

SECOND EDITION

# The Italian Language Today

Anna Laura Lepschy  
and Giulio Lepschy



# **The Italian Language Today**

Anna Laura Lepschy  
Giulio Lepschy



London and New York

First published 1977 by Hutchinson Educational  
Paperback edition first published 1979  
Second edition first published 1988

Reprinted 2001 by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy 1977, 1988

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Lepschy, Anna Laura  
The Italian language today.—2nd ed.  
1. Italian language—Grammar—1950—  
I. Title II. Lepschy, Giulio C.  
458.2'421 PC1112

ISBN 0-415-07862-8

ISBN 978-1-136-13276-6 (ebk)

**Transferred to digital reprinting 2001.**

**Printed in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd, Eastbourne**

# Contents

Preface to the second edition	5
Preface	7
<b>Part One The Linguistic Situation in Italy</b>	
I Italian Today	11
II A Historical View	19
III Italian Dialects	41
IV Varieties of Italian	62
<b>Part Two The Grammar of Italian</b>	
V An Outline	89
1 Phonology	89
2 Spelling	95
3 The article	102
4 Prepositions with the article	103
5 Conjunctions	105
6 Nouns and adjectives	108
7 Comparatives and superlatives	112
8 Adverbs	114
9 Personal pronouns	115
10 Possessives	122
11 Interrogatives and relatives	123
12 Negatives	126
13 Demonstratives	127
14 Indefinites	128
15 Numerals	130
16 Verbs	133
VI Sixteen Points of Syntax	161
1 Some notes on word order	161
2 The use of the article	164
3 Evaluative suffixes	176
4 Compound and juxtaposed nouns	183

4	<i>Italian Language Today</i>	
5	Position of adjectives	190
6	Agreement of adjectives	192
7	Position of adverbs	194
8	Some constructions with/without prepositions	196
9	Agreement of past participles	209
10	Clitic clusters	212
11	Constructions with causative and perception predicates	214
12	The use of <i>si</i>	220
13	The use of indicative past tenses	228
14	The use of the subjunctive	232
15	Sequence of tenses	238
16	The use of the conditional	241
	Short Bibliography	247
	Table of main symbols used	250
	Index	251

## Preface to the second edition

In this second edition we have introduced many changes, based on the experience gained through the use of the book since it was first published ten years ago, on the comments made by numerous colleagues who have used the first edition over the years, and on the modifications made for the Italian version (*La lingua italiana*, Bompiani, Milan, 1981) and for the German translation (*Die italienische Sprache*, Narr, Tübingen, and Francke, Bern, 1986). In this second edition both chapters V and VI have one section more: we have added a brief discussion of conjunctions, section 5 of chapter V, and we have split section 10 of chapter VI into two: clusters of unstressed pronouns (now section 10), and complex sentences with causative or perception main predicates (now section 11).

We hope in the near future to be able to respond to the requests of several colleagues and to provide the book with an appendix of progressive exercises which would facilitate its use as a course book for beginners, suitable for class work and for self-teaching.

We gratefully acknowledge the many helpful suggestions made by the German translator, Susanne Hagemann, and by other colleagues and friends: among those whose names should be added to the list given at the end of the preface to the first edition we should like to mention Paola Benincà, Pier Marco Bertinetto, Giovanni Carsaniga, Sara Castelfranchi, Alan Freedman, Verina Jones, Uberto Limentani, Yakov Malkiel, Gemma Momigliano, Howard Moss, Enrico Palandri, Frank Palmer, Alfredo Stussi, Sebastiano Timpanaro, and Shirley Vinall.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Preface

In this work we have tried to describe contemporary Italian and to examine some aspects of its history which have often led people to wonder whether an 'Italian' language really exists.

The first part of the book gives an introduction to the present day linguistic situation in Italy (chapter I) and outlines its origin and its development particularly during the last century (chapter II); it sets out historically the main subdivisions of the Italian dialects (chapter III), and provides information on modern Italian and its varieties (chapter IV).

The second part offers a grammar of Italian, including a detailed examination of special points (chapter V), and a longer discussion of certain questions which present particular problems to students of Italian or are not adequately discussed in current grammars (chapter VI). This part is organized as a reference grammar and not as a progressive grammar, but we hope it may also prove useful for those who are learning the language. Apart from the basic outlines, our coverage is selective: we have concentrated on what seems most interesting to us and have not tried to include the kind of information which is easily found in dictionaries (we have not, for instance, discussed in detail adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions; but as dictionaries do not usually give adequate information on constructions of verb + preposition, we have listed these quite fully). We describe contemporary usage, but mention historical developments wherever we feel they are illuminating.

