Rethinking Languages in Contact
The Case of Italian
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Managing Editor
Dr Graham Nelson
41 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JF, UK

legenda@mhra.org.uk
www.legenda.mhra.org.uk
IN MEMORY OF
Rethinking Languages in Contact

The Case of Italian

Edited by

Anna Laura Lepschy and Arturo Tosi

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This volume contains the proceedings of the conference held on 11 October 2003 in memory of our colleague the late Joe Cremona of the University of Cambridge, a scholar who did so much to foster the study of Romance linguistics, and in particular Italian linguistics, in the UK. We took as our topic ‘languages in contact’, a subject that was dear to Joe and one to which he often returned, as is evident from his list of writings, which we are pleased to include at the end of the book.

A wide range of problems in contact linguistics will be discussed in the present collection, from both a geographical and a historical angle, covering a variety of regions of Italy, but also broadening out in the Romance area and further afield into the Mediterranean and Malta (from where Joe originated), and finally encompassing English pressure on Italian in the context of the European Union.

We are very grateful to all our contributors; to Giulio Lepschy who was instrumental in planning the conference and in preparing the volume; to Valentina Seravalle who gave valiant and generous assistance in putting the collection together; to Giovanna Gruber, Vice-Director of the Italian Cultural Institute, who made us so welcome for the conference; and to its new Director, Pierluigi Barrotta, who not only gave us financial backing for the publication, but who has already shown himself to be sympathetic and encouraging towards our initiatives. We are very glad to publish again with Legenda, and thank Martin McLaughlin and Graham Nelson for their friendly collaboration.

Anna Laura Lepschy and Arturo Tosi
Joseph Brincat is Professor of Italian at the University of Malta.

John Green is Professor of Romance Linguistics at the University of Bradford.

Adam Ledgeway is Senior University Lecturer in Romance Philology at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Downing College, Cambridge.

Anna Laura Lepschy is Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, and Emeritus Professor at University College London.

Martin Maiden is Professor of the Romance Languages at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford.

Peter Matthews is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge.

Mair Parry is Professor in Italian Linguistics at the University of Bristol.

Christopher Pountain is Professor of Spanish Linguistics at Queen Mary College, University of London.

Brian Richardson is Professor of Italian Language at the University of Leeds.

Cecilia Robustelli is Associate Professor of Italian Linguistics at the Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia.

Rosanna Sornicola is Professor of General Linguistics at the Università di Napoli Federico II.

Arturo Tosi is Professor of Italian at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Visiting Professor of Sociolinguistics at the Università degli Studi di Siena.

Alberto Varvaro is Professor of Romance Philology at the Università di Napoli Federico II.

Nigel Vincent holds the Mont Follick Chair of Comparative Philology at the University of Manchester.
CHAPTER 2
❖
Languages in Contact in Medieval Italy
Nigel Vincent

1. The Problem
The goal of the present paper is to re-examine the complex question of the socio-
linguistic composition of Italy in the period delimitable (in round terms) as 1000–
1300 from a new perspective, that of comparative syntax. I suggest that when viewed
through this lens what has traditionally been taken to be a situation of extreme
linguistic heterogeneity assumes a considerably more uniform character.

The structure and dynamics of social situations that involve layers of bilingualism
and/or diglossia, such as are found in many parts of the modern world, are notoriously
difficult to analyse, and have given rise to an extensive theoretical and descriptive
literature. The problem is compounded when the situation under investigation is at
some centuries’ remove from our direct inspection. In such a circumstance the evidence
available has been subject to the vicissitudes of history, and is therefore necessarily
partial (in both senses!), finite, not adequately representative of all parties, and not
directly interrogable by the usual methods of empirical linguistic inquiry. Rather, such
evidence as we have is textual, and hence our investigation is inevitably attended by all
the complexities that surround the use of documentary material, including the dating
and localizing of texts, the nature of the different manuscript traditions and so forth.
My goal is therefore an ambitious one, and the steps I am able to make towards it in
the present contribution are at best tentative and programmatic.

As a preliminary to this account, I shall say something about our understanding
of syntax, and about the place of syntax within different traditions of linguistic
and cultural analysis. Then, before offering my own view, I shall look briefly at the
kinds of sociolinguistic model that in the past have been projected onto the Italian
Middle Ages.

2. Syntax, Sociolinguistics and History
The mid-twentieth century saw the explosive development of two sub-domains
of linguistics: syntax, from the 1950s onwards, largely but not solely due to Noam
Chomsky, and, from the 1960s, sociolinguistics in the hands of William Labov,
although he too was not without forerunners. Historical linguists, especially
Romanists, have been quick to seize on advances in the latter field but not the former.
In the Italian context may be cited most evidently the work of Alberto Varvaro, to whose ideas I return below. The reason is not hard to find. Many, perhaps even most, of the traditional historical questions about the developments from Latin to Romance, are — implicitly or explicitly — sociolinguistic. Even a crude label like Vulgar Latin, for all its subsequent misuse, involves a primitive attempt at a social stratification of the speech community within which Latin evolved into the Romance languages. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that scholars have sought to apply constructs like diglossia, koine and (de-)creolization to the Romance situation, even if these attempts have not met with universal acclaim.

