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# *C'era i fascisti e i tedeschi: Instances of Linguistic Simplification in a corpus of Italiano popolare*<sup>1</sup>

Silvia Ballarè (University of Bergamo) and Eugenio Gorla (University of Torino)

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is the discussion of preliminary results of the ongoing study of an Italian **substandard variety** (*italiano popolare*) with the ParVa spoken corpus (Guerini 2016). The focus is on the interplay of two structural factors: contact with Italo-Romance dialects and **linguistic simplification**. The corpus shows previously overlooked syntactic features, which may improve the view of this subvariety and also allows a quantitative analysis of agreement in existential constructions.

KEYWORDS: *italiano popolare*, social variation, simplification, existential constructions

## 0. Introduction

Over the past century, the Italian lowermost variety on the diastratic axis of variation (*italiano popolare*) has been closely studied. This varietal development has occurred mainly by the relatively recent schooling of a large part of the population and the survival of the regional Italo-Romance (primary) dialects alongside the standard variety. These dialects still represent the L1 for lower-class speakers in several regions. Due to this specific sociolinguistic configuration, *italiano popolare* has over time developed a number of diagnostic features, some of which are the result of substrate influence from a regional dialect, while others represent the outcome of a more general process, namely linguistic simplification. However, until recently

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of ongoing and systematic collaboration between its two authors. Silvia Ballarè wrote Sections 0, 1 and 4, while Eugenio Gorla wrote Sections 2, 3 and 5.

research on *italiano popolare* relied primarily on written data. Only recently spoken corpora became available, making it possible to test previous assumptions and to discover previously unaccounted features.

In this paper, our use of the Parva corpus (*Partigiani Val Camonica*, Guerini 2016) aims at both goals. This corpus has about 15 hours of semi-structured interviews on the Resistance during World War II in Northern Italy (particularly in the region of Val Camonica, province of Brescia). The interviewees are 24 former resistance fighters of both genders who share their war memories. Most relevant to our research is that they provide extensive biographical information, particularly about their jobs and education, thus allowing the identification of class distinctions.

In Section 1 we discuss the major features of *italiano popolare*, paying special attention to the phenomenon of linguistic simplification. In Section 2 we outline our research questions and provide a description of the methodology used for the analysis. Section 3 first presents the outcomes of a qualitative investigation involving this corpus (Section 3.1), followed by a case study concerning a single linguistic variable (Section 3.2).

## **1. On *italiano popolare***

In Italian sociolinguistics, *italiano popolare* refers to a social variety associated with speakers with a limited educational background. This variety received a lot of attention during the second half of the 20th century (see e.g. De Mauro 1970[1963], Cortelazzo 1972, Sanga 1980 and Berruto 1983), and was dealt with mainly in relation to speakers with a diglossic linguistic repertoire. Typically, such speakers have an Italian dialect as their L1 and acquired Standard Italian only as a second language and through the educational system. It is important to stress that Italo-Romance dialects are not varieties of Italian but, according to Coseriu (1980), they are to be considered as primary

dialects, i.e. languages which are distinct from Italian, given their significant structural differences (see Manzini and Savoia 2005).

The most widespread type of linguistic repertoire on the Italian peninsula has a dilalic structure (see *dilalia* in Berruto 1987), with both Italian and one or more dialects being equally present in early socialisation and informal conversation. Therefore, it can be observed that while in a broader perspective *italiano popolare* is clearly diastratically marked, in that it is associated with speakers with limited formal education, if we focus on this specific subgroup of the speech community, the picture that emerges is different. In fact, for these speakers *italiano popolare* represents the H variety, given that it is the only variety of Italian that they master. Since it is used only in formal situations and represents the highest degree of formality that these speakers can achieve, it also displays strong diaphasic markedness.