The first part of the book should clarify and put into the right perspective the assumptions on which the second part is based, particularly with regard to standards of acceptability and correctness. We aim at presenting educated Italian not as it is prescribed in grammars and dictionaries, but as it is actually written and spoken. For those aspects in which there does not seem to be a unitary national standard, we have followed northern usage, which seems

## 8 *Italian Language Today*

to us to enjoy most prestige. We aim at enabling foreign students to understand a wide range of expressions and to select those which are most suitable for them to use, in speech or writing. Where necessary we have characterized certain usages as formal or informal, colloquial or literary, or typical of certain parts of the country.

Translations are given for all Italian and dialect examples, usually offering only one of the possible meanings, not necessarily the most common, but the one relevant to the point being made. Italics are used for all the examples in traditional spelling in Italian (language or dialects). Where necessary a broad phonetic transcription is given (based on the principles of the International Phonetic Association) between square brackets (see the Table of Symbols, page 250). Only rarely has it been relevant to speak of phonemes (phonological units which are distinctively different); phonemic transcriptions appear between slants. Accent marks are placed directly above the vowel rather than at the beginning of the syllable because syllable divisions do not coincide in all varieties of Italian. Marks for secondary stress appear below the line.

Although this book makes use of many notions of modern linguistics, it is not written for linguists, and it adopts a traditional grammatical framework, accessible to readers who have not studied linguistics. Rules are given in an informal way. The formalism of contemporary linguistics would have made them more precise and explicit, but unusable by the non-linguist. In order to illustrate them we sometimes inevitably make use of sentences which are not likely to appear in everyday conversation.

The data and suggestions offered here, some of which are not available elsewhere, should be of value to the linguist as well as to those for whom this book is intended, students of Italian and others interested in the Italian language.

We are very grateful to the following friends and colleagues whose comments and suggestions on the first draft of this work have enabled us to make many improvements to our text: Guglielmo Cinque, Maria Corti, Denis Devereux, John Hale, John Lindon, Peter Matthews, Luigi Meneghello, John Moores, Andrew Radford, John Scott, Peter Trudgill, Nigel Vincent. We should also like to thank Drina Oldroyd for her helpful reading at proof stage.

Part One

**The Linguistic Situation in Italy**



# I Italian Today

'The Italian language today': what is it? If one tried to be very 'scientific' and to provide an answer based on observation and verifiable empirically, one would meet with considerable difficulties. Students of linguistics from the University of Mars, sent to the Earth to do some field work, and asked to write a report on the Italian language today, would be faced with a very confusing situation. If they listened to the utterances made by people within the boundaries of the Italian Republic, they would find an extraordinary variety of speech, which could not be interpreted as belonging to one and the same language ('Italian'). Then, if they extended their investigations further they would find that some of the varieties of speech used in Italy are also used by large communities in other parts of the globe, ranging from Australia to the Americas, and in European countries such as France, Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium.

Their confusion would be caused not by the speech of the so-called 'linguistic minorities' in the Italian territory (using German for instance in the Alto Adige, and Albanian or Greek in parts of southern Italy), but by the variety of dialects used both in Italy and in the large Italian immigrant communities abroad.

It may be useful at this point to clarify some notions. The Italian situation differs considerably from the English one, where dialects are concerned. English dialects, with grammar, lexis and phonology very different from standard English, are mostly dying out; they survive in the main in isolated or peripheral areas, particularly in the speech of the elderly. Elsewhere, especially in the south of England, the differences between dialects and standard English are less marked. Standard English is spoken with different accents in different parts of the country. There is also a non-regional pronunciation, generally indicated with the abbreviation 'RP' ('received pronunciation'), which is typically used in public schools. During

## 12 *Italian Language Today*

the first half of the twentieth century its diffusion was encouraged by a fairly strict adherence to it on the part of the BBC. It is a flexible standard, in many cases offering a large variety of choices between different pronunciations; and it changes as time passes. This can be seen by looking up in Daniel Jones's and A. C. Gimson's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (which presents RP) the different pronunciations recorded for so many words, and by comparing the changes incorporated in successive editions. This dictionary was meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, although it is often used as a model to which foreigners and, when uncertain, some native speakers of English try to conform.

RP, originally based on the speech of the educated in south-east England, is a social rather than a geographical indicator: it characterizes the educated speech of the upper and middle classes. Traditionally, if speakers use RP people will not be able to tell from their speech which part of the country they come from. If they do not use RP not only will they be socially characterized, but to this social characterization will be added a geographical one: people will be able to tell which part of the country they come from. Eliza Doolittle's speech could be pinned down to Lisson Grove; Professor Higgins, using RP, did not give away his place of origin.

It is against this background that one can understand recent developments and reactions such as the greater use of regional English by the BBC, or the tenacity with which some University students retain their regional accents because of the ideological implications of losing them: using RP would mean not so much substituting a national standard for a regional variety, as substituting the speech of the middle class for the speech of the working class. The class connotations of accent emerge very clearly in the field of politics, trade-unionism, and in the media where it is not uncommon to hear people adapting their accent to the circumstances.