The reception of modern syntactic theory has also been mixed, though for somewhat different reasons. Indeed, it is syntax, rather, that has discovered linguistic change, and in two largely independent traditions: that of generative grammar on the one hand, where the data of change have been recruited to support an essentially psychological rather than sociological ontology of language, and, on the other, research into the revitalized concept of grammaticalization, which has led to an undermining of the Saussurean distinction between synchrony and diachrony, though not of the equally Saussurean separation of the linguistic system from its socio-cultural context. In their own ways and for their own ends, then, both generativists and grammaticalization theorists have drawn extensively on Romance data, but they have used it in the service of their own theoretical debates rather than feeding work on historical syntax back into the analysis of the sociolinguistic circumstances in which the changes took place.

The reasons for this relative neglect of syntax in the domain of Romance socio-historical linguistics are threefold. First, it is difficult to apply classic sociolinguistic and dialectological methods at the level of syntax, since these involve identification of variables, whether they be sounds, graphemes or morphemes, which can be compared across speakers, contexts, social classes *salva veritate*. But when the syntax changes, it is precisely the meaning that is liable to change with it, since syntax serves to articulate the propositional and supra-propositional content of texts (understood here in the widest possible sense). The default assumption must therefore be that syntactic differences between written texts from different regions or different authors reflect different intended meanings on the part of their authors. Hence such variation cannot easily be used for sociolinguistic purposes unless semantic variation can reasonably be excluded. This is possible to some extent if we are dealing with texts that refer to similar content (e.g. the Bible, the St Brendan story, the story of Troy), of which, fortunately, there are many examples in the period under discussion; but even so there is a long cline from straight translation (assuming we have the original at all) through various degrees of more or less loose adaptation, so caution is always required.

A similar problem concerning the function of syntax also hampers the researcher whose focus is extant communities, and explains the fact that there is little or no tradition of sociosyntax to parallel the rich vein of sociophonetic research that has developed over almost half a century since Labov’s pioneering work. At least, however, the modern researcher can explore via questionnaires the variables of a given speech community. In historical work, by contrast, we cannot have recourse to informants, a restriction that constitutes a second constraint on historical sociosyntax, though
one that renders such research more difficult rather than impossible. In the words of Varvaro: ‘Realizzare una dialettologia del passato forse non è impresa impossibile, ma certo delicata e complessa’ (‘To achieve a dialectology of the past is perhaps not an impossible undertaking but it is certainly a delicate and complex one’).\(^6\)

The third problem links back to the first one. If syntax serves to articulate meaning, it is natural to see it not as part of the structural system of a natural language, but rather as the means by which a writer or speaker conveys their message. To quote Varvaro again,\(^7\) on this view syntax is seen as ‘la sede della libertà di chi scrive’ (‘the domain in which writers have freedom to express themselves’), and thus as something to be excluded from the traits that could be used in identifying a dialect, language, koine, or, one presumes, any other such sociolinguistic construct. This tradition, which makes syntax virtually continuous with style, is called ‘sintassi da filologo’ by Vincent, Parry and Hastings,\(^8\) and is contrasted with a different view and one more useful for present purposes, dubbed ‘sintassi da linguista’. On this latter view syntax is taken to be a component or level of natural language structure, along with phonology, morphology and lexis. It can be modelled in a variety of mathematically definable, formal ways, although these will not be discussed here; I shall confine myself, rather, to the descriptive armoury provided by traditional grammatical metalanguage. The issue at this point is not the choice of model, important though that may be in other contexts, but simply the place that is assigned to syntax within the overall conception of a natural language.

This paper, inevitably speculative in parts, seeks then to suggest that some classic questions can and should be refocused if an attempt is made to marry syntax (in the above sense of ‘sintassi da linguista’) and sociolinguistics within a historical context. The essence of the argument can be summed up in the following propositions:

(a) That a view of syntax that sees it as a level or component of the structure of a linguistic system provides another dimension, besides the traditional ones of phonology, morphology and lexis, in terms of which languages or dialects can be compared.

(b) That when the languages or dialects of medieval Italy are compared according to the metric of syntax, what is striking is the degree of similarity they display rather than the diversity that a focus on phonology, morphology and lexis emphasizes.

(c) That the existence of such a degree of similarity poses the question of how it is to be mapped onto the sociolinguistic matrix of that era.

(d) That the traditional model of dialect fragmentation is thereby challenged, since it naturally accommodates patterns of difference (that is indeed why it was developed!), but is not similarly responsive to extensive interdialectal structural similarity.

(e) That a new model is therefore called for in which similarity and difference can both be accommodated.

The work of Joe Cremona in the later years of life (see his 2003 overview,\(^9\) and Varvaro’s discussion in Chapter 11 of this volume) has, so to speak, eaten into the traditional model from the later end, suggesting that a unified Italian existed in some
contexts at least as a *lingua veicolare* outside the literary language for at least three hundred years before the date of political unification. The aim now is to look at the question from the other end, and to suggest that there was also a greater degree of linguistic unity than is usually thought within the peninsula at the beginning of the vernacular tradition.

