

A sociolinguistic approach to bilingual adaptations: Patterns of variation in bidialectal Italian communities

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In the last 100 years, bilingualism has been the focus of an ever-growing stream of research, with studies inquiring about both its pure linguistic dimension and its cognitive outcomes. Regarding the latter, a strong debate is still ongoing and concerns whether speaking (or signing) more than one language could be advantageous or disadvantageous for our cognitive domains (Feldman & Shen, 1971; Paap et al., 2015, 2021; Bialystok & Craik, 2022 *inter alia*). However, although research on bilingualism has continued growing, some aspects of this complex experience, such as the role of specific social or sociolinguistic factors, have been less examined. Additionally, most research has focused on bilingual populations of standard languages, with non-standard varieties and minority languages remaining relatively understudied (Garraffa et al., 2017; Leivada et al., 2013 *inter alia*).

With respect to non-standard varieties, Italy provides a breeding ground of investigation. Indeed, besides the so-called “Standard Italian”, the Italian linguistic landscape is characterized by a multitude of non-standard linguistic varieties, among which Italian dialects play a major role. From a structural point of view, these dialects are independent from Standard Italian, since they developed directly from Latin and present their own formal features (Loporcaro, 2009). However, historical and social developments have led to a situation of diglossia where, from the 19th century onwards, Italian dialects tend to be used in limited communicative settings, while Standard Italian has the linguistic monopoly (Berruto, 1987).

The present study aims to contribute to research on bilingual language processing, focusing on Italian bidialectal populations. Our experiments use an acceptability judgement task to compare three linguistic groups in spotting Subject-Verb agreement attraction errors. The three groups include Italian monolingual speakers (n=27), Italian-Pavese bidialectal speakers (n=26), and Italian-Agrigentino bidialectal speakers (n=25). Pavese and Agrigentino are two Italian dialects spoken in Lombardy and Sicily respectively, which present huge differences in terms of structural properties, geographical distribution, and sociolinguistic features. Studying bilingual speakers of non-standard languages could uncover the role of specific social and sociolinguistic factors in the bilingual experience by doing justice to unstudied bilingual populations. Our main research questions are the following: (i) Do monolingual and bidialectal speakers present any difference in the processing of Subject-Verb agreement attraction errors? (ii) Do bidialectal speakers process the linguistic input differently depending on the language in which it is presented? (iii) If there are any between-group differences in monolingual and bidialectal language processing, can they be traced back to specific social and sociolinguistic factors?

To answer these research questions, we asked our three linguistic groups to perform a timed auditory acceptability judgement task. Experimental stimuli consisted of ungrammatical sentences with Subject-Verb agreement mismatches where subject and verb were disrupted by plural NPs distractors. The same experimental stimuli were presented in Standard Italian to monolinguals and bidialectals, but Italian-Pavese and Italian-Agrigentino participants completed the exact same task also in their own dialects. Acceptability judgements (AJs) were elicited on a 5-point Likert scale and reaction times were recorded. Besides the AJs task, participants completed a granular sociodemographic questionnaire (a modified version of LSBQ, Anderson et al. 2018) where detailed

demographic information was asked, enabling us to compile a fine-grained depiction of their linguistic profiles (i.e., in terms of language use, language proficiency, language trajectory, etc.) and of their linguistic attitudes towards their spoken languages. Preliminary results show statistically significant differences both in the between-group and within-group comparisons. Monolinguals showed a higher percentage of selecting the lowest value of the Likert scale (1) for judging ungrammatical stimuli compared to the bidialectal groups. Italian-Pavese respondents, in turn, recorded higher rates of the lowest value with respect to Italian-Agrigentino bidialectals. Interestingly, regarding the maximum value (5) recorded for ungrammatical stimuli, the opposite tendency was observed: Italian-Agrigentino speakers reported the highest rates, followed by Italian-Pavese bidialectals and monolinguals. In general, for the bidialectal groups, rates of ungrammatical stimuli appeared distributed in medium-low values of the Likert scale, while monolinguals' AJs were polarized into the minimum value, showing less tolerance for grammatical errors. Concerning within-group comparisons, both bidialectal groups tended to accept ungrammatical stimuli more easily in their own dialects than in Italian, recording lower percentages of the minimum value (1) and higher percentages of the maximum value (5) for ungrammatical sentences in dialect.

Initial findings attest to the impact of bilingual experience on language processing. Besides differences between monolinguals and bidialectals, further variation characterizes the two Italian bidialectal groups. This result underscores the importance of describing the bilingual/bidialectal experience by providing as many social and sociolinguistic details as possible. Linking experimental results to detailed sociolinguistic profiles can only be achieved by considering the intricate mosaic of sociolinguistic variables which shape different bilingual experiences.

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