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Address Variation in Sociocultural Context. Region, power and distance in Italian service encounters

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Book Review

Address Variation in Sociocultural Context. Region, power and distance in Italian service encounters

Agnese Bresin, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2021, 290 pp. ISBN 978-9027208125, EUR 105,00 (Hardback)

The Italian address system is interesting from many points of view. First of all, if we consider address pronouns, Italian has a more complex system than those in use in Romance languages that use a binary address system (T or V) as it employs three forms: *tu* (2SG), *lei* (3SG feminine), *voi* (2PL) used as a V form. Since Italian is a pro-drop language, where subject agreement is triggered by the verb, these three different forms produce different types of agreement in the singular – *tu* with 2SG verbs, *lei* with 3SG verbs – and in the plural: *voi* with 2PL verbs. A second interesting aspect concerns the sociolinguistic variation involving these forms, whereby *voi* is used to different extents in different areas of Italy.

This book explores the vitality of the tripartite system and also its regional distribution. The analysis is based on a significant collection of original data, discussed from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective, always in connection to a specific socio-interactive context of use, i.e. Italian restaurant encounters. The specific object of the research is the reported use of singular address pronouns.

The book contains 12 chapters, each of which ends with a useful reader-friendly conclusion. After a brief introduction, the first chapter outlines and defines a series of concepts necessary to frame address practices from different research fields: identity and communication theories, sociology, and address research. These different perspectives allow the author to elaborate her own socio-cultural approach to identity in community of practice contexts. The key concepts presented, although in a synthetic and essential way, are related to image, common ground and closeness, social distance, power, respect, accommodation principles, and cultural vs. situational context. The chapter closes with a discussion about the notion of community of practice and common practices, and their relation with practices as expression of identity – that is, between social constraints and personal choices. Building on these premises, the author bases her research on the theoretical model of identity proposed in sociocultural linguistics.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the Italian cultural and linguistic context, which enables the reader to understand the contemporary linguistic landscape, made up of local languages (dialects) and Italian varieties. The framework refers in particular to the five regions selected for the in-depth study and presents both socio-historical and linguistic concepts.

In the following chapter the situational and interactive context of restaurant encounters is methodologically described in terms of interactions between waiters and customers; this restriction allows the author to get comparable data across regions. An interesting point concerns power dynamics between the customer and the service provider, an issue that previous studies have considered from different perspectives: as a relation of mutual dependence, one in balance between closeness and distance, or in imbalance between these behaviours. Survey-based and corpus-based studies on address practices in specific Italian territories are briefly examined and restaurant levels and types are presented.

Chapter 4 discusses some methodological issues, presenting the research design, the relevant research questions and the methods employed for data collection and elaboration (including statistical analysis). A valuable element of awareness of the Italian situation is the fact that the author carefully operates the choice of research sites in different areas, taking into account both the local dialects and the relevant isoglosses. The areas chosen are Emilia, Umbria, Lazio, Salento, and Sardinia. For each

1 of them, research hypotheses are formulated, then investigated on a large amount of data, collected
2 through an online questionnaire including 55 items (and provided in the Appendix). Although the
3 number of respondents is rather high (519), the author points out that the number is not statistically
4 significant, considering the sociolinguistic variables in the different regions and above all considering
5 that the respondents were not selected in a balanced way. The results of the research should therefore
6 not be overextended: they represent "an investigation of regional variation in reported address
7 practices" (p. 94). The methodology of the qualitative analysis (individual interviews, focus groups,
8 direct observation) is also carefully presented.
9