### 3. The ‘Standard View’

I shall begin by characterizing what can be thought of as the received wisdom or, as I call it, the ‘standard view’ concerning the linguistic situation in medieval Italy, which may be described in terms of the pyramid metaphor familiar from sociolinguistics. Around the end of the first millennium AD there were at the bottom of the pyramid a myriad of local vernaculars, perhaps as many as 700 according to Muljačić, each with a high degree of autonomy and mutual unintelligibility with respect to other surrounding dialects. At the top we find instead a single language, namely Latin, as the ‘high’ language of formal writing and, probably to a lesser degree, of formal speech. With the passage of time we witness the gradual emergence of local written standards (*scriptae*), and regional vernaculars covering a larger area than before. Thus, Muljačić claims, ‘[i]t would be no exaggeration to postulate, towards the beginning of the thirteenth century, about one hundred *volgari d’Italia* (‘Italian vernaculars’).’

From the fifteenth century on, and spreading differentially over the peninsula and islands, there comes a wave of Tuscanization of the literary language and, later, of all written uses of the vernacular. By contrast, the emergence of a national standard Italian for use in all registers is a post-unification (1861), and to a considerable degree even a post-Second World War, phenomenon. As Varvaro reminds us, and as Devoto had already noted, one feature of the standard account needs to be modified to take into consideration the fact that Tuscany’s early pre-eminence in the commercial sphere had already led to its linguistic practices being taken as models well beyond the frontiers of the region. Nonetheless, the picture of a linguistically fragmented medieval Italy is not substantially altered.

On this view, in the earliest phase there are no intermediate languages between the local vernaculars and Latin. Where there are common features in the textual material of diverse regional provenance that has come down to us, these are to be attributed to one of two factors: (a) the omnipresence of Latin as the language of education, religion, science and law; and (b) for those aspiring to literary composition, the existence of Old French and Provençal as models and as sources of potential loans. In other words, interdialectal similarity is attributed to external factors of contact and imitation, not to internal structural properties of the languages or dialects themselves.

Moreover, as vernaculars with a larger regional coverage develop (compare Muljačić’s proposed reduction from 700 at the turn of the millennium to 100 by the beginning of the Duecento), they do so from the bottom up. There is no middle stratum of language that is inherited from Latin, and there are no inter-regional languages, apart from Latin, that have been constituted for special purposes, such as the composition of literature, before the local intra-regional consolidation had taken place. In a word, there are no koinai. Thus, for example, when discussing the
emergence of a commercial language, particularly as evidenced in the correspondence of merchants, in Tuscany between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Ignazio Baldelli writes:

Fra queste lettere, e altri documenti economici finanziari, scritti a Pisa, a Lucca, a Siena, a Firenze, a Prato, si ha una notevolissima vicinanza, se non una quasi identità, dell’assetto linguistico generale: eppure il contrario di ogni intenzione di koinè.\[13\]

[Between these letters, and other economic and financial documents, written in Pisa, Lucca, Siena, Florence and Prato, there is a remarkable degree of similarity, if not indeed virtual identity, in their general linguistic organization: and yet there is the exact opposite of any aspiration towards a koine.]

Note here how the concept of a koine, or intermediate language between the local vernacular and Latin, is related to the notion of intention and a conscious desire to achieve a unified language, and is strenuously denied for this time and place. Baldelli argues that the fierce sense of local pride and autonomy would have militated against koineization in such an overt, conscious and standardizing way. This is not to say that there were not common themes in the early literary texts of different regions, but these are due to the already mentioned and well-known mechanisms of borrowing and translation. According to Baldelli, ‘Insomma, testi rilevanti che muovono da luoghi culturali importanti; eppure la linea è piuttosto la traduzione e l’adattamento di essi ai diversi volgari’ (‘There are, then, significant texts that spread out from important cultural centres, but the line is rather one of translation and adaptation to the different local vernaculars’).\[14\] When it came to preaching, if the preacher did not know the local language, he got by as best he could by relying on common vocabulary mixed with Latinisms and Gallicisms that would have been known to everyone.

Baldelli’s view is also consistent with Muljačić’s in terms of what might be called ‘granularity’, that is, the size and extent of the individual vernaculars. Baldelli lists five Tuscan city states, and if we inspect a map of Italy for that period we can without too much difficulty arrive at approximately one hundred. The list might continue with Milan, Verona, Ferrara etc.\[15\] Historians, adopting of course different criteria, arrive at a similar figure. The magisterial account by Jones,\[16\] though not so explicitly numerological as the one by Muljačić, recognizes roughly the same number of such entities at about this time (approximately 150 centres that could qualify as city states are listed in his index, for instance).\[17\] Daniel Waley entertains a somewhat higher figure, suggesting that ‘at the end of the twelfth century, when many of the smaller communes had not yet been swallowed up by larger ones, some two or three hundred units existed which deserve to be described as city-states’\[18\], but we are still within the same general range.

