

Towards the Definition of a Standard: Spoken and Non-Verbal Languages in Early Modern Italy

The rationale of this conference points out the growing importance of multimodality in human communication. This new perspective opens up new, unexplored territories to other disciplines, thus far considered “no man’s land”. In the field of linguistics, in fact, gestures have gained importance only in the last few years, for many scholars, following the example of Saussure, had previously posed that language, in order to be such, must be spoken; as a result, linguists indulged in using the words ‘language’ and ‘speech’ interchangeably (Kendon 1992: 48).

Applied linguists, on the contrary, have begun to acknowledge the importance of gestures in second language teaching as a way of emphasizing both the peculiarity of a certain culture and the different meanings of gestures shared by two or more cultures; accordingly, one would caution the student not to depend on gestural “false cognates”, so as to avoid awkward situations. For example, a teacher of Italian would explain not only the meaning of *corna* (horns), a typically Italian gesture whereby one raises the index and the pinkie fingers to insult someone, but also a gesture such as the English “knock on wood,” which in Italian refers instead to a stubborn person (Diadori 36). However, despite a few attempts, all of which were experimental and only published in specialized journals, textbooks and other educational materials generally fail to use gestures functionally in second language learning. With regard to Italian, kinetic pedagogy is largely confined to non-scientific material, with titles like *How to Be an Italian*, most of which tend to portray a rather stereotyped, almost mocking image of Italians as a continuously gesticulating people.

It is relatively easy to learn the standard pronunciation of a national language through a great number of resources (audio-visuals, TV, radio, etc.), so much so that nowadays it is almost impossible to think of a “book-only” approach to learning. For ancient languages, however, pronunciation is (or better, used to be) not as relevant as grammar and syntax in the economy of learning. Typically, students of Latin will focus more on the latter aspect, for their goal is generally to read and to translate (and occasionally to write) using this language.

This long preamble was necessary to explain the aim of my paper. Today we tend to perceive the entire process of language learning as enmeshed in a good pronunciation, but if we look back in time, this equation is no longer valid. This makes more sense in Italy, where to this day the concept of standard pronunciation is so vague that only actors and a considerably small number of upper class, educated Florentines can actually speak Italian “without an accent” (see Lepschy and Lepschy 11-18). The rest of the speakers, including Tuscans, use several varieties of regional Italian, which, in turn, are broken down into countless local varieties, all of which are influenced by dialects, which are still widely used in the country. No city, therefore, is considered the exclusive centre of Italian; rather, the cities where the national TV stations are concentrated, chiefly Rome and Milan, may constitute the “new standard”, considering the fact that TV has been the most important factor in spreading the national language. Nowadays, the linguistic importance of Florence is rather marginal, although its legacy is still enormous (Lepschy and Lepschy 14 and 33-34). The making of a national language has been a long process, divided as the peninsula was for over a thousand years; if a spoken unification is yet to come, however, the standardization of the written language was achieved in 1525 with the publication of Venetian cardinal Pietro Bembo’s (1470-1547) *Prose della volgar lingua*. The linguistic debates of sixteenth-century Italy, which converged in the standardization of Bembo’s model, also dealt with the problem from several viewpoints of precisely which language should be taught in the schools. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the procedure for learning Italian involved merely reading the classics (Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tasso, etc.), although sparse, scattered exceptions occurred, in which spoken and non-verbal languages were in fact considered.

My paper explores the latter attitude towards the study of a language, which has been almost completely neglected – neglect, due, in part, to the inadequate study of the topic. I shall focus on the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: a crucial period that eventually redefined the linguistic model of Italian from a solely literary to a recognized national (and eventually, to a certain extent, spoken) language.

The problem of a vernacular raised to the altars of national language had been the topic of numerous debates in Spain, France, and Italy between 1425 and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Such treatises as *Il Dialogo delle lingue* (1542), by the Italian scholar Sperone Speroni, and its French counterpart *La Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise* (1549), by Joachim du Bellay, aspire principally to create illustrious poetry in vernacular by giving rules to it and by posing the epistemological question of its authority as a national language. The crux of the matter, according to Renaissance scholars, was to arrange language within a historical context, and to reconcile norm and usage as part of a broader debate that involved followers of Plato and Aristotle (cf. Swiggers 59-65). France and Italy arrived at two diametrically opposed solutions: the former based its national idiom on the *bon usage*, namely the language spoken by the upper classes, the latter on the cult of the “Tre corone” (three crowns), that is Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, Florentines who wrote mostly in the fourteenth century (Swiggers 72). This theory, created by Pietro Bembo, and accurately described in his *Prose della volgar lingua*, a treatise considered as the codification of the Italian literary

language, would prevail after roughly 30 years of debate, often defined as the *Questione della lingua* (see at least Vitale)

Bembo based his ideas on the fact that the national language had to be kept apart from the people's speech, as the latter was subject to sudden changes; thus, a good poet had always to refer to Petrarch, whereas a good prose writer should imitate Boccaccio (Formentin 185). By setting up a vernacular canon, Bembo applied to Italian vernacular what the Humanists had previously done with Latin. In fact, they discarded all the mediaeval authors to concentrate only on Cicero and Virgil, abandoning all the possible living aspects of this language (Formentin 186).