The situation is quite different in Italy. People may of course be characterized socially by the language they use, but it is a question more of their style of speech, of the 'manner' in which they speak, than of their phonological systems. The distinction between Italian and dialect has no firm correlation with social hierarchy, because although ignorance of Italian is limited to the bottom of the scale, the use of dialect is not, and cuts right across class barriers. But it is also true that Italian is inevitably associated with the upper part of the scale and dialect with the lower, and that the attempt to move up from the bottom is often accompanied by rejection of dialect and

adoption of Italian.

When people talk of Italian dialects they are not usually referring to different varieties of Italian. Italian dialects differ from literary Italian and among themselves so much that one dialect may be unintelligible to the speaker of another dialect. They may differ among themselves as much as French differs from Spanish, or Portuguese from Rumanian, or for that matter Italian from English. The initial effect of strangeness, foreignness and unintelligibility can be the same. The situation is of course different, because with Italian dialects, which derive from Latin and have had some cultural contact with literary Italian as it developed through the centuries, the establishment of a basis for mutual understanding, the identification of correspondence rules and the beginnings of a translation and of a learning process are obviously so much easier.

Dialects in Italy are far more commonly used and differ from each other and from the national language more radically than dialects in England, and generally one can sharply distinguish between Italian and dialect. The notions of Italian and of dialect, however, both need to be specified.

It has recently been suggested<sup>1</sup> that, for some parts of Italy at least, one needs to distinguish between four strata: besides (a) the national language and (b) the local dialect there is (c) a more inward looking variety of the national language (regional Italian); this is comparable to the phenomenon very much alive in England, of standard English spoken with a local accent; and (d) a more outward looking variety of the local dialect (regional dialect).

Take a simple sentence like 'Go home, boys' as uttered in a village in Venetia. The allegedly standard form in the national language would be [andáte a kkása ragáttsi] and in the local dialect something like [ve káza túzi]. But in the same village people may also use a less local, more regional Venetian form like [nde káza tózi], and a less national, more regional Italian form like [andáte a káza ragási].

In this example the lexical choice (*ragazzo* vs. *tosso*) immediately shows the distinction between Italian and dialect, and there are grammatical and phonological differences which allow one to differentiate quite clearly between the two types of dialect (local vs. regional: with and without metaphony (see chapter III, pp. 50–1) and with different forms of *andare*) and the two types of Italian (national vs. regional: with and without double consonants and affricates [ts dz]).

#### 14 *Italian Language Today*

Do these four strata in fact correspond to a fourfold choice offered to the speaker? We deliberately chose a transcription which was broad enough to show up those features which contribute to distinguish the four varieties. But there is no polar opposition between single and double consonants (a novelist with a keen ear for language has noted that a speaker may try to pronounce a double consonant, but succeed only in uttering one and a half)<sup>2</sup>, nor between the affricates [ts dz] of the national and the sibilants [s z] of the regional standard. Perhaps one can move between the two varieties of the standard and the two varieties of the dialect with an indefinite number of intermediate stages. Also, even though there is no intermediate stage between *toso* and *ragazzo*, in considering actual utterances, one finds that the various words of one and the same utterance may have been chosen from different varieties. These varieties are more easily definable in terms of the speakers' linguistic situation than in terms of sets to which particular sentences or words can be allotted. One might certainly hear [andáte káza túzi] and [ve káza ragáttsi]. One should perhaps leave open whether these varieties are more appropriately considered to be distinct entities between which one has to switch, or rather dimensions which allow movements along continuous gradients.

It is doubtful whether the 'top' stratum, the alleged national standard as represented by educated Florentine, ought to appear at all in this example. Florentine features, such as initial voiceless affricates, as in [tslo], intervocalic voiceless sibilants as in [kása], or syntactic doubling as in [a kkása] are not used in actual fact in northern Italy and do not even constitute a theoretical model which people there try to imitate: they are felt to be either parochial and alien, or affected. In Venetia there may however be a distinction between a more dialectal use of Italian, with [ragási], a less dialectal one, with [ragáttsi] and a more national one, with [ragáttsi].

In a village the less local variety of the dialect might conform to a regional standard or might be an attempt to imitate the dialect of the nearest town. In a town like Venice people cannot switch from a local to a regional form of the dialect; the regional standard and the local dialect seem to coincide, and two rather than three or four strata are sufficient to account for the linguistic conditions. The number of strata which are involved ought to be decided instance by instance, rather than once and for all.

In many cases the distinction between these poles may be made more complicated by the presence of another distinction, between a

spontaneous and informal vs. a careful and formal style of speech. More complicated, because often (but by no means always or necessarily) the spontaneous and informal is associated with dialect and the careful and formal with Italian. An exclamation like *Guarda che roba!* 'Look at that!' would be [gwárda ke rróba] in the presumptive standard and [várda ke róba] in Venetian; the first word may become [árda] and [fda] in both, and may appear as [ára] and even [a:] in the dialect. Within the dialect one finds, with decreasing degrees of formality [andé], [nde], [de], and [ne] for 'go!'. A narrower transcription would allow one to capture other pronunciations intermediate between these, and would correspond to the natives' intuition that they are here faced more with a continuum than with a set of discrete choices placing them either in the language or in the dialect, either in one variety or in another. As we said, the Martian linguist, trying to be scientific and to ascertain facts rather than opinions, would have no easy task.

