RETHINKING *ITALIANO POPOLARE* FOR HERITAGE ITALIAN

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Abstract: This article questions the long-standing assumption that heritage Italian can be characterized as *italiano popolare* on account of a number of similar non-standard features. It is argued that this is a problematic comparison due to some methodological lacunae in research into heritage Italian and that a systematic corpus-based analysis is needed in order to reveal its underlying sociolinguistic dynamics. This study focuses on a corpus of Italian spoken by the Italian community in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and presents a multivariate analysis of a set of morphosyntactic simplification features that have been labelled as typical of *italiano popolare*. It will be shown that the features of heritage Italian clearly correlate to a set of traditional language contact variables (e.g., contact with the home language and intergenerational transmission). This variation pattern shows that heritage Italian can no longer be connected to *italiano popolare* in the original sense of the term (viz. an interlanguage or diastratically lower regional Italian).

1. Introduction

In this article, I question the common characterization of heritage Italian as an *italiano popolare* by considering the linguistic and social dynamics pertaining to heritage languages. I will concentrate on the spread of a set of morphosyntactic simplification phenomena that Italian linguists in the 1980s have attributed to popular and heritage Italian (Berruto, “Per una caratterizzazione” and *Semplificazione linguistica*; Cortelazzo; Rovere, “Gli studi”). This study builds on a corpus of Italian spoken by second- and third-generation Italians in Flanders (Belgium) and uses statistical measures to quantify the sociolinguistic dynamics in the informants’ speech. I will argue that the description of so-called simplification form rates does not throw sufficient light on heritage Italian and that a full understanding of the variable use of features of *italiano popolare* and

of the social factors that affect their use cannot be achieved without variationist techniques.

To this end, I will first describe and analyse the distribution of a set of simplification features that scholars have described as typical of *italiano popolare* (sections 4 and 5). Second, I will analyse the sociolinguistic processes underlying the variation in the examined corpus of heritage Italian in order to get a grasp on the current situation of heritage Italian in Flanders and on its relationship with contemporary Italian (section 6). It will be shown that the spread of the simplification features in heritage Italian in Flanders manifests traditional patterns of language change in a migration setting and that the comparison with *italiano popolare* oversimplifies the complex dynamics underlying heritage Italian (section 7). I will first start by documenting the problems related to the notion of *italiano popolare* (section 2) and by outlining the main methodological prerequisites for this study (section 3).

2. Italiano popolare: A problematic notion

The Italian migrant community that is spread across the globe traces its origins to very different linguistic regions in Italy, ranging from North to South. The thousands who emigrated from Italy each year from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s mostly spoke local vernaculars (so-called Italo-Romance dialects, see Cerruti), as did the majority of Italians that they left behind (Bettoni, “L’italiano”; De Fina; Haller, “Italian in New York” *Una lingua*; Marzo, “Italiano”; Vanvolsem). Until the 1950s, Italians living in extraterritorial contexts were mostly not fluent in the national language, which in Italy began to spread during the twentieth century (De Fina; Haller, *Una lingua*). While in Italy the use of dialects was gradually limited to home and family, or even abandoned in favour of a common pan-Italian variety (according to ISTAT statistics, in the 1980s only 14% of Italians living in Italy spoke exclusively dialect: see Antonelli 18), among Italian migrant communities, the local vernaculars remained the main form of speech for decades.

As a consequence, Italians exported not only their cultural habits but also dialectal characteristics that mingled with the dialectal features of their compatriots who came from other Italian regions. In the same way as on the Italian peninsula, contact between these different regional features has engendered a series of *koinéization* processes that we might expect when speakers of different varieties of languages interact. Hence, heritage Italian was traditionally

described as having been affected by universal simplification processes with paradigmatic and syntagmatic levelling and analogical regularization (Gonzo and Saltarelli, “Monitoring” and “Pidginization”). This led Italian linguists in the 1980s and 1990s to characterize heritage Italian as a form of *italiano popolare* (Berruto, “Fremdarbeiteritalienisch”; Bettoni, “L’italiano”; Felici; Rovere, *Testi*; Vanvolsem). *Italiano popolare* (or generally translated as “popular” Italian) is defined by linguists as a social variety of Italian spoken by less-educated speakers (Telmon) and is generally situated along the lines of interlanguages in second-language acquisition. The notion of *italiano popolare* was in vogue principally in the 1970s and 1980s and served to define a spoken variant of the principally written and highly bureaucratic form of Italian. Cortelazzo considered *italiano popolare* as the result of an imperfect learning of Italian by dialect speakers, as “the kind of Italian which has been imperfectly acquired by those who have their dialect as a mother tongue” (“la variante dell’italiano imperfettamente acquisita da chi ha come madrelingua il dialetto,” Cortelazzo 11). Although the origin and nature of this notion have always been a matter of debate (which I will not discuss further here),¹ according to De Mauro (*Storia linguistica*), *italiano popolare* emerged and stabilized in the years following Italy’s unification. During this time, large sectors of peasants and the urban working class increasingly needed the possibility of interregional communication, and this strongly affected, if not fostered, the diffusion and use of a common language. These sociolinguistic changes characterized not only the Italian peninsula, but also Italian migrant communities. As noted by De Mauro, the migration from Southern Italy towards Rome and Northern Italy and the historical emigration beyond Italy acted as a “school of Italianization” (De Mauro, *Storia linguistica*), exposing individuals to other dialects and languages for the first time and driving them to develop a *lingua franca*. As already mentioned, *italiano popolare* has often been considered a transitional form—an interlanguage—between dialectal varieties and the national Italian variety (Telmon). As such, it was characterized by features that may be subsumed under the general category of tendencies based on simplification (Britain; Mühlhäusler, *Pidginization*; Trudgill) with respect to the more elaborate structures of standard Italian. Since the sociolinguistic studies of heritage Italian in the 1980s viewed it as a heterogeneous pidginized *lingua franca*, resulting from an imperfect acquisition of a pan-Italian language, the label of *italiano*

