialettologia italiana* the diffusion of Italian depended on the degree or

²³ Tullio De Mauro. *Storia Linguistica Dell'Italia Unita*. pp. 33-34.

²⁴ Tullio De Mauro. "Per la Storia Linguistica Dell'Italia Repubblicana" *Italia* 88, no. 1 (Spring, 2011), 40-58.

²⁵ See Map 2.

²⁶ Leone Levi. "The Economic Progress of Italy during the Last Twenty Years, since the Formation of the Italian Kingdom in 1861." *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 45, no. 1 (1882): 1-36.

²⁷ Italian²³⁴.

quality of instruction.²⁸ Outside of the urban centers, besides attendance being low, De Mauro cites numerous accounts describing teachers that “do not know it [Italian] or do not want to adopt it, defending themselves with the excuse that their students do not understand them.” Teaching in Standard Italian was almost impossible because the students were not able to understand their teachers. This means, according to De Mauro, that those who only received an elementary education (the vast majority of those who attended school at all²⁹) would probably leave it literate but were not guaranteed any real competency in the national language.³⁰

This was a frustration for the nationalist government, but not a truly serious concern until Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime came into power in 1921. In the Fascist ideology man as an individual was not important. The individual exists and is valuable solely for the sake of the state. Because of this value placed on it, this meant the state needed to be unified, with all its parts contributing to the betterment of the whole by working from the same ideology towards the same goal. Nothing besides the accepted language, the accepted culture, or the accepted ideology would be tolerated because it could undermine the powerful homogeneity that was needed for the Fascist state to thrive.

²⁸ Cortelazzo, Manlio. *Avviamento Critico Allo Studio Della Dialettologia Italiana*. Vol. III. Pisa Pacini, 1972. p. 14.

²⁹ Not until statistics from 1991 does it show more than one half (53.1%) of the adult Italian population having completed more than an elementary education, and in that year 9.8% of adults still had not completed even that level. (Tullio De Mauro. *Per la storia linguistica dell’Italia repubblicana* *Italia* 88, no. 1 (Spring, 2011), 55.)

³⁰ Tullio De Mauro. *Storia Linguistica Dell’Italia Unita*. 34-40.

The linguistically and culturally fractured condition of the Italian peninsula, then, was insufferable for Mussolini. The slow process that was begun at the Risorgimento (unification) had not done its job, but Il Duce made it his mission to complete the task of standardization. Again language was a key tool for unification and again education would be seen as the main means of transmission, but this time the intent was serious. Words of foreign origin were quickly banned from publications, signs, and speech, and even essential parts of the language were strongly discouraged because they seemed to imply a cultural weakness.³¹ In Mussolini's Fascism the state "accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State"³² and those that did not speak Italian did not share the state's interests. Minority languages and dialects, especially, came under fire. They "represented all that was wrong with the old Italy, including political regionalism, cultural disunity, and anti-modernism." and society had to be cleansed of this undesirably relic. Dialect use was forbidden in any public context; legislation was passed³³ that took it out of the schools, and regional authorities were told to enforce these restrictions through closure or confiscation of any publication that was printed in dialect. Also dialect

³¹ The Italian formal second person singular pronoun *Lei* was no longer accepted for use because (since it is also the pronoun meaning *she*) it was considered a sign of weakness and a remnant of Italy's days of servitude. Instead, Italians were advised to use the second person plural pronoun *voi* in its place. (RAI. *Gli Anni della Censura Il Fascismo e la Lingua Italiana*. In *ITALIA - L'Italia e L'Italiano per Stranieri*. Accessed April 10, 2015.)

³² Benito Mussolini. "Mussolini - THE DOCTRINE OF FASCISM " *World Future Fund* January 1, 1932.

