

Migration, language, and variation: the challenge of foreign speakers to detect Italian linguistic varieties

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Abstract.

In the last decades, new migratory waves have affected Italy, enriching its sociolinguistic landscape. On one hand, Italy has been dealing with the integration of new immigrants, on the other hand, foreign immigrants need to cope with the sociolinguistic complexity of the Italian linguistic reality. This study aims to examine how foreign speakers perceive Italian linguistic diversity to improve Italian glottodidactics, and, consequently, to help the integration of new immigrants in the society. A perceptive experiment was conducted on 44 foreign respondents to test the perception of six regional Italian varieties. Results showed that explicit learning of Italian enhances linguistic comprehension, but it is not enough to grasp differences across regional varieties of Italian, leading to comprehension difficulties towards the unrepresented varieties in Italian language programs. Increasing the representation of regional Italian varieties could support Italian language comprehension for foreign speakers, fostering new immigrants' integration into the welcome society.

Keywords: migration; language variation; linguistic perception; regional Italian.

Abstract. Migrazione e variazione linguistica: la percezione di varietà linguistiche Italiane da parte di parlanti stranieri

Negli ultimi decenni, nuove ondate migratorie hanno coinvolto il territorio italiano. Una delle maggiori sfide dei migranti consiste nell'interfacciarsi con la complessa realtà sociolinguistica dell'Italia, dove diverse varietà regionali e dialetti affiancano il cosiddetto "Italiano standard". Il presente contributo mira ad analizzare come parlanti stranieri percepiscono la variazione linguistica italiana. Nello specifico, 44 rispondenti stranieri hanno svolto un esperimento percettivo riguardo a sei varietà regionali italiane. I risultati hanno rivelato un effetto positivo dell'apprendimento esplicito dell'italiano sulle abilità generali di comprensione, ma non sulle capacità di distinguere diverse varietà regionali, portando a maggiori difficoltà di comprensione per le varietà regionali assenti nei programmi di italiano come lingua straniera. In luce dei risultati ottenuti, una maggiore rappresentazione della variazione linguistica nei programmi di italiano per stranieri risulterebbe favorevole per migliorare le abilità di comprensione degli studenti, con un ulteriore risvolto positivo per l'integrazione dei nuovi migranti nella società d'arrivo.

Parole chiave: migrazione; variazione linguistica; percezione linguistica; Italiano regionale; Italiano LS.

Resum. Migració, llengua i variació: el repte dels parlants estrangers per detectar les varietats lingüístiques italianes

En les darreres dècades, noves onades migratòries han afectat Itàlia i n'han enriquit el paisatge sociolingüístic. Si, d'una banda, Itàlia ha hagut d'ocupar-se de la integració dels immigrants nous, de l'altra, els immigrants estrangers han d'enfrontar-se a la complexitat sociolingüística que defineix la realitat lingüística italiana. Aquest estudi pretén examinar com perceben els parlants estrangers la diversitat lingüística italiana per millorar la glotodidàctica italiana i, en conseqüència, ajudar a la integració dels nous immigrants a la societat italiana. Es va dur a terme un experiment perceptiu amb 44 enquestats estrangers per comprovar la seva percepció lingüística de sis varietats regionals italianes. Els resultats van demostrar que l'aprenentatge explícit de l'italià millora la comprensió lingüística, però que no n'hi ha prou per captar les diferències entre les varietats regionals de l'italià, cosa que provoca dificultats de comprensió de les varietats no representades als programes de llengua italiana. Sugerim que la millora de la representació de les varietats regionals italianes podria afavorir la comprensió de la llengua italiana per part dels estudiants estrangers i també podria fomentar la integració dels nous immigrants a la societat d'acollida.

Paraules clau: migració; variació lingüística; percepció lingüística; italià regional.

1. Introduction

When looking at the Italian linguistic landscape, the heterogeneity of its linguistic varieties and the sociolinguistic values attached to them constitute its main distinctive features. Although standard Italian has been defined as the national linguistic benchmark, many other linguistic varieties are frequently spoken by the Italian population. Among these, Italian dialects and Italian regional varieties hold a primary position, both for their social diffusion and for their linguistic features. In this regard, a distinction between primary and secondary Romance dialects has been made (Coseriu, 1980; Loporcaro, 2009; Regis, 2017). For the Italian context, the term *dialetti primari* (i.e., primary Italian dialects) refers to those linguistic varieties which are structurally independent from standard Italian, since they developed directly from Latin. They are “sister languages” of Florentine, an Italian dialect which gained prestige in the 14th century and was progressively codified in written form as standard Italian (Berruto, 2018). Although primary Italian dialects do not derive from standard Italian, they are socially subordinated to it and they are often ascribed to lower prestige. The so-called *dialetti romanzi secondari* (i.e., secondary Romance dialects), instead, are those linguistic varieties that derive from the geographical differentiation of the standard language. In Italy, secondary dialects are the regional Italian varieties that hold an intermediate position between standard Italian and local dialects and derive from the combination of these two linguistic systems (D’Achille, 2002; Cerruti, 2011 *inter alia*).