The Venetian cardinal gave very little importance to the spoken language; in fact, he asserts, "it would be of little advantage to be born a Florentine should one wish to write well in Florentine" (Dionisotti 114, my translation); however, other theorists of his time had different views. Mantuan diplomat Baldesar Castiglione (1478-1529), in his *Il cortegiano* (1528; translated as *The Book of the Courtier*) conceived of language as an instrument of communication whereby speech was crucial to the process of exchanging ideas: "It is my belief that writing is nothing other than a kind of speech which remains in being after it has been uttered, the representation, as it were, or rather the very life of our words" (Bull 71); later in the same chapter, however, he shows preference to written language: "I believe that it is more important to make one's meaning clear in writing than in speaking; because unlike someone listening, the reader is not always present when the author is writing" (72). Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), in his treatise *Discorso o dialogo sulla nostra lingua* (probably written in 1525, right after Bembo's *Prose* were released) affirms the *natural* supremacy of the living Florentine vernacular because of its phonetic and morphological consistency (Formentin 205; see Vitale 72-78).

Bembo's ideas were widely accepted across Italy, except in Florence itself where linguists circulated pamphlets denouncing the writings of the Venetian cardinal and those of other theorists (such as Castiglione and Gian Giorgio Trissino, both of whom proposed a super-national language based on the vernacular spoken in the courts), who, in the minds of Florentine linguists, were guilty of usurping Florence's cultural superiority since they themselves were not from Tuscany (see Vitale 78-105). Nevertheless, in the *Questione della lingua*, the interest in spoken language remained confined to the margins, if not to utter obscurity. Castiglione mentions the importance of spoken language only once. Machiavelli's treatise disappeared for several years, then was published only in the eighteenth century; and in the last twenty years, scholars have debated whether Machiavelli himself wrote this work at all, or if it was a later imitation (Sorella 120-140).

Benedetto Varchi (1503-65) re-examined and imported to Florence Bembo's theory through his dialogue *L'Hercolano*, published posthumously in 1570. His reflection on the classical model served as a Trojan horse to reintroduce the issue of the spoken Florentine into the debate, for it was an attempt to reconcile written norms with the modern speech of the upper classes. It would be worthwhile to spend a few words on Varchi's *L'Hercolano*. The dialogue is subdivided into ten *quesiti* (questions): surprisingly ahead of his time, the author distinguishes the two separate moments of the speech, the *favellare*, a "real, complete command of the word", and the *parlare*, a "mechanical, imitative act" (Marazzini 81). In these terms, "one or more peoples' *favellare* takes place when they use the same words with the same meanings and with the same accident" (quoted from Marazzini 82; my translation). Varchi's distinction acknowledges and focuses on the actual existence of a community of speakers whose main communicative act is the *favellare* (and not writing!). For this reason, it was indispensable to spend a period of time in Florence learning the language for those who wanted to learn how to speak 'properly'; in spite of this, however, Bembo's classicism had already triumphed in the rest of Italy, and there was very little that Varchi and his friends of the Accademia fiorentina (fostered by Cosimo I, Duke of Tuscany) could do but to expand the canon to all the authors from the fourteenth century. These were the premises for the publication of the first dictionary of the Italian language, published in 1612 by the Accademia della crusca, a spin-off of the Accademia fiorentina (see Vitale 100-105).

Another writer who expressed interest in the act of speaking was Stefano Guazzo (1530-93), from Casale Monferrato, Piedmont, an area that, at that time, was more culturally linked to France than to Italy. In his *La civil conversazione* (1574), Guazzo fully accepts Bembo's ideas, provided that they apply only to the written language. For everyday conversation, he suggests a three-style system, making a parallel to fashion: plain (*schietto*), gaudy (*sfoggiato*), and mixed (*misto*; Quondam 100; Marazzini 104). Guazzo admits that spoken Tuscan (i.e. Florentine) would be a "refined" (*polito*) standard, but believes it to be quite unpractical as a truly spoken standard, for when one speaks, it is necessary that one do so with a certain degree of naturalness. Therefore, he proposes "to write as one must, and to speak as one is accustomed" (Quondam 98; Marazzini 105)

It is clear that Italian, at this time, was still considered a foreign language to those living outside of Florence and Tuscany, and thus it had to be learned as such, just like any other second language (as explained in Titone 24). As a consequence, one could argue that only the rich could afford to hire native speaking teachers to develop skills in Italian,

but the reality was, in fact, quite different. After the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church, while holding onto the Latin Bible and liturgy, conceded that the written and spoken vernacular played a major role in preaching. Typically, we find two kinds of preachers: those who operate in cities, whose audience is usually varied and, at times, more learned; and those who are sent to countryside missions. Each category was provided with its own *manuale* (“handbook”), but in each case, preachers were encouraged to learn the locals’ language or, alternately, to associate words with images or chants (Librandi 355).

