

# Language Variation Theory in Italy: The Coserian Perspective

**Liubov ZHOLUDEVA**

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

**Abstract:** Eugenio Coseriu's theory of language variation and change that singles out the main parameters of language variation (diachrony, diatopy, diastraty, diaphasy) has been successfully applied by a number of Italian linguists to describe the restandardization of the Italian language. What is now called "Neo-Standard Italian" is, in fact, the modern variety of Italy's standard language that has become more versatile, expressive and widely usable than the traditional Standard Italian due to the development of the lower part of register spectrum (diaphasy axis) and a higher tolerance to variation in diatopy and diastraty. The Italian school of linguistic thought completed the Coserian system of dia- terms by another one, namely, "diamesia", that stands for the distinction between oral and written language. In the Italian historical linguistics, the Coserian theory of language norm and variation allowed to explain the reemergence of certain language features, now considered typical of Neo-Standard Italian, attested in Old Italian texts but later avoided in writing and labelled as substandard. Among other Coserian concepts recurrently discussed and cited by modern Italian linguists one can mention the distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary dialects, the idea to juxtapose functional language and historical language, and the concept of language architecture. Coseriu's functional approach to language studies, which views language as integral part of human life and cultural milieu, has resulted fruitful and largely congenial to Italian linguistics that traditionally avoids the extreme structural approaches and favors complex, well backgrounded studies taking into account the historical and sociocultural factors.

**Keywords:** Coserian linguistics, Italian sociolinguistics, Neo-Standard Italian, language variation, diaphasy

## **Introduction**

Eugenio Coseriu's anniversary is a good occasion for reconsidering the impact of his concepts of language variation and norm on the development of modern linguistic traditions in Europe and worldwide. The present paper focuses on the reception of Coseriu's linguistic thought in Italy, with special emphasis on how the concept of Neo-Standard Italian was proposed due to the implementation of the Coserian idea of language norm and his theory regarding the system of language variation parameters. The set of notions used by modern Italian linguists to describe the specific course of their literary language's development is, basically, Coserian, which is easily explicable given Coseriu's strong biographical connection with Italy and his profound interest in the Italian linguistic and philosophical thought that made his theoretical foundations congenial and easy to implement for the Italian audience. However, this paper does not aim to reconstruct the influence of Italian linguistic and philosophical tradition on Coseriu's linguistic theory but, vice versa, to trace the development of Coserian concepts in the most important pieces of Italian linguistic thought that regard the sociolinguistic situation in modern Italy and its historical premises.

### **1. Coseriu's criticism of post-Saussurean models of language and his idea of language variation**

Coseriu's early works – in the first place, his “Sistema, norma y habla” (Coseriu 1952) and “Sincronía, diacronía e historia. El problema del cambio lingüístico” (Coseriu 1958) – reflect the dissatisfaction with the way F. de Saussure's conceptualization of language was assessed and reinterpreted by the mid-XX century European linguistics. This dissatisfaction was partly caused by the abuse of *langue* – *parole* and *synchrony* – *diachrony* dichotomies,

when the properties of linguistic concepts were arbitrarily reinterpreted as properties of the object of study, that is, language itself. While pointing out to these speculative aberrations, Coseriu made an important contribution to the development of functional approach to linguistic studies by introducing his concept of language norm as the third member of “language – speech” correlation. By doing so, Coseriu placed language variation within the conceptual scheme of post-Saussurean linguistics: the existence of normal realizations of language system presupposes that there is a choice, and wherever we find a variety of options, there is the potential for growth and development. However simple this line of reasoning may seem, the so-called paradox of language change caused much confusion and was widely discussed (Lipgart 2000) before Coseriu came up with his elegant solution.