Baldelli’s scepticism about the possibility of a koine in central Italy is shared for the south and for Sicily by Varvaro and for the North by Grignani.\[19\] We are left, then, with a picture in which there is rampant linguistic diversity at the level, so to speak, of language on the street, coupled with some standardization for local literary purposes — the so-called scriptae — but as yet no supra-regional languages.
4. Two ‘Non-Standard’ Views

The standard view resides on the assumption that with the collapse of the Roman Empire the social and civil matrix that supported a single, unified, even if regionally diverse Latin language disappeared, and Latin receded into the monasteries and studies of a cultural elite, leaving the modern vernaculars to develop out of the myriad regional languages that were left behind. Two currents of thought over the last couple of decades have, in different ways, sought to undermine this assumption. The first, launched by Roger Wright in 1992 in an important and much-discussed book, Late Latin and Early Romance (in Spain and Carolingian France), and refined over the years in a series of papers, argues for as late as possible a dating of the transition from Latin to Romance. On this view, even some of what are traditionally considered to be the earliest attestations of modern Romance vernaculars, such as the Strasburg Oaths (AD 842), are thought to fall into the Latin period. Although Wright is comfortable with the view that what we call Spanish of the eleventh century is in fact Latin, neither he, nor, as far as I am aware, anyone else has sought to argue that Latin was still alive in Italy after the turn of the millennium except as a diglossic high language accessible only through classroom instruction (so-called Medieval Latin or more simply grammatica; DVE 1. i. 3).

More important in the Italian context is the long debate, already alluded to above, about the existence of koinai within the peninsula. In modern times the most controversial articulation of this idea is due to Glauco Sanga, who, in a series of publications, has argued for the existence of a koine in Italy from a very early date, and whose endpoint would be the lingua cortegiana discussed by Castiglione and others in the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, some of Sanga’s arguments have been too easily dismissed because of his unsuccessful attempt to recruit the Sicilian school poetry to his cause (see, for example, Arrigo Castellani’s careful dissection of Sanga’s arguments). A more conservative view would suggest the presence of a literary koine in northern Italy at the time that concerns us here. In the discussion of this hypothesis there are impressive ranks of scholars lined up on either side. Broadly speaking in favour are, among others, Mussafia, Bartoli, Salvioni, Marcello Durante, Sanga and, more cautiously, Vidossi and Paola Benincà. Resolutely against are Ascoli and Contini, as well as, most recently, Grignani. (For a good summary of the debate, see Vidossi, and the symposium proceedings collected in Sanga.) In fact, somewhat paradoxically, the narrower the geographical focus, the more plausible the idea of a koine becomes. Even those who are against the idea of a northern literary koine, and a fortiori against the back-projection of a common but non-Tuscan lingua cortegiana to the the early Middle Ages, would in all probability have little difficulty in accepting the detailed and persuasive application by Ferguson of the idea of koineization to the formation of Venetian.

In fact Ferguson’s study is enlightening in a number of respects. First, as noted, he identifies an ongoing process of koineization in Venice and the communities of the Venetian lagoon from the earliest times. Secondly, he bases his account on the idea that koine formation involves in essence the stripping away of local peculiarities. Thirdly, it is worth noting that his discussion is based solely on lexical and morphophonological variables; and finally he emphasizes the links between
patterns of urbanization and linguistic development. This account squares well with the general model of koineization proposed by Donald Tuten in his recent study of medieval Spain.\textsuperscript{29} In what is the most extensive study to date of koine formation in the context of medieval Romania, Tuten also emphasizes the way a koine develops within systems with some degree of mutual intelligibility.\textsuperscript{30} Muljačić adds another dimension when he links the process of koineization to Kloss’s concept of elaboration (\textit{Ausbau}), a stage on the road to standardization. On this view: ‘Le \textit{koinè sarebbero delle lingue elaborate diventate comuni da poco’ (‘Koines are elaborated languages which have only recently become shared’).\textsuperscript{31} All these aspects of koines and koine formation work well at the level of local and, at best, regional networks (though recall Baldelli’s dissent, cited above, regarding the network of city states in twelfth–thirteenth century Tuscany); but they are hard to apply on the larger scale that is the Italian peninsula and islands. A different way of viewing the situation is thus required.

5. Before koine in Greece and Italy

Rather than follow the idea of koine as a convergent linguistic system produced in a given place and time through the process of accommodation and the discarding of marked features, I shall take my cue from a study by Anna Morpurgo Davies of the original Greek situation. She surveys the evidence in Ancient Greece and argues that ‘even though there was no standard language in Greece before the koiné, an abstract notion of Greek as a common language which subsumed the dialects was present among Greek speakers at a relatively early stage, i.e. from the fifth century B.C. onwards.’\textsuperscript{32} The existence of the Greek koine itself, on the other hand, is recognized only from the mid- to late fourth century B.C.\textsuperscript{33} Can a similar idea of an abstract non-koineized common language be made to hold within medieval Italy? Is this perhaps the \textit{panthera} that Dante famously tried to track down?

A scholar whose work suggests a positive answer to these questions, at least in the northern Italian context, is Paola Benincà.\textsuperscript{34} Her argument departs from a distinction between two types of koine:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(a)] stable, homogeneous ones, which arise when one language has high prestige and serves as the focus for the other(s); this can happen whether the languages are closely related or not;
  \item[(b)] more variable, less homogeneous ones, which arise in situations where closely related languages of more or less equal prestige accommodate to each other.
\end{itemize}

