

# Why linguists need variation Reflections on Italian in "troubled contexts"

Raffaele Simone

This paper discusses some points of instability in the structure of Italian, belonging in particular to "troubled contexts" (that is, settings where the use of the language is not completely fluent but somehow disturbed). It is argued that these points are likely to become points of change, as they reveal the effect of a certain number of variational "pressures". It is concluded that linguists could take advantage from taking variation into account, since it gives significant information about the very structure of languages.

## 1. Preliminaries.

In a well-known 1984 paper Bernard Comrie tried to answer a question he phrased in these terms: "Why linguists need language acquirers?". The conclusion of his argumentation was that the way how people acquire languages (in his case, second languages) is relevant for general linguists and particularly for typologists for it gives crucial information on how languages are (and human language is) made. Comrie's paper suggested also a more radical tenet: general linguistics, which is sensitive to the internal aspects of languages, and other branches of linguistic research which are particularly biased towards external dimensions of them can profit from systematic interchange; this cooperation may even be indispensable if we want to get significant information about language(s).

The present article<sup>1</sup> takes over both the title and the spirit of Comrie's and tries to adapt them to the range of questions raised by the papers contained in this issue of RdL.<sup>2</sup> In particular it intends to show that when

<sup>1</sup> This paper contains a sketchy presentation of some structures of Italian. Therefore the reading of it presupposes some knowledge of the basic elements of this language. The literal translation which follows every example can partly help interpret the facts under discussion.—I am very grateful to Patrick Boylan for his help in the preparation of final version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> This article does not claim to encompass all the points discussed in the papers in this issue of RdL. It only selects some of them and uses them as starting points for some consideration on the subjects indicated by its title.

studying a language like Italian from a strictly linguistic (i.e. internal) point of view a fair amount of information can be obtained from considering how it varies in the vast range of its uses. More generally this is tantamount to say that it is not enough to study languages as abstract systems; significantly more interesting results, also concerning their structural design, can be reached by looking at them as systems with which their users can interact and on which they can have some shaping effect. In short, (general) linguists *do* need linguistic variation.<sup>3</sup>

In order to appreciate what follows it has to be kept in mind that I will speak more as a grammarian than as a sociolinguist and that accordingly the considerations I will be proposing may not be relevant to sociolinguists at all. I will not present any fresh empirical data on variation of Italian language, but I will limit myself to discussing (among other things) some of the data collected and analyzed in the previous papers contained in this volume, and to exploit them in order to pull out of them some plausible generalizations about Italian. As a conclusion I will emphasize the advantages that theoretical and descriptive linguistics can derive from considering language variation.

## 2. Some theoretical assumptions.

2.1. The overall approach I follow here is a broadly functional one resting on the seemingly obvious assumption that languages are made to be used by human (that is finite) beings. If they are to be used by finite users, they have to be designed in a tendentially "ergonomic" way, namely so that users can handle them without an excessive amount of hindrance. Accordingly languages have to be structurally user-oriented as far as possible. The "form" of languages is partly due to this ergonomic need.

There is however no language that fully conforms to abstract ergonomity requirements, which would allow users to manage it without any effort. Every language presents a certain amount of resistance to its users: it may be rich in "difficult" structures (e.g., mechanisms hard to remember or oppositions hard to distinguish), it may not prevent possible confusions arising from structural disturbances (e.g., asymmetries, etc.) and in general phenomena requiring too high an effort to be managed as compared to the functional result they give. Consistent speakers' judgments can be obtained not only (as is usually done) as regards grammaticality or acceptability of utterances, but also as regards the "handiness" and difficulty that users

<sup>3</sup> Such an approach owes very much to an orientation of linguistic research like "natural linguistics" (for which see the work of Dressler, e.g. Dressler 1990). Some historical precedents could also be quoted for it: for instance Frei (1929). The line of thought involved in the considerations contained in this paper is reconstructed in Simone (1990a).

may experience when handling some structures. What is striking about such judgments is their consistency and the fact that structures receiving a low rating in "handiness" tend to be relatively infrequent in actual linguistic behavior. In general, structures which are perceived as "difficult" even by educated speakers may reasonably be assumed as corresponding to "structural troubles" in the language under examination, and it is very surprising that the recent functional trend in linguistics has not taken this crucial dimension into consideration.