Due to the structure of the speakers' repertoire (Cerruti and Regis 2014) and to the fact that in the Italian context social variation is subordinate to geographic variation (see Koch and Oesterreicher 1990 and Berruto 2012 [1987]), it would be opportune to consider several different regional varieties of *italiano popolare*<sup>2</sup> in relation to the dialectological background of specific areas. In other words, every variety of *italiano popolare* represents a regional variety and is therefore marked diatopically. In fact, substrate influence from Italian dialects is one of the main sources responsible for the emergence of substandard features in this variety. At the same time, however, all the varieties of *italiano popolare* also display great structural similarities, irrespective of their substrate dialects. An example of a pan-Italian feature of *italiano popolare* is the case of doubly filled complementisers, as in (1)<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Each geographical variety has its own internal structure dictated by the crossing of the diastratic and the diaphasic axes. However, as far as *italiano popolare* is concerned, diatopic factors bear much greater weight than they do in other varieties.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the paper, the Italian examples will have the same standardized format. Interlinear glosses with respect to the Leipzig glossing rules (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf>), and a list of abbreviations is provided at the end of the paper. The examples labelled as *ItaPop* come from the working-class subcorpus of the ParVa corpus (see below) and have not been edited for publication, while their Standard Italian counterparts are provided by the authors.

(1) a. <i>ItaPop</i> :	quando	che	è	venuta	la	liberazione
	when	COMP	be:3SG	come.PP	the	liberation
b. <i>StIta</i> :	quando	è	venuta	la	liberazione	
	when	be:3SG	come.PP	the	liberation	

“When the Liberation came”

This linguistic feature is discussed by Cerruti (2011, 15), who states that “due to its over-regional presence, it can be considered as one of those fossilized interferences that form the basis for the [...] common grammar of *italiano regionale popolare*.” In several cases the features that have emerged independently from substrate influence are the result of a process of linguistic simplification (Berruto 1983:15), whereby they contain alternatives which are structurally lighter or less complex than those occurring in the standard variety of Italian. Such a process will be dealt with in more detail in the following section.

## 2. Linguistic simplification in *italiano popolare*

As previously stated, *italiano popolare* differs from other sociolects of Italian, first of all because of the greater influence of substrate dialects, and secondly because of linguistic simplification. These are also the main points whereby it differs structurally from Standard Italian, which is by definition supra-regional and structurally elaborate. It is important to note that the effects of language contact are highly unpredictable, since the extent of dialect influence varies according to the structure of regional (or perhaps sub-regional) linguistic repertoires. Moreover, contact with other Italo-Romance varieties produces different results in different situations, including matter and pattern replication (Matras and Sakel 2007), as well as contact-induced grammaticalisation (Cerruti 2014). Conversely, if a typologically-oriented notion of linguistic complexity is adopted, as in McWorther (2001) and Miestamo (2008, 2017.), it is possible to disentangle the outcomes of linguistic simplification from other phenomena occurring in sub-standard varieties. Within this framework,

our focus will be on what Miestamo (2017:239) terms *local complexity*. Therefore, we will identify formal parameters that allow us to consider the grammatical encoding of one particular functional domain as simpler or more complex than other grammatical strategies, as opposed to adopting holistic complexity metrics, e.g. in Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi (2009), to demonstrate that *italiano popolare* as a variety is structurally simpler than other varieties of Italian. Our claim is much more limited in this respect, for we argue that the constructions involved in the marking of single functional domains in *italiano popolare* represent structurally simpler alternatives than those occurring in the standard variety. On the contrary, extending this type of reasoning to the whole variety would involve a number of theoretical problems. Namely, within the Italian sociolinguistic scenario, substrate influence of the local dialects constantly interacts with contact-independent simplification, and the combination of the two could actually result in both simplification and complexification with respect to the standard.

The parameters on which we rely for our account of simplification are the two diagnostic features of complexity discussed by Miestamo (2008), which can be paraphrased as follows:

- (i) “Fewer distinctions”: the more distinctions are grammaticalised within a functional domain, the greater the complexity;
- (ii) “One meaning one form”: multiple encoding of the same function is more complex than single encoding

Furthermore, while these are generally intended paradigmatically, in terms of a loss of structural oppositions, allomorphy, etc., we argue that simplification may also be observed at the syntagmatic level. This involves parameter (ii) in particular, e.g. those cases in which single marking of a grammatical category is preferred to double marking.