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¹ For further information, see Ernst; Lepschy, “L’italiano popolare,” *L’italiano popolare*, and *Mother Tongues*; Radtke, “Die Bestimmungskriterien.”

popolare was often accepted as an all-around definition for the varieties of heritage Italian spoken all over the world (Berruto, “Fremdarbeiteritalienisch” and *Sociolinguistica*; Bettoni, “L’italiano”; Haller, *Una lingua*; Vanvolsem).

Although these studies all provide a thorough general picture of the language varieties and repertoires spoken by Italian in diasporic contexts, the comparison between heritage Italian and *italiano popolare* raises a number of theoretical and methodological problems, including these: (1) the comparison simplifies the underlying sociolinguistic dynamics present in heritage Italian, and (2) the notion of *italiano popolare* turns out to be too obsolete and (3) methodologically problematic to study the present state of heritage Italian. I will elaborate on these problems in the following paragraphs.

First, it should be noted that the comparison between *italiano popolare* and heritage Italian overshadows the underlying language change dynamics of the latter. In heritage Italian, there has been what Thomason calls a “multiple causation” for change, viz. a complex interlacing of different types of language change processes (Thomason 62). On the one hand, two types of contact-induced processes can be distinguished, namely dialect levelling and foreign interference (due to long-term contact); on the other hand, Thomason’s term “multiple causation” can be extended here to a series of extra-linguistic pressures (e.g., distance from the home language) that have further influenced the linguistic development of a heritage Italian.² This combination of factors distinguishes the heritage variety from the Italian vernacular diffused in Italy. The notion of *italiano popolare* fails to account for these dynamics as it focuses too narrowly on the acquisition of an interlanguage and the presence of regional or dialectic features.

A second problem is the highly precarious status of the concept of *italiano popolare*. In 2003, Berruto insisted that *italiano popolare* had become old-fashioned and that it could no longer be considered a useful object for linguistic and theoretical description (Berruto, *Fondamenti* 343). Indeed, with regard to heritage Italian, the notion does not allow for the depiction of the actual situation of new generations of Italians. Over the last few decades, the Italian language spoken and maintained outside of the Italian peninsula has systematically changed due to greater mobility and contact possibilities. New generations now have more frequent contact with contemporary Italian through holidays in Italy, television,

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² It must be noted that Thomason’s “multiple causation” was only meant to describe the combination of different linguistic causes and thus did not pertain to extralinguistic factors.

and internet access. It is thus inevitable that heritage Italian speech will come to resemble more closely contemporary Italian spoken in Italy.

Thirdly, *italiano popolare* turned out to be a complex methodological concept. While this variety of Italian has already been described largely on the basis of frequently occurring phenomena (Berruto, “*L’italiano popolare*” and “La natura linguistica”; Cortelazzo; De Mauro, “Introduzione”; Lepschy, “*L’italiano popolare*,” “*L’italiano popolare: riflessioni*,” and *Mother Tongues*; Mioni; Vanelli), its existence has never been substantiated by systematic and empirical studies based on adequate corpora of spoken Italian. In the 1980s, Italian linguists (e.g., Berruto, “Per una caratterizzazione”) were already pointing out the need for corpus studies. However, no one has heeded this call, and hardly any corpus studies (except Alfonzetti; Aureli, “Le relative”; Fiorentino) have been carried out to better understand the phenomenon of *italiano popolare*. In other words, we need detailed corpus studies of the features that characterize the so-called *italiano popolare* variety, preferably in different linguistic contexts.

This last point brings us to the most glaring problem in the study of heritage Italian over the past three decades: the lack of systematic data on the basis of corpus research. Except for the recent Heritage Language Variation and Change project in Toronto (Nagy et al.; Nagy and Kochetov) and Scaglione’s study on Italian in San Francisco, the majority of the studies on heritage Italian offer mainly descriptive analyses of small samples and are therefore difficult to compare. In the same vein as the Toronto project, the present study addresses the issue of heritage Italian in Flanders from the standpoint of variationist sociolinguistics (Chambers; Labov, *Principles* and “The Social Motivation”). Based on a controlled sample of forty-eight informants, this paper aims to contribute to our general understanding of the language variation and change of heritage Italian. By revealing the underlying sociolinguistic dynamics in the use of a set of morphosyntactic features, I want to question the comparison between *italiano popolare* and heritage Italian. The choice of the variationist approach implies that the terms “heritage language” and “simplification” are used with no implication of linguistic deficit and that no generalizations will be made about impoverished systems.