A typical example of this "structural trouble" effect is the indicative/subjunctive distinction in the Italian verb: it is too complex and hard for users to handle (particularly if they are not truly educated speakers) as compared to the functional advantages it can produce. Another typical Italian fact of this kind is the structurally important opposition between different types of subject pronouns. Italian has two distinct sets of subject pronouns, one for human and the other for non-human referents. For the former *egli/ella/essi* are theoretically available; for the latter *esso/essa/essi*. A long grammatical and educational tradition speaks in favor of this distinction. It is however quite rare to have this opposition respected: instead of either type Italian speakers (at least in informal and semi-formal uses) normally use a third and completely different pronoun set, i.e. *lui/lei/loro*, which accordingly neutralizes the human/non-human opposition. An asymmetry and a "difficult" distinction of the system is thus rejected in actual use in favor of a more convenient solution. (I will return to this specific issue later: cf. § 3.2).

Normally the response to such structural troubles is to simplify, regularize or delete overly complex structures in order to restructure or "reset" the language in such a way to make it more user-oriented (Berruto 1990). To resume the case of the indicative/subjunctive opposition, in spoken varieties this opposition is neutralized by simply deleting the subjunctive and giving the indicative the functional load originally attributed to the other form.

2.2. The ergonomic trend regulating the user's behavior is not bound to prevail automatically and everywhere in the language. This process does not affect the whole language at the same time, but only specific areas of it: accordingly it can be conceived of as a modular phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Under the pressure of speakers, languages may become simplified in one area and, at the same time, complicated in another one. A complicated area is likely to undergo sooner or later new structural adjustments, and so on. Through this cyclic mechanism languages are continuously exposed to a simplification-

<sup>4</sup> This claim is based on the hypothesis of modularity of languages, which is adopted both by generative and functional linguistics.

and-complication pendulum, which is partly activated by the pressure exerted on them by their users.

This pendulum largely affects the structural stability of languages. Some languages change dramatically in time whereas the rate of change of others is more limited. In the same vein it is possible to predict that changes will take place in specific areas of some languages rather than in others. In general such areas are signalled by the fact that major discrepancies may be noticed within them between the mechanisms which are theoretically available in the language and those that speakers actually tend to use. Research inspired by *Varietätslinguistik* shows abundantly that speakers respond to the problems aroused by such areas with a well-defined set of behavior forms (confusions, simplifications, over-extensions of the use of some forms, etc.). In this sense the functional grammar of a language tends to be simpler than its structural grammar.

In order to understand these facts it is helpful to represent languages as undergoing a set of pressures acting on them and affecting their stability with different degrees of strength. They include the following: a language is stabler

(a) when it responds to the natural preferences<sup>5</sup> of speakers: for instance, when it is symmetrically built or when it reaches a relatively high degree of transparency or motivation (I will call it the "balance pressure");

(b) if it fully responds to the demands of the linguistic type which it belongs to; the less the language responds to these demands, the more it will be exposed to changes tending to bring it more neatly within the boundaries of its type; in this sense, we can distinguish languages according to the degree to which they respect typologically determined demands (the "typology pressure"<sup>6</sup>);

(c) when its spoken form is not too different from its written form: otherwise the written form may tend to conform more and more to the spoken one (the "spoken form pressure");

(d) when it does not demand overly complicated choices by its speakers (the "fine grammar pressure"<sup>7</sup>);

(e) if the loyalty of its speakers to it is strong (the "loyalty pressure"). This list mixes up factors of quite different kind without distinguishing the role of each of them with the delicacy that would be needed. In fact, some types of pressure are internal in nature (such as "typology" and "fine grammar" pressures), while others are more internal (the remaining types). At the same time, some pressure types may not be completely independent

but may be somehow implied by others: for instance, the spoken form pressure may well be a consequence of the balance pressure. Moreover it is not unlikely that some pressure factors are stronger than others in producing changes in the language under examination. In any case all this class of problems cannot be tackled with here.

