Language policy during the *ventennio* of Fascism

Introduction

Whether in the quest for clarity, or as a product of simplification, time and again historical overviews of the Italian nation turn to the same parameters: from Unification to the First World War; the Fascist period; from the end of the Second World War and agreement of the Constitution, onwards.

World wars and changes in leadership clearly have great bearing on the development - or indeed, demise - of nations, and thus, are rational divisions to make. However, more than any other, it is the fascist period that seems to lend itself, so obligingly, to such historiographic subdivision. This tendency is displayed by historians and linguists alike.

Marazzini, in his historic profile of the Italian language, states that:

“*Il fascismo ebbe una chiara politica linguistica.*”

This statement would suggest, firstly, that the approach to language policy by the fascist government differed from policy implemented prior to and since the *ventennio*, and secondly, that language policy during this period possessed a degree of uniformity and followed a defined agenda.

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The aim of this paper will be to judge whether Marazzini’s claim holds true. For this to be determined, it will be necessary to detail the policies introduced by the fascist regime, consider the motives behind their introduction and, importantly, assess the greater historical context.

**Language and nationalism before fascism**

Fascism displayed a remarkable and self-confessed ability to adapt:

“Noi ci permettiamo il lusso di essere aristocratici e democratici, conservatori e progressisti, reazionari e rivoluzionari, legalisti e illegalisti, a seconda delle circostanze di tempo, di luogo e di ambiente.”

Thus, coming up with a definition can be problematic. However, throughout the twenty-year reign of fascism, for all its ideological shape-shifting, there was at least one constant: nationalism.

Nationalism, of course, was already prevalent decades before Mussolini came to power. The *Risorgimento*, the unification of Italy, meant the birth of the Italian nation and, as is true with any concept of a nation, a shared national language was required. While German and French had long been considered distinct languages, having diverged from Latin as early as the end of the first millennium, the various tongues of the Italian peninsula enjoyed no such status and were seen, merely, as forms of Vulgar Latin. The nation-builders of the nineteenth century, namely Manzoni, looked towards the latter of the two models: France. However, the French model drew on the

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strength of Paris, unquestionably the political, linguistic and economic core of the nation; Italy had no such multifaceted, municipal candidate.

Rome clearly had the historical edge, and romantic notions of past imperial glory would indeed be employed by Mussolini in his propagandist rhetoric. The northern cities of Milan and Turin were also strong candidates and would prove influential in the economic development of the country during the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it was Florence that, ever since the Rinascimento, had laid claim to being the intellectual and literary capital and, accordingly, Florentine was deemed the most suitable choice, in selecting a national language. The problematic, polycentric nature of Italy is, perhaps, best expressed by Mussolini himself:

“lingua toscana in bocca romana!”

Rhythmically pleasing though it may be, it certainly falls short of transmitting the sense of absolute, national linguistic unity expressed by ‘one country, one nation, one language’, a chant connected to French nationalism.

In 1889, the Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri was founded, and entrusted with the task of promoting and disseminating the language throughout the nation. Contributing to the difficulty of this task were the high and sustained levels of illiteracy and lack of formal education - in 1864 only 30% of males and 18% of

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females went to school\textsuperscript{7}. It was not until the First World War, and the subsequent internal migration, that the issue of national language was truly scrutinised. Though it does not completely excuse the incompetence demonstrated by high-ranking officials, one can appreciate the difficulty of commanding a national army that does not share a national language\textsuperscript{8}. As exaggerated as it may seem, often a speaker of one dialect was left with no means of communicating with a speaker of another dialect. The extent of this unintelligibility is exemplified by the speed at which Italian immigrants, both in the UK and the US, acquired English; they did so not simply to aid integration and to improve their chances of employment, but because English functioned as a lingua franca for communicating with Italians from other parts of the country\textsuperscript{9}.

In addition to highlighting the issue of dialects, the First World War extended Italy’s boundaries, bringing new territories. With the annexation of Trentino Alto-Adige and Venezia-Giulia, came significant linguistic minority groups: speakers of German dialect, Slovene and Serbo-Croat\textsuperscript{10}. It is important to note that, during the governance of the Liberals, steps were already being taken to “Italianise” these minority groups\textsuperscript{11}.

