

## The History of the Language and the History of the Nation

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### Abstract

The history of the language represents a moment of deep knowledge in the development of the political thought of the Nation. With regard to the Italian language, we must recognize observations and summaries of linguistic history produced ever since the origins of the language itself.

A short number of examples, coming from the history of the Italian language, and from the history of Italian literature, will be considered. We will consider in which way the language has been taught over time and the University statement.

**Key words:** *history of language, history of language and history of the nation, history of Italian language, the University Chair of History of Italian language.*

### Introduction

The representation of the history of a language, in both diachronic and synchronic terms, particularly in the formation of a national language, is always an important cultural operation, with unique elements, providing a starting point or indeed a point of comparison. In the history of the Italian language, it may even be said to constitute a distinctive feature, as well as being at the same time a condition and a gateway, and to have done so constantly over time. The landscape inhabited by the history of the language is from time to time delimited, but it does allow us to glimpse the possibility of progressive acquisitions which, in the past and the present, manage to cross the boundary that encloses and separates.

Up to a certain point in the life of a language, its history may be considered insignificant, since the use of that language becomes more widely spoken and

acquires importance only in a specific historic moment, which is different for each language. From that moment on, chronologies and accounts are written, and together with the history of the language the history of a civilisation is agreed upon and takes shape.

It is important here to consider the words with which the parameters of the discipline were established by one historian of the Italian language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — in the period when the first histories specifically devoted to the language were published:

*A profile of Italian linguistic history is neither a chapter of Italian history nor an introduction to Italian historic grammar. It is a microcosm of civil history, seen through the family of systems, more or less coordinated amongst themselves, that constitute the language of the community to which we belong. (Devoto 1954:1)<sup>1</sup>*

In a wider sense, broadening our viewpoint, «it is a complex of different forms of knowledge and techniques spread across a series of contiguous areas» (Serianni 2015:3). The history of the language sheds new light on knowledge, as Ghino Ghinassi pointed out in the presentation of the work by Bruno Migliorini:

*When Migliorini's Storia della lingua italiana (History of the Italian language) appeared in early 1960, it was immediately perceived as an absolute novelty in the Italian scientific panorama: his original identification of the proper ambit of a discipline that had long been called for but was still, we may say, new, together with his endowment of this discipline with an enormous quantity of data, revealed an aspect of Italian history that until that time had not been described except by chance or in fragments; his work shone a new light on the history of Italy that served to bring key moments and*

*episodes more clearly into focus and to question anew its overall line of development.*

(Ghinassi 1998:xv)

The first histories of the Italian language were produced precisely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in 1960, marking the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the language, the *Storia della lingua italiana (History of the Italian language)* by Bruno Migliorini was published. It would become a canonical text for the discipline, one whose value has not diminished with time. Together with the *Profilo di storia linguistica italiana (Profile of Italian linguistic history)* by Giacomo Devoto (published in 1953), Migliorini's work directly entered the life of the nation, first and foremost because they were both linked to the creation of university chairs. The latter were instituted in Italy in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, later than the creation of the equivalent chair in the history of the French language in France (Serrianni 2015, 4-11; Ghinassi 1998, x-xi). Consequently, the impact of these two works was also felt via the education of generations of university students, and not just in the humanities (on the scientific profile of the two historians of the language, and on the linguistic and academic environment in Italy in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and subsequent developments, see the papers arising from the study meetings in Santipolo – Viale 2009 and 2011).

### **The Physiognomy of the History of the Language**

In order to delineate the scientific physiognomy of the history of the language, we need to examine certain earlier observations made by Migliorini in his *Storia della lingua e storia della cultura (History of language and history of culture, 1932)*, later included in the collection *Lingua e cultura (Language and culture, 1948)*, as well as in numerous radio broadcasts, later included in the collection *Conversazioni sulla lingua italiana (Conversations on the Italian language, 1949)*:

Language is the main instrument on which civil life is founded, and to know well the national language is, I would say, the primary civic duty (Migliorini 1956: Premise).

This principle is confirmed shortly afterwards when he says that «the language is closely linked to the national character» (Migliorini 1956:11). Seen from the perspective of another historian of the language, in the evolution of «different points of view and methods»,

*... it seems obvious that there must be some link between linguistic shifts and the history of culture and society [...] a language should be considered and studied as an instrument that is predisposed by its very nature to provide over time solutions to communicative needs that are ever more suitable, more differentiated, more economical. For me language is a complex of mechanisms, which, by means of their assiduous deployment, in response to the stimuli that arise from the cultural climate, are destined to result in progress, which is the goal of all technique.*

(Durante 1981:v-vi)

The framework of varieties that make up the Italian language and have animated its linguistic history necessarily prompts the linguist to acknowledge the distinction between the functions of the language and those of its dialects, a distinction which – in the case of Italian – is fundamental:

*It is not a stroke of luck, not an arbitrary decision that brings a dialect to the level of language: it is rather a transformation that changes both its functions and its appearance; a transformation that can happen only when historic events cause an entire people to perceive the need for a common language and the urgency of obtaining it.*

