

## Introduction

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The papers in this section all exemplify the variety and depth of research interests present nowadays in Italy in the field of language studies. They span from theoretical-explanatory to descriptive-experimental research and consist of either elaborations of comparative approaches or linguistic analyses with teaching implications. Even when not explicitly stated, insights into the practice of teaching always surface from both descriptive and explanatory approaches. In the order we have arranged the papers, we have tried to unfold a logical progression along the canonical domains of grammatical studies – from phonology/phonetics to morpho-syntax, to semantics, up to the more composite areas of discourse, pragmatics, cultural and comparative studies.

In the manner of a prelude, we open with a general reflection on the meaning of the words we, language technicians, use with our audiences, including in classroom settings. We linguists use language about language. We also abuse language, when our addressees do not (or can not) share the terminology we offer – often taking it for granted. Our listeners can be alienated rather than fascinated, and the technological detail of our observations is lost. When addressing students the problem is even more crucial. Prat Zagrebelsky applies her personal teaching experience rather than abstract academic notions to suggest a few solutions to the problem of terminological fuzziness with university students. Several causes are detected for communicative difficulties and a few guidelines are suggested for overcoming potential miscommunication. Amongst other things, syllabus planning and a certain eclecticism of approach play a central role, together with the need to introduce terminological clarifications early in the academic curriculum.

Within the area of phonology/phonetics, two papers deal, from different perspectives, with problems of pronunciation.

Bertacca's study on the origins of standard pronunciation tackles the complicated area of reconstructed phonology and phonetics; pronunciation in the XV and XVI century, with tape recorders a long way ahead still, is a very thorny issue, here treated with convincing historical detail. The author describes the development of central aspects of the phonological system of standard English from a diachronic standpoint, starting when the attainment of a standard for the spoken language was still unthinkable: from the period of Middle English, he leads us to contemporary English through interesting cross-linguistic references to the history of standard Modern French. One of the discriminating points in the

history of the two languages seems to have been the institution of "public schools". Furthermore, the author demonstrates the importance of language heterogeneity in the development of standards, since language change always presupposes variability (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968: 95-189).

Complementary to this descriptive-diachronic stance, Busà adopts explanatory-synchronic methods, with a careful eye to possible teaching implications for L2 English pronunciation. The focus is in particular on the acquisition of American English (Wells 1982: 467-490) as acquired by the community of Italian immigrants who have moved from L1 Italian to Californian American English after adolescence. How successful are they in acquiring the target language vowel system, in particular the quality and length of lexically stressed unreduced vowels? She examines three groups of Italian speakers of L2 English – lightly, medium and heavily accented – to test experimentally two issues: whether English vowels pronounced by Italians are crucial in the detection of a foreign accent; whether distance from the native phonetic model correlates positively with the perception of foreign accent. The aim is to discover which aspects of pronunciation most prominently impair communication (cf. Munro and Derwing 1995: 73-97). Italians turn out to be more sensitive to vowel duration than quality, and this may also depend on wrong teaching assumptions whereby non-existent contrasts are actually taught (eg. /i/ = long and /I/ = short, cf. Baker 1992).

Two authors deal with issues in comparative morphology and syntax: Bertuccelli Papi on converbs and Caimi Valentini on compounding.

The former studies an extremely interesting morpho-syntactic structure, the converb, which could be defined as an 'adverbial verb'. It can be encoded, in various languages, by gerunds, participles and infinitives in turn. The problem is which grammatical function realises the converb in Italian and in English. A careful analysis based on sometimes unexpected grammatical examples leads to interesting conclusions regarding both languages, but also triggers a far-reaching re-analysis of the grammatical status of English *-ed* participles.

Caimi Valentini aims to develop a contrastive link between concept and word formation in English and Italian. Compounding is thoroughly analysed in the two languages drawing critically on the literature (cf. Lieber 1992: 79-96; Scalise 1992: 175-199; Selkirk 1982); criteria are stated for the definition of compound status, the Head/Modifier relation is examined, the semantic structure of compounds compared to sentential structure, and semantic opacity is also treated. The essay offers invaluable information and a wealth of interesting examples on the mutual interference between Italian and English and also explains borrowing from historical, social and cultural perspectives.