³³ Jillian R. Cavanaugh 22.

theater and songs were discouraged, and “actors were forbidden to speak even a few lines of dialect in films” because it promoted sentiments that ran contrary to and undermined the cultural unity the fascist regime was trying to achieve. Language was so strong a symbol and facilitator of unity during the Fascist period that anything that was not deemed purely Italian was condemned to non-usage and an almost treasonous status.³⁴

In addition to the “declaration of war” against the dialects and minority languages through political means, such as legislation and restriction, Fascists also began the shift of the popular perception of regional languages compared to the standard Italian. They started programs and events that referred to local and regional culture as “folklore”, implying that it was something that was only an outdated relic of the past, along the lines of superstition, and something that was not relevant to the present day. This went for local language traditions too, which were also to be considered an element of the past that hindered progress toward the future.³⁵

After the end of the Fascist era in Italy, however, the attitudes toward dialects, even among speakers, continued to shift. Italian, even before unification, had been the language of the wealthy and of the ruling class, therefore it was associated with power and prestige. It was the language that had to be spoken if anyone of importance was going to listen. After the Second World War the gap between the classes had lessened slightly, but

³⁴ Philip V. Cannistraro. *Mussolini's Cultural Revolution: Fascist or Nationalist?*. *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 7, No. 3/4 (Jul. - Oct., 1972), 130.

³⁵ Jillian R. Cavanaugh 22.

dialects were still clearly the language of the rural peasant – “inferior modes of expression”³⁶. Competency in Italian was necessary for anyone wanting a job that would improve his prospects or provide any upward mobility or social standing. “Speakers regarded their dialect as undesirable, embracing politicians’ and scholars’ portrayal of the dialects as impediments to be overcome in their efforts towards prosperity.” Parents encouraged their children to learn and become fluent in Italian rather than their dialects, which were lower class, “coarse and plebeian”³⁷, and unsuited for the work place.³⁸ H.H. Vaughan, a professor of Italian at University of California Berkeley, summed up the prevailing sentiment well by saying, “It [Italian] is the language of serious thought and worth-while expression. Banter must be in dialect.”³⁹

While the change of attitude toward the standard Italian in the home is probably one of the strongest influences in the shift away from dialect, other areas helped facilitate the change as well. In the new constitution of the Italian Republic the compulsory school age was raised from twelve to fourteen⁴⁰, and the percentage of the population that was able to avoid

³⁶ Hermann Haller 195.

³⁷ Luigi Bonaffini. Translating Dialect Literature *World Literature Today* 71, no. 2 (1997): 279.

³⁸ Jillian R. Cavanaugh 23.

³⁹ H. H. Vaughan 78.

⁴⁰ Alfonso Tesoro and Ginevra Capocelli. The Fundamentals of the New Italian Constitution. *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 20, no. 1 (1954): 52.

mandatory schooling dropped significantly in the post-war period.⁴¹ These factors together mean that the transmission of the national language was more thorough and could reach a greater number of the population.

Another significant factor was mass media. Newspapers, radio, and television, the latter two especially, brought a greater number of people into contact with the national language. De Mauro points out that radio and television were so effective because of they were relatively inexpensive.

“No other type of show or information had such a low cost. This economic element allowed the overwhelming reception of the broadcasting even in the geographic regions and social classes with the lowest incomes, which are also the areas where dialect has persisted with the most tenacity.”⁴²

The availability of these forms of media and the fact that most programs were broadcasted exclusively in Standard Italian, were essential vehicles of spreading a common culture and a common language.⁴³

During the 1970s, however, the public opinion towards dialects began to shift again. Jillian R. Cavanaugh, a professor of anthropology at Brooklyn College, discusses how the economic stability that had been achieved allowed Italians to begin to feel safe with dialects again. She points back to the sentiments that prevailed in the decades just after the Second World War when people were encouraging their children to give up their dialects to help them achieve greater economic and social success. However, since now their

⁴¹ Tullio De Mauro, *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*, 83-85.

⁴² Tullio De Mauro, *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*, 354-355.

⁴³ Jillian R. Cavanaugh 23.

place in society was stable, the old language that reminded them of the peasant past was no longer a threat.

Also, especially among the youth and leftist political groups, Standard Italian began to be seen as artificial. It was, to them, a fabricated culture that had been forced on the people during a time of oppression (mainly the fascist period) and was not capable of allowing full expression. Dialect, on the other hand, was viewed as a more genuine form of language and a link to the traditions and history that the mass society had tried to take from them. Because of this, for many, “dialects became ‘cool’ as symbols of an idealized simpler time.”⁴⁴ To use dialect was a way to rebel against the prevailing culture or what was perceived as the “ruling class”.⁴⁵

Today, this idea of using dialect as a form of resistance is still strong, though manifested in a much more political context. The best example of this is the Lega Nord, or Northern League, a current, extremely conservative political party in Northern Italy. The main focus of the League is the independence of the north of Italy to form the nation of Padania (the full name of the party is Northern League for the Independence of Padania), in fact, in 2014 a statute that outlines the political structure of the hypothetical new nation was already approved by the party.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Jillian R. Cavanaugh 24.