(Migliorini 1956:16)

Continuing with his definition, Migliorini cites the link with Dante and the classics of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, clarifying the literary and conservative character of the Italian language that distinguishes it from the other Romance languages, pausing to dwell on the decisive moment in which one variety becomes the national language:

*But every time we would find that the transformation of a language of nature into a language of culture unfolds in tandem with the broadening of the spiritual horizon.*

(Migliorini 1956:19)

While thus far we have spoken briefly of the premise and the key features of the history of the Italian language in the editions associated with the birth of the discipline and the institution of the university chairs, in reality, observations and summaries of linguistic history have been produced ever since the origins of the language itself. These have included intertextual references and more extensive analyses, in both poetry and prose, which appeared with growing intensity until the dawn of the classics: Dante drew the map of the various popular tongues and their link to the ‘cultivated, curial, cardinal’ language, of which he presents an early profile, tracing the period from the Sicilian poets down to his own day. A cultural operation of a different kind, reconstructing the genesis of the language, was performed by Petrarch. To a greater or lesser extent, we must however acknowledge that the adoption of a particular stance with respect to the existence and the definition of the language, its nature and its use, has been a constant feature of Italian writing: every author has expressed his or her idea of the language, in many cases leaving their mark or shifting linguistic history in a new direction. Without going into detail, which would take us too far from our chosen path, we shall merely cite the names of Pietro Bembo, Alessandro Manzoni, and, closer to our own day, the names of Italo Calvino and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

The scaffolding of the history of Italian rests on unmovable pillars: the transformation from Latin, the constitution of the language of literary tradition

(and the language of poetry in particular), the efforts to codify the language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the conquest of the spoken language in modern times. At its heart it remains divided in two, as has been pointed out ever since its origins, representing a balanced form of bilingualism (see the sequence of chapters in Devoto 1954 on unconscious bilingualism, aware bilingualism, new bilingualism).

### **History of the Italian Literature and the History of the Italian Language**

By way of demonstrating the premise set out above, let us dwell a moment on another key phase in literary history and the history of the nation, in order to observe the undeniable link between the history of the language and Italian writing. In 1870, with the formation of the Kingdom of Italy almost complete, Francesco De Sanctis described its language on the same level as its culture, reconstructing the moment of the language's birth:

*It is in the nature of culture to call forth new ideas and needs that are less material, to form a more educated and civil class of citizens, to put them in contact with foreign cultures, to bring languages together, developing in them not what is local but what is shared. Italian culture produced this double phenomenon: the restructuring of Latin and the formation of the vernacular [...] This common language is formed more easily where there is a centre of culture, which brings together the cultivated classes and acts as a forum for the most illustrious men. This was seen in Palermo in the court of Frederick II, which drew people from Sicily, Puglia, Tuscany, Romagna...*

(De Sanctis 1973:63)

The linguistic and literary commentaries of various kinds that have taken shape over time have mirrored the results of scientific research: the origins of Italian, which for a long period were set by the Sicilian School in the 13<sup>th</sup>

century, have now been put back to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The reformulation of the period of the origins is a continuous process, given the discovery of new documents on the language and literary texts in the form of both prose and poetry (for example the most ancient Italian poems examined by Stussi 1999). The axis on which the history of the language moves is thus retrograde, tending to shift the start further back in time: the language is updated by delving further and further into its past, backdating and broadening the framework of reference of language and style.

### Language and Nation

The history of the link between language and nation, in particular of language as an equivalent, a signifier, of the nation, was examined by Tullio De Mauro, from antiquity, with reference to the Syriac writer Bardaisan, to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and European Romanticism. *Lingua e nazionalità in Italia (Language and nationality in Italy)*, the first chapter of another, more modern history of the language, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita (Linguistic history of united Italy)*, first edition 1963), traces, once again starting in antiquity, the historical and linguistic development of Italy up until unification, based on a paradigmatic observation:

*Ever present in the background of every event in Italian history, not necessarily decisive, but clearly exerting a strong influence, is the discontinuous geography: even Italian historians and linguists who are generally inclined to dismiss the importance of geographical boundaries and other aspects compared to political and administrative boundaries and the landscape created by human beings, when faced with the regional discontinuity of the Peninsula, are obliged to admit that especially in periods of less intense economic and social life, it has strongly favoured regional distinctions.*

(De Mauro 1979:17)

Summing up the historical and linguistic interpretations, the Italian language constitutes a unique case that has been handed down since the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the absence of a state or other form of political hegemony: «a language without an empire», as it is called in the title of the essay by Bruni (2013:9-21). Perhaps the nature of this language is perceived more strongly and described more clearly by foreigners — who have described it as the language of music (Folena 1983), or the “language of the angels” (Stammerjohann 2013) — than by its indigenous speakers, a language configured on the model of the classics. By backdating slightly, it is possible to broaden the framework of reference: for a brief period in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, political hegemony influenced both the language and the nation during the reign of Frederick II. This period saw the rise of Sicilian poetry, which would become the model of the great Italian poetry of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, from the *Stilnovisti*<sup>2</sup> to Dante, Petrarch and many others besides.