It must be noted that in recent years, there have also been other studies on heritage Italian that did not look at immigrant Italian in terms of deficit. Recently, a few important attempts have been made to analyse in a microlinguistic, ethnographic perspective the actual language use in small Italian communities (Fellin; Pagliai) or in Italian families (e.g., De Fina). These studies have highlighted the

symbolic meaning of the use of the (albeit sometimes limited) linguistic resources among Italian speakers. Although these studies have shed important light on the indexical meaning of Italian and dialect in heritage Italian communities, I will not further elaborate these findings since they go beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Method

The data presented here are drawn from a corpus of heritage Italian spoken in Flanders (Belgium). The corpus was collected between 2004 and 2006 and contains interviews and narrative stories³ from forty-eight informants. It consists of 148,726 words and is homogeneously stratified along four dimensions: (a) gender, (b) generation (second and third generation), (c) exposure to national, standard Italian language and culture (frequent and occasional), and (d) place of residence (two neighbourhoods).

The methodology relies on two kinds of measures: (1) frequency of occurrence of the features under study (viz. the simplified and the non-simplified or standard-like variants); and (2) the hierarchies of extralinguistic factors that influence the probability of the feature or variant's occurrence to a greater or lesser extent.

Based on existing descriptions of *italiano popolare* (e.g., Berruto “*L’italiano popolare*” and “*La natura linguistica*”), each occurrence of a number of linguistic features in the corpus is identified as either simplified or standard or common Italian (see section 4 for an inventory of the linguistic characteristics analysed). A simplification index is then calculated. This index is a percentage based on the sum of the relative frequencies of all occurrences of simplified variants. Next, the effect of a number of extralinguistic and independent factors on the language of the speakers is assessed through statistical analysis. The statistical package R 2.0.1 is used to identify associations and interactions between the factors that influence the use of simplified forms.

In order to set the scene for the variationist analysis, I begin by explaining the envelope of variation (Tagliamonte, *Analysing* 86).

4. The Envelope of Variation

The morphosyntactic features presented herein are the result of simplification processes, which can be defined as “optimalization of existing rules and the

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³ The wordless cartoon story *Frog Where are You?* (Mayer, 1969) was used to trigger these stories.

development of regularities for formerly irregular aspects of a language” (Mühlhäusler, “Structural Expansion” 44). They all imply a clear increase in the morphosyntactic regularity of the Italian system. It is worth noting that some features (e.g., *che polivalente*, Blasco Ferrer 223–225) may arise from internal linguistic evolutions also present in other language varieties, such as *français populaire* or the German *Umgangssprache* (Lepschy, *Mother Tongues* 50).

The set of features has been selected on the basis of previous descriptions of *italiano popolare* (e.g., Berruto, “L’italiano popolare” and “La natura linguistica”; Tosi) and Italian heritage language (e.g., Haller, *Una lingua*). In the second stage, the distribution of these characteristics across the forty-eight informants was controlled: a particular variable was selected only when the variant occurred in at least ten informants. If the occurrence of a variable did not meet this condition, then it was not selected since it would risk being idiosyncratic. Since the present corpus is rather limited, these corpus criteria were of paramount importance in order to ensure representative analysis.

4.1 The Paradigm of the Masculine Article

The first process of simplification is evident in the loss of allomorphs in the paradigm of the masculine article, which in standard Italian has different forms depending on the subsequent word. The basic forms of the definite and indefinite article are *il* and *un* for singular (*il/un libro*—“the/a book”) and *i* for plural (*i libri*—“the books”). The definite articles *lo* (singular) and *gli* (plural) and the indefinite article *uno* (singular) are used in the following contexts:

- before words beginning with the consonant clusters [ps], [pn] and [pn], e.g. *lo psicologo*—“the psychologist” or *uno gnomo*—“the dwarf”
- before words beginning with [ks], as *lo xenofobo*—“the xenophobe”
- before the so-called “impure” *s*, viz. when [s] is followed by another consonant, as in [sp], [sl], and [sc], as in *lo/uno scrittore*—“the/a writer”
- before words beginning with [ts] and [ds] as in *gli zii*—“the uncles” and *lo zucchero*—“the sugar”

The plural indefinite *gli* and the singular definite *l’* occur before vowels, as in *gli aerei*—“the plains” and *l’amico*—“the friend.”

Table 1. Standard and Simplified Forms of the Masculine Article

masculine definite article				masculine indefinite article			
singular standard	singular simplified	plural standard	plural simplified	singular standard	singular simplified	plural standard	plural simplified
il	il	i	I	un	un	dei	Dei
lo		gli		uno		degli	
l'	l'						

The simplification process affects the allomorphic character of this paradigm, which is sometimes reduced to the basic forms *il*, *i*, *un* and *dei*.