Two papers deal with semantic and discourse problems.

Webber offers very interesting insights into the style of scientific conference language in English and Italian. Central is the contrastive use of personal deixis, discourse markers and indefinite quantifiers. The methodology is corpora collection, transcription and analysis, with two spoken corpora collected at large medical conferences, for a total size of about 40.000 words. The analysis shows interesting cross-linguistic interactions between English and Italian, in that some of the features detected show similar behaviour in the two languages. Both languages for instance offer informal uses of pronouns, where first and second person pronouns are frequent. Italian seems to adopt casual features less than English, although style shift figures prominently in both languages. Marked differences between the two languages lie in the area of discourse markers rather than indefinite quantifiers. Motivations for these phenomena are provided with many clear examples.

Garzone investigates the grammatical form of performativity. Her essential interest is finding out which are the possible forms of performatives found cross-linguistically in Italian and English. Common patterns do emerge, but the two languages diverge in fundamental ways. In order to outline the differences, the author sets up an interesting framework for the classification of performatives, where prominent are categories such as explicit vs. implicit performatives ("I warn you there's a danger" as opposed to "Danger!") andthetic vs. non-thetic performatives ("I declare you husband and wife" against "I thank you"). An interesting pattern contrasts the two languages – while Italian favours the present tense as the prototypical form of performativity, both present tense and *shall* are possible in English, with a preference for the modal in binding statements and norms. A detailed analysis of the modal *shall* (based on two legal texts) suggests that *shall* is often used in English with the same performative function as the Italian simple present tense. Interesting observations are gathered on performative and deontic *shall* – in the texts in question the former being slightly more widespread.

Discourse analysis and semantics as useful teaching aids appear in the following two papers.

Lombardo and Piazza focus on the organization of discourse in oral narratives produced by intermediate and advanced students of English and Italian as a foreign language at University level, in order to identify developmental discourse features common to both groups of students at an interlanguage stage. The area is of vital importance, due to the scarcity of literature on L2 development of narrative skills. Learners showed some difficulty in the formulation of the episodic component of their stories and their predicates were often stative instead of action verbs. Reference and connectivity were managed elegantly in advanced narratives and, among other things, the article offers a valuable analysis of tense switching in L2 narratives.

One of the most common (and cursed) L1 transfer errors from Italian to English concerns the connective *in fact*, too often heard as true friend of *infatti*. Bruti takes up the complex issue of defining the essence of this discursive and pragmatic non-equivalence. A detailed description of the contrastive behaviour of these items with abundant examples in context, clarifies how *in fact* has an essentially corrective, cataphoric and progressive valence, whereas *infatti* is rather confirmative, anaphoric and non-progressive. Teaching implications can be drawn from the intrinsic nature of these items.

Two more articles move in the domain of language teaching, namely D'Acerno's and Douthwaite's papers on the role of literary texts in language teaching.

The former attempts to demonstrate how poetic language is really not far from everyday language and how this can be exploited in the classroom by using poems, songs, rhymes, etc. to teach language as a composite system. In particular, a poem by Mary Angelou is examined in its language teaching potential – its grammar, prosody, semantics, cultural background are analysed and teaching suggestions offered. Naturally, these could be extended and adapted to different kinds of learners, an aim which goes beyond the scope of the essay.

Along similar lines, albeit with quite a different methodology, Douthwaite's paper puts a few literary passages to the test as possible language teaching aids, constructing a complex methodological pathway to the exploitation of literature in language courses. A text is seen as a multifaceted network of 'voices' – echoed, implied, recalled in the work as well as in its potential teaching use. Language is seen as varied communication, and linguistic proficiency goes on a par with mastering language variety. Beside offering interesting theoretical implications, this essay constitutes a practical demonstration of how to structure language courses in line with the multifarious complexities of human language.

## References

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