2.3. These pressures can be observed most clearly in those specific settings I have proposed to call "troubled contexts",<sup>8</sup> where the use of the language is not completely fluent but is disturbed by a series of external factors of variation. Such contexts include learning the language as a foreigner, learning and/or using it as a contact language, using it without having completely efficient physical equipment (as in deafness).

All these contexts are situations where language learning and behavior take place under conditions of uncertainty and within severe limitations. Troubled contexts act accordingly as a "filter" which passes some features of the linguistic structure and rules others out. As a consequence language phenomena elicited or gathered up in troubled contexts may offer particularly conspicuous evidence for the identification of more and less stable areas in a language. Troubled contexts can be viewed as a kind of "weak" equivalent of what experimental settings are in empirical sciences.

All the papers in this issue of *RdL* regard situations that may be labelled as troubled contexts. In fact they refer to domains where the Italian language is used by people of Italian origin in contact with some other native language (in our case, English: see Bertroni and Haller) or by people of diverse origin who use Italian as a pidgin (see Berruto). In such contexts Italian is, as it were, forced to reveal its points of instability and unbalance, where it is most likely to undergo significant changes.

### 3. Some points of instability of Italian.

3.1. From many points of view, Italian can be considered as an unstable language (Vincent 1988).<sup>9</sup> Several factors, both internal and external, contribute to this status. The main external one is that it has long been a purely written language and has come to be used also under its spoken form only relatively recently. Accordingly it has developed structures and mechanisms which are by far more suitable to written than to spoken use. Gradually becoming a spoken language, Italian allows ancient structures to re-emerge after a long period of inhibition (Nencioni 1987).

This is a quite peculiar situation among modern European languages

<sup>5</sup> For the idea of "linguistic preferences" of the speaker, see Dressler (1990).

<sup>6</sup> The claim that the typological nature of a language affects in some measure has been defended among others by Coseriu (1968).

<sup>7</sup> For this concept cf. Simone (1987).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Simone (1988).

<sup>9</sup> The following considerations about the points of instability of Italian are based on Simone (1991).

and also determines a series of internal consequences. To illustrate this point, suffice it to remind that Italian developed from Latin a very complex verbal system containing a remarkable number of innovations, but in fact this system is hardly used by speakers in its entirety. Some specific instances in this field include the following:

(a) the future indicative form seems to be restricted to formal situations, for speakers prefer to make reference to future time by the simpler form of indicative present (if necessary with temporal adjuncts specifying more accurately the temporal location of events) of which they over-extend the range of functions (Berretta 1990).

(b) The gerund, another specifically Italian form only superficially related to the Latin gerundives, tends to be used mainly in diagrammatic sentences, that is when it refers to events which are subsequent to those referred to by the main clause (*Sono caduto facendomi male* "I fell, [thus] hurting myself") (Solarino in press). The variety of its other uses is usually ignored in spoken Italian, while it is exploited more abundantly in written language (mainly that of educated speakers). On the other hand, the compound gerund (i.e. *avendo avuto*) virtually tends to disappear even from spoken use (Ferreri 1983-1986; Solarino in press). Thus the verbal system varies according to the mode in which it is used: its "written" realization is by far more complex than the "spoken" one, above all if the latter belongs to the informal register.

On other levels of analysis, additional evidence of this instability can be quoted.