All developments in the culture of a nation influence its language, and from this point of view, the history of the Italian language constitutes an adventure without parallel and without precedent, in which various cultural currents have acted simultaneously, in a linguistic landscape that has solidified in a disconnected way, with isolated eruptions in the great sea of medieval Latin, against a backdrop of multilingualism. The birth of the language, on the back of the varieties of various political or cultural entities, all sharing a common neo-Latin origin, has been refracted over the course of linguistic history and national history, sustaining the dialects, at least in the spoken language, until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, in shifting linguistic manifestations, down to the present day.

The adventure descends to the etymological depths, to the point of involving the meaning of the name of the language itself: the word *Italian* is not of geographical derivation, unlike the many names by which Italy has been called since the most ancient times and by the most ancient civilisations: the term ‘Italiano’ began to solidify in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, coined with the help of the suffix *-ano* attached to the word ‘Italia’ (Migliorini 1998:115-116; Serianni 2015:36; Ghinassi 1998:xx-xxi). The term marks the start of a

linguistic and cultural trail that leads right up to modern times (Tomasin 2011:§ IV).

### **The Italian Language**

On this polyhedral, multifaceted matrix, the system of the language is inscribed. It is always open to new acquisitions and yet always highly conservative, like a language found in an isolated area (in the words of Renzi 1988:20: «it never entirely discards the forms of the phases now concluded, like in a house in which new furniture is purchased, but without ever throwing away the old»). Without belonging to an isolated area, the Italian language possesses features that derive from the immobile aspect of the written language. As evidence of its conservatism, we may cite first and foremost the extensive complexity of its morphological system, and, to a lesser degree the never abandoned link with Latin, on which it draws incessantly:

*And even when the use of the vernacular began to be widely adopted in writing, Latin had not yet fully exhausted its purpose, as the butterfly replaces the chrysalis, but was to remain an active force that would profoundly influence the history and the structure of Italian.*

(Durante 1981:v)

With regard to innovation, the lexical system is closely linked to the events of political and cultural history, with modifications generated by contact with other languages, or by the interference or supremacy of other languages (such as the introduction of Spanish and French words, respectively in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries).

In the history of the Italian language the longest chapter is the history of the written language, which overlays all the diatopic varieties, making them uniform over time. Until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the written Italian language contrasted with the spoken word, which was mainly dialect.

It is here that a wedge (the representation of speech) is inserted that at the same time both separates and mediates between ancient and modern: from the ancient texts to the modern varieties, the interpretation proceeds precisely according to the use of the spoken word (for an essential basic bibliography, see D'Achille 1990, Sornicola 1981 and De Mauro 1993).

The claim that «language is alive» (Folena 2002:59) — a key principle in the interpretation of ancient texts, in which we expect to find linguistic innovations derived precisely from the spoken varieties — comes to us from the discipline of philology: from philological research derive both the texts and knowledge of the varieties in which they were composed. The link between the Italian language and philology — deeper and more substantial than the other Romance languages — and the close connection between history of the language and philology (Serianni 2015:§ 1.1) becomes clearer in this context: the tools of the language derive from the history of the texts, and philological operations lead to knowledge of the language over time, while these same tools make it possible to handle innovations and classify the modern language. Ultimately, this enables us to connect the two extremes of the Italian continuum, whose cardinal points are the language of the speakers and the language of the authors (Nencioni 1989:227).

### **Conclusion**

Tying up the threads of a discussion that has necessarily been brief, in a broad excavation of a diverse range of historic and social aspects, the principle aim of the history of the language is to recognise the «*unity of the culture*» in the cultural horizon of each period, or at least to identify its premise, by which is meant:

*...not only and not so much the unity of anthropological cultures or various sciences or various branches of knowledge and various forms of unity, but the possibility of movement, of shifting within the cultural space, i.e. the restitution to each individual (regardless of the atomisation arising from*

*the division of peoples, of labour and of social class) of the ability to move freely, by choice, within the cultural space, experiencing first hand its ordered unity.*

(Italics in the original, De Mauro 2018:101)

**Note:**

1. All quotations in the text were translated from Italian into English for this edition.
2. *Stilnovisti* is the collective term for the poetic pioneers and partisans of the Italian dolce stil novo in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and early 14<sup>th</sup> . Cf. <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272-001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-1084>>

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### Լեզվի պատմությունը և ազգի պատմությունը

Լեզվի պատմությունը տվյալ ժողովրդի քաղաքական մտքի զարգացման վկայությունն է: Իտալերենի առումով անհրաժեշտ է հաշվի առնել այն դիտարկումներն ու ամփոփումները որոնք առկա են լեզվի սկզբնավորումից սկսած մինչև մեր օրերը: Սույն հոդվածում քննության են

առնվում իտալերեն լեզվի և գրականության պատմությունից բերվող տարբեր օրինակներ, փորձ է արվում ներկայացնելու իտալերենի ծագման ու զարգացման տարբեր փուլեր և դրանց դերը իտալական մշակույթի ու քաղաքակրթության ձևավորման հարցում:

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