The importance of Coseriu’s early writings is, though, not limited to untangling the real and imaginary contradictions within the preexisting conceptions. The idea of language change with time and its linear representation in the diachronic perspective, as proposed by Saussure, was used by Coseriu as starting point for developing a more comprehensive kind of language model that allows for variation in space (*diatopy* as parameter of language change), across society (*diastraty*) and from one register to another (*diaphasy*) as well<sup>1</sup>. Hence the idea of “functional” language that is meant to elaborate Saussure’s idea of synchronic projection: the focus on language as system presupposes that the researcher has a static homogeneous picture before his eyes, and to achieve this optical effect one needs to study a synchronic,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Denn die funktionelle Sprachbeschreibung betrifft eigentlich jeweils eine nicht nur synchronische, sondern zugleich syntopische, synstratische und symphasische Sprache als homogenes System (“funktionelle Sprache”) (Coseriu, 1980: 115).

syntopic, synstratic and synphasic language variety. A “historical” language, on the contrary, is a kind of umbrella notion that highlights all the parameters of language variation (diachrony, diatopy, diastraty and diaphasy) at a time and brings them together to make up a complex and multidimensional object of study<sup>2</sup>. Thus, by introducing the *diaphasy* parameter (*diatopy* and *diastraty* had been introduced earlier and discussed in (Flydal 1951)) Coseriu completed the transition from the Saussurean scheme, that served either for studying language in static projection or for studying language’s dynamics regardless of its systemic nature, to the new language model, suitable for assessing the dynamic, fluid character of a living language and its patterns of use by a non-homogeneous language community. That was exactly what the Italian linguistics needed to produce an adequate and comprehensive description of the processes that underlie the shift from Standard to Neo-Standard Italian, widely discussed since the 1980s.

## **2. The Italian historical linguistics and sociolinguistics: the Coserian theory of variation and its impact on Italian language studies**

As Coseriu pointed out in in the early 1970s in his article “The situation in linguistics” (Coseriu 1971), it was already clear that the development of linguistics at that point could not be boiled down to a simple transition from structuralism to functionalism. Linguistic studies of various nature, according to Coseriu, could be classified according to the level of abstraction: general linguistics (cross-language studies focusing on language

---

<sup>2</sup> “Una lengua histórica – salvo casos especiales – no es un modo de hablar único, sino una familia histórica de modos de hablar afines e independientes, y los dialectos son miembros de esta familia o constituyen familias menores dentro de la familia mayor” (Coseriu, 1981: 6).

universals) *vs* individual language studies *vs* text studies. Individual language studies in Italy or, more precisely, Italian language studies in Italy thus fall into the second category (although in the second half of the XX century Italian scholars produced a huge bulk of research of the third type, in the present paper it will be impossible to take it into account, our purpose being to outline the filiation of Coseriu's ideas of language variation).

In her survey of the Italian language studies of the first half of the XX century, published in the same year as Coseriu made his generalization about trends in linguistics, T. Alisova (Alisova 1971) summed up the most specific features of this national school of linguistic thought. Firstly, Italian linguistics and philology is largely interdisciplinary: there is no rigid boundary between the language studies and the cultural-historical ones. Secondly, Italian linguists are known for their criticism of structuralist approaches for the excessive use of abstract speculations that do not add much to understanding and scientific interpretation of individual language facts. Finally, Italian linguists are interested in language variation and change. All of these characteristics can well be applied to Coseriu's linguistic writings, and one can easily assume that this affinity has a biographical explanation: the early stage of Coseriu's formation as a scholar, from 1940 to 1951, was marked by the influence of his Italian teachers and the intellectual milieu typical of the famous Italian universities – those of Rome, Milan, and Padua – where he conducted his PhD research and started his academic career. The 8-year period of work in Uruguay did not cut these personal and scholarly connections short: a number of prominent Italian linguists were Coseriu's friends (Renzi 2015), which undoubtedly favored the diffusion of his ideas in Italy. Among these ideas and

concepts, the multidimensional scheme of language variation parameters was the one that took root most deeply.