A good example of simplification on the syntagmatic level is the development of post-verbal negation in contexts where Standard Italian only allows discontinuous forms<sup>4</sup> (see Sanga 1980: 6

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<sup>4</sup> According to Bernini and Ramat (1996:41), there are pragmatic factors that may favour the occurrence of postverbal negation in languages like Italian, where standard negation can be expressed by a discontinuous strategy. For an account of a similar phenomenon in other varieties of Italian see also Ballarè (2015).

and Cortelazzo 1972:107). This provides a structurally simpler alternative, in that single-marking of negation is preferred to double-marking. Consider, for example, the difference between the structures in (2a) and (2b):

- (2) a. *StIta*:        non    mi                    sono            fatto niente  
                          NEG 1SG.OBL    be1SG        do:PP nothing
- b. *ItaPop*:        mi                    sono            fatto niente  
                          1SG.OBL    be:1SG        do:PP nothing  
                          “I did not hurt myself”

Simplification at the paradigmatic level can be found in the system of relative pronouns: while Standard Italian requires inflected relative pronouns, as in (2a), the marking of relative clauses is done in *italiano popolare* by means of uninflected general subordinator *che*, as in (3b); see Alisova (1965):

- (3) a. *StIta*:        Cesare **a**        **cui**            è            venuta        l'        idea  
                          Cesare to        REL.OBL    be:3SG        come:PP    the        idea
- b. *ItaPop*:        Cesare        **che**            è            venuta        l'        idea  
                          Cesare        COMP        be:3SG        come:PP    the        idea  
                          “Cesare, who had the idea”

In brief, adopting a typological perspective on linguistic simplification may shed light on the dynamics that shape the structure of *italiano popolare*. At the same time, one should bear in mind that forces other than linguistic simplification have an influence on this variety, including contact with local dialects and performance-related phenomena. Therefore, linguistic typology can provide an explanation for why *italiano popolare* is characterised so saliently by particular structures and possibly why sub-standard varieties of different languages share structural similarities. However, other competing motivations will at some future point have to be considered in order to provide an extensive account of this variety.

### 3. Research questions and methodology

In this paper, we will focus on linguistic simplification as one of the mechanisms responsible for the emergence of substandard features in *italiano popolare*. Particularly, we aim to determine whether newer oral corpora can provide a broader picture of this variety, revealing previously overlooked features. In fact, research in the past decades has been strongly biased towards written language, mostly due to the fact that the vast majority of spoken Italian corpora do not provide any metadata for the speakers (see Crocco 2015 and Gorla and Mauri *forthcoming* for a recent overview). On the contrary, written production from speakers of *italiano popolare* has been widely investigated, e.g. by Sanga (1980).

The corpus used for this research is the ParVa corpus (Guerini 2016). This resource tool includes about 15 hours of taped interviews collected in one particular region, namely the Val Camonica (province of Brescia), and involving former fighters who took part in the Resistance during World War II. While there is no regional variation between the speakers, who all belong to the same area, the corpus is particularly fit for investigating the diastratic dimension, in that some of the speakers belong to the lower social classes and have lower educational achievements, while some other are middle-class speakers, as demonstrated by professional qualifications or university degrees. Therefore, as in Cerruti (2016), we have created two subcorpora based on the level of education, the first representing speakers belonging to lower social classes (14 informants), and the second representing middle-class speakers, who have attained a high level of education (10 informants).

The analysis presented here is both qualitative and quantitative in scope. In qualitative terms, a manual examination of the corpus yielded an updated inventory of features of *italiano popolare* produced by structural simplification. Some features are already known from prior descriptions of this variety, while others were previously unaccounted. For the quantitative portion of our study, we provide a thorough examination of a single linguistic variable, namely subject-verb agreement in presentative constructions



## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 New Features

A manual examination of the working-class component of the ParVa corpus offered a picture that was fairly consistent with previous accounts of *italiano popolare*. Due to space limitations, our focus will be on two features that have heretofore not been described in relation to the variety in question, and for which we hypothesise a direct connection with speakers of *italiano popolare*, namely the loss of the reflexive in pronominal verbs and the loss of auxiliaries in the analytic past tense.

As with several other Romance languages, Italian has reflexive pronominal verbs that are constructed with a pronominal clitic added to the verbal form. However, such forms may be simplified through the elimination of the pronoun, as shown in the comparison between (4a) and (4b):

(4) a. *ItaPop*:    come siamo            andati su,        siamo            addormentati dopo  
                  as     be:1PL            go:PP up        be:1PL            fall\_asleep:PP later

      b. *StIta*:        ci=                    siamo            addormentati dopo  
                  1PL.REFL    be:1PL            fall\_asleep:PP later

                  “As we went up, we fell asleep later”

It is important to note that in the example the omission of the reflexive pronoun does not leave room for any other interpretation; the fact that the verb *addormentarsi* exhibits a reflexive morphology is to be considered an idiomatic characteristic of the verb, in that its semantics does not convey any “reflexive” meaning. Furthermore, its transitive counterpart (*addormentare*, “put someone to sleep”) requires a different paradigm, i.e. the auxiliary *to have* (*abbiamo addormentato*) and not *to be*.

