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Comparing standard language change dynamics in Flanders and Italy: style-shifting in Flemish and Italian commercials

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Several evolutions in late-modern society have challenged the idea of homogeneity within European languages. These dynamics have led to the emergence and spread of new supra-regional varieties competing with traditional standard languages in different formal contexts (Kristiansen & Coupland 2011; Ghyselen et al. 2016). Recently, the increased use of these varieties has been linked to dynamic prestige, mainly attributed to their omnipresence in mass media (Grondelaers et al. 2016), but generally little is known about their social meanings.

This paper focuses on two highly comparable language areas, Flanders (Belgium) and Italy, where intermediate varieties in the diaglossic standard-dialect stratification are believed to be undergoing a bottom-up process of informal standardization since the latter half of the twentieth century. These varieties are italiano neostandard in Italy (Cerruti et al. 2017) and tussentaal in Flanders (Grondelaers et al. 2016). We want to gain further insights into the role of dynamic prestige in the diffusion of these varieties by exploring their social values through a quantitative analysis of inter-speaker style-shifts in recent spoken commercials in both areas. By comparing similar data from the two language areas, we get a better understanding of the status of informal varieties in Europe.

We turn to advertising as a data source to analyze the prestige of language varieties. As marketeers stylistically exploit linguistic elements to build a brand identity based on positive values such as authenticity and reliability, commercials have been shown to be highly suitable to investigate social meanings (Van Gijsel et al. 2008).

We collected a corpus of Flemish and Italian commercials, broadcast on national radio and television (the Italian data between 2015 and 2019, the Flemish in March 2018). A colloquiality index was computed for each spot element, expressing how strongly tussentaal and italiano neostandard features are represented. Next, regression analyses were used to determine which aspects of the ads (e.g. type of spot element or product) were linked to increased usage of the colloquial features. For both languages, non-standard features are more frequent in situations where people interact, which confirms their supra-regional suitability in informal contexts. In Flanders, higher colloquiality indexes in trendy telecom commercials suggest a dynamic prestige. Nevertheless, our results contradict a presumed weakening of the “standard language ideology” in terms of authority and objectivity, as both standard varieties prevail in informative spot elements, and Italian children’s commercials normatively avoid neo-standard features.

References