By the year 1983 the Coserian scheme of variation parameters was known in Italy well enough to be completed by yet another parameter – that of *diamesia*, standing for the distinction between spoken and written language (the then binary opposition, now looking as a continuum due to the development of digital forms of communication sharing certain properties of the two extremes). It was done by Alberto Mioni, professor of general linguistics at the University of Padua, in his paper entitled “Italiano tendenziale: osservazioni su alcuni aspetti della standardizzazione” (Mioni 1983) and immediately picked up and made their own by all the Italian linguists who wrote about language variation using the Coserian theoretical frame since then. A reference to Mioni’s paper (but not to Coseriu’s writings – maybe because of a more narrow and specific focus of the study in question) can be found in the work by Francesco Sabatini “L’italiano dell’uso medio: una realtà tra le varietà linguistiche italiane” (Sabatini 1985) published in Tübingen (the city that is famous for its university where Coseriu worked from 1963 to 1991) within the collective volume “Gesprochenes Italienisch in Geschichte und Gegenwart”. This well-known and widely cited piece of research was among the first ones - if not the very first - to highlight the existence of informal and stylistically neutral language features shared by the speakers from all over Italy. This is not something to be taken for granted in case with Italy where standard language has quite an unusual history and patterns of use.

For a greater part of European languages, the growth and elaboration of literary idiom passed through the stage of diglossia when the spoken language of a given community was not used in all spheres, the more prestigious language being for a time predominant, for example, in state administration and juridical

practice. Alongside the establishment of national states, the native language of the community gradually made its way into these socially important spheres, drawing on the conceptual and structural wealth of the prestigious language when necessary. As a result, diglossia gave way to a new - monolingual - situation, and the new national language (as a rule, one of the spoken dialects that, for a number of sociocultural reasons, managed to become the *Dachsprache* for the whole community (Muljačić 1984)) became truly polyfunctional, versatile and rich.

In Italy the development of national language followed a different pattern. The diglossia typical of the Old Italian period (the dialects of Italy vs Latin), XIII-XIV cc., by the mid-XVI century was substituted by another diglossic situation (the dialects of Italy vs literary Italian)<sup>3</sup>. The dialect of Florence in its elaborated and archaic literary form was by no means native tongue for the population of the numerous Italian states and microstates. Each of them possessed a spoken (and, quite often, written) Romance dialect of its own, and the divergencies between these dialects, if we confront the extremes of the continuum, were much more profound than, for example, the divergencies between Scandinavian languages. In fact, they could have become independent Romance languages if it had not been for a complex of historical and cultural factors that finally led to the political unification of Italy and its emergence as state in the second half of the XIX century.

---

<sup>3</sup> Even now, according to the survey conducted by the ISTAT (Italian National Statistics Bureau) in 2015, about one third of Italians (32,2%) use dialect alongside literary language for everyday communication in family, and 14% mainly speak dialect at home (among those who are over 75 the percentage of those who prefer dialect in all situations is 37,1%): <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/207961>.

Thus, while other vernaculars, to become literary idioms, needed to boost their stylistic potential in one way (through gaining stylistic “weight” for appropriate use in formal and high registers), Italian needed quite the opposite. The Italian literary language, *italiano standard*, could well be used in writing, in high-flown verse and prose, in formal, bureaucratic documents, but it sounded too posh for informal conversation. Because of its specific history, due to its being associated with the Italians’ common cultural heritage, the Florentine Renaissance literature, it suited the purpose of becoming official, literary language. But this official language was not, in fact, mother tongue or language of everyday conversation even for the Florentine-born Italians, whose living dialect had been living its own life since the XVI century (D’Onghia 2018) when the Italian language norm, based on the use of XIV-century Florentine writers, was codified in grammars.

In Coseriu’s terms, the Italian standard language had serious limitations in diastatia (in the first decades of the XX century only the social élite had a good command of literary language; later, thanks to the progress of school education and the influence of mass media, the situation changed, but not drastically: the correct use of Standard Italian is still a social marker (Berruto 2014) ) and diaphasia. Speaking of diatopic variation, it will suffice to notice that even now, despite the influence of the media, the Italian language varies much in phonetics (Loporcaro & Bertinetto 2005, Crocco 2017), and not only (De Blasi 2014); even in writing (especially informal) one can often find lexical and morphosyntactic features that hint at the provenance of the author. The necessity of the new variation parameter, *diamesia*, that was absent in Coseriu’s system of parameters (it was probably regarded as an intrinsic part of *diaphasia*), can also be explained by this specific language situation: throughout the XX



century in Italy standard language was used by well-educated people, in writing, and in formal situations much more often than by other categories of users, in speech, and in informal situations. By the last decades of the XX century it became obvious that written and spoken Italian were different in many aspects, the former being much more uniform, magniloquent, formal, and conservative than the latter.