A similar case is represented by the loss of auxiliary verbs in analytic past tense constructions. Standard Italian has a past form characterised by either “have + past participle” or “be + past

participle”. This subsection of the ParVa corpus contains several examples whose construction is simplified through the omission of the auxiliary form, as in (5):

- (5) a. *ItaPop*:    il        giorno dopo    cominciato    a        pensare  
                         the    day    after    start:PP        to        think:INF
- b. *StIta*:    il        giorno dopo    ho                    cominciato    a        pensare  
                         the    day    after    have:PRES.1SG    start:PP        to        think:INF
- “the day after I started to think”

Both features can be regarded as instances of simplification on the morphosyntactic level. In the first case, the elimination of reflexive clitics may be seen as an elimination of redundancy in person marking, as well as an increase in the semantic transparency of the construction. Furthermore, the same value is conveyed by the auxiliary “to be” and by its morphology. Similarly, the elimination of the past tense auxiliary in (5) may be considered in relation to the “fewer distinctions” principle, in which a single form, unmarked for person, is generalised over the whole past-tense paradigm. On a syntagmatic level, only the lexical part of the verb (the past participle) is maintained, while the grammatical morpheme (the auxiliary) is omitted. Finally, it should also be noted that in a case like (5), pragmatics plays a key role; in fact, even if the person marker is lost, the grammatical subject can easily be inferred by the co(n)text, given that it corresponds to the speaker.

Such substandard linguistic features only occur in the working-class section of the corpus, and in the literature, they have gone unaccounted in other varieties of Italian. Clearly, the correlation between these features and *italiano popolare* still has to be demonstrated through quantitative studies testifying that such phenomena are associated with particular groups of speakers or particular sociolects in a statistically relevant way.

#### 4.2 Case Study: Existential Constructions

Existential constructions (Bentley *et al.* 2013) have the function of predicating the existence of a particular referent or group of referents. In Standard Italian, this construction has the form of a copular clause, in which the *copula* is preceded by the fixed clitic pronoun *ci*, originally of locative value. The referent whose existence is predicated normally occurs after the *copula*. It is crucial in Standard Italian that there be number agreement between the *copula* and the following NP, as in (6):

(6) *ci* sono dei libr-i sul tavolo  
there be:PRES.3PL some book-PL on\_the table

“There are some books on the table” (Bentley *et al.* 2013: 1. Gloss adapted from the original)

The absence of number agreement between the subject and the verb in existential constructions can be considered a product of linguistic simplification, in that the singular form is systematically overextended to plural controllers and is treated as a default choice, as in (7):

(7) *ItaPop*: e poi c' è le munizion-i  
and then there be:PRES.3SG the ammunition-PL

“And then there is the ammunition”

In our analysis, we consider agreement in the existential construction to be a sociolinguistic variable, whose variants are represented by the presence or absence of agreement with plural controllers. Previous studies, such as Berruto and Cerruti (2015), have identified the absence of agreement in this context as a feature of several substandard varieties of Italian. The same sociolinguistic markedness is also found in substandard varieties of English (see e.g. Tagliamonte 2009, Tagliamonte and Baayen 2012 and Adger and Smith 2010) and has been considered in relation to *vernacular universals* (Chambers 2004). It must be added, though, that within the Italian context the absence of agreement in this context could also represent a contact feature arising from the local dialects, as is the case in Val Camonica; in fact, in the dialect of this area the existential construction does not exhibit number agreement. Nevertheless, since the phenomenon is not limited

to such areas but instead has a much broader distribution, both intra- and extra-linguistically, considering language contact as the only explanation does not tell the whole story.