(c) Italian morphology maintains (like that of other Romance languages) a systematic distinction between a masculine and a feminine form in nominals; but this distinction seems to be in some cases too complex to be consistently used and many uncertainties can be noticed in this field particularly as regards data gathered in troubled contexts.

(d) Another conspicuous field of instability is the system of relative pronouns, where Italian both innovates and complicates the system it inherited from Latin. In Italian, three relative pronoun forms are available, and the selection of the appropriate one requires a full command of its grammatical status: the *che*-form may be used both as subject and as object, while the *il quale*-form (also under oblique government: *del quale*, etc.) is only non-object. Moreover, there is a third possibility, the *cui*-form, which can act either as a dative (in which case it is absolute) or as part of a variety of indirect complements (preceded by the relevant preposition: *da cui*, *dal cui*, etc.). In sum, the selection of the relevant pronoun form is controlled by the distinction of its grammatical function. The abundance of resources for indicating the relative clause linkage explains why speakers, at least in informal settings, prefer to simplify this system drastically by over-extending the functions of *che* and recurring to a variety of makeshift devices (like the addition of a clitic or other elements indicating person—like for

instance possessive adjectives<sup>10</sup>) suitable to specify the grammatical function of the relative pronoun:

(1) PROPER FORM  
Questo è il bambino di cui conosco la madre  
"This is the boy whose mother I know"

COLLOQUIAL FORM  
Questo è il bambino che conosco sua madre  
"This is the boy that I know his mother"

(2) PROPER FORM  
Dammi il libro su cui hai studiato  
"Give me the book on which you studied"

COLLOQUIAL FORM  
Dammi il libro che ci hai studiato  
"Give me the book that you studied on-it"

3.2. The list of the points of instability in Italian could easily be longer. I want to close it up by quoting only a few phenomena in some more detail. The first one is the case of third person subject pronouns which I already referred to.

Italian has two distinct series of third person subject pronouns, the former reserved to human referents, the latter to non-human (see Table I).<sup>11</sup>

TABLE I

Subject pronouns

	For human referents	For non-human referents
3 m	egli	esso
3 f	ella	essa
6 m	essi	essi
6 f	esse	esse

This system has two or three (external) factors supporting it: first of all it is backed by a long puristic tradition; second, it is regularly taught in schools; third, it is typical of formal communicative situations. On the other hand it also has some (formal) shortcomings which break up its solidity: (a) the human/non-human distinction neutralizes in plural forms into *essi/esse*; (b) the subject/non-subject distinction disturbs the balance of the system, because some elements (those printed in boldface in Table I) may also work as non-subject whereas the remaining ones are only subject; (c) the whole paradigm is composed of forms which are formally heterogeneous (*egli/ella* vs *esso* etc.). The "balance pressure" can be expected to step in here, and this is precisely what happens: if we check the actual uses of this system made by speakers, we find that things go completely another way.

<sup>10</sup> Rules governing the choice of the clitic designed to replace a more specific relative pronouns are very complex and will be not discussed here in detail.

In fact, this system is entirely rejected in actual use and an alternate, non-standard system takes its place. This is the series formed by three pronouns which are normally considered as non-subject (i.e. object and indirect complement) and restricted only to human referents:

TABLE II  
Non-subject pronouns

3 m	lui
3 f	lei
6 m + f	loro

What is the advantage of this massive replacement? It eliminates the need for two delicate distinctions (human/non-human and subject/non-subject), which act only in a few cases in Italian, and at the same time it reduces the rate of irregularity formed by the simultaneous presence of two formally unrelated series like *egli/ella* and *essi/esse* in the same paradigm.

But in this way the system does not fall into any set order. Some residual difficulties still remain. From the external point of view, this third pronoun series is "perceived" as quite informal, so people may hesitate when using some of its elements in formal situations. From the internal point of view, since this series also works as non-subject, it may happen that two (or more) *lui* (or *lei*) occur in the same sentence, the first one as a subject, the other ones as non-subject, thus creating possible confusions.

