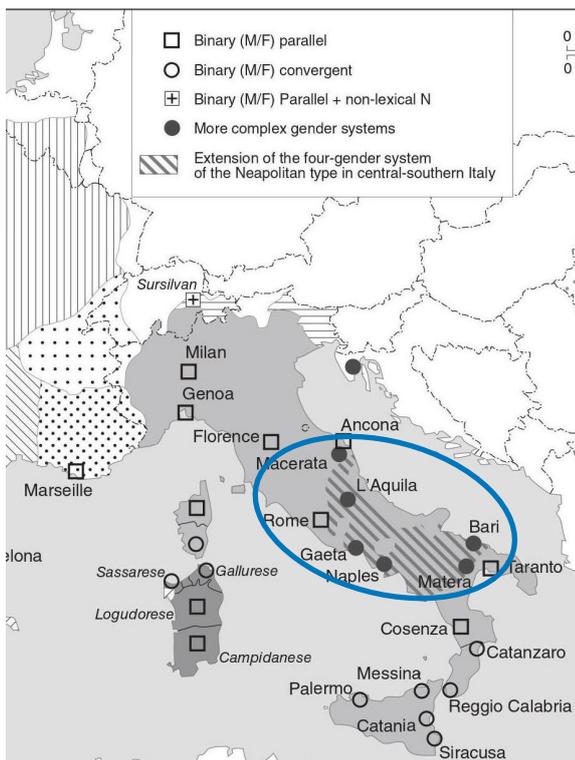


1. Objective of the study

This PhD project aims to study the cognitive dimension of language change as it unfolds. “The brain acts as a prediction machine” (Nieuwland et al. 2018), thus, it is not surprising that we exploit anticipation strategies, based on semantic and grammatical cues, to facilitate comprehension. My research question is: When the gender agreement system of a linguistic variety is changing, will grammatical gender information still be exploited as anticipatory cues?

- (1) Map of the different gender systems which can be found among Italo-Romance varieties (readapted from Loporcaro 2018: 60)



In Italy, the area between the Roma-Ancona line (to the north) and Puglia and Lucania (to the south)¹ displays three genders (F[eminine], M[asculine] and N[euter]) signaled by dedicated forms of agreement targets (articles, pronouns, etc.). However, in many of these dialects, the N is presently merging into the M, as N nouns tend to be reassigned. I will examine whether speakers of such dialects who still use N agreement in production rely on N morpho-syntactic cues during language comprehension. Two dialects have been selected for the investigation: Molfettese and Spellano. Participants from a third dialect spoken in Foligno will constitute a control group, since this variety has already lost the N gender and consequently has two stable gender values (F vs M) with no ongoing change.

2. Methods

Ongoing change is frequently not investigated by experimental linguistics, especially if it affects dialects. Thus, to suggest a different approach, I will

use a psycholinguistic methodology, targeting noun anticipation: the eye tracking (ET). This technique has been successfully employed by Lundquist et al. (2016) to explore ongoing language change in three Norwegian dialects in which F gender is being demised. The authors provide evidence that when grammatical simplification is unfolding, morpho-syntactic cues are not exploited during language comprehension, even by those who still use F agreement in production. I intend to apply the same methodology to the above mentioned Italo-Romance varieties. Participants will look at two pictures on a screen; in the most relevant condition of the paradigm, one will depict a N noun (target) and a M noun (distractor). During the trial, they will hear the voice-command “look at the N...(target noun N)” in their own variety; gender is marked on the article preceding the noun. The dependent variable is the probability to look at the target noun before hearing it. If N

¹ The area is marked in (1). Actually, it would be more appropriate to describe it as a four-gender system area, but in my project, I will concentrate on the three genders expressed by means of a dedicated form of the article.

agreement marked on the article is not a reliable anticipatory cue anymore, this probability will be smaller than in the other experimental conditions. This procedure is known as the *Visual word paradigm*

3. Schedule

These are the steps of my project:

- ✓ Selection of the three varieties under investigation: I selected two experimental varieties (Molfettese and Spellano) and one control variety (Folignese). These dialects are suitable for the research because they have a conspicuous speaker community, which facilitates the recruitment of the participants; the neuter gender class hosts more than 20 nouns, a number that will allow me to have a decent amount of experimental stimuli; their gender systems have been already described; the neuter gender class has a dedicated form of the definite article which is necessary to apply a paradigm, as this one, based on anticipatory strategy by means of grammatical information marked on the article.
- “Traditional” fieldwork to clarify whether or not the systems are changing: the descriptions about gender agreement in these varieties are not very recent (the one on Molfettese dates back to 1917). Consequently, I decided to conduct interviews to assess the actual status of the gender systems, using likert scale judgments. This will allow me to present myself to the speakers’ community and get in touch with potential participants for the experimental part. Fieldwork research has already been conducted for the variety of Molfetta with promising results, showing that, although the neuter is still present as an agreement class, some nouns are being reassigned to the masculine, even among conservative speakers. I will finish all the fieldwork research by the end of the year.
- The experimental part: this part is still under structuring. I already know how to present the stimuli and how to recruit the participants. Nevertheless, there are some issues that need to be clarified and that I will address in the following section.
 - Preparation of the stimuli
 - Recruitment of the participants
 - Analysis

4. Problems

- Becoming familiar with the ET procedure: in my MA thesis I employed a neurolinguistic paradigm: the ERP (event-related potentials) and I was educated as a linguist and as a dialectologist. I have experience with quantitative and statistical analysis and I am quite familiar with the ET literature about comprehension and production or about anticipation during linguistic processing. Nevertheless, I have never used an eye tracker.
- Founding: I still need to obtain funding for the experimental part, but I already sent some applications.
- Necessity to assess the frequency of the nouns that I will use for the experimental part: in this kind of experiments it is necessary to select nouns that are frequent in use. When dealing with standard varieties, frequencies can be measured using corpora. With dialects the

situation is different, since no corpora and sometimes no vocabularies are available. Consequently, I need to find a suitable way to assess the frequency of the nouns that I will use.

5. (basic) References

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