F. Sabatini in (Sabatini 1985) and, two years later, G. Berruto (Berruto 2014; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1987) in his monograph “Sociolinguistica dell’italiano contemporaneo” drew attention to a new phenomenon. While the diglossia “dialects of Italy vs Standard Italian” was giving way to something new (Berruto would call it *dilalia*), the situation when both dialects and standard language are regularly used for informal communication, Standard Italian – by then, native tongue and means of everyday conversation for a considerable part of young Italians - was developing new features. Sabatini’s article sums up the phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical features of the new emerging informal and / or neutral Italian calling it “*italiano dell’uso medio*”. Berruto, besides doing the same, proposes a theoretical model – the Coserian one – for explaining and describing these new tendencies and calls the resulting picture “*italiano neo-standard*”. It was Berruto who explicitly relied on Coseriu’s system of language variation parameters and drew a schematic picture of the transformation of Italian as standard language. Neo-Standard Italian is more ‘elastic’: it englobes the old standard and spreads further, thus taking in a number of features previously regarded as substandard – or disregarded by the grammarians at all. The geometrical center of the figure that represents Neo-Standard Italian on the scheme is much closer to the point where the variation axes meet – the most neutral part of the stylistic spectrum. This means that Neo-Standard Italian, unlike Standard

Italian, is equally good for being used in written formal genres and in informal everyday spoken communication.

The question that arises is, where the Neo-Standard Italian borrowed the lacking language resources and stylistic properties to fill the gaps in the lower part of its register spectrum. For other languages, that were filling the gaps in the opposite – upper – part of the spectrum, the answer was obvious: there was a prestigious language to imitate; for the Italian language the task was by no means trivial - in a way, similar to the task to make Hebrew a living spoken language. In a study by P. D’Achille an attempt was made to explain how certain features, typical of Neo-Standard Italian, were, in fact, re-adopted by the language after a period of absence – or capillary presence – in formal written use.

D’Achille’s book entitled “*Sintassi del parlato e tradizione scritta della lingua italiana: analisi di testi dalle origini al secolo XVIII*” (D’Achille 1990) is a corpus-based study in which the Coserian concept of language variation is adopted for describing patterns of use of a selection of morphosyntactic phenomena. These phenomena emerged in Old Italian but then, around the XVI century, the frequency of their use started to vary across registers. For structuring his data, D’Achille adopted the variation axes principle: the corpus is divided into five sections on the chronological basis (diachrony), and into three sections according to register (high – middle – low; diaphasy). Diastrophic variation and degree of spontaneity are represented by a system of coefficients. As a result, D’Achille presented a coherent picture that illustrates the process of functional-stylistic diversification of Italian. Certain morphosyntactic features, which were present in early texts and the frequency of which in formal writing became considerably lower since 1500s, were uninterruptedly used by less learned writers and, sometimes, in less formal genres. The use of some of these features was overtly criticized in grammars and

treatises while others did not attract much attention. These features reemerged when the Italian language was in need of new – or pseudo-new – structures to complete its system of functional styles and to cover the lower part of register spectrum.

The Coserian idea of compatibility between studying diachrony and system in a linguistic study was also illustrated by the authors of the two-volume collective monograph “Grammatica dell’italiano antico” (Salvi, Renzi 2010). The authors draw on Coseriu’s concept of language architecture (Renzi, Salvi 2010: 13-14) and functional language. In accordance with their purpose – to describe Old Italian language system applying the tools and findings of modern linguistics and using the comprehensive descriptive grammar of Modern Italian (Renzi, Salvi, Cardinaletti 2001) as touchstone – they selected a corpus of texts and described the structural properties of Old Italian on their basis. The specific feature of this collective study, perfectly fitting in with the Coserian theory, is that the choice of texts for analysis was made so as to make the corpus as homogeneous as possible in terms of diachronic (the time lapse studied is about one century long, from 1211 to about 1320), diatopic (the aim was to narrow down the choice to Florentine texts, thus leaving apart Umbrian, Sicilian and other early pieces of writing traditionally regarded as Old Italian in the wide sense of the term), and diaphasic / diastratic variation (the corpus contains prose writings that, for the time being, could only be produced by educated members of society). The resulting corpus represents Old Italian as functional language - as accurately as possible when one deals with historical texts. This helps to produce an adequate, clear-cut description of language system, as the diatopic, diaphasic and diastratic variation is temporarily put aside and does not interfere with the task.

