

The parametric variation of possessives in Italian and some Italian dialects

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Introduction - This study investigates the parametric variation of possessive in Italian and in some dialects of Northern, Central, and Southern Italy, focusing on third person singular and plural possessives when used with a kinship term.

In Italian, possessives may occupy a prenominal or a postnominal position, and may also occur with an article, depending on the type of nouns they are associated with. When prenominal possessives occur with a common noun, the article is always placed before the possessive. When possessives are combined with a kinship term, nouns appear without the definite article, when they are in the singular (*suo fratello* “my brother”, *sua sorella* “my sister”), regardless of the person features of the possessive. The article has to be obligatorily expressed when the possessives occur with plural nouns (*i miei fratelli* ‘the my brothers’, *le mie sorelle* ‘the my sisters’).

Based on AIS maps (Jahberg and Jud, 1928/1940), Rohlfs (1968) and Cardinaletti and Giusti (2019) offer an overview of the attested combination of possessives with singular and plural kinship nouns in different Italian dialects. In Italian dialects, much diatopic variation is observed with kinship nouns regarding the position and either the presence or the absence of the possessive and its co-occurrence with the definite article. In northern Italy, in Veneto, the prevailing pattern consists in prenominal possessives without definite article for all noun forms (singular, plural, masculine, and feminine) (PREN-ZERO). In Emilia-Romagna, for singular nouns, possessives occur in prenominal position and the article is omitted, as in Veneto, whereas in the plural, kinship nouns occur with both possessive and definite article (PREN-ART). In Tuscany, kinship nouns are always preceded by both possessive and article under all conditions (PREN-ART). In Campania, two patterns are found. In some locations, the possessive occupies the postnominal position and the definite article precedes the noun (PSTN-ART). In some other locations, the possessive is omitted, and the noun is only combined with the article (ZERO-ART).

Using an online questionnaire controlling for the above-mentioned variables, the aim of this study is to investigate how the different dialects behave as for the order of possessive when they are combined with kinship names. In addition, we want to verify whether their distribution is different from what reported in the AIS maps. Finally, we want to investigate whether regional Italian has been influenced by the dialect spoken in that area.

Methodology - An online questionnaire was used to investigate the diatopic variation of possessive in Italian and in Italian dialects. We analyzed the responses of 174 participants, recruited in different areas of Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. In Northern Italy we collected data from the varieties spoken in Conegliano, in the province of Treviso (Veneto, N=52), in the area of Mestre-Venezia (Veneto, N=15), Ferrara (Emilia-Romagna, N=36), and Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna, N=15). In Central Italy, we collected data from the varieties spoken around Grosseto (Tuscany, N=17). In Southern Italy, we collected data from the varieties spoken around Naples (Campania, N=39). The participants were asked to judge the acceptability of some sentences in Italian and in their dialect showing the four patterns presented above. Before the questionnaire with experimental items was administered, participants were asked to answer some questions concerning their language dominance (Italian vs. dialect), using the Dilalic Language Profile developed by Procentese et al (2022).

Results - The distribution of the four forms in the different locations is shown in Figure 1. In Italian, the prevailing form in the plural is PREN-ART in all locations, although Piacenza, Grosseto and especially Naples also show a high percentage of ZERO-ART. In the other locations (Conegliano, Mestre-Venezia, Ferrara), ZERO-ART is quite frequent. ZERO-ART is also frequent in the singular in Naples, and a high rate of occurrence is also observed in Piacenza. With singular nouns, the prevailing form in all locations is PREN-ZERO. The second most frequent form is ZERO-ART. In dialects, much more variation is observed. The form PSTN-ART is found only in Naples both in the singular and in the plural. In the other locations, this form is rare. The form PREN-ART is the prevailing form in the plural in almost all locations, especially in Grosseto and Piacenza. In Piacenza, this strategy competes with ZERO-ART. The form PREN-ZERO is the prevailing form in the singular in Conegliano, Mestre-Venezia, Ferrara, and Piacenza, as in Italian. In the plural, this form occurs to a lesser extent, however, it is well attested in all these locations.

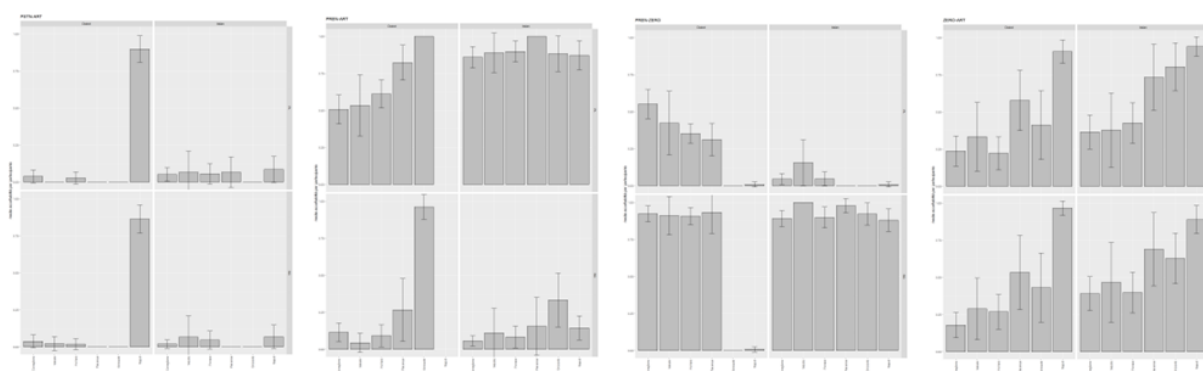


Figure 1: distribution of the four forms in the different locations distinguishing between Italian (on the right) and dialects (on the left), and between singular (above) and plural (below).

Discussion - The pattern that emerged from the analysis of our data shows some differences compared to the patterns depicted in the AIS maps. The fact that in the locations in Emilia-Romagna a number of occurrences has been observed in the dialect for the plural form PREN-ZERO shows that the article omission that was more frequent in Veneto (AIS maps, Rohlfs 1968), has also extended to some areas of Emilia Romagna. These two phenomena appear to be modulated by language dominance only for the speakers from the Veneto region.

Finally, we interpret the fact that in Naples the form PSTN-ART is frequent in the dialect while in Italian it is not attested as a sign of the fact that the dialect does not influence Italian.

References

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