- *il* (instead of *lo*)

(1) [...] si cioè euh *il stato* italiano euh... cioè... organizzava queste queste colonie per i bambini dei dei lavoratori italiani all'estero ("yes ehm the Italian state organized these these summer camps for the children of Italians working abroad")

- *un* (instead of *uno*)

(2) [...] voglio dire è *un spaccone*... poi io con lui non siam mai andati d'accordo. ("I mean he's a boaster... and we never got along with each other")

- *i* or *dei* (instead of *gli* or *degli*)⁴

(3) [...] perchè *i stivali* non mi sembrano che possono essere del bimbo. ("since I think the boots do not belong to the child")

- *i* or *dei* (instead of *gli* or *degli*)

(4) [...] dopo *i altri* hanno messo una base più o meno come l'ho messa io. ("afterwards the others created a basis like I did")

In my analysis, the variable context of the masculine article contained three (near-) categorical contexts, where the variation was very low or even zero per cent (Tagliamonte, *Analysing* 86): idiomatic expressions, titles of journals or

⁴ Since the "articulated prepositions" for a plural indefinite article consist of a preposition + definite article, in the analysis they were considered as definite articles.

fixed nominal groups.⁵ All of these contexts were excluded from the envelope of variation.

4.2 *The Levelling of the Relative Pronoun: che polivalente*

The overextension of the use of the pronoun *che* (“that”) is one of the most-studied features of contemporary spoken Italian (including heritage Italian). The concept of *che polivalente* (“polivalent *che*”)—also called “Allroundpronomen” (Radtko, “Italienisch” 372) or “multi-purpose *che*” (Tosi 51)—generally comprises different uses of the conjunction *che* that establish subordination above its standard morphosyntactic functions. The present paper takes into account only the use that Fiorentino characterizes as the simplified relative clause introduced by *che*—a “weak relative complement” (in Italian, *il complemento relativo debole*). This clause modifies an oblique relative pronoun without any pronominal compensation. The antecedent can be (1) a temporal nominal syntagm, like *il momento in cui/che* (“the moment in which”), *il periodo in cui/che* (“the period in which”) *l’anno in cui/che* (“the year in which”); (2) a locational complement, like *il paese in cui/che* (“the country where”); or (3) another oblique (dative) complement, e.g., *la ragazza a cui/che ho dato il libro* (“the girl to whom I gave the book”). In the next example, the antecedent is an oblique complement:

(5) [...] la parte di mio marito *che* [< con cui] parlo il calabrese. (“my husband’s family to whom I speak the Calabrian dialect”)

We will refer to this use with the term *che polivalente* (“polivalent *che*”). Like the morphological reduction of the masculine article paradigm, the *che polivalente* is a case of simplification. With the reduction of a complex paradigm to one single pronoun, *che*, the relative clause construction becomes homogeneous and analogous to the basic forms, viz. the clauses introduced by a subject or direct object (e.g., *la ragazza che legge*, “the girl who reads,” and *la ragazza che vedo*, “the girl that I see”).

According to several studies in the 1980s and 1990s (Berretta, “Morfologia” and “Il parlato”; Berruto, “L’italiano popolare,” “La natura linguistica,” and “Per una caratterizzazione”; Cortelazzo; Sabatini), the weak relative clause recurred not only in low diastatic registers, but also in colloquial contemporary Italian.

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⁵ In particular, there was no attested variation for *La Gazzetta dello Sport* nor for the nominal group *Università degli Stranieri*; variation was almost absent in the fixed nominal group *lo stesso* (“the same”), for which only two cases of *il stesso* were registered.

However, the *che polivalente* is still stigmatized as a substandard variant with clear diastratic marks (Berruto, “Per una caratterizzazione”; Radtke, “Italienisch”). This has been confirmed by a series of recent quantitative studies measuring the variation between the two variants in contemporary spoken Italian. In fact, scholars have demonstrated that the *che polivalente* hardly occurs (Alfonzetti; Fiorentino) but that it is perceived by users as being non-grammatical (Aureli, “Le funzioni” and “Le relativi”).

It is precisely this marginal variation in contemporary Italian that makes this relative clause an interesting variable in a study of heritage Italian, since a comparison with the earlier studies may possibly reveal differences between informal spoken Italian in Italy and Italian spoken in extraterritorial contexts.

A series of contexts were excluded from the envelope of variation, in particular the relative clauses with a temporal value introduced by *che*, e.g., *dal momento che* and *nel momento che*, which are equivalent to *dal momento in cui* (“from the moment in which”), *nel momento in cui* (“at the moment in which”). In these contexts, the use of *che* is now commonly accepted in standard Italian and indeed ubiquitous in spoken Italian; Sabatini considers it a form of neostandard Italian (Sabatini, “italiano dell’uso medio” 164). Moreover, in these contexts no variation was observed and only the simplified *che* variant appeared.