The multiple languages that characterize the Italian sociolinguistic scene can be represented on a continuum, where the two extremities are occupied by primary Italian dialects and standard Italian, following Auer’s (1997) model. This complex linguistic picture becomes further intricate if we consider the migratory waves affecting Italy in the last decades. Together with people, languages migrate and land in the destination country, giving rise to new opportunities for linguistic and cultural contact (Siebetscheu, 2018). Thus, the linguistic landscape of Italy, already defined by strong plurilingual dynamics, has been described through the notion of *neo-plurilingualism*, which refers to a new Italian linguistic reality where, next to standard Italian, Italian dialects and historical minority languages (De Mauro, 1981), a large number of languages spoken by foreign immigrants is added (Vedovelli, 2010).

But how do foreign people react to the Italian sociolinguistic complexity? Do they manage to grasp all the nuances of its (socio)linguistic continuum and the diatopic variation from which it is strongly characterized? Our study aims to address these questions through the following sections. First, I will illustrate the current situation in Italy in terms of new migratory waves and the immigrants’ challenge in coping with the complexity of Italian linguistic variation (section 1.2). In section 1.3 I will present the influence of Standard Language Ideology on foreign language teaching, and I will outline the

research questions of the current work. Section 2 will explain the methodology I used, while section 3 will be devoted to the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses. In section 4 I will report the results of the study linking them to the glottodidactics and perceptive framework discussed in the previous sections. Finally, in section 5, I will draw the main conclusions from the experiment, together with some possible future outcomes of the study.

1.2 New migrants, new challenges for Italian as a foreign language

Together with Greece, Spain, and Portugal, Italy is one of the European nations which has been receiving the largest migratory waves from extra-European countries in the last decades (Giannini & Scaglione, 2011). ISTAT (2014a; 2014b) recorded a remarkable increase in foreign population in Italy: the number of foreign people between 25 and 34 years old raised from 8.8% in 2006 to 14.4% in 2015, and people residing in Italy and having a different mother tongue from Italian increased from 4.1% in 2006 to 9.6% in 2015. These demographic changes are also reflected in school environments: if in 1983/84 foreign students were only 0.06% of the school population, in the following years, there was a gradual increase in the number of foreign pupils which raised from 0.08% in 1996/97 to 7.9% in 2010/11, till reaching 9.2% in 2015/16 (ISTAT, 2016). Among the most spoken foreign languages, there are Romanian, Arabic, Albanese, Spanish, and Chinese. From a sociolinguistic point of view, this change entails two major challenges: on the one hand, Italy needs to cope with the sociocultural and linguistic integration of new immigrants, on the other, new immigrants need to handle the sociolinguistic complexity of their destination country.

Despite their crucial role in social inclusion, the acquisition of Italian dialects and regional Italian varieties by new immigrants has not been addressed by ISTAT surveys. However, some research in sociolinguistics and language acquisition has underlined the impact of such varieties on immigrants' interlanguages. Maturi (2016), for example, focused on the acquisition of Italian by immigrant workers and highlighted that besides the challenge of learning a new language (i.e., standard Italian), foreign immigrants have to deal with a complex sociolinguistic reality where the use of different linguistic varieties is conveyed by context and interlocutors and changes in space. In many geographical areas, local varieties hold a primary position in language use practices of the community, and learning such varieties becomes essential for immigrants' inclusion in society. However, the representation of regional linguistic variation in Italian language programs is lacking and even immigrants who attend Italian classes experience a kind of linguistic disorientation. In his work, Maturi went through three specific Italian realities, namely Veneto, Sicily, and Campania, and found that the most integrated immigrants were those who also knew local dialects and spontaneously acquired a certain degree of sociolinguistic competence about the context in which they were immersed.

The acquisition of local traits by foreign immigrants was also studied by Mattiello and Della Putta (2017), who investigated the linguistic repertoire of Slavic-speaking immigrants in Naples. Results showed that most immigrants acquired lexical and structural elements of Neapolitan and considered their competence in the local dialect as an advantage for their inclusion into the local community.