As for the on-going studies in sociolinguistics, the Coserian perspective remains one of the distinctive features of the Italian

school of thought. In their “Manuale di sociolinguistica” G. Berruto and M. Cerruti adopt the approach that distinguishes between sociolinguistics and sociology of language (Berruto, Cerruti 2015: 6). The former concentrates on language structures and patterns of language variation, while the latter studies the structure of society in terms of language use (which makes one remember the Coserian idea that modern trends in linguistics tend to follow different paths depending on the level of abstraction: the findings and methods of *sociology of language* are much more prone to generalization and cross-linguistic application, while those of *sociolinguistics* are language-specific). In the same manual the authors address the Coserian distinction of primary, secondary and tertiary dialects (Berruto, Cerruti 2015: 76) discussing its applicability to different kinds of language communities in history.

In 2017 a group of Italian scholars published the collective monograph “Towards a new standard: Theoretical and empirical studies on the restandardization of Italian” (Cerruti, Crocco, Marzo 2017) that contains a number of up-to-date studies regarding the actual state of the Italian language and its variation patterns. The introduction to the volume, as well as some articles (Regis 2017), mention Coseriu and demonstrate the Coserian approach to describing language variation and change.

The restandardization of Italian is, thus, the process that has been considered in the light of Coseriu’s theory of language variation from the start of its discussion in the 1980s and continues to be dealt with in the same perspective since then, and the practical results of this discussion can be seen, for example, in the way Italian is taught in Italy and outside it. However, the transition from teaching Standard Italian to teaching Neo-Standard under the influence of modern sociolinguistic research is a subject

that is too complex and self-sufficient to be discussed within this paper.

## **Conclusion**

In Italy the Coserian perspective of language variation studies was adopted by a number of prominent specialists in such fields as history of language, sociolinguistics and historical sociolinguistics. This complex of linguistic disciplines since the 1980s has become the frontline of research that brought to light the specific features of Italian as standard language and explained the processes that underlie its continuing restandardization.

Nowadays, when linguistic science, on the whole, tends to value the research on the higher level of abstraction over language-specific studies, the Italian school of linguistic thought preserves its unique character. The attention to language change in history and space combined with an outstanding tradition of text studies going back to the Renaissance made it possible for the Italian linguists to take in many achievements of general linguistics without discarding their own scholarly heritage and to come up with a new theory that views Modern Italian in the functional-linguistic light. The impact of Eugenio Coseriu's theory of language norm and variation on the development of modern Italian functional-linguistic thought is hard to overestimate, and, hopefully, we are going to see more achievements continuing this fruitful line of research.

## **REFERENCES**

ALISOVA, T. (1971): "Mesto ital'yanskoi shkoly v sovremennoi lingvistike" ["The place of the Italian school of thought in modern linguistics"], *Sovremennoe ital'yanskoe yazykoznanie [Modern Italian linguistics]*. Ed. T. Alisova. Moscow, Progress, pp. 3-16.