A foreigner learning Italian inevitably asks: what variety of Italian shall I adopt, and in particular what sort of pronunciation? Which is the pronunciation that can be considered standard (in some sense 'the best') and used as a model in the same way as RP can be used as a model in British English?

The answer to the latter question is that there is no Italian equivalent to RP. Educated pronunciation is not uniform but varies locally, it is more similar in each region to the uneducated pronunciation of the same region than to the educated pronunciation of other regions. The normal, widely accepted state of affairs in Italy is for speakers to retain their local accents. This situation is to be expected in the context of Italian history. Italian is no less effective for this (different pronunciations are no real cause for misunderstandings); this variety reflects the different local traditions and cultures which a united Italy has absorbed but not obliterated.

The former question – what pronunciation is a foreigner to adopt? – can perhaps be answered depending on the circumstances, with practical considerations in mind. In chapter V a solution is offered which disregards the phonological oppositions which are treated differently in different parts of Italy (and therefore do not belong to a national standard), and chooses, when a choice has to be made, a northern Italian standard, which has acquired more prestige than other varieties. The choice of this phonological system also facilitates the task of the foreign student as it is more faithfully represented by traditional spelling.

## 16 *Italian Language Today*

It should be added here that these points are contentious, and that these two questions could receive different answers. In particular there is one position, usually adopted by textbooks and dictionaries, which can be called, for brevity but not inappropriately, puristic, according to which there is only one correct pronunciation of Italian, i.e., educated Florentine, and it is this which ought to be learnt by foreigners – and by Italians.

Cutting across geographical subdivisions (local varieties of Italian) there is another set of partitions into different spheres of linguistic usage (sectional varieties): the language of literature, of bureaucracy, of politics, of journalism, of advertising, of science, of the church, etc. Newspapers, radio and television do not have a clearly definable sectional idiom of their own; they act rather as channels through which idioms of other fields reach a wider public.

The fields from which everyday language borrows most are sport and advertising. Sport is followed with enormous enthusiasm. It has been noted that only with reference to sport do some people who are normally dialect speakers use Italian expressions, learnt from sports commentators. As well as the sports pages in ordinary newspapers, Italy has the privilege of having as many as four dailies devoted entirely to sport. Readers often seem not to realize that the hyperbolic style used by some sports writers corresponds to a very special register, and repeat their baroque images in the wrong key, as if they belonged to a neutral, unmarked stylistic level. Expressions adopted by ordinary language from the field of sport include for instance: *mettere alle corde*, *seguire a ruota*, *salvarsi in corner*, *prendere in contropiede* (roughly translated 'to put into a tight corner', 'to tail', 'to escape by the skin of one's teeth', 'to catch on the wrong foot').

Advertising, in its attempt to persuade, manipulates language in a very elaborate way, making use of the most refined rhetorical techniques. Some advertisements strive to be memorable by their unusual expressions (but mostly they popularize rather than innovate), others try to impress themselves on the public's consciousness (or perhaps on its subconscious) more surreptitiously, through a smooth, colourless message presenting itself as artless rather than drawing attention to its structure. It is very common for fragments of advertisements to become set phrases: e.g., *contro il logorio della vita moderna* 'against the stresses of modern life' (from the advertisement for an apéritif), or *seduce, seduce, seduce* 'it seduces,

seduces, seduces' (from a soap advertisement).

The media are traditionally the butt of puristic complaints: they are accused of polluting the language with their lazy or snobbish use of foreign words and dialectalisms. They have however been among the most important factors in spreading knowledge of Italian. Rather than the use of foreign or dialect words, which may enliven their language, it is their adherence to heavy and opaque formulas that is to be deplored. They are full of the same sort of evasive obscurity which marks the speeches of many Italian politicians, and newspaper articles often appear to be addressed not to the general public but to a highly sophisticated minority capable of reading between the lines and of interpreting convoluted allusions. Even in the more modest reporting of local events the freshness and authenticity of spontaneous expressions is suppressed in favour of a limited and dull inventory of stereotypes, a false idiom which Italo Calvino has called an 'antilanguage', and has exemplified as follows. This is what a witness might say:

*Stamattina presto andavo in cantina ad accendere la stufa e ho trovato tutti quei fiaschi di vino dietro la cassa del carbone. Ne ho preso uno per bermelo a cena. Non ne sapevo niente che la bottiglieria di sopra era stata scassinata.* 'Early this morning I went into the cellar to light the boiler and I found all those bottles of wine behind the coal-bin. I took one to have with my supper. I didn't know anything about the wineshop above having been broken into.'

