
Marinella Caruso

**I
TALIAN LANGUAGE
ATTRITION
IN AUSTRALIA**

The verb system



**Materiali Linguistici
Università di Pavia**

FRANCOANGELI

Materiali Linguistici. Collana a cura dell'Università di Pavia, Dipartimento di Linguistica

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FRANCOANGELI

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Premessa

Questo libro, versione rielaborata della mia tesi di dottorato in Linguistica Italiana presso la University of Western Australia, nasce da due interessi generali: il primo nei confronti della linguistica del contatto, il secondo nei confronti dell'italiano in Australia, una lingua caratterizzata da un crescente *shift* verso l'inglese e da una forte limitazione nell'uso.

Nello specifico, l'idea di questo studio trae origine dalla convinzione che la situazione di perdita della lingua in contesto migratorio sia un'opportunità unica per contribuire in modo originale alla teoria linguistica. Alla base di questo lavoro sta dunque la premessa che, come già osservato per i dati sull'acquisizione di una L2 (Giacalone Ramat 1989), anche la semplificazione della grammatica osservata nell'erosione permetta di indagare l'incidenza di principi universali, in particolare della marcatezza, nel processo di perdita e quindi di offrire apporti alla teoria linguistica.

Questa indagine sull'italiano in Australia esamina i fenomeni strutturali dell'*attrition* e, ponendo attenzione sull'espressione morfologica della temporalità, mira a verificare se la perdita proceda secondo un ordine di marcatezza, da marcato a non-marcato. Lo studio della morfologia temporale in italiano è stato oggetto di numerosi lavori, particolarmente in prospettiva acquisizionale, ma non ha ricevuto la dovuta attenzione nella vasta ricerca sull'italiano all'estero. Parallelamente, la nozione di marcatezza è stata largamente e proficuamente applicata allo sviluppo e alla variazione di sistemi linguistici, ma trascurata in prospettiva di logorio linguistico.

I dati della ricerca provengono da campioni di lingua parlata da italo-australiani di prima e di seconda generazione appartenenti alla comunità italiana di Perth, in Western Australia. Utilizzando la metodologia del confronto intergenerazionale, i parlanti sono stati collocati su un continuum di erosione rappresentante fasi diverse della perdita, e su tale continuum si è esaminata l'espressione morfologica delle relazioni temporali e aspettuali. Alcune delle domande che ci si è posti sono: quali sono le caratteristiche del sistema verbale lungo il continuum di erosione? Quali tempi verbali non sono rappresentati

nel sistema? È possibile individuare fasi nella perdita della morfologia temporale? Che ruolo ha la nozione di marcatezza nella spiegazione dei meccanismi che sottendono all'erosione del sistema verbale?

Come indice di erosione si sono considerate sia l'assenza di morfologia verbale in dati contesti, sia la presenza di forme funzionalmente e morfologicamente non corrette. Sono stati inoltre analizzati casi in cui il parlante ha fatto ricorso ad altri codici (inglese o dialetto) per codificare la temporalità.

Il volume si compone di sette capitoli. Il primo offre l'inquadramento concettuale generale dello studio ed introduce le finalità e la struttura del lavoro. Il Capitolo 2 esamina il fenomeno dell'erosione linguistica mettendone in risalto la vicinanza con altre situazioni di contatto. Il Capitolo 3 discute i risultati della vasta letteratura di riferimento sulla lingua italiana e i suoi dialetti in Australia. I capitoli successivi rappresentano il nucleo dell'indagine. Il Capitolo 4 inizia con un'ampia discussione della nozione di marcatezza, e sulla base di tale discussione formula ipotesi in merito all'erosione nel sistema verbale dell'italiano. Segue, nel Capitolo 5, una descrizione dei principi metodologici e relativi alla costruzione di un corpus di dati. L'analisi dei dati e la verifica delle ipotesi sono presentate nel Capitolo 6. Nel Capitolo 7 si traggono le conclusioni.