4.3 The Generalized Use of the Pronoun *ci*

The next case of simplification is the generalised use of *ci*, viz. the use of the original locative *ci* to cover all third-person indirect object pronouns, *gli* (masculine), *le* (feminine) and *loro* (general plural).

Whereas the extension of the masculine *gli* (third person singular) to the plural *loro* has now entered in general use and is accepted in spoken Italian (Sabatini 1985; Tosi 2001) and even in written journalistic Italian (Antonelli), the use of *ci* for all the dative clitics of the third person is still considered a marked phenomenon used only in uncontrolled speech (Berretta, “Ci’ vs. ‘gli,’” “Il parlato,” and “I pronomi”; Cortelazzo; Rovere, “Gli studi” and *Testi*). In the next example *ci* is used for the masculine plural *loro*.

(6) [...] per esempio coi studenti euh *ci* parlo euh se hanno problemi [...]. (“for example with the students ehm I talk to them ehm when they have a problem”)

The evident complexity of the Italian pronominal system is at the root of this simplification process. More than four decades ago, Migliorini (30) noted how the masculine singular pronoun *gli* was used instead of *le* and *loro*. Sabatini (143) attests to this generalized use even in written texts. On the other hand, the further simplification of *ci* to cover all three pronouns derives from Northern Italian dialects (Cortelazzo 90).

4.4 *Analogy of the Verbal Endings: -ono vs. -ano*

The morphological regularization of the verbal system is another typical simplification process. In colloquial Italian, many forms of reduction have emerged over the years: for example, the analogical reduction of the marked forms of either the imperfect conjunctive (*dassi* and *stassi* instead of *dessi* and *stessi*) or the present conjunctive (*vadi* and *vadino* instead of *vada* and *vadano*). The same reduction has affected the paradigm of the remote past, particularly the irregular forms of the first plural person, e.g., *dissimo* instead of *dicemmo* and *fecimo* instead of *facemmo*.

The analogical reduction of the conjunctive and remote past is excluded from this study owing to the infrequent occurrence of these modes and tenses in the present informal spoken corpus. I did include in the study one specific type of simplification, viz. the morphophonological reduction of the ending *-ano* into *-ono*; this occurs in the third-person plural of both the present indicative of the first conjugation (*parlano*, *mangiano* → *parlono*, *mangiono*) and the imperfect indicative of the three conjugations (*parlavano*, *mettevano*, *capivano* → *parlavono*, *mettevono*, *capivono*).⁶

(7) [...] appena *avevono* chiusi i occhi la rana uscì [...]. ('as soon as they closed their eyes, the frog got out').

4.5 *The Missing Agreement between the Past Participle and Its Subject*

The missing agreement between the past participle and its subject is barely documented in studies of simplification patterns in spoken Italian, yet, it is a

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⁶ During data extraction, the following verbal forms in *-ano* and *-ono* were excluded: (1) the standard endings in *-ono* (present indicative of the second and third conjugations), and (2) the standard endings in *-ano* where no variation occurs, viz. the present conjunctive (e.g. *possano* and *siano*).

clear manifestation of active simplifying processes (Berruto, “*L’italiano*” 57). Two contexts are taken into account for this variable: when the subject is (1) a feminine singular and (2) a feminine plural. Each of these cases is subject to variation.⁷

(8) [...] perché guarda finché sono stato io nel consiglio del club giovanile mai sono entrati delle droghe [...]. (“... because listen, until I was on the board of the youth club, we had never problems with drugs”)

5. Variables and hypotheses

5.1 Variables and Factors

In the statistical analyses, the dependent variables are the use of either the simplified or standard variant and the independent variables are the sets of extralinguistic (social) factors associated with the different probabilities of the dependent variables’ occurrence.

Each relevant linguistic token was coded for eleven independent variables, which were arranged in two groups. The first group contains five social and demographic variables: (1) gender, (2) generation, (3) age and (4) level of education. The generation variable consists of two values, i.e., second and third generation. Second-generation Italians are those informants whose parents are both first-generation immigrants (i.e., who came to Belgium as adults or after the age of eight, the point at which language is considered to be almost fully acquired);⁸ third-generation immigrants have at least one parent who was born in Belgium. For the age variable, two groups were used: a group with informants between the ages of fifteen and thirty and an older group of informants between the ages of thirty-one and fifty. Level of education is coded in terms of whether the speaker

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⁷ When the subject is a masculine plural, the verb endings are barely subject to variation, viz. in this context the missing agreement occurred in only in two per cent of the cases (seventeen cases of the 639). For this reason, this variation context has not been taken into account.

⁸ This comes from Haugen’s (1953) principle about generation 1a and 1b. According to this principle, people born in Italy who migrated to Belgium after the age of eight belong to generation 1a; generation 1b consists of people who migrated before the age of eight, the critical age for complete language acquisition. In the present study, the third generation consists of those informants with at least one parent who was either born in Belgium or is a member of generation 1b.

has finished secondary school (professional or general secondary school), college or graduate school.