This is how an official takes it down on his typewriter: *Il sottoscritto, essendosi recato nelle prime ore antimeridiane nei locali dello scantinato per eseguire l'avviamento dell'impianto termico, dichiara d'essere casualmente incorso nel rinvenimento di un quantitativo di prodotti vinicoli, situati in posizione retrostante al recipiente adibito al contenimento del combustibile e di aver effettuato l'asportazione di uno dei detti articoli nell'intento di consumarlo durante il pasto pomeridiano, non essendo a conoscenza dell'avvenuta effrazione dell'esercizio soprastante.* 'The undersigned having descended in the early hours of the morning to the basement rooms to set in motion the heating installation, declares that he made the fortuitous discovery of a quantity of viticultural products situated to the rear of the container of combustible material, and that he effected the removal of one of the said articles with the intent of consuming it during his evening meal, not being aware of the burglary which had taken place in the commercial premises above.'<sup>3</sup>

The differences between sectional idioms are mainly apparent in

## 18 *Italian Language Today*

vocabulary, partly in syntax, and minimally in morphology. Phonology is involved through the use of particular intonation patterns which are considered to be appropriate to or typical of, for instance, the reading aloud of poetry, the preaching of a sermon, the presentation of a radio, television or cinema advertisement, or the delivery used in reporting a football match. Usually the geographical subdivisions emerge through the sectional ones, and it is only occasionally that the former are used as a further means of sectional characterization because a southern accent, say, is thought to typify the speech of a policeman or of a bureaucrat, or a Lombard accent a dynamic but philistine industrialist or businessman. For instance in the song *Ma mi . . .* Ornella Vanoni switches from the dialect of the protagonist, a character from the Milanese underworld (*mi son de quei che parlen no* ['I'm one of those who don't talk']), to the Italian, heavily southern in accent and grammar, of the police inspector (*noi li pigliasse . . . ma se parlasse . . .* ['we'll catch them . . . but if you were to talk . . .']). But that is another story, which is interesting for folklore as well as linguistics, i.e., the use of mottoes, often abusive, in which Italians have traditionally incorporated their judgements of the inhabitants of other parts of Italy, making fun of their speech characteristics.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cf. PELLEGRINI, G.B., 'Tra lingua e dialetto in Italia', *Studi Mediolatini e Volgari*, 8, 1960, pp. 137–153; 'L'italiano regionale', *Cultura e Scuola*, n.5, 1962, pp. 20–29; 'Dal dialetto alla lingua (Esperienze di un veneto settentrionale)' in *Dal dialetto alla lingua. Atti del IX convegno per gli studi di linguistica Italiana*, Turin, 1975, pp. 11–54). See also HOLTUS, G. and RADTKE, E., eds., *Varietätenlinguistik des Italienischen*, Tübingen, 1982. In what follows we shall take examples from the Venetian situation with which we are most closely acquainted.

<sup>2</sup>MENEGHELLO, L., *Libera nos a malo*, Milan, 1963, p. 212, and in the series *Oscar oro*, Milan, 1986, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup>CALVINO, I., in *Il Giorno*, 3 February 1965 (also in *Una pietra sopra*, Turin, 1980, p. 122); we quote from BALDELLI, I., 'Aspetti della lingua della prosa letteraria contemporanea', *Cultura e Scuola*, n.18, 1966, pp. 15–16.

## II A Historical View

What is the present day linguistic situation in Italy, and how did it originate? During the Middle Ages the written language was Latin; it was a literary language which could of course also be 'spoken', in the Liturgy, in the Universities, on many formal occasions, and would be employed in ordinary conversation by people whose native tongues were different, but who were familiar with Latin and could use it as an auxiliary language. This possibility would only have been open to a tiny minority; most people were illiterate, and hence, by definition one might say, did not know Latin. The majority would use their own native tongue, the vernacular, that is, one of the Italian dialects. These dialects derive from Latin; they are spoken Latin as it evolved naturally, unaffected by schooling and formal education, or, to be more precise, largely unaffected, as some learned influences are in fact found in the development from Latin to Romance.

Why did spoken Latin evolve so differently in different parts of Italy? We do not know for certain. An often accepted explanation uses the notion of *substratum*: the Italian dialects are Latin as spoken by Celts, Veneti, Etruscans, Umbrians, Oscans, etc. In some cases (Tuscan, Venetian, Sardinian) the development appears to show little trace of the languages of the original inhabitants, perhaps because these languages were radically different from Latin; in other cases (most of the central and southern Italian dialects) the substratum languages were less radically different and are alleged to have influenced the development of Latin to a far greater extent. The 'superstratum' is much less important; the Germanic invaders (Goths, Longobards) and the foreign powers (Arab, Norman, Spanish, French, Austrian) which dominated different parts of Italy at various times left little trace on the language, apart from loan-words; this is also the case with 'adstratum' influences, i.e., from foreign linguistic communities with whom there was cultural con-

tact, like English or Slav.