- BERRUTO, G. (2014): *Sociolinguistica dell'italiano contemporaneo*. Roma, Carocci. (1st ed. 1987).
- BERRUTO, G. & CERRUTI M. (2015): *Manuale di sociolinguistica*. Torino, Utet.
- CERRUTI, M., CROCCO, C. & MARZO S. (eds.) (2017): *Towards a New Standard: Theoretical and Empirical Studies on the Restandardization of Italian*. Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter.
- COSERIU, E. (1952): *Sistema, norma y habla (con un resumen en alemán)*, Montevideo, pp. 43-51.
- COSERIU, E. (1958): *Sincronía, diacronía e historia. El problema del cambio lingüístico*, Montevideo.
- COSERIU, E. (1971): "The Situation in Linguistics", *Collection of Papers Commemorating the 50th Birthday of the Korean Language Research Society*, Seoul, pp. 483-492.
- COSERIU, E. (1980): "'Historische Sprache' und 'Dialekt'", *Dialekt und Dialektologie. Ergebnisse des Internationalen Symposions "Zur Theorie des Dialekts"*, Marburg/Lahn, 5. -10. Sept. 1977. Ed. J. Göschel, P. Ivic, K. Kehr, Wiesbaden, pp. 106-122.
- COSERIU, E. (1981): "Los conceptos de 'dialecto', 'nivel' y 'estilo de lengua' y el sentido propio de la dialectología", *Lingüística española actual*, vol. III, no.1, Madrid, pp. 1-32.
- CROCCO, C. (2017): "Everyone has an accent. Standard Italian and regional pronunciation", *Towards a New Standard: Theoretical and Empirical Studies on the Restandardization of Italian*. Ed. M. Cerruti, C. Crocco, S. Marzo. Berlin, De Gruyter, pp. 89-117.
- D'ACHILLE, P. (1990): *Sintassi del parlato e tradizione scritta della lingua italiana*. Roma, Aracne.

- DE BLASI, N. (2014): *Geografia e storia dell'italiano regionale*. Bologna, Mulino.
- D'ONGHIA, L. (2018): "Da quanto tempo gli italiani parlano italiano? Riflessioni sparse sulla questione dell'italofonia preunitaria", *Trasversalità delle lingue e dell'analisi linguistica*, Ed. G. Fiorentino, C. Ricci & A. Siekiera. Firenze, Cesati, pp. 35-48.
- FLYDAL, L. (1951): "Remarques sur certains rapports entre le style et l'état de langue", *Norsk tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap*, vol. 16, pp. 241-258.
- LIPGART, A. (2000): "Funktsional'naya stilistika v svete dikhotomii «yazyk - rech'»" ["Functional stylistics in the light of "language – speech" dichotomy"], *Terminologicheskii vestnik [Bulletin of terminology studies]*, no. 1, pp. 35-37.
- LOPORCARO, M. & BERTINETTO, P. (2005): "The sound pattern of Standard Italian, as compared with the varieties spoken in Florence, Milan and Rome", *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 131-151.
- MIONI, A. (1983): "Italiano tendenziale: osservazioni su alcuni aspetti della standardizzazione", *Scritti linguistici in onore di Giovan Battista Pellegrini*. Vol. 2. Ed. P. Benincà P. et al., pp. 495-517.
- MULJAČIĆ, Ž. (1984): "Il fenomeno Uberdachung, "tetto", "copertura" nella sociolinguistica (con esempi romanzi)", *Linguistica*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 77-96.
- REGIS, R. (2017): "How standard regional Italians set in: the case of Standard Piedmontese Italian", in Cerruti M., Crocco C., Marzo S. (eds.), pp. 145-175.

- RENZI, L., SALVI G. & CARDINALETTI A. (eds.) (2001): *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione. Vol. I-III.* Bologna, Mulino. (1st ed. 1991).
- RENZI, L. (2015): “Il “mio” Coseriu. Cenni di una biografia”, *Oltre Saussure: l'eredità scientifica di Eugenio Coseriu* . *Atti del IV Convegno internazionale, Università degli studi di Udine, 1-2 ottobre 2013.* Ed. V. Orioles, R. Bombi. Firenze, Franco Cesati editore, pp. 55-68.
- SABATINI, F. (1985): “L'italiano dell'uso medio: una realtà tra le varietà linguistiche italiane”, *Gesprochenes italienisch in Geschichte und Gegenwart.* Ed. G. Holtus & E. Radtke. Tübingen, Narr, pp. 154-184.
- SALVI, G. & RENZI L. (eds.) (2010): *Grammatica dell'italiano antico. Vols. I-II.* Bologna, Mulino.