In addition, each speaker is coded for five social variables related to the issues of language and dialect contact: (1) regional origin, which distinguishes between the different regional provenances (Central Italian–Tuscan–Southern Italian–Northern Italian); (2) exposure to the Italian spoken within the migrant community in Belgium (Occasional–Frequent); (3) exposure to the national, non-regionally marked Italian language spoken in Italy (Occasional–Frequent); (4) exposure to a regionally marked Italian, spoken with speakers from the same regional origin (Occasional–Frequent); and (5) the number of years the speakers have taken Italian language lessons (metric variable);

In the present analysis, I pay close attention to the hierarchical ranking of the independent variables with respect to their influence on the dependent variables (Tagliamonte, “Comparative” 751ff). Hierarchies of independent variables answer questions such as whether one variable (e.g., exposure to the national, standard Italian language) is ranked as more influential than another variable (e.g., gender). The hierarchical ranking of the factors is made possible by using a forward stepwise regression. In this procedure, the independent variables are added to the model in order of significance; the variable added first is the one that produces the greatest decrease in variance (cf. *infra*).

5.2 Language Simplification Hypotheses

A contact-induced language simplification hypothesis predicts that simplification rates should show a positive correlation with the generation of the interviewees (the younger generations show more simplification phenomena due to less-frequent exposure to Italian and to less-systematic contact with native Italian-speaking people) and with their exposure to Italian spoken in Belgium (more exposure to heritage Italian leads to more simplification phenomena); it should show a negative correlation with their exposure to the national non-regionally marked Italian language spoken in Italy (the higher the exposure to the national language spoken in Italy, the fewer simplification phenomena occur) and with the number of years the speaker has taken Italian lessons (the more years in language courses, the fewer simplification phenomena occur). Since the emergence and spread of the simplified features have been related to dialect contact (see previous

definitions of *italiano popolare* in section 2), the correlation with the variables “regional origin” and “exposure to regional varieties” will also be examined.

The other variables serve to control possible interactions with other factors, i.e., gender and level of education. In particular, age is included to control for the effect of the generation variable, since the latter is often problematic in language contact research (e.g., Hulsen 189; Jaspaert and Kroon 89).

6. Results

6.1 Variation Patterns

It became clear that simplification phenomena are not always dominant in the informants’ speech: only four of the seven variables across the corpus present a dominant simplified variant. Figure 1 presents the relative frequencies for the eight variables. Simplification particularly affects the article paradigm (definite and indefinite singular, plural before vowels), the relative pronoun and the verbal endings. In these cases, the simplified variant passes the 50% mark and even the 70% mark. Simplification affects the other paradigms less, i.e., the plural article before consonants, the third-person dative pronouns, and the verb-subject agreements. Two features merit particular notice, viz. the use of the polyvalent *che* and the generalized use of *ci*. The high frequency of the relative *che* in dative context is remarkable, especially when it is compared to its very low frequency (0.28%) in informal spoken language in Italy (Aureli, “Le funzioni” and “Le relative”). This may indicate a clear diffusion of this feature in diasporic contexts. The generalized use of the pronoun *ci*, however, is rather low and thus does not tie in with the predictions that were once made on the future diffusion of this feature (Berretta, “Morfologia” and “Il parlato”).

Figure 1. Relative frequencies of the occurrence of the simplified and standard forms for the different phenomena

Table 2 shows the absolute and relative frequencies and the calculated significance of the variation between standard and simplified forms. It can be concluded that the variation is highly significant in all cases, except for the use of the definite and indefinite singular articles (variation *il* - *lo* and *un* - *uno*), and except for the verbal endings. As said before, the present analysis does not aim to merely record frequencies of linguistic characteristics, but rather to determine which social constraints influence the use of simplified forms. To answer this question, a multivariate statistical analysis is proposed to explore the social factors that account for the variation between popular and standard forms. Since the principal goal is to discover the complex sociolinguistic processes underlying the linguistic variation encountered, we need a method that considers several related variables simultaneously, with each one being considered to be equally important.

Table 2. Simplification variables

Variable	Number of tokens	%	p value
1. Definite sing. + conc.			
il - simplified	(26/49)	53%	p = 0.6682
lo – standard	(23/49)	47%	
2. Indefinite sing. + cons.			

un - simplified uno – standard	(15/25) (10/25)	60% 40%	P = 0.3173
3. Definite and indefinite plur. + cons.			
i / dei - simplified gli / degli - standard	(49/235) (186/235)	21% 79%	p < 0.0001
4. Definite and indefinite plur. + vowel			
i / dei - simplified gli / degli - standard	(50/64) (14/64)	78% 22%	p < 0.0001
5. Relative pronouns			
polivalent che - simplified standard relative pronoun	(59/69) (10/69)	86% 14%	p < 0.0001
6. Ci pronoun			
ci pronoun - simplified gli / le / loro - standard	(45/169) (124/169)	27% 73%	p < 0.0001
7. Analogy in verbal endings			
-ono - simplified -ano – standard	(552/1117) (565/1117)	49% 51%	p = 0.6973
8. Verb /subject agreement			
Missing agreement - simplified agreement - standard	(59/495) (436/495)	12% 88%	p < 0.0001

6.2 Social Constraints upon the Simplification Processes: Multivariate Analysis

I have performed a statistical analysis to assess whether the use of simplified forms is driven by the extralinguistic factors discussed in section 5. The dependent variable is constituted by the sum of the average of every single simplification variable, to which I will refer as a “simplification index” (cf. *supra*). Since this variable is continuous (viz. potentially varying between 0 and 100%), a linear regression analysis can be conducted.