These examples show how the awareness of local varieties plays a crucial role in immigrants' social integration and suggest the need for helping foreigners in understanding the complex sociolinguistic dynamics of Italy. Despite the relevance of this topic for Italian as a foreign language, the representation of Italian regional varieties and dialects in Italian language courses is almost absent, and priority is given to standard Italian (Calise, 2016). The lack of linguistic variation in Italian language programs brought me to investigate how foreign people perceive Italian linguistic diversity. The core point behind this research is to understand how foreign speakers' perception can be influenced by glottodidactics. Inquiring about how foreign people perceive Italian varieties and which factors play a role in the comprehension process could help designing successful linguistic programs for different profiles of learners. If we consider the pivotal role of language for the integration into a new community, it is clear that the development of well-designed Italian programs could foster the inclusion of new immigrants in the Italian society. The experimental sample of the current study is formed by both foreign learners of Italian and foreign people who have never studied Italian as a foreign language, to observe how people with different linguistic backgrounds perceive and comprehend different regional Italian varieties. Although the sample does not include foreign immigrants residing in Italy, data from this experiment could lead to useful findings for the recent sociolinguistic context of Italy, where the enhancement of glottodidactics programs could be beneficial also for new foreign residents.

1.3 Standard Language Ideology and foreign language teaching

The lack of representation of linguistic variation in foreign language programs is a common trend for many languages besides Italian. Most research has been focused on English both for its global diffusion and for its primary position among the foreign languages studied all over the world. Halliday, McIntosh, and Stevens (1964) observed that English courses tended to favor the diatopic varieties from Britain, Australia, and North America, which have been defined as "the BANA group". Thus, language teaching programs appear to be influenced by a BANA approach, where linguistic varieties which differ from the standard language are either left in the margins or totally absent. The consideration of BANA varieties as the gold standard in foreign language programs turns out to be particularly challenging for the acquisition of

English phonetics and phonology by foreign learners who try to acquire such linguistic domains after the critical period (Jakobson, 1941; Larsen-Freeman, & Long, 1991; Chini, 2005).

Among the several problematic consequences of the BANA approach, the negative connotation ascribed to varieties which differ from the standard assumes a prominent role. Many studies have focused on foreign learners' linguistic perception towards different English varieties. Chiba and Matsuura (1995), for example, showed that Japanese learners of English preferred American accents with respect to non-standard English accents, including the Japanese one. Later, McKenzie (2008) reported similar results: Japanese learners ascribed higher prestige to British and American accents, despite judging the Japanese variety better in terms of group solidarity. The author observed an interesting correlation between respondents' judgements and some of their background variables such as gender, English proficiency, and English language exposure. Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, and Wu (2006) adopted a similar approach to test foreign learners of English in the U.S. and focused on the perception of American, British, Chinese, and Mexican accents of English. Results showed a strong preference for the BANA varieties (i.e., American English and British English) and reported a positive correlation between the pleasantness ascribed to the accents and their comprehensibility rates, in line with previous studies (Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Morinaga Shearman, 2002 *inter alia*). Comparable findings were later reported by Kim (2012) for Korean learners of English, who showed a preference for BANA accents over lower-prestige varieties, including Korean.

Results from the aforementioned studies suggest that foreign language programs are dominated by a *Standard Language Ideology* (Lippi-Green, 1977), which supports the utopistic view of a fixed standard language without any kind of geographical or sociolinguistic variation. Such linguistic ideology could bring negative outcomes, in terms of both linguistic stereotypes and comprehension abilities of non-standard varieties. Albeit English as a foreign language is different from Italian in terms of diffusion and number of foreign learners, the Standard Language Ideology seems to also affect the teaching of the Italian language, both for foreigners and native speakers (Ruffino, 2006 *inter alia*). However, differently from English, research on the (under)representation of Italian language varieties in foreign language programs is lacking, although the societal and demographic changes in Italy described in §1.2 suggest the importance of educating foreign speakers about Italian linguistic variation.

Our work aims to fill this literature gap and shed light on how foreign speakers relate to the complexity of Italian linguistic variation. Our main purpose is to help in developing better language programs, which could be particularly useful for new migrants leaving in Italy, favoring their integration in the society. Under the assumption that language comprehension and

perception are among the core abilities for acquiring a new language, our research will focus on whether and how foreign speakers perceive the difference between regional varieties of Italian. We will investigate the perception of six regional Italian varieties by both students of Italian as a foreign language and foreign people who have never explicitly studied Italian. This composite research sample could reveal how foreign speakers with different linguistic backgrounds perceive Italian linguistic variation and which factors modulate their perception. Foreign speakers' judgements could also show whether some linguistic stereotypes exist and whether they are comparable to the ones observed in native speakers of Italian (Galli de' Paratesi, 1976, 1984; Baroni, 1983; Pistolesi & Schwarze, 2007; De Pascale & Marzo, 2016; Masullo & Meluzzi, 2020 *inter alia*). The research questions of the present study are the following:

1. Can foreign people distinguish between different regional varieties of Italian? If so, are there any significant differences between the evaluations of regional varieties in terms of comprehensibility of the voices, pleasantness, and socioeconomic values attached to them? Is there any kind of linguistic stereotypes comparable to the ones observed in Italian native speakers?
2. Are judgements about the pleasantness of Italian varieties linked to the comprehensibility ratings of the varieties themselves?
3. Does explicit learning of Italian play a role in linguistic perception and comprehension? Which specific factors entail better comprehension abilities?