In order to perform a thorough corpus analysis, we have selected the following six factors, both linguistic (following Berruto and Cerruti 2015) and extra-linguistic:

*Structural factors:*

- Noun phrase structure:
  - No determiner (*c'è Maria*, “there is Maria”)
  - 1 determiner (*c'è la ragazza*, “there is the girl”)
  - > 1 determiner (*c'è la bella ragazza*, “there is the beautiful girl”)
  - coordinated noun phrase (*ci sono Maria e Giulia*, “there is Maria and Giulia”)
- Proximity between the copula and the NP:
  - adjacency (*c'è la ragazza*, “there is the girl”)
  - non-adjacency<sup>5</sup> (*c'è veramente la ragazza*, lit. “there is really the girl”)
- Proximity between the copula and the head of the NP:
  - adjacency (*c'è Maria*, “there is Maria”)
  - non-adjacency (*c'è la bella Maria*, “there is the beautiful Maria”)
- Verb tense:
  - past (*c'era*, “there was”)
  - present (*c'è*, “there is”)
  - future (*ci sarà*, “there will be”)

*Social factors:*

- Social class:
  - middle class
  - lower class
- Gender of the speaker:

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<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that verb-particle constructions are often considered to be geographically marked and are more frequent in the northern varieties (Cini 2008).

- female
- male

The analysis was conducted adopting a chi-squared test in order to verify the correlation between substandard variants and lower-class speakers (external predictors), and then to identify positive correlations with specific linguistic contexts (internal predictors). Finally, we compared our results against those obtained by Berruto and Cerruti (2015), who, however, used a different dataset in their analysis of the same variable. Due to the small size of the corpus, we limited ourselves to measuring the significance of each factor through a chi-squared test (p-value <0.001). The results proving statistically significant are the NP structure and the social class.

Table 1 indicates the distribution of the variants across social classes.

	<i>Presence of plural agreement</i>	<i>Absence of agreement</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Middle-class</i>	69	2	71
<i>Lower-class</i>	112	43	155
<i>Total</i>	181	45	226

*Table 1 Distribution across social classes*

As expected, the substandard variants are, in general, less frequent than the standard ones. Nevertheless, almost all the tokens were produced by lower-class speakers, thus confirming the connection of this variant to *italiano popolare*, as previously argued by Berruto and Cerruti (2015).

The distribution of NP structure is presented in Table 2 below.

	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Sub-standard</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Sub-st/St</i>
<i>no determiner</i>	24	4	28	0.17
<i>I determiner</i>	142	25	167	0.18
<i>&gt;I determiner</i>	10	4	14	0.4
<i>coordinated NP</i>	5	12	17	2.4
<i>Total</i>	181	45	226	

Table 2 Instances of existential construction based on NP structure.

Even if, as stated above, it is impossible to make an absolute statement based on such a limited data set, it is nevertheless worth noting that the Standard/Sub-standard ratio is significantly higher in the case of coordinated NPs, as in example (8):

(8) *ItaPop*:        c'        era                i        fascist-i        e        i        tedeschi  
                         there be:PST.3PL    the        fascist-PL        and        the        german-PL  
                         “There were the fascists and the Germans”

Such a correlation has already been identified in Berruto and Cerruti (2015) for other varieties of Italian and is explicable in terms of a lesser salience of the plural semantics of lists, given the fact that each item could equally be singular or plural.

To conclude, the study of sub-standard agreement in the existential construction confirms what has already been argued for the same variable based on other corpora, concerning both the social markedness of this construction and the structural factors that facilitate its realisation. However, the issue regarding the geographic markedness of this feature remains open. Such a factor should be weighed in further studies by comparing this sociolinguistic setting with other situations in which local dialects display patterns of agreement more similar to Standard Italian.

## 5. Conclusions

The use of the ParVa corpus has enabled us to attain a broader and updated perspective on *italiano popolare*, considering the fact that spoken data made it possible to identify new features with the same diastatic markedness as those traditionally associated with this variety but not attested in written sources. We have also had the opportunity to test previous findings on one single variable, i.e. agreement in the existential construction, and we have demonstrated that the same factors are responsible for the emergence of sub-standard variants both in spoken *italiano popolare* and in other less sociolinguistically marked varieties of Italian (see Berruto and Cerruti 2015).

As for the more general issue concerning linguistic simplification, the starting point of our reflection was Miestamo's (2017) crosslinguistic account of linguistic complexity. By comparing structures occurring in Standard Italian and in *italiano popolare*, i.e. by applying Miestamo's

framework to intralinguistic variation as well, we have identified many of the structures occurring in the latter variety to be systematically simpler than those occurring in the standard.

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## Abbreviations

1PL	1 <sup>st</sup> person plural
1SG	1 <sup>st</sup> person singular
3PL	3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural
3SG	3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular
COMP	complementizer
INF	infinitive
NEG	negation
OBL	oblique
PL	plural



PP	past participle
PRES	present
PST	past
REFL	reflexive
REL	relative