The latter, she argues, is characteristic of what happened in northern Italy in the Middle Ages, and thus Dante’s \textit{vulgare semilatium} is a real language: ‘il volgare con cui comunicava la metà settentrionale d’Italia’ (‘the vernacular with which the northern half of Italy communicated’).\textsuperscript{35} But if this is the case, we can ask whether Benincà’s argument can be extended to the rest of Italy. Do the conditions for a koine of the second type not also hold at this level as well? Was there indeed a \textit{vulgare latium}? The arguments and evidence adduced by scholars such as Baldelli and Varvaro weigh too strongly for such a conclusion to be plausible, if what we have in mind is a genuine, more or less homogeneized, koine — a language in the traditional sense. But if, instead,
we adopt Morpurgo Davies’s suggestion of an ‘abstract notion’ of a pre-koine unity, the question becomes more intelligible and the possibility of a positive response more feasible. But can we then flesh out some of the properties of this abstract medieval Italian? I would suggest that we can if we address the question at the level of the syntax, seeking to show that there are a range of (morpho-)syntactic properties that link the medieval vernaculars throughout Italy and provide the common framework within which phonological and morphological diversity can be contained without always impairing interregional communication.36

6. A (Partially) New View

As an example to demonstrate the possibility of applying Morpurgo Davies’s account of the Greek situation to the Italian context, I shall consider the thirty-two lines of a poem by Giacomino Pugliese, of the Sicilian school, which were found in a northern manuscript now in the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich (and hence known as the Zurich fragment). At first sight the evidence here might seem to support what I have characterized above as the traditional view. Consider the following comment in a recent volume of literary history:

Le tracce meridionali rinvenibili in filigrana nel frammento di Zurigo e la veste moderatamente siciliana della trascrizione di Barbieri testimoniano con ogni probabilità la lingua originaria di tutta quell’esperienza poetica, un siciliano ‘illustre’ con forti influssi latini e provenzali.37

[The southern traces that can be seen like a watermark behind the text of the Zurich fragment and the moderately Sicilian character of Barbieri’s transcription in all probability bear witness to the original language of that whole poetic experience, an ‘illustrious’ Sicilian with strong Latin and Provençal influences.]

This conclusion fits in well with Baldelli’s characterization (quoted above) of the situation in Tuscany and Central Italy at approximately the same period. For literary historians, the novelty of the text transmitted in this fragment lies in the fact that it demonstrates that a Sicilian poem had been transposed into a northern dialectal form, and that this transposition seems to have happened without Tuscan mediation; and thus it attests to a pan-peninsular but non-Tuscan diffusion of literary models and practices.38 Linguistically, however, it is instructive to re-examine texts such as these with an eye to similarities, rather than to the differences that are the staple of a philological argument such as that conducted with such exemplary skill and precision by Giuseppina Brunetti in her edition and analysis of this text.39 Set out in Table 1 are all the lines that contain a verb form from the Zurich fragment beside the text of the same lines in the Vatican manuscript.

Inevitably (and properly) philologists seek the detailed discrepancies of phonology and morphology as evidence of provenance, but from the morphosyntactic perspective what is striking is the degree of parallelism. Of the 32 lines of this fragment, 19 contain a verb form, and the verbal systems to which they attest are identical. Where there are differences, as for instance in line 21, it is in the choice of the lexical item (potere ‘can’ as opposed to osare ‘dare’), and these verbs are in any case close to synonymous when used, as here, in the negative. The same holds for line 22, when the conditional
configuration is the same but the lexical choice (volere and potere beside fare and volere) differs.

How is such parallelism to be explained? One possibility is what Varvaro has called ‘commutazione’ (‘commutation’), which he defines as ‘uno scivolamento più o meno avanzato da una varietà all’altra’ (‘a more or less extreme slipping from one variety to the other’). The crucial question, of course, is: What status are we to attach to the ‘varieties’ between which such commutation occurs? Is it akin to the mechanism of accommodation already alluded to in connection with the formation of a koine? One would assume not, given Varvaro’s dismissal of the notion of koine (see discussion above). But if something more than this is intended, we are close to the idea of more or less autonomous linguistic systems (traditional ‘dialects’), having sufficient structure in common to enable speakers to move more or less freely between them, or at least while having active competence in one to acquire without problems passive competence in one or more of the others. In this case, the problem re-poses itself: What constitutes this common matrix? The answer I propose (which is almost certainly not Varvaro’s) is syntax.

Varvaro himself connects his concept of commutation to two other dichotomies. The first is Folena’s important distinction between volgarizzamento and translation, according to which the ‘vertical’ transposition between a ‘high’ (in the diglossic sense) language and a ‘low’, so-called volgarizzamento is different in kind from translation, defined as the horizontal passage between languages on the same sociolinguistic level