The Franciscan Francesco Panigarola (1548-94) wrote one of the aforementioned *manuali*, *Il predicatore* (published 1609). His argument was that preachers required a purer, more correct language, thereby conjoining in this way Bembo and Varchi’s theories. In Panigarola’s opinion, preachers should avoid expressions and registers of the lower classes, for even peasants and common people would have a passive knowledge of Italian: “One should not say that farmers would not understand us because we utilize other words, for we already know that when they come to town, they understand those nobles with whom they converse” (quoted from Librandi 357; my translation). Following the example of Varchi, Panigarola suggests that preachers spend time in Tuscany to learn the language and the grammar of the region, “as one can best understand a language without studying it, but it is impossible to speak it without knowing the rules” (quoted from Librandi 360; my translation).

The Church also provided children with a basic education, even if the literacy rate among the lowest classes was extremely high. Until the second half of the eighteenth century, the Church held a monopoly over primary education, insofar as education consisted of reading and memorizing catechisms; these were written in Italian, with a few notable exceptions such as in the outlying regions of Piedmont, Sicily, and Friuli, where children studied catechisms written in their local dialect (Librandi 356). Secondary education, on the other hand, was taught chiefly in Latin, thereby maintaining the social hiatus that existed between social classes. In this setting, teachers would focus solely on Latin literature and, even if at times they switched into vernacular, they did not concern themselves with the correctness of their speech, to the extent that frequently people who were able to write in impeccable Latin could not construct a sentence in “correct” Italian (De Blasi 1993: 391). The only language for textbooks was Latin (indeed, for some time vernacular was even banished from schools), and more astonishingly, until the age of Enlightenment, there was a total absence of textbooks in Italian for those students whose mother tongues were other than Tuscan. In fact, for the majority of Italians the Italian language was a foreign idiom (ironic as that may seem!), as most of them spoke the tongues indigenous to their town or region; it is no surprise, therefore, that the first textbooks were modelled on those for learning a second language. One book of instructions for teachers (*Compendio del metodo delle scuole normali per uso delle Scuole della Lombardia Austriaca*, by Francesco Soave), printed in 1792 in Lombardy, advises instructors to employ dialect with students: “by saying this or that sentence in the Lombard dialect, ask them to translate it into correct Italian” (quoted from Matarrese 32, my translation). Nevertheless, by the end of the seventeenth century, literary Italian had spread throughout the peninsula, and the educated classes began to embrace it, but with strong local accents influencing the otherwise the Tuscan pronunciation. The question of a standard pronunciation was raised once again, and through much of the nineteenth century the publication of several dialectal dictionaries as well as practical guides for the correct Italian pronunciation (such as the *Cenno sulla diritta Pronuncia italiana* by Neapolitan Carlo Mele, published in 1835; see De Blasi 1998) would flourish; this boom in educational and scholarly output was the result of a new, revived interest in the spoken language (Matarrese 117).

The surviving sources for study on the “history of gestures” in Italy are, as Peter Burke puts it, “inadequate for these tasks, although they are as rich as an early modern historian has any right to hope” (1992: 73). He recalls two primary sources, among the others, on which I shall further comment: the formal treatises *L’arte de’ cenni* (1616), by Giovanni Bonifaccio, and *La mimica degli antichi* (1832; translated as *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity*), by Andrea de Jorio.

The period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a growing interest in gestures, both from a theoretical and practical viewpoint. In the classical and mediaeval periods gestures purported to reinforce and to emphasize the argument, but too much gesticulation throughout the course of a conversation was often perceived in a negative light, that is as a sign of vulgarity. During the Renaissance, as non-verbal communication became more important, scholars’ remarks on gestures attained greater importance: Giovanni della Casa (1503-56), in his *Galateo* (written between 1551 and 1555, published in 1558), reproaches those who do not gesture at all, as well as those who “move their hands so that it looks as if they want to shoo away flies from you.” (Eisenbichler and Bartlett 97). Castiglione goes even further and prescribes which gestures may be more suitable for Italians:

It seems to me that the customs of the Spaniards are more suited to the Italians than those of the French, because the calm dignity characteristic of the Spaniards seems to me more appropriate to us than the ready vivacity we see in almost everything the French people do. In them, this is not unbecoming [...]. And

admittedly there are many Italians who do their best to imitate the way the French behave; but all they understand is wagging their heads as they speak and bowing clumsily to one side. (Bull 146)