Da un punto di vista teorico la ricerca mostra che le relazioni di marcatezza tra gli elementi linguistici sono generalmente efficaci nel prevedere la direzione e l'ordine in cui tali elementi sono soggetti alla perdita. Come verrà illustrato nel corso del volume, la marcatezza si rivela una nozione importante per descrivere l'erosione nel sistema verbale, ma non è sufficiente da sola a spiegare la complessità dei fenomeni osservati. Il background linguistico dei parlanti (cioè il loro originario bilinguismo italiano-dialetto), così come le caratteristiche specifiche delle lingue del loro repertorio, devono rientrare tra la gamma dei possibili fattori che incidono sul processo di erosione.

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1. Introduction

The importance of studying Italian-English contact in the migration context has now long been recognised. Since Camilla Bettoni (1981: 12) described the literature in this area as “not very large (...) sketchy and unsystematic”, a large amount of research has been undertaken, including in Australia, where Italian continues to be the most widely spoken language in Australia after English.

“Multilingual Australia”, to use the title of Clyne’s (1982) popular book, is particularly fertile and interesting ground for linguistic investigation indeed, even when the dynamics of language contact manifest themselves in the phenomenon of language attrition, that is, the loss of language, or part of it, by members of a speech community.

This investigation situates itself within the research area of language attrition, particularly in the contexts of migration and language shift. It assumes the situation of loss attested for Italian in Australia as a starting point in order to examine aspects of Italian verbal morphology (i.e. the expression of temporality), and to verify the impact of universal principles (i.e. markedness) in the loss process. This book is an attempt to understand Italian language attrition better through applying the insights of language theory.

By starting from the indisputable situation of loss that characterises Italian in Australia, I do not intend to disregard the diversity of variables that are at play in this process, or the need for further investigations aimed at providing a broader linguistic picture than we have at present. However, Bettoni (1981, 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991b) has already convincingly documented the linguistic process of language attrition, and, although her Sydney studies cannot be taken as indicative of the degree of attrition of Australia in general, it is safe to say that Italian is no longer actively spoken by the third generation (in fact, by some members of the second generation either, as my data will show), and that this applies Australia wide. Consequently, a situation of language loss can be assumed a priori. This is not to imply that a rigorous definition of language attrition is unnecessary, but to identify the focus of the study as the

structural changes resulting from lack of contact with the community language.

In undertaking an empirical investigation in the area of Italian language attrition, I am attempting not only to understand a phenomenon of the contemporary Australian linguistic panorama¹, but also to verify a linguistic theory that has received considerable attention but has not been fully applied to attrition data. This is the theory of markedness. The impetus for this study came, in fact, from findings made in the related area of interlanguage studies, in which markedness has been recognised as an important factor in shaping the learning process. In acquisitional studies, it has been shown that the order in which grammatical structures enter the interlanguage is influenced by their degree of markedness, with less marked structures being acquired before more marked ones. While similarities between language attrition and other language contact processes have been suggested (see Andersen 1982, 1983, Gonzo and Saltarelli 1983), I believe that the relevance that attrition data have for linguistic theory has not yet been fully emphasised (notable Australian exceptions being Clyne 1992 and 2003, in which attritional data are used to test linguistic theory). Like second language acquisition data – and unlike first language acquisition data – language attrition data are not strictly linked to the cognitive development of the speaker, and can therefore effectively reveal the mechanisms involved in the reduction of a linguistic system.

Within this perspective, Italian, due to its complex morphology, is well suited to the verification of hypotheses based on markedness. My hypothesis is that more marked forms of the Italian verbal system (within the indicative mood) are lost earlier than less marked forms. The Australian context is also appropriate for this type of investigation. This is not only because it provides us with a language undergoing attrition, but also because this language is spoken by a community in which, in contrast to other countries, such as the United States, the first generation is still numerous (although in decline)². This allows a cross-generational type of study in which different stages of attrition can be observed. To this we should add a comprehensive amount of research on Italian language attrition, which offers methodological and analytical research tools.

¹ In Australia the proportion of the population using a language other than English is in fact rising due to a number of socio-political factors, amongst which, most notably, is revitalisation by new migration especially from outside Europe (Clyne and Kipp 2006, Rubino 2007). Yet, this richness in linguistic diversity, as Clyne (2005) argues convincingly, does not translate into a real recognition of the country's language potential due to a "persistent monolingual mindset" (p. xi).