10 From chapter 5 onwards, the results of the research provide an interesting and detailed picture of the
11 reported use of *tu*, *voi* and *lei* in relation to the sociolinguistic variables considered. The results
12 convincingly confirm the research hypotheses, which were formulated on the basis of the type of
13 interaction: in restaurants *lei* is perceived as the most natural pronoun, followed by *tu*, while the form
14 *voi* seems to be marginal. It should be noted that this conclusion, which is well justified by the data,
15 may be influenced by the choice of geographical areas: in particular, the author did not include
16 Southern areas in her analysis, such as Campania, Calabria, and Sicily, where the greater use of *voi*
17 is generally acknowledged in the relevant literature. This is a methodological flaw of this research.
18 Figures 12 and 16 effectively summarise the distribution of the three address practices in the five
19 areas investigated, showing how the use of *lei*, prevalent in all areas, reaches the highest level in
20 Sardinia, *tu* in Lazio and Umbria and *voi* in Salento, with some variation in the act of receiving and
21 giving address pronouns. Interesting observations concern the preference for respectful distance
22 (Sardinia) or closeness strategies by maids or customers (Lazio and Umbria).
23

24 The following chapters deepen the themes of age variation (ch. 7) and restaurant levels (ch. 8), a
25 factor that proves to be, perhaps not too surprisingly, one of the most important in the choice of
26 address practice between waiters and customers. In high-level restaurants, waiters and customers
27 form a community of practice oriented towards respectful distance and formality, hence the use of
28 *lei*. The opposite occurs in low-level restaurants, where the preference for closeness and informality
29 favours nonchalant behaviour, such as the use of *tu* and dialect.
30

31 Since Salento turned out to be the area with the highest reported use of *voi*, chapter 9 presents a case
32 study on this issue, introduced by a useful and updated literature review on singular *voi*. The
33 discussion of quantitative and qualitative data allows us to observe some inconsistencies in the
34 reported use of *voi* by the respondents, leading the author to hypothesise that *voi* in Salento is not
35 originally local, but is due to the influence of other neighbouring southern varieties or of the national
36 variety.
37

38 A second case study concerns two dialectal areas in Umbria (ch. 10), each of which has a distinct
39 address system: north-western dialects use *tu*, *voi* and *lei*, while south-eastern ones tend to generalize
40 *tu*. This distinction partly holds both for dialects spoken in the two areas and for Italian corresponding
41 varieties.
42

43 The final discussion (ch. 11) summarises the hypothesis confirming *lei* as the most used reported
44 form in restaurant encounters, even if this research demonstrates the expansion of the use of *tu*,
45 identifying the cultural and social features behind this process and linking it to a diffusion of closeness
46 practices in Italy.
47

48 The conclusions (ch. 12) ascribe to the volume the merit of analysing the Italian language through
49 the lens of regional pragmatic variation, and, following the model of Bucholtz and Hall (2005),
50 anchoring the investigation on the concept of communities of practice. The rigorous and detailed
51 methodology provides data which will be comparable with further research, although the very specific
52 context, restaurant encounters, must be kept in mind to avoid the address practice described being
53 automatically associated with that used in the different Italian areas and contexts and, a fortiori, with
54 Italy as a whole.
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1 The novelties of the book are manifold: it adds interesting insights to the field of regional pragmatic
2 variation; it is the first in-depth study drawn on the Italian context on a topic more often investigated
3 in other languages (Félix-Brasdefer & Placencia 2020); it makes possible the specification of how
4 much the address system of Italian can be subject to sociolinguistic variation. In fact, not only regional
5 variation emerges clearly from the data, but also the social variation linked to the age of the
6 interlocutors and the differentiation produced by restaurant levels and customers' expectations.
7 Although the volume is devoted to the pronominal address system, there are also interesting
8 references to related nominal address aspects.

9 The volume is also very well edited and it is rare to find misprints (e.g. Fig. 5, Bolonga instead of
10 Bologna).

11 In short, the reader can appreciate the rigorous way in which the research is carried out and the clarity
12 of the argumentation, even if the circumscribed social perimeter in which the address practices are
13 investigated and the geographical areas of enquiry do not allow for easy generalisations.

14 Bucholtz, Mary, Hall, Kira, 2005. Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach.
15 Discourse studies 7 (4-5), 585-614.

16 Félix-Brasdefer, J. César, Placencia Maria Elena (eds.), 2020. Pragmatic Variation in Service
17 Encounter Interactions across the Spanish-Speaking World. Routledge, Oxford/New York.

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