In Guazzo's aforementioned *La civil conversazione*, the author explores in greater detail the rhetorical role of gestures, which, in the wake of the Aristotelian and Ciceronian traditions, were for the purpose of *docere*, *mouere*, and *delectare* (teaching, moving, and entertaining; see Mortara Garavelli 1994: 23-24 and 36-37): "In gestures as well, such a temperament is required whereby those with very little should not represent the immobility of statues, and those with too much should not represent the instability of apes" (Quondam 130, my translation). Guazzo justifies the importance of gestures asserting that they are a direct emanation of the human's soul: "The external action must be preceded by the internal one, in such a way that the sound of the words and the movements of the person may be generated by the strength of the soul. And from all this we conclude that the eloquence of the body exists as much as the eloquence of the soul" (Quondam 132, my translation).

The Baroque speculation of the seventeenth century put much effort into describing non-verbal languages. If the scholar Emanuele Tesauro (1592-1675) wrote in his *Il cannocchiale aristotelico* (published 1678) that "the very Angels, the Nature and the Almighty God, conversing with humans, have expressed their most abstruse and important secrets [...] by the means of Symbols, and Enthymemes" (quoted from Costanzo 35; my translation), a lawyer from Treviso, Giovanni Bonifaccio (1547-1635), went further and actually titled one of his treatises *L'arte de' cenni*. In its preface, Bonifaccio explains the grounds of his work: "This way of making oneself understood by gestures and by signs is truly from any point of view most noble, especially because of its antiquity, for it is true (in Aristotle's words) that humans, are born mute and deaf, and that first they hear and then they speak, yet they see much earlier and they invent actions and gestures" (quoted from Costanzo 47; my translation).

The book itself is a masterpiece of Baroque erudition, since the author gives an accurate explanation of over 600 gestures, all linked not to treatises on rhetoric, but to literary sources (mostly Latin and Italian classics), and organized into the semblance of a dictionary (Casella 333). Even for Bonifaccio, as well as for Guazzo, external actions reflect humans' inner psyche, but "God, who wants to show his deity in this world, creates immortal souls for mortal humans [...]; therefore, as one knows the will of masters through their servants' actions, in the same way, one can comprehend the souls' attitude by the gestures themselves" (quoted from Casella 335; my translation). However, these gestures pertained to the dominant classes. This appropriation of gestures, according to Mario Costanzo (55), was an attempt by the highest strata of society to engage the only remaining possible form of communication that still belonged exclusively to the lowest social classes, for all the other forms of communication characteristic of this sector of society (first vernacular poetry, then popular poetry, finally dialectal poetry) had long been appropriated.

The Neapolitan priest Andrea de Jorio (1769-1851) compiled, in 1832, another dictionary of gestures, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*. Times had changed and so had the purpose of the treatise: it was no longer to link gestures to God (and in this, de Jorio criticizes Bonifaccio: "the extent to which his efforts have deviated from the aim proposed in the title of the work, and the small profit that can be extracted from the mass of learning collected in it, shows clearly the inadequacy of his method for a true treatise on gestural expression"; Kendon 2000: 21-22), rather to link them to the peoples' diversity. De Jorio, in fact, admits that there are as many different mimics as dialects in Italy:

The foreigner perhaps, on hearing the expression *Neapolitan gesturing* will believe it is the same for all the Two Sicilies [i.e. Sicily and Southern Italy]. How wrong he would be!! Go, let us not Say to Sicily, but simply to Puglia, and one will see what other source of rich gesturing will be met there in the particular dialect of those provinces. (Kendon 17)

De Jorio was probably the last Italian to write a formal dictionary of gestures before the advent of modern linguistics. On the other hand, in the eighteenth century, the casual notes taken by foreign visitors to Italy began to catalogue successfully the gestures of Italians: John Evelyn's diaries (Burke 73) or the *Sketches Illustrative of the Manners and Costumes of France, Switzerland and Italy* by R. Bridgens (1821), a repertoire and description of nine Italian gestures (Cartago 43-44), must be considered as the predecessors of the non-scientific texts mentioned above, the likes of which are still very popular today.

This short summary of names and works may be sterile and of little relevance for linguists or literary historians, since it mentions, perhaps too rapidly, topics already studied; however, my purpose here is to bridge the gap between applied linguistics, pragmatics and history of literature and language. Only through a correct historical perspective is it possible, in my opinion, to develop effective curricula in second language teaching. A student of Italian should be able to find a clear answer to such questions as "what variety of Italian shall I adopt?" (See Lepschy and Lepschy 15) or to level such myths as "You should go to Florence to learn real Italian," which without a doubt explains the purpose of this symposium.

Dario Brancato
University of Toronto

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