### Table 1. Lines from ‘Resplendente stella de albur’ by Giacomino Pugliese, a poet of the Sicilian school.

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<thead>
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<th>Line</th>
<th>Zurich Zentralbibliothek C88</th>
<th>Canzoniere Vaticano Vat. Lat. 3793</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>lu meu cor as in balia</td>
<td>lo mio core c’ài in balia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[d]a voy non si parte en fidanença</td>
<td>da voi nom si-dipartte, im fidanza;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>m’ad on’or te renenbra la dya</td>
<td>or ti-rimembri, bella la dia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>quando formamo la dulçe ama[n]ça</td>
<td>che noi fermammo la dolze amanza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bella, or ti siâ</td>
<td>Bella, or ti-siâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>quando in deporto stava cum voy</td>
<td>quando in diportanza istava con voi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>ba[s]a[ni]do me disist: «anima mya</td>
<td>baciando mi-dicie’: «ánima mia,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>lu gran solaç k’è ’ɪnfa nɔy du&lt;z&gt;e</td>
<td>lo dolze amore, ch’è ’ntra noi dui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>ne falsai per dona [k]i sia!</td>
<td>nom falsasse per cosa che sia»</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>m’[a][vi] si preso</td>
<td>m’a[vi] si preso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>m’[a][vi] conquiso</td>
<td>m’a conquiso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>si ch’e’u di voy non posse partire</td>
<td>si che da voi non aso partire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>e no ‘l volria, si-ben lu podese</td>
<td>e non faria sed io lo-volesse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>k[a] me &lt;l&gt; poria dupler li martiere,</td>
<td>ben mi-poria adoblare li martire,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>k’inver di voy [f]allançà facisse</td>
<td>se ’never’voi fallimento faciesse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>sta smarita</td>
<td>è ismarita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>si non fusu […] dulce conforto</td>
<td>se nom fosse la dolze aita e lo confortto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>nenbrando k’e’u lu ter-al meu braço</td>
<td>membrando ch’èi-te, bella, alo mio brazo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>quant descendist a me i[n] deporto</td>
<td>quando sciendesti a me in diporto</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
even though they may have greater structural and genetic differences. The problem here is that Varvaro’s commutation maps most obviously onto Folena’s account of translation, but this relation obtains not only between different Romance vernaculars but also between, say, Greek, Arabic and Latin, and the distance, both structural and lexical, between these does not square easily with Varvaro’s idea of slippage from one variety to another. Secondly, he adduces the distinction drawn by the medieval philosopher Roger Bacon between ‘substance’ and ‘accidence’. Beside Bacon’s words, ‘Grammatica una et eadem est secundum substantiam in omnibus linguis, licet accidentaliter varietur’ (‘Grammar is one and the same in substance in all languages, even though it may vary in accidence’), Varvaro juxtaposes an observation by Thomas Aquinas, ‘In eadem lingua saepe diversa locutio fit, sicut patet in Francia, et Picardia, et Burgundia, et tamen una loquela est’ (‘In the same language there are often different ways of speaking, as is evident in France, in Picardy and in Burgundy, and nonetheless there is only one language’).

Interestingly, in his discussions of this model of variation, Varvaro never cites any syntactic variables, which is consistent with the view (quoted above) that syntax is ‘la sede della libertà di chi scrive’ rather than being part of what makes up the system of a language. Once, however, we introduce syntax into the equation, we have a way of defining more precisely what the unity of grammatica is. It is precisely in the syntax that we can find the realization of Morpurgo Davies’s idea of an ‘abstract notion’ of linguistic unity, and Varvaro’s notion of a common structure within which the process of commutation may operate.

How, one might reasonably ask, does the view I am advocating here, with its emphasis on the overall structural unity of the Italo-Romance vernaculars as defined in syntactic terms, differ from the views of Wright and of Sanga, which in their different ways are also built on an idea of greater linguistic unity than what we have called the standard view assumes? The answer in the case of Wright is straightforward. He sees a continuity between Latin and the evolving Romance vernaculars lasting until a very late date, possibly even as late as the eleventh century in Spain. I would, if anything, go in the opposite direction, seeking signs of an emergent Romance morphosyntax already in the evidence of fourth- to sixth-century texts such as the Itinerarium Egeriae and others of that era. For him, then, the common pattern is the pattern of Latin itself, in direct contrast to the Romance-based view that I outline here. In that sense my view has something in common with the arguments developed by Durante and by Sanga. There seems to me to be more than a grain of truth in Sanga’s assertion that ‘la nascita dell’italiano può essere anticipata al VI sec., quando si è esaurita la fase delle trasformazioni latino-volgari e cominciano ad apparire strutture chiaramente italiane’ (‘the birth of Italian can be brought forward to the sixth century, when the phase of transformation from Latin into the vernacular has worked itself out, and when structures that are clearly Italian begin to emerge’). Yet, Sanga surely goes too far if what he has in mind is, as it sometimes seems, a fully-fledged language unified at all levels of structure. Rather, what we have is a syntactic template that defines the common patterns of linguistic italianità, but which is integrated and realized through significantly different phonologies and morphologies.
7. A Grammar of Written or Spoken Language (lingua o stile?)

My argument so far has been that syntax is centripetal whereas the other levels of language are centrifugal, and this argument has been reinforced by the understanding of syntax as part of the defining structure of a language and not simply as the vehicle by which an individual writer articulates his (and at this period much less commonly her) thoughts. To put things in modern linguistic terms, syntax is seen as belonging under the heading of Chomskyan competence rather than Saussurean parole. However, it is not impossible that some at least of what we find in our early texts is, again in Chomskyan terms, performance rather than competence. Consider the case of the double complementizer constructions as in the following:

(1) prego li mie’ comessarii che, pasado io de sta vita, ch’eli despaça […]

‘I beg my executors that, when I have passed from this life, they should release…’