The substratum theory appears tempting because modern dialectal boundaries often basically coincide with the boundaries between the different groups of the inhabitants of Italy before the Roman conquests, and because some linguistic phenomena are the same in the pre-Roman and in the post-Roman period; for instance where Latin has *nd* Oscan has *nn* (Latin *operandam* corresponds to Oscan *úpsannam* 'to be made') and the same applies to the dialects of Campania: Latin *quando* becomes Neapolitan [kwánnə] 'when'. There is however the problem that one would have to suppose that some of these substratum influences acted not at the moment (which anyway is difficult to establish with precision) when Latin was adopted, but after intervals, sometimes of centuries, and there is the further problem of how the written documents relate to the language which was actually spoken. The fact is that, in spite of the achievements of comparative historical linguistics, particularly in the field of Indo-European, it is still not known why languages change, why certain changes occur rather than others, and why they occur at a particular time in a particular place.

Another question which cannot be answered with certainty is: when do the Romance languages, in our case the Italian dialects, begin? According to some scholars (e.g., W. v. Wartburg) they derive from different dialects of spoken Latin, and so can be traced back to the first centuries A.D. According to others (e.g., H.F. Muller) they cannot have originated much before their earliest written documents, that is, as late as the eighth century. In this case the birth of Romance would date from the Carolingian renaissance, brilliantly represented by Alcuin, which brought about a greater correctness in the writing of Latin texts; a hiatus was thus introduced between a purified Latin, closer to the classical language, and much more 'vulgar' forms, which were now seen to be very different from it and which precipitated into the vernacular.

What we have here is perhaps not so much a disagreement over facts, as a choice between different points of view: if one looks at individual changes one can trace many of them very far back, but if one is searching for a natural break in the language development, and wants to avoid imposing any artificial subdivision, then one will have to look beyond the examples, to the actual speakers. One will then say that the vernacular begins at the moment in which the speakers become aware of the existence not of two different varieties of the same language (classical vs. vulgar or literary vs.

spoken), but of two different languages, one the vernacular, acquired by all in infancy and used as everyday speech, the other Latin, acquired only as a result of study and used as a literary language. People may have been conscious of a bilingual situation even before the first documents which have come down to us, but we cannot prove it. The first attestations of this awareness come fairly late: the Council of Tours, 813, in its seventeenth deliberation stated *'ut easdem omelias quisque aperte transferre studeat in rusticam romanam linguam aut thiotiscam, quo facilius cuncti possint intellegere quae dicuntur'* (that everyone should try to translate the said homilies into the rustic Roman language or into German, so that everyone may more easily understand what is being said), and the Strasbourg Oaths of 842 are the first document of a Romance language with the French (as well as the German) words of the oath inserted in the Latin narrative.

In Italy evidence of the vernacular emerges later than in France. In the ninth century we find texts which have vernacular characteristics; in the following century we get several references to the use of the vernacular in Italy: the poem *Gesta Berengarii* relates that at the coronation of Berengarius I (915) the senate expressed themselves *'patrio ore'* 'in the language of the fathers' and the people cried *'nativa voce'* 'in their native tongue'. There is a reference to *'nostrae vulgaris linguae quae latinitati vicina est'* 'our vulgar language which is close to Latin' dating from 960; the epitaph of Pope Gregory V (999) states that *'usus francisca vulgari et voce latina instituit populos eloquio triplici'* 'by using French, the vernacular and Latin he instructed the nations in three tongues'. The first dated texts which present the two languages clearly distinguished in one and the same document go back to 960. For the development of a literary vernacular we have to wait until the thirteenth century, when various works are produced in different parts of Italy: Sicilian poetry, Umbrian religious texts, northern Italian didactic poems, Bolognese and then Tuscan verse and prose. Are they written in Italian dialects? The answer is 'yes' only if we accept the use of the term 'dialect' for a period in which there was no standard national language to which the dialect could be opposed, and in spite of the fact that these vernacular writings tended to be 'ennobled' and illustrious and to underplay their more parochial features.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Dante provided in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* a critical survey of vernacular literature in

## 22 *Italian Language Today*

Italy up to his own day which is still valid now, and at the same time he traced the first outline of Italian dialectology from the point of view of a vernacular writer. The Florentine dialect in which Dante wrote his *Comedy* became the basis of a national literary language partly through the excellence of the literature written in it during the fourteenth century, partly because of general historical developments in Italy at the time (the political, economic and cultural prestige of Florence) and partly on linguistic grounds, as the Tuscan dialects were, not only geographically but also linguistically, intermediate between north and south.