² For an account of the Italian language in the USA see, amongst others, De Fina and Fellin (in press), Haller 1992, Scaglione 2000.

It is therefore my intention to examine the speech of members of the Italo-Australian community in order to identify and explain stages in the loss of certain aspects of verbal morphology. In focusing on the verb system as the object of the inquiry I am also attempting to fill a gap in the study of Italian abroad. Notwithstanding the strong tradition of studies in this area, little attention has in fact been paid to verbs (cf. Bettoni 1991b, di Luzio 1995), in contrast with the large amount of research devoted to the acquisition of tense and aspect distinctions in Italian as a second language (see Banfi and Bernini 2003, Bernini 1990a, 1990b, Bernini and Giacalone Ramat 1990, Berretta 1990a, Giacalone Ramat 1995, 2002, Giacalone Ramat and Banfi 1990, Giacalone Ramat and Rastelli 2008, Wiberg 1996).

This volume is structured in seven chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides the terminological and conceptual framework of this study through a concise survey of the literature on language attrition. Chapter 3 presents the social and linguistic background of the investigation, by considering the research findings obtained in the area of Italian language attrition in Australia. Chapter 4 provides the theoretical approach of the study. It includes a discussion of the notion of markedness, an account of the Italian verb system in terms of markedness, and the formulation of my hypotheses. The fifth chapter describes the methodological steps followed in the construction of a corpus suitable for the examination of verbal morphology in the speech of second-generation Italo-Australians and for the testing of the hypotheses. The model of analysis devised for this inquiry continues the tradition of intergenerational studies, while proposing an original formulation of an attritional continuum along which verbal morphology is compared. Chapter 6 analyses the data and discusses the findings, and the final chapter summarises the findings and draws conclusions.

In sum, the interest of this investigation is in the linguistic characteristics of Italian language attrition and in particular in the loss of verbal morphology expressing temporality. The study is set in the Australian context and, while it assumes the relevance of linguistic structure in the attrition process, it adopts a sociolinguistic perspective in that it recognises the sociolinguistic background of the speakers as a major factor determining attrition (see Bettoni 1991b: 369, drawing on Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Clyne 2003). It is for this reason that the speakers' Italian-dialect bilingualism is taken into account in this inquiry. This study intends therefore to contribute to a better understanding of the Italo-Australian linguistic reality, and of the principles which govern the process of attrition that Italian is undergoing, with the conviction that this insight can help not only expand language theory, but also promote Italian language maintenance abroad. It is hoped that research in this field can, to use Pauwels' words (2004: 733), "assist such groups [ethnolinguistic

minorities] in making linguistically informed decisions and also assist them in LM [language maintenance] efforts by drawing upon case studies from the past”.

2. Language attrition

In this chapter I will define the terminological and conceptual parameters for the study. I will do this by approaching the multifaceted phenomenon of language attrition from its various angles and by surveying the literature in this field. As I move from the general to the specific, I will be situating this investigation within the research tradition of first language attrition. Given the nature of my inquiry and its focus on intergenerational attrition, I will also discuss the notions of individual vs. group attrition, and of attrition vs. “failure to acquire”. The general conceptual framework introduced here will be followed, in the next chapter, by a more detailed account of Italian language attrition in Australia.

2.1 Definitions

Since the publication of Lambert and Freed’s *The loss of language skills* in 1982, studies in the area of language attrition have multiplied and so have its definitions. Language “deterioration”, “regression”, “decline”, “disintegration”, “loss” and “death” are only some of the terms commonly used in the literature on this theme.

The most widely accepted definition of language attrition is found in Freed (1982: 1): “Broadly defined, language attrition may refer to the loss of any language or any portion of a language by an individual or a speech community”. This definition represents a very important step in the approach to language attrition¹. Until the 1980s, the study of language attrition had been applied almost exclusively to the pathological area, and the loss of language was a result of a clinical disorder, such as in aphasia. Freed’s definition, instead, goes beyond the pathological area and describes processes that affect not only

¹ For an account of definitions in chronological order, with reference to research carried out in the 1980s, see Waas 1991.