Commenting on this construction, Stussi observes: ‘L’esempio più frequente di queste ridondanze per così dire chiarificatrici è la ripetizione della congiunzione che qualora tra essa e il verbo dipendente sia stata inserita una frase parentetica’ (‘The most frequent example of what we may call clarificatory redundancy [sc. in early Venetian texts] is the repetition of the conjunction che whenever a parenthetical clause is introduced between the conjunction and the verb in the subordinate clause’). The expression ‘clarificatory redundancy’ here suggests that the pattern of repetition is driven by communicative necessity rather than an intrinsic structural requirement. The same idea is echoed by Nello Bertoletti in his comment on a similar example from a fourteenth-century Modenese letter:

(2) et om ve prega che, se vo porté monetha, che vo gardà cum’ o ve la dugé, che vo la porté plu aschosa che vo podeti

‘And we (lit. one) beg you that, if you carry money, that you are careful how you carry it, that you carry it as hidden as possible’

And yet this phenomenon is widely attested in texts from several regions and in various registers, including ones in which pressure of circumstances or immediacy of communicative need can be excluded. Thus:

(3) e divennero si copiosi in dire che, per l’abondanza del molto parlare sanza condimento di senno, che cuminciaro a mettere sedizione e distruggimento nelle cittadi

‘and they became so prolific in public speaking that, on account of the sheer quantity of what they said without any leavening of sense, that they began to sow sedition and destruction in the towns’ (Brunetto Latini, La rettorica, 28. 4–6)

(4) donè li terme per tal convent que, si el al terme non aves paià quest ave, qu’el serea pendù

‘he set a term for such an agreement that, if he at the term had not paid this sum, that he would be hanged’ (Piedmont, Sermoni subalpini, VII. 11–13)

(5) ch’i’ non discredo che, s’egli ’l sapesse un che mi fosse nemico mortale, che di me di pieta[de] non piangesse
'that I do not disbelieve that, if one who was my mortal enemy knew it, that he
would not out of pity cry for me' Cecco Angiolieri
(6) ti priego che, se egli avviene ch’io muoja, che le mie cose ed ella ti sieno
raccomodate
‘I beg you that, if it should happen that I die, that both she and my possessions
should be commended to you’ (Decameron, 2. 7)
The alternative possibility presents itself, therefore, that this pattern, which can be
summed up in the formula [che + parenthetical + che + embedded clause], is a recur-
rent syntactic construction at all levels and in all regions and not simply the product
of carelessness or haste on a particular occasion and in a particular place.

8. Regional vs. Supra-Regional Syntax

In arguing for the importance of a supra-regional ‘Italian’ syntax even in the Middle
Ages, one must be careful not to overstate the case. There are, of course, differences
which are syntactic or morphosyntactic and which can be tied down to specific geo-
graphical regions, such as the use of the past tenses (Ambrosini) or the systems of
demonstratives (Ledgeway).

Even here, however, it may turn out that the regional difference is at the level of
the morphology rather than the underlying syntax. Thus it is well known that in
Neapolitan texts from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries there are personal
inflections attached to non-finite forms of the verb as well as to finite ones, as in
the following examples of the inflected gerundio:

(7) vedendeno li Grieci tanta copia de cavalieri armati […] fortemente se maraviglyaro
de la multetudene loro
‘When the Greeks saw so many armed knights, they (= the Greeks) were truly
amazed … (Libro de Destruczione de Troia, 141. 20–22)

(8) […] tutti li Grieci […] se partero da Troya […], vedendollo li Troyani et alle-
grandonosse multo de quella partenza
‘all the Greeks departed from Troy, on seeing which Trojans rejoiced greatly at
their departure’ (Libro de Destruczione de Troia, 256. 7–9)

(9) Imprimamente achilles con grande impeto insio a la vattaglya, contra lo quale
insio lo re Hupon […], et ortandonosse de llance achilles le dey uno si forte
cuolpo […]
‘First Achilles with a great rush went out to battle, against whom King Hypon
went out …, and hitting-AGR.3PL-REFL with lances, achilles gave him such a
strong blow… (Libro de Destruczione de Troia, 177. 12–14)

An obvious hypothesis might be that the difference in surface morphology correlates
with a difference in underlying syntax, for instance that when the gerundio bears an
inflection it can have a subject identified by that inflection and different from the
subject of the main verb, while the inflectionless gerundio is restricted to contexts in which it shares a subject with the main verb. Now the first part of that hypothesis is certainly true, as examples such as (8) and (9) above clearly show. Yet the second part is not true, and for two reasons: because there are instances, such as (7), of an inflected gerundio that refers to the same subject as that of the main verb in Neapolitan texts; and, more strikingly, because there are instances in non-Neapolitan texts of an uninflected gerundio that do not have the same subject as the main verb. In other words, the syntax of the gerundio is pan-Italian; it is only the morphology that differs from region to region.

Moreover, this interregional syntax of the gerundio does not derive from Latin, where the gerund(ive) had a very different role. Finally, the simple gerundio is different in its textual distribution from the compound gerundio. Whereas the latter emerges only in the context of direct translation from Latin — the first examples are in Boccaccio’s renderings of Livy — and never subsequently loses its association with high literary registers, the simple gerundio is a genuine Italian construction. Its role in the early literary language had already been recognized in important studies by Corti and by Segre dating from the 1950s. Subsequent research has revealed the wider geographical extent of its use, and thus of its value as a diagnostic of the general phenomenon I have been seeking to identify: interregional syntactic convergences at a time when other criteria would suggest that divergence is the norm.