This possibility blurs the simplicity attained by replacing the pronouns in Table I with those in Table II, and the whole system is forced to get restarted. In practice, speakers (mainly in informal settings) tend to replace the *lui*-forms functioning as non-subject with a makeshift device constituted by a typical use of clitics:

(3) PROPER FORM	Egli ha preso il cane ed è uscito con esso <sup>12</sup> "He took the dog and went out with it"
PLAUSIBLE FORM	Lui <sub>k</sub> ha preso il cane; ed è uscito con lui <sub>i</sub> "He took the dog; and went out with him <sub>i</sub> "
COLLOQUIAL FORM	Lui ha preso il cane; e ci <sub>i</sub> è uscito "He took the dog; and went out with-him <sub>i</sub> " <sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For simplicity, the persons are referred to by a number from "1" for the first singular person through "6" for the third plural one.

<sup>12</sup> For non Italian-speaking readers it will be useful to know that this form, although absolutely proper, is at the same time quite unnatural and would sound ridiculous to anybody.

<sup>13</sup> This translation, like that of (4), is unavoidably obscure: the Italian example contains a clitic, *ci*, which is not exactly rendered by *with* + another clitic.

Moreover, for some reasons which it would be interesting to explore, Italian speakers would never recognize *lui/lei/loro* as plausible pro-forms for inanimate referents. With an inanimate referent, the complement position would never be occupied by *lei*, and the clitic solution would be obligatory:

- (4) Lui ha preso l'automobile e ci è uscito  
"He took the car and went out with-it"

This is a case where a conflict rises between the structural potentialities of Italian and its actual use. In fact, the potentialities of Italian in the domain of subject pronouns would include: (a) a series of pronouns for human subjects (*egli*, etc.), another one for human non-subjects (*lui*); (b) one and the same series for non-human subjects and non-subjects (*esso*, etc.). In spite of these potentialities, in practice the system seems to be the following: (c) the *lui*-series for human and non-human [+animate] subjects and non-subjects: (d) no specific pronoun for non-human [-animate] subjects and non-subjects.

In view of the point (d), there is a hole in the system: in practice there is no specific pronoun to refer to non-human [-animate] subjects and non-subjects. This is perhaps why they are indicated both by zero and full phrases in subject position, and by generic clitics (like *ci*; cf. (3)) in indirect complement position. Another possible solution is to have them referred to by an inappropriate *lei/lui* form, like in the following passage written by an educated speaker:

- (5) È sbagliato ipotizzare l'unità della cultura italiana rifiutandosi di capire come, dietro di *lei*, si celino realtà variegatissime  
"It would be erroneous to imagine a unitary Italian culture; and to refuse to understand how, behind \*her, diverse phenomena are hidden".

In this case, *lei* has *la cultura italiana* as its antecedent (or "point of attachment", as I proposed to call it<sup>14</sup>)—a solution which would not be agreed upon by all Italian speakers.

The uncertainty which reveals itself when facing the problem of selecting the form more appropriate to act as a pronoun linked with an abstract referent suggests that a major restructuring is likely to take place in this area of Italian. As an additional argument for this position, we can remind that Spanish and French do not distinguish between [+animate] and [-animate] referents as far as anaphoric pronouns are concerned (Fr. *il* and *lui*; Sp. *él*).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of "point of attachment" and of its grammatical content has been presented in Simone (1983) and generalized in Simone (1990b).

3.3. In the previous section a case of balance pressure has been discussed. But Italian also presents a rich series of examples of other types of pressures determining its instability. A typical issue is that of the clitic *ne*, whose description has been attempted at several times, both from the structural and the acquisition point of view.<sup>15</sup>

It is a well known fact that *ne* suffers from a systematic decline in spoken Italian, except in fixed structures (like *non ne so niente* "I don't know anything about-that") where its anaphoric virtues are not exploited. It is very hard, for instance, to have it used in the full range of its structurally possible forms: in particular the ablative sense of *ne* (like in *Ne arrivo adesso* "I just arrived from-there") is virtually about to disappear. As a consequence Italian *ne* is a typical example of fragility, as appears both in spoken forms of this language and in troubled context forms.