As mentioned above, the statistical model is built using a forward stepwise procedure, in which the independent variables are added to the model in order of their significance. In the statistical output, the order of the selected variables indicates the hierarchical order of relevance and reveals which variable is most

significantly correlated to the dependent variables (the simplification index). The variables which are not selected do not contribute to the model.

The configuration also indicates the effect of the individual variables by way of the regression coefficient. This coefficient, also called the B-value (or the estimate) of the independent variable, provides a measure of how the dependent variable (the simplification index) increases if the other variables in the model remain constant. In other words, it indicates the strength of a factor's independent contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable.

In addition, it is possible to evaluate the global model by interpreting the R-squared value: this value between zero and one indicates the degree to which the model can explain the variation in the data. Finally, the p-value for the significance of the global model is also given.

Table 3. Multivariate analysis: output of the forward stepwise regression

Independent variables	<i>P-value</i>		<i>B-value</i>
intercept (<i>a</i>)	< 2e-16	***	0.49440
Exposure to Italian in Italy - Frequent	< 4.62e-05	***	-0.22790
Gender - Women	0.0108	*	-0.09093
Generation – Third	0.0501	.	0.06876
		p value	8.27e-05
		R ²	0.3681
Significance: *** 0.001 * 0.05 . 0.1			

Three factors significantly contribute to the variation explained, with “exposure to Italian in Italy” being added first to the model, followed by “gender” and “generation.” The stepwise procedure did not find any interactions between the variables. Table 3 provides an overview of the p-values of the different factors and the B-values.

Evidently “exposure to Italian in Italy” is a highly significant factor ($p < 0.001$), with the estimate predicting that the simplification index will be 22.79% lower when speakers have frequent contact with Italian spoken in Italy. This means that Italians who have been, and still are, more exposed to a non-regionally marked Italian language spoken in Italy are less inclined to use simplification phenomena. The estimate is -0.09 for gender which shows that the model gives

women 9% less than men for the simplification index. The third most important factor influencing the simplification index is the speaker's generation, and the third generation is predicting to increase the simplification index by about 7%.

The statistical output shows that the model is highly significant ($p < 0.0001$). This means that the chance that the simplification index is not influenced by the three selected factors is virtually non-existent. Finally, the R-squared value is 0.3681, meaning that the model explains about 37% of the variation in the data. Although it cannot be claimed that this is a high score, it can be concluded that the model succeeds in predicting the degree of simplification on the basis of the constraints selected for this study. It has to be admitted, however, that other factors (that may not be related to the simplification hypotheses explained in this study) are needed to explain the entire range of variation. Further research into this area is required.

6.3 Interpretation of the Simplification Process

The observed variation in this study indicates that the simplification process is not predominant: some features present a trend towards simplification, others show a tendency for the standard variant.

The simplification index increases under the influence of rather traditional social constraints, namely the speaker's lack of exposure to the language spoken in the Italian peninsula, his/her generation and gender. The variables "exposure" and "generation" both reflect a rather traditional contact-induced simplification pattern, also affirmed in previous studies (Otheguy et al.). Since the simplification features of this study increase under the influence of exposure to the national language and generational transmission, it might be argued that we are dealing with a sort of apparent time change and that heritage Italian in Flanders is actually undergoing a process of change into a system where alternative forms are reduced. However, it needs to be stated that exposure to the national language and generation do not always significantly explain language variation and change in heritage Italian. For example, in their recent study on contact effects in the use of null subjects in Toronto heritage Italian, Nagy et al. found no significant effects between speakers born in the Toronto (second-generation) area and those born in Italy (first-generation).

After the exposure factor, gender is the extralinguistic factor exerting the most influence over the presence of simplified forms. Again, this reflects rather

traditional variation patterns. By now, a plethora of sociolinguistic research on gender variation (e.g., Coates; Cheshire; Fasold; Labov, *Language in the Inner City*) has demonstrated that women tend to use standard forms more than men do. The explanation offered is women's supposed prestige-consciousness and desire for upward mobility. Findings from several case studies (Holmes et al.; Horvath; Pauwels) reveal that this attitude is reinforced in bilingual or multilingual communities, where women tend to use and stimulate their children to use the standard variety, both from the native language and from the local language. These linguistic preferences seem to mirror second-generation women's aspirations to ascend the social hierarchy. In the same vein, research on heritage Italian has demonstrated that women from the second generation tend to avoid the use of dialects (Bettoni and Rubino, *Emigrazione*; Romano) and even use a variety that is less affected by dialectal vernaculars (Scaglione). Studies have pointed out the difference with first-generation Italian women who remained more attached to conservative cultural and linguistic habits (due to their important domestic role) and were more inclined to use dialectal varieties (Bettoni and Rubino, "Emigrazione" and *Emigrazione*). This change in attitude resulted from an important shift in lifestyles from the first to the next generations. The present findings clearly fit within this picture.