2. Methodology

The verbal-guise technique (Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022) was applied to examine foreign learners' perception of different regional Italian varieties. Eight Italian native speakers were recorded while giving directions. Speakers were asked to describe the route they took every day to reach their home from their workplace. The recordings consisted of spontaneous speech and each audio lasted between 41 and 1.33 seconds. The speakers came from six Italian regions: Lombardy and Veneto, in the north of Italy, Tuscany and Lazio, in the center, and Campania and Sicily in the south. Besides geographical variation, an additional variable was added and concerned speakers' gender: only for Lombard and Campanian varieties, both a female and a male speaker were recorded to detect the possible impact of gender on listeners' linguistic perception. All the speakers were between 22 and 27 years old, to exclude the influence of tone and other biological voice features on speakers' evaluation. The recordings were used as auditory stimuli for a perceptive questionnaire created by Google Modules and made up of eight identical sessions,

one for each voice. Every session started with a link to a YouTube playlist which allowed participants to listen to the recordings. After listening to each audio, participants were asked to complete seven questions about the voice. The first question was a comprehension question about the content of each specific recording, to assess comprehension abilities. Then, the following questions concerned the impact of the varieties on the comprehensibility of the message, how Italian the voice sounded (i.e., “Italianity”), where the speaker came from, what the speaker’s job was, how pleasant the voice was, and how reliable the speaker seemed. Judgements about speakers’ accentedness, pleasantness, Italianity, and reliability were elicited on a 5-point Likert scale. After the eight auditory sessions, the respondents were asked to complete a final background questionnaire through which specific participants’ information was collected. Besides basic demographic information (i.e., age, gender, nationality, residency, education), questions about participants’ linguistic background in terms of mother tongue, spoken languages, and experience with Italian (i.e., explicit study of Italian, motivational factors, stays in Italy, linguistic exposure, activities in Italian, etc.) were asked.

Data were gathered from Spanish learners of Italian who were students at Asociación Dante Alighieri in Seville during the months of July and August 2019 and attended Italian classes taught by two Italian native speakers who came from Lombardy and Campania. Then, in March 2020, additional data were collected through the diffusion of the experiment on social networks and online communities. This last phase gathered data from foreign speakers with different mother tongues, linguistic backgrounds, and learning trajectories since not all the participants studied Italian explicitly. Spanish respondents completed the experiment in Spanish, while foreign participants recruited in the second phase did the test in English. In addition to the experimental group, a control group of six Italian native speakers was tested. Italian native speakers completed the experiment in Italian.

Both the auditory stimuli and the Spanish, English, and Italian versions of the experiment are available at the following repository: https://osf.io/7cmp3/?view_only=0781a8006bdc4a70af91228875cd598c

3. Results

The experimental group included 14 Spanish learners of Italian and 30 foreign speakers from other countries, for a total of 44 respondents. The sample was balanced for gender and age of participants, with most of them (79.55%) being between 20 and 30 years old. Respondents’ countries of origin, instead, presented great variability: besides Spanish participants (31.82% of the whole sample), respondents came from Albania, Bosnia, Canada, France, Germany, England, Ireland, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine,

and Venezuela. The control group was also balanced for gender, origin (3 participants from the north of Italy, 1 from the center, and 2 from the south), and respondents' age. Table 1 shows the participants' demographics.

Background information on participants' experience with the Italian language revealed different degrees of exposure: some of them spent some months in Italy for different purposes (i.e., studying, tourism, etc.), while some others had never been to the Italian Peninsula. In all cases, the stays in Italy were temporary and none of the respondents was residing in Italy permanently. Regarding the sample of foreign respondents who did not attend the Italian course in Seville, 50% of the group studied Italian, either on their own or by attending courses. However, in most cases, respondents could be classified as beginner or intermediate learners, as Dante Alighieri's students.

Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were conducted through Jamovi, version 1.8 (The jamovi project, 2022).

Group	N	Age		Native Language
		Mean	SD	
Dante Alighieri's students	14 