⁴⁵Luigi Bonaffini 279.

⁴⁶LegaNord 'LegaNord per L'Indipendenza della Padania' 2015.

The other central issue in the Lega Nord's platform concerns immigration policy. Sabina Perrino, a lecturer in Romance Languages and Literature at the University of Michigan, cites the increased flow of immigrants into Italy during the 1980s and 1990s as the source for the anti-immigration policies that developed in the League. She argues that the "new and increased flows of immigrants have affected Italian discourses about national culture and identity" and the ensuing labeling of *us* (northern Italians) and *them* (anyone else, including southern Italians) has been the main push behind the revitalization and politicization of the dialects.⁴⁷

There was a need for the leaders to create a sense of identity, and, in direct opposition to the national language and culture the various national governments had tried to create and spread over the past century and a half, the Northern League has chosen to emphasize the regional languages and cultures as symbols of an identity that they wish their people to embrace. They want to defend their "people against foreign migrants while also drawing a boundary around their region and language"⁴⁸ by "elaborating the differences between Padania and the rest of Italy in sociocultural and linguistic terms... and declaring the League the champion of local northern dialects and cultures."⁴⁹ The Northern League saw that to gain followers the people needed to see themselves as different from the whole of Italy; they

⁴⁷ S. Perrino. "Venet o out of Italy? Dialect, Migration, and Transnational Identity" *Applied Linguistics* 34, no. 5 (2013): 578.

⁴⁸ S. Perrino 577.

⁴⁹ Jillian R. Cavanaugh 25-26.

needed a separate identity, and language (as during unification and the Fascist period), through the revitalization and emphasizing of dialects, was chosen as the best tool for this identity.

The Italian language is still changing, the process of standardization is still incomplete, and the relationship between Italian and the dialects are even today being used as a tool. During the Risorgimento and Fascist period language was used to create an Italian identity that had not existed before and that they felt was necessary for the nation. In the present day, language is still being utilized in much the same way, though with the opposite goal. Organizations such as the Northern League are rebelling against what they feel is a false linguistic and culture homogeny that was forced upon them, and they are using language – the dialects – to create regional identity (and eventually national Padanian identity) and foster loyalty toward a more local cause. However, in every case language is the foundation of the society and language is the most important means for a sense of national unity.

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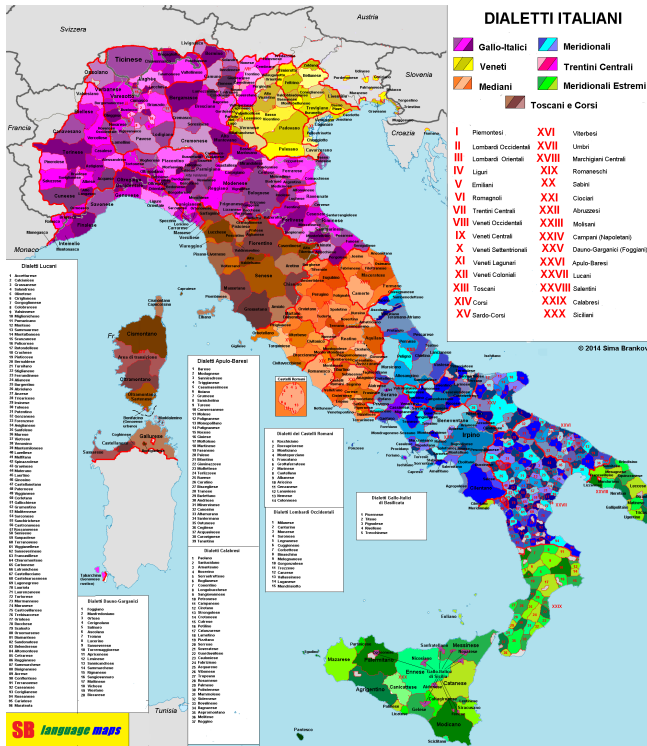
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Map 1



Map 2