The combination of the three selected factors suggests that the sociovariational distribution of the simplification phenomena reflects a rather traditional evolution of heritage language, where contact with the home language, prestige norms and intergenerational transmission determine the future development of the heritage language and culture.

Since *italiano popolare* has been defined primarily as an inter-language of speakers whose language acquisition has stalled somewhere between knowledge of their local dialect and an Italian that is not fully acquired, it is striking that no correlation with either regional origin or exposure to dialect speakers has been observed.

These considerations bring us to the principal goal of the paper, which consisted in evaluating the complex relationship between heritage Italian and *italiano popolare*. The analysis shows that heritage Italian in Flanders presents a variation pattern that can no longer be connected to *italiano popolare* in the original sense of the term. Indeed, the social constraints on the spread of simplification phenomena discussed in this study counter the contention that heritage Italian is an *italiano popolare* in the sense of an interlanguage or a diastatically lower regional

Italian. Instead, the social factors provide evidence that heritage Italian in Flanders is undergoing a process of change that involves the gradual elaboration of a system that, by reducing available alternatives, ends up being simpler and thereby diminishes the cognitive burdens (Lapidus and Otheguy, “Contact Induced Change?” and “Over Nonspecific Ellos”; Otheguy et al.).

7. *Conclusions*

The analyses reported here have revealed sociolinguistic dynamics underlying the spread of simplification phenomena in a corpus of heritage Italian spoken in Flanders. Following a quantitative corpus-based methodology, a correlation was found between the presence of simplified forms and a set of traditional language contact variables. More particularly, a lack of exposure to the national language spoken in Italy has a direct influence on the use of simplified features. These data have shed more light on the current situation of heritage Italian and on its relation to what originally has been called *italiano popolare*.

While the focus here has been primarily on empirical findings, the results are relevant to more theoretical discussions surrounding language variation, contact and change. First, this analysis has shed light on the complex and questionable notion of *italiano popolare* and on its future application to studies of both heritage Italian and contemporary Italian in Italy. Lepschy (*Mother Tongues*) has already pointed out that *italiano popolare* can no longer be defined as “the kind of Italian which has been imperfectly acquired by those who have their dialect as a mother tongue” (Cortelazzo) and that it should be considered a “modern ordinary Italian language,” i.e., the variety that has supplanted the traditional *italiano popolare* and that can be defined as the language of Italians who are not native speakers of dialect and who may not be competent users of the literary standard norm (Lepschy, *Mother Tongues* 66). In fact, the same considerations should be made for heritage Italian. However, more attention should be paid here to the language-internal simplification process that develops regardless of the evolution of “modern ordinary Italian” in Italy.

Second, the outcome of this study confirms traditional hypotheses regarding the cross-generational transmission of heritage languages where both exposure to the language and culture of origin and intergenerational transmission play essential roles in the internal processes of simplification. Similar findings were reported in recent studies of heritage language change (Lapidus and Otheguy, “Contact

Induced Change?” and “Over Nonspecific Ellos”; Otheguy et al.). Although earlier studies of heritage Italian gave first indications for these processes (Bettoni and Gibbons; Haller, *Una lingua*; Saltarelli), no statistic evidence was provided until now.

More challenging questions remain to be answered by future research. First, the next step in this research would be to consider linguistic or internal constraints on the different variables. There may be another change in some contexts that is being masked by considering a general simplification index. A fully-fledged model that considers both linguistic and social factors will probably account for more of the variance. Second, studies of the distribution of the features of contemporary Italian spoken in Italy presented are also needed. Aside from recent studies of the diffusion of the polyvalent *che* in Italy (Alfonzetti; Aureli, “Le funzioni” and “Le relative”; Fiorentino), almost no corpus studies on contemporary Italian in Italy have been conducted. It would be interesting to investigate which social factors affect the presence of the same phenomena in Italy and to compare these results with those of heritage Italian. And finally, from a more general perspective, the variation and diffusion of simplification phenomena in this corpus have not been explained in terms of speech communities or social networks that share a set of norms governing social or stylistic variation (Labov, *The Social Stratification*; Milroy). Indeed, our findings reveal a more general diffusion pattern of the simplification phenomena. Nevertheless, previous research (Marzo, “Italiano”) has shown that social networks play an important role in the creation and diffusion of new dialectal vernaculars in Italian diaspora communities. It is likely that a further elaboration of this phenomenon would also reveal new diffusion patterns for simplification phenomena that have not been explored in this article. Hence, the challenge facing future studies of language variation and change in heritage Italian is how best to incorporate linguistic variation into a coherent description of language use that takes full account of the different linguistic and social dynamics of the speakers.

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