In the former case, a non-educated person speaking Italian as a native language will preferably use some direct object clitic rather than *ne*:

(6) PROPER FORM      È finita la frutta; ne compro ancora?  
 "There is no more fruit. Shall I buy some of-it?"

COLLOQUIAL FORM    È finita la frutta; la compro ancora?  
 "There's no more fruit. Shall I buy it?"

In the latter case (see Bettoni, this volume, § 2.2.) some *ne* are simply omitted. This fact agrees with predictions based on Berretta acquisitional scale for Italian clitics (Berretta 1986), where *ne* occupies the top position of difficulty.

How is it possible to explain the gradual weakening of this so specifically Italian resource? Two reasons can be invoked. The first has to do with the extremely complex grammatical and cognitive import of *ne*: in order to identify that a *ne* is needed in a certain position in the sentence it is necessary to have full information about the nature of its "point of attachment" and to control the variety of logical operations which can be performed on the reference of the "point of attachment". Since the first aspect has already been discussed (Simone 1983), let us see the logical operations in some more detail. They include:

- (a) withdrawal of a part from a set (*Il caffè c'è; ne vuoi ancora?* "There's still coffee. Do you want any more of-it?"),
- (b) reference to a set a first token of which is referred to by a full NP and a second one by *ne* (*Ho una sorella grande e ne ho una più piccola* "I have an elder sister and I have a younger of-them"; see Bettoni, this volume),

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Simone (1983); Berretta (1986).

- (c) reference to the possessor, where *ne* could be easily replaced by a possessive form (*È figlio di Carlo e ne porta i segni* "He is the son of Carlo and he shows the signs of-it" = his signs<sup>16</sup>), etc.

Properly speaking, since *ne* expresses several logical operations, it can possibly be disaggregated into specific sub-forms to be ordered along a scale of handiness or accessibility based on diverse factors (grammatical content of the "point of attachment", logical operation performed on it, etc). In such a case the weakening of *ne* could be represented as being not equally marked for all its sub-forms but as distributed according to a hierarchy. In some uses it tends to be omitted, in others it might prove to be more resistant. (In any case, its instability is closely linked with the general rearrangement of the Italian clitic system which has already been noticed).<sup>17</sup>

The second reason invoked above has to do with typology pressure. As regards its clitics, Italian is isolated among Romance languages, having a clitic system which is neither structurally balanced nor simple to use. As far as *ne* is concerned, Spanish has nothing similar (since it prefers the analytic solution prep + clitic: *de ello, de ellas*, etc.), while French indeed has an *en*-form, but its range of functions does not coincide with that of Italian. In one sense we can say that Italian is isolated inasmuch as it has a *ne*-form with such a range of uses and functions.

3.4. Data presented by Berruto and Bettoni (both in this volume) also point to another area of instability in Italian, that of auxiliary verbs. Italian has two auxiliaries, *avere* and *essere*. Transitive verbs accept only *avere* as an auxiliary, whereas intransitive verbs may use either *avere* or *essere* according to criteria which are far from being well understood (Vincent 1988). The situation is made more complex by the fact that some verbs may accept both *avere* and *essere* (such is for instance *vivere*), once again according to very delicate rules; and a certain number of dubious cases contribute to make the issue of Italian auxiliaries complicated and bothersome. In fact, the speakers' oscillations (like those documented by Bettoni and Berruto, in this volume) between one form and the other do not permit this system to become stabler and more regular.

