All'autore va riconosciuto il pregio di descriverci anche se monoliticamente come il maschio normale sia un violentatore in nuce, e forse questo è il risultato migliore dell'intero romanzo, discutibile ma stilisticamente efficace.

E se questo diario fosse tutto inventato? Se lo stupratore non fosse altro che uno studentello/scrittorello insonne che si diletta con volontà di potenza?

Un libro da leggere ma soprattutto da discutere.

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Toronto, Ontario

Lepschy, Giulio. *Mother Tongues and Other Reflections on the Italian Language*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. Pp. 148. ISBN 0-8020-3729-1 US.\$29.95

In this book, Giulio Lepschy offers four distinctive sections on Italian linguistics, together with one specifically focused on the Venetian play *La Venexiana* and a remembrance of Carlo Dionisotti. Although the author's attention is drawn mostly to the Italian language, his reflections on Latin, Hebrew, and other languages are likely to make a wide range of readers appreciate his work.

The main topic tackled from the first chapter is that of the 'native speaker' of a language, which, as the author states, strictly relates to the concept of 'mother tongue'. Lepschy overviews the history of the two expressions and discusses the difficulties involved in their definition, especially when no living witness of a language is available to investigators. While considering the topic from the Italian perspective, the author comments on its peculiarity. Indeed, the co-existence of a standard language, regional dialects, and minority languages in the national territory poses some questions on how best to identify the Italian native speaker.

For a long time, the linguistic situation in Italy presented a diglossic division between the literary language, that is to say, the standard variety of Italian that was taught at school, and the dialects, that is, their mother tongues. Only by the 1970s had Italian gained the role of common language also in the oral form as contact with television allowed anyone an easy and daily access to the standard language.

Lepschy readily points out that, however common the language has become today, Italians' speech can still reveal regional features, or the speaker's level of education. Also, over the last few decades, standard Italian has changed under the influence of the various situations when communication takes place, and so has the individuals' attitude towards the language itself. As an example, Lepschy proposes the case of the subjunctive mood and the fact that it can often be seen replaced by the indicative. Although Italian and dialect speakers can interpret this as more or less grammatically correct, the preference for either mood does not hinder the success of people's interactions.

In the fourth chapter Lepschy presents an analysis of stress patterns in Italian. By means of examples, he argues that secondary stresses, opposed to those falling on the tonic syllables, can contribute to phonological distinctions between open and closed vowels, as well as to semantic meanings. Since these facts are shown to vary among speakers and regional realizations, the author can state that prosodic

features, too, lend themselves to multiple interpretations of today's Italian.

The linguistic aspects here briefly summed up are just some of the reasons for the variety of discussions on the actual identity of the Italian native speaker and the proper components of Italian as a mother tongue. Without limiting his view only to the Italian language situation, Lepschy attempts a solution to these questions.

He says, in particular, that the concept of 'acceptability' can help researchers distinguish native from non-native speakers. Native speakers must rely on some intuitive language knowledge to be able to accept certain structures and reject others. Because non-native speakers learn, rather than acquire a language, they lack such intuitive knowledge and consequently can misjudge unacceptable language as correct and possible. For example, Lepschy has noticed that in Italian border areas, where minority languages such as German or Slovenian are also spoken, users of Italian may not be aware of the ungrammaticality of certain phrases containing the indicative in place of the subjunctive mode.

However valid the concept of acceptability may be, Lepschy adds, one should not forget that many world famous writers choose to express themselves in a language other than their own. In so doing, they produce some beautiful and original literary works that would not otherwise be created. If this confirms the close link languages and literature establish between each other, Lepschy thinks that it does not make the definition of the native speaker any less complex a matter. When speaking of poetry, the author even claims that 'no one is a native speaker of the language of poetry' (27), meaning that the nature of poetry is independent of the language in which one writes.

In the last two sections of the book, Lepschy comments on the Renaissance play *La Venexiana* and on Carlo Dionisotti's life and works.

Lepschy is particularly fascinated by *La Venexiana* for two reasons: the role and the language of its female characters. The author agrees with the opinion that *La Venexiana* represents an innovative piece of work, where the female characters stop being 'passive objects' and become 'active sexual subjects' (113). Perhaps as a way to anticipate the next section dedicated to Dionisotti, Lepschy reminds us that the Italian scholar himself interpreted a few passages as suggestive of a 'female' touch rather than the expected 'male' one. In the author's view, this interpretation introduces further evidence of a message challenging some of the cultural and sexual conventions current at the time.

Besides praising Dionisotti's 'natural distinction' (123) and great number of publications, Lepschy values his approach to *La Venexiana*. While discussing the scholar's position within modern Italian culture, the author makes a remark that connects with his previous considerations in the book—he emphasizes Dionisotti's interest for a geographical perspective in Italian studies. This is most likely the way Lepschy shares with Dionisotti the idea that in Italy local characteristics and traditions need to be made the starting point for the analysis of any fact concerning the Italian language and literature, both of the present and of the past.