When the vernacular re-emerged, after a period of crisis during the fifteenth century, when many humanists disparaged its use, considering it uncouth, undignified and corrupt compared to Latin, it became the subject of the *questione della lingua*, a controversy which was deeply felt, and far from being an idle rhetorical game, had the most wide-ranging cultural and historical implications. What sort of vernacular was best suited as a medium for literary expression? Modern textbooks present a useful, though too schematic, classification into four positions combining two pairs of contrasting views, modernists vs. archaists, and Tuscanists vs. Italianists: (1) those, like Bembo, who favoured archaic Tuscan, as represented in particular by vernacular classics, Boccaccio for prose and Petrarch for poetry: this language was to be learnt through study, just as Latin was to be learnt through the imitation of such classics as Virgil and Cicero; (2) those, like Machiavelli, Tolomei and Gelli, who favoured modern Tuscan; (3) those, like Muzio, who favoured an archaizing composite literary language; (4) those who favoured a modern composite language, like the 'lingua cortigiana' used by people from different parts of Italy at the main courts in Rome, Urbino, Ferrara, etc.; this preference was expressed among others by Trissino and Castiglione. The first position prevailed, and Bembo's theories, defining a trend which was already implicit in the development of Italian literature, were to mark Italian culture for the next four centuries.

From the sixteenth century on, we find dialect literature proper, in the modern sense. Here 'dialect' has quite a different connotation from the one it had with reference to the thirteenth century. It is now contrasted with a 'standard' literary language, and dialect texts tend to underline, and not to underplay, their parochiality. A new form of bilingualism is introduced into the vernacular, so that during the sixteenth century Italian literature consists of works

written in three mediums: in Latin, in the national literary language, which is based on early Florentine but has different varieties, and in a dialect, as for example Ruzzante's plays in Old Paduan and Veneziano's poetry in Sicilian.

From then on literature in Italian followed a path of rhetorical preoccupations, of aspiration to formal perfection and of detachment from ordinary life. Authors did not write for the common people, and the common people did not read works of literature, for even if they were not illiterate they would find the style impenetrable. The first great dictionary devoted to any modern language was the Italian *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (first edition 1612). Largely through the influence of L. Salviati, the Crusca took its inspiration from Bembo's theories. Its dictionary did not help to make Italian more widely known or to get it adopted as a spoken national language. It was based on a distinction between Tuscan authors, mainly from the past, who were 'pure' and whose words were to be included, and all the rest whose language was 'impure' and so were excluded. The aim of the dictionary was not to present the usage of writers and of cultured people objectively, but to provide the norm to which this minority should conform in their writings.

During the following centuries we find many restatements of puristic principles (from Lionardo di Capua to Antonio Cesari and Basilio Puoti), and rebellions against them, mainly by representatives of new scientific movements and by thinkers open to European ideas, above all French, who wanted to renew Italian culture, as for example the Milanese group of *Il Caffè*, headed by the Verri brothers.<sup>1</sup> It would be wrong to infer from prevailing post-romantic attitudes (still current today) that purists were always reactionary and wrong, and their enemies always progressive and right. Purism might embody a patriotic attitude which in certain circumstances could be progressive.<sup>2</sup>

How could a modern national literature flourish in these conditions? How could one write novels in literary Italian? Manzoni described his predicament with clarity: Italian was like a dead language; he expressed himself spontaneously in the Milanese dialect and found French a rich and versatile literary medium, but he could hardly write a novel addressed to the Italian public either in Milanese or in French. Manzoni turned the *questione della lingua* upside down. He did not want literature to decide what the national language should be, he wanted literature to adopt the language

## 24 *Italian Language Today*

most suited to the conditions of the country. Writers ought not to try to impose on the nation the rhetorical and obsolete language of Italian literature of the past; they ought to use a living idiom, one that could become the national language, both written and spoken. This could only be Florentine. Manzoni wrote his novel three times, trying as best he could the third time (1840) to make it conform to contemporary Florentine. He did not fully succeed, partly because his knowledge of Florentine was insufficient, partly because it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to keep the language of the literary tradition out of a work of literature.

For the first edition of *I promessi sposi* Manzoni used the Milanese-Italian dictionary by Francesco Cherubini, looking for Italian equivalents of the dialect words that came spontaneously to his mind; but like other dialect dictionaries of the time, Cherubini provided elaborate Crusca renderings for dialect expressions, and their juxtaposition was sometimes incongruous and it had in many cases an unintentionally comic effect, and Manzoni tried in vain to convince Cherubini to adopt contemporary Florentine for the second edition of his dictionary (1839) instead of the language of the Crusca. Manzoni greatly overrated the importance of dictionaries; in a report to the Minister of Education in 1868 (*Dell'unità della lingua e dei mezzi di diffonderla* 'On the Unity of Language and the Means to Propagate it'), arguing for the adoption of contemporary spoken Florentine as the national language, he maintained that the preparation and diffusion of a dictionary of Florentine was the best way of turning his theories into reality. The *Nòvo vocabolario della lingua italiana secondo l'uso di Firenze* 'New dictionary of the Italian language according to Florentine usage' was duly prepared under the editorship of the ex-Minister himself, E. Broglio, and of Manzoni's son-in-law, G.B. Giorgini, and was published between 1870 and 1897.