Many proposals have been made as regards the rules according to which the selection between one and the other auxiliary is made (Vincent 1988, Centineo 1986), but it cannot be said that a satisfying solution has been found. But rather than looking for regularities in this field, it would be by far more cautious to say that this area is characterized by a very

<sup>16</sup> Notice that replacing *ne* with a possessive adjective is possible just in this third case and not in the previous two. This can be an argument in favor of the distinction between different types of logical operations underlying to *ne*.

<sup>17</sup> See for this point Berretta (1985a; 1985b); and Berruto, this volume.

pronounced instability, as use reveals, and that the whole auxiliary system in Italian is likely to change. Moreover many Italian vernaculars are not sensitive to the distinction between *avere* and *essere* inasmuch as they use only one of them (specifically *avere*). This set of arguments suggests that both the balance pressure and the typology pressure (Spanish also has only one auxiliary, *haber*) conspire to introduce modifications into this area.

3.5. The last bit of evidence I would like to present is the opposition between two third person tonic pronouns, *lui/lei/loro* and *sé*, respectively. This opposition corresponds to another subtle distinction, that between a generic third person and a third person which is co-referent with the subject (or the actor) of the utterance:

(7) Carlo ha incontrato Luigi e ha parlato con lui<sub>k</sub>  
"Carlo met Luigi and spoke to him<sub>k</sub>"

(8) Carlo<sub>k</sub> ha incontrato Luigi; e lo<sub>i</sub> ha portato con sé<sub>k</sub>  
"Carlo<sub>k</sub> met Luigi; and took him<sub>i</sub> with himself<sub>k</sub>"

(9) Carlo<sub>k</sub> ha incontrato Luigi; e lui<sub>i</sub> lo<sub>k</sub> ha portato con sé<sub>i</sub>;  
"Carlo<sub>k</sub> met Luigi; and \*him<sub>i</sub> took him<sub>k</sub> with himself<sub>i</sub>."

Respecting this distinction implies a full control of co-reference mechanisms and, furthermore, the identification of what is and what is not the subject (or actor) in the sentence. In fact, variational consideration reveals that this distinction is very rarely respected. Normally what happens is that it neutralizes into the mere *lui/lei/loro* form, with the virtual loss of the possibility of referring to subject as separate from non-subject:

(10) ?Carlo<sub>k</sub> ha incontrato Luigi; e lo<sub>i</sub> ha portato con lui<sub>k/i</sub>  
"Carlo<sub>k</sub> met Luigi; and took him<sub>i/it<sub>i</sub></sub> with him<sub>k/i</sub>."

Accordingly, the *lui/lei/loro* series takes a crucial role in the Italian pronoun system, for it is required not only for the uses referred to above (cf. 3.2.), but also as a global device for signalling third persons irrespective of the grammatical function they have in the sentence. When describing the Italian pronoun system it is impossible not to specify that the *lui/lei/loro* series is the most important element—a conclusion that a purely internal approach would be completely unable to draw.

#### 4. Some conclusions:

Facts of the kind discussed in the previous sections lend themselves to some concluding remarks. Knowledge of languages (in our case, of Italian) would be partial and misleading if we did not take into consideration their variational dimension. It is perhaps the only way we have to get information

on the stability or instability of certain parts of a language and of that language as a whole. It would be a mistake to describe Italian as provided with a full-fledged and well-balanced system of subject pronouns or with a complete clitic system. What really happens is that, in the case of subject pronouns, the system is full of holes and dramatically simpler than one images; and that, as for clitics, a number of them are not used at all or, if they are, they do not fulfill any anaphoric role.

From the methodological point of view what matters more in this connection is that variational phenomena (mainly inasmuch as they take place in troubled contexts) allow us to uncover a number of areas where the structural and functional grammar of a language do differ. For linguists concerned with specific languages, this can be an outstanding field of observation and prediction of future changes; for those more interested in overall regularities, this is a fertile way to explore the mechanisms of language change.

#### Address of the Author:

Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio, Università di Roma "La Sapienza", via del Castro Pretorio 20, 00185 Roma, Italy

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