9. Conclusion

The case for supra-regional effects that may suffice to give a sense of an ‘abstract notion’ of the Italian language gets stronger the more one focuses on the (morpho)syntax rather than on the phonology and morphology. In this sense the traditional and ongoing debate about koineization in medieval Italy has been misstated, because linguists, philologists and literary and cultural historians have chosen to concentrate on only a subset of the available data. Interestingly, my conclusion here chimes remarkably well with the one Joe Cremona derived by a very different route through his seminal studies of Mediterranean consular documents, namely, that it makes sense to speak of Italian even outside literary contexts much earlier than has traditionally been supposed.

Notes to Chapter 2

The ideas presented here are based in part on research conducted within a project on the syntax of early Italian dialects funded by the AHRB, whose generous support is hereby gratefully acknowledged; for a description see Nigel Vincent, Mair Parry and Robert Hastings, ‘Il progetto SAVI. Presentazione, procedure e problemi’, in Atti del Convegno sulla sintassi dell’italiano antico, Università di Roma 3, settembre 2002, ed. by Maurizio Dardano, Nigel Vincent and Gianluca Frenguelli (Rome: Aracne, 2004). It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the inspiration and insight of other project members on the questions addressed in this paper, and especially of Mair Parry. Nevertheless, the views expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the other project members. I am grateful to those who participated in the oral discussion of this paper when it was presented at the Italian Institute on 11 October 2003, and in particular to Laura and Giulio Lepschy for their comments on an earlier draft. It is both a pleasure and a sadness to dedicate this paper to the memory of Joe Cremona, who first introduced me to some of the problems discussed here more than three decades ago.
1. Mention should be made in particular of the work of Labov’s own teacher Uriel Weinreich, revisited sympathetically but perceptively in the present volume by Peter Matthews (see Chapter 1).


8. ‘Il progetto SAVI’.


15. I leave it to the reader, as an interesting mental exercise, to enumerate the centres that would constitute the foci of Muljačić’s claimed 100 vernaculars. Recall by way of comparison Dante’s division of Italy into fourteen, a figure that would, however, exceed 1000 if secundari and subsecundari varieties are allowed into the count (De vulgari eloquentia [DVE], i. x. 7).


17. Historians are perhaps not always as sensitive as they might be to matters of language, as Joe Cremona’s late work testifies in another context. Yet, interestingly, Jones observes that ‘It is no accident of record that in every phase of business life the earliest surviving documentation is uniformly Italian’ (p. 184), citing documents from as far apart as Genoa, Florence and Venice. On the thesis I am arguing for in this paper, Jones is in fact right to identify a common Italianness to these early documents, although at the level of orthography and morphology there are substantial differences between, say, early Tuscan and early Venetian commercial texts; cf. Alfredo Stussi, Testi veneziani del Duecento e dei primi del Trecento (Pisa: Nistri-Lischì, 1965).


21. Roger Wright, Early Ibero-Romance (Newark, NJ: Juan de la Cuesta Monographs, 1995).

22. For a sceptical assessment of Wright’s hypothesis in the Italian context, as well as for valuable general discussion of the problems in this area, see Livio Petrucci, ‘Il problema delle origini e i più antichi testi italiani’, in Storia della lingua italiana, ed. by Luca Serianni and Pietro Trifone (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), iii, §6. 3.

25. Compare here Castellani (p. 465), who, in discussing the undoubtedly Tuscan *Ritmo Laurenziano* (mid-12th century), refers nonetheless to an admixture of forms ‘che vanno ascritti a quel tanto di convenzionalità estraregionale e settentrionalizzante-gallicizzante presumibilmente normale nel linguaggio giullaresco dell’Italia centrale superiore’ (‘which must be ascribed to that degree of extra-regional and northernizing-gallicizing convention that was presumably normal in the language of the minstrels of upper central Italy’).
26. ‘Koinè nell’Italia settentrionale’.
38. Note that this account is not inconsistent with the view already mentioned, and attributed to Devoto, that the influence of Tuscan as a model was earlier than customarily thought, since (a) it still would not have been this early, and (b) the earliest influence was in the commercial rather than the literary sphere.
42. Folena, 1994, p. 78.
43. In fact there are two ways. To put the matter in Chomskyan terms, it is natural to read Bacon as an early advocate of the distinction between Universal Grammar (= substantia) and the grammar of the individual language (= accidentia). Aquinas, on the other hand, seems to be talking about differences between varieties of a single language, and thus appears to be nearer to the concept Varvaro seeks to develop. The question, however, is a complex one, and must be put aside here for lack of space. Another issue on which I defer discussion is that of consciousness and intentionality (cf. Baldelli’s above-mentioned reference to ‘ogni intenzione di koinè’). This is clearly an important matter in a literary context, where Varvaro’s warning against projecting a modern sense of language and identity onto the Middle Ages is surely well taken: see his “‘La tua loquela ti fa manifesto’. Lingue e identità nella letteratura medievale’, in *EUROAL*, ed. by R. B. Finazzi and others, pp. 49–67; repr. in his *Identità...*
It is less clear that the same strictures can apply when the object of enquiry is, as here, the tacit knowledge, or ‘competence’ in the Chomskyan sense, of the members of the medieval Italian speech communities.


45. ‘La koinè italiana’, p. 82.


47. Stussi, p. 74. 10r.