Perhaps the lasting merit of the *Nòvo vocabolario* is that the publication of its first volume prompted G.I. Ascoli to write his *Proemio* (1873). Ascoli, the greatest linguist Italy has ever had, and one of the leading comparative philologists of his time, established Italian dialectology on a scientific basis, writing and promoting a large number of studies, many still unsurpassed today, which he published in his journal, the *Archivio Glottologico Italiano*. His *Proemio*, i.e., proem or introduction to the first volume of this journal, is a concise and vigorously argued essay – almost a manifesto – on Italy's linguistic problems. After political unification the *questione della lingua* had re-emerged with a new urgency, and with

practical implications previously absent.

Against the proposal that contemporary spoken Florentine should be adopted by all Italians and that a main vehicle for its diffusion should be a dictionary, Ascoli pointed out that this was not the way national languages were formed. He drew his examples from the linguistic history of France, England and Germany. In France the dialect of Paris had become the national language, through centuries of political, bureaucratic and cultural centralization. In Germany it was not a local dialect, but the idiom used by Luther in his translation of the Bible, that was the basis of the language adopted by the whole nation, at all social levels, thanks to the advance of literacy and the flowering of cultural and civic activities, which, in spite of the lack of political unity, established close links between all sections of the community. The Italian situation was quite different: there was a literary language, developed by men of letters for men of letters, which had never become truly national and popular; there had been neither political centralization, as in France and England, nor widespread cultural activity as in Germany. Manzoni's choice of modern Florentine was quite arbitrary. It was true of course that literary Italian was based on fourteenth-century Florentine, but it had been shaped in the following centuries by influences from other parts of Italy that had not affected the dialect of Florence, which meanwhile had developed along its own lines, quite differently from the literary language.

Why, asked Ascoli, should one introduce forms with *o* instead of *uo* (such as *Nòvo* in the title of the *Nòvo vocabolario*) when the accepted form in literary Italian had for centuries been the one with the diphthong? The fact that modern Florentine preferred forms without the diphthong was certainly not a good reason. Similarly Florentine used *anello* for 'thimble', while other dialects, both in the north and in the south, used *ditale*, which was accepted as the Italian word, and there was no reason for switching now to a Florentine dialect form. In any case, the linguistic situation of a country could not be changed by decree, nor by giving people a dictionary of the dialect which was being proposed as a standard. The formation of a national language was a complex historical phenomenon which depended on social and cultural forces. Italian was a literary language with elitist and formalistic characteristics deriving from aspects of Italian civilization which Ascoli called 'cult of form' and 'low density of culture'.

Ascoli could clearly see, thanks both to his experience as a ling-

## 26 *Italian Language Today*

uist and his progressive ideological position, that to try to modify a linguistic situation by making everyone learn the Florentine dialect, in order to change the condition of the country (i.e., to make it a really unified nation, at a deeper level than the political framework of a unified state) was to go about things the wrong way. The formation of a unified language to be used in all parts of the country by all classes, could only be the consequence of deep social and cultural changes.

In accounts of the *questione della lingua*, it is traditional to set Ascoli and Manzoni against each other as representing two extreme positions: the one being that of 'pure science', which does not allow interference with the natural development of language, the other being perhaps over enthusiastic, but more practical, favouring concrete proposals to remedy the linguistic difficulties of the new Italian state; and subsequent developments in the history of the Italian language are presented as corresponding partly to Manzoni's aspirations, partly to Ascoli's forecast.

But this is rather misleading. In the first place Ascoli should not be opposed to Manzoni: in spite of the seeming contrast in their positions, one finds in both the same rejection of a rhetorical approach to literature and culture and the adoption of a much more sober and realistic attitude, which sees questions concerning language and literature in terms of the society in which the language is used and the literature produced, rather than vice versa. (In the *Proemio* Ascoli finely characterized Manzoni's style and the effect it was having on Italian culture: *quel Grande, che è riuscito, con l'infinita potenza di una mano che non pare aver nervi, a estirpare dalle lettere italiane, o dal cervello dell'Italia, l'antichissimo cancro della retorica* 'that great man, who with the infinite power of a hand that seems sinewless, has succeeded in eradicating from Italian letters, or from the brain of Italy, the ancient canker of rhetoric'). In the second place the position upheld in the *Proemio* turned out to be right. The development of the Italian language followed the course opened to it by Italian history, and particularly by the changes which took place in Italian society, and not the course dictated by linguists, or rather *linguaioli*, to use the Italian term indicating people who assume that language ought to conform to their preferences.

The terms 'purist' and '*linguaiolo*' have been used here as labels to cover two outlooks which were in fact very different. For traditional purists the way to achieve correctness lay in imitating a set of texts; according to the *linguaioli* who followed Manzoni,<sup>3</sup> it lay in