**Fascism and dialects**

Firstly, a note concerning terminology: the word ‘dialect’ can be a source of much ambiguity. Ever since Florentine was chosen as the national language, all other vernaculars in Italy have been referred to as ‘dialects’, just as they are today. They

\textsuperscript{7} Salvi, Sergio. 1975. *Le lingue tagliate*. Milano: Rizzoli. p. 64
\textsuperscript{8} Tosi, Arturo. 2004. The Language Situation in Italy. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 5: 3. p. 278
\textsuperscript{11} Klein, Gabriella. *La politica linguistica del Fascismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino. p. 92
would, in fact, be more accurately described as “romance vernaculars”—they are linguistic siblings of Florentine, rather than derivational entities. The very label ‘dialect’ can, in fact, serve to devalue a language and lower the status of its speakers. For instance, during Franco’s regime, regional languages in Spain—such as Galician and Catalan—were frequently referred to as ‘dialects’ of Castilian. While it is important to be mindful of such implications, to avoid over-complication, in this paper Italy’s ‘romance vernaculars’ will continue to be referred as dialects.

As I have already illustrated, for those concerned with the construction of a nation, dialects were seen as a great obstacle. Indeed, opposition to this linguistic diversity, anti-dialettismo, was already prevalent in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century. Extraordinarily, however, one of the first policies introduced by the fascist regime was decidedly progressive and pluralist in its approach. The Riforma Gentile, introduced in 1923, outlined a method of teaching - dal dialetto alla lingua - which recognised dialect as a spontaneous form of expression and as a starting point in the educational process. Though dialects were present in schools during the nineteenth century, they had generally been used out of sheer necessity, as a means of communication, or in an attempt to combat illiteracy. Gentile’s reform incorporated dialects into the curriculum by promoting the use of local literature and poetry as educational resources and producing numerous dialect-Italian manuals and dictionaries.

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This was not to continue however, for after only a few years of rather inhibited activity, Gentile was removed from office\textsuperscript{16}. The policy may have been somewhat idealistic, as it worked on the presumption that dialects could be considered on a region-by-region basis. This would hardly have been possible because, at that time, many children only spoke an extremely local dialectal form, often unintelligible even to speakers of other dialects within the same region\textsuperscript{17}. The success that the reform could have had will remain a matter of speculation, because, in 1925, the same year Gentile was removed from power, a law was passed to abolish the teaching of dialects in schools completely\textsuperscript{18}.

Language policy regarding the dialects was not confined to the realms of education. Due in part to successful negotiations with the church, the 1930s saw Mussolini grow in confidence and a more aggressive position against dialects ensued.

\begin{quote}
"Il Fascismo deve volere che dentro i confini non vi siano più veneti, romagnoli, toscani, siciliani e sardi: ma italiani, solo italiani."\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In Mussolini’s vision of nationalism, there was no room for linguistic variation. This meant leaving behind the mosaic of heterogeneous regions and coming together under the third Rome\textsuperscript{20}. Dialect was seen to be weakening the unitary spirit that a single national language expressed. This wave of anti-regionalist sentiment led to a law in

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\textsuperscript{17} Klein, Gabriella. \textit{La politica linguistica del Fascismo}. Bologna: Il Mulino. p. 44
\textsuperscript{18} (Decreto 22) Salvi, Sergio. 1975. \textit{Le lingue tagliate}. Milano: Rizzoli. p. 69
\textsuperscript{19} Taken from \textit{Il programma fascista}, a speech by Mussolini, cited in Simonini, Augusto. 1978. \textit{Il linguaggio di Mussolini}. Milan: Bompiani. p. 123
\end{flushleft}
1930, which banned dialects from being used in film and another, in 1932, which prohibited their use in daily and periodical press\textsuperscript{21}.

“I quotidiani, i periodici, e le riviste non devono più occuparsi in modo assoluto del dialetto.”\textsuperscript{22}

Though these are typical methods of fascism, insomuch as they display a withdrawal of liberties, one must be conscious of the ever-present void between rhetoric and everyday reality. Publicly, the use of dialect was certainly stigmatised, as officials spoke of a “malerba dialettale”\textsuperscript{23}, and policies were oppressive. This said, privately, there would have been little the regime could have done to monitor dialect use, let alone outlaw it. Moreover, the \textit{Riforma gentile}, as discussed above, was not the only example of the active promotion of dialects by government bodies. Paradoxically, in 1930, the same year the use of dialect was banned from cinema, the \textit{Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro} staged regional festivals that featured local dances, costumes, and dialect songs and poetry. Ben-Ghiat argues that this was less a revival of regionalism, and more a means of “relegating regional culture to the realms of carnival”\textsuperscript{24}. Others have taken up a similar position with regards to Franco’s relaxation of laws restricting the use of Catalan\textsuperscript{25}. These arguments are perfectly credible; however, if Mussolini had

\textsuperscript{22} Taken from a speech which Mussolini gave in 1941, cited in Simonini, Augusto. 1978. \textit{Il linguaggio di Mussolini}. Milan: Bompiani. p. 210
\textsuperscript{24} Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. 1997. Language and the construction of national identity in fascist Italy. \textit{The European Legacy}. 2: 3. p. 440
truly been intent on eliminating dialect use, such celebrations of dialect would surely not have been tolerated, let alone subsidised.

**Fascism and minority languages**

Linguistic diversity had been a feature of Italy before the annexation of Trentino Alto-Adige and Venezia-Giulia. At the time of unification in 1861 Catalan was spoken in Sardinia, French and Occitan in Piedmont and the Aosta Valley, and Albanian and Greek in southern regions and Sicily. These linguistic minorities are believed to have made up over 2.1% of the total population. Some time before the advent of fascism, there had been attempts to actively assimilate these groups. Also, in 1879, French was discouraged in primary schools and completely banned from institutions of higher education, much to the dismay of French-speaking Valdostans.

The assimilation of minority groups was on Mussolini’s agenda from the outset of his reign. In 1923, a tax was levied on the use of foreign word in shop signs, which later became prohibited altogether. In the same year, neither German, Slovenian, nor Serbo-Croat languages were allowed to be taught in primary schools. All classes had to be carried out in Italian; the teaching of any other languages was confined to extracurricular activities. For the most part, this was a united campaign, and yet still there were occasional contradictions. In its vernacular use and on signs, German was prohibited; however, as a foreign language it continued to be tolerated.

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It was argued in the last chapter that language policy dealing with dialects never went beyond the discouragement of their use in public; this would have had little impact on people’s everyday lives. However, this was not the case for speakers of minority languages, many of whom experienced far greater interference into their private lives.

In 1926, a process of Italianisation began, whereby German and Slavic place names throughout Alto-Adige and Venezia-Giulia were replaced with Italian ones. This seemingly primitive, out-of-sight-out-of-mind method of linguistic oppression knew no limits. By 1927, in Alto-Adige, a local prefect had even sent out a circular banning the use of German on gravestones. The campaign did not stop here; finally, a law was passed that forbade parents from giving their child a foreign Christian name.

The heavy-handedness of the fascist regime’s approach is, perhaps, best articulated by the treatment of the South Tyrolese. The German-speaking community, which had inhabited the region for generations, was given an ultimatum: they were either to adopt the Italian language, or they would have to move from their homes, across the border to live in Germany. This ceased to be a language policy driven by nationalistic and purist ideals, but part of a more comprehensive and multifaceted operation of xenophobia.

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Linguistic Purism

Marazzini, besides making the judgement that fascism had a clear, calculated approach to language policy, goes on to highlight the following three key aspects:

- *la polemica antidialettale*
- *la repression delle minoranze etniche*
- *la battaglia contro i forestierismi*

In accordance with findings of this paper, Marazzini affirms that the treatment of minority languages was far more severe, compared to that experienced by speakers of dialect. However, I view his inclusion of ‘the fight against foreign words’ as quite unnecessary. Marazzini, along with many others, makes reference to the strong purist sentiment of the time: in particular, books written by Tittoni (*La difesa della lingua italiana*) and Monelli (*Barbaro dominio*)\(^33\). Both texts address the dilemma of foreign words creeping into the Italian language. In 1943, linguists were commissioned to compile a list of words of foreign origin\(^34\). For many of the 650 words, Italian replacements were duly suggested. One of the most ridiculous substitutions was *coda di gallo* for *cocktail*\(^35\); needless to say, it did not catch on. More cause for entertainment is the irony attached to Mussolini’s following command:

“*Italiani, boicottate le parole straniere...*”\(^36\)


With the lexical selection of the verb ‘boicottare’ - a distinctly English word, originating from Captain John Boycott - Mussolini was violating the very rule he was attempting to issue\textsuperscript{37}.

The hotbed of fascist nationalism provided perfect conditions and linguistic purism escalated. However, this is no confirmation that linguistic purism is necessarily an implicitly fascist concept. While its connection to nationalism is difficult to ignore, it is possible that it could be more a product of pride for one’s language, as in the case of Anglo-Irish writer Jonathan Swift. Conversely, we have examples of overtly oppressive regimes that displayed no concern for linguistic purism. In fact, the Nazi regime showed very little interest in speakers of dialects, minority languages, or the existence of foreign words\textsuperscript{38}.

Lepschy has suggested that “the ‘openness’ of a language, its ability to absorb foreign elements could be considered a sign of its strength, of the confidence with which it is used”\textsuperscript{39}. Following this theory, the avid purist campaign during the fascist period could be seen as an expression of insecurity, as could the treatment of speakers of dialects and minority languages.

Although one must be cautious when comparing Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, given the difference in circumstances, not to mention ideologies, it can prove useful. The Nazi regime’s lack of concern for language diversity could, of course, be explained by the fact that the discrimination, oppression and persecution of groups was racially motivated, following ideas of Aryan supremacy. However, it is possible

\textsuperscript{38} Klein, Gabriella. La politica linguistica del Fascismo. Bologna: Il Mulino. p. 149
to say that the two regimes’ differing attitudes towards language policy reflect their differing political approaches, more generally. The Nazi regime, rather than troubling itself with language diversity within its borders, was more involved with the promotion of German, as a future world language\textsuperscript{40}. This, most clearly, articulates Hitler’s confident, expansionist aspirations. In contrast, Mussolini’s concentration on the purification of the Italian language, the breaking down of the structures of regionalism and the assimilation of ethnic minority groups, appears decidedly more stagnant and defensive.

**Concluding remarks and the situation today**

Arguably, the campaign against *esotismi* had very little effect on people’s linguistic behaviour or, in fact, on the lasting lexicon of the Italian language. Similarly, even though there was a movement to discourage the use of dialect in public, policies often had short-sighted motives of political propaganda and no real strength\textsuperscript{41}. Rather than being oppressed in such a private manner as with minority languages, dialects were “systematically ignored”\textsuperscript{42}. Although this did not drastically curb their levels of use, it may have had an impact on their status. It is not that dialects have lacked grounds for prestige: De Mauro effortlessly lists an abundance of celebrated writers and poets with strong dialectal ties, both past and present\textsuperscript{43}. Nevertheless, typically, dialects have a low linguistic status; this was the case during fascism and is still the case today. De Mauro has claimed that:

\textsuperscript{40} Klein, Gabriella. *La politica linguistica del Fascismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino. p. 151  
\textsuperscript{41} Tosi, Arturo. 2004. The Language Situation in Italy. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 5: 3. p. 278  
“La secolare dialettofobia della scuola italiana ha certamente ottenuto dei risultati: molti si vergognano di farsi sorprendere a parlare il loro dialetto.”

This implies that the low status of dialects is a consequence of systematic and ongoing neglect within the education system. If one is to judge the language policy of the 1930s, which was responsible for removing dialects from schools, as fascist, then one must find current language policy, which is equally neglectful, to be fascist as well.

As mentioned earlier, the treatment of minority groups was overtly oppressive and xenophobically motivated. The various policies which were introduced, from changing place names, to prohibiting foreign names and amending graves, can be viewed as the actions of an insecure nation. The presence of Germans and Slavs would have been seen as a great threat to what was, thanks to the strength of regionalism, already a shaky national identity. Perhaps then, what is most notable about Italy is this unrelenting regionalism. In fact, Coluzzi refers to this as ‘micronationalism’45: a phenomenon which entails that “the unit of loyalty is often the municipality or at most the province, rather than the region”46. For all of fascism’s centralistic efforts, local identities have stayed strong.

Returning to Marazzini’s claim: evidently, language policy had a significant role within fascism as a vehicle of oppression, with speakers of minority languages being most severely affected. However, there is little evidence to suggest there was a clear and coordinated campaign; some policies were even quite progressive, while those

45 Coluzzi, Paolo. 2007. *Minority language planning and micronationalism in Italy*. Bern: Peter Lang
that were more oppressive generally lacked real strength. Nationalist tendencies, whether *anti-dialettismo*, the marginalisation of minority groups or linguistic purism, all predated fascism, and, in one form or another, are still prevalent to day.

It is certainly convenient to view fascist atrocities as having begun in 1922 and finished in 1943, but frequently, there are lines of continuity that should not be ignored. When using a parameter such as the *ventennio* of fascism, one should be mindful not to overlook similar practices of oppression, linguistic or otherwise, which went on before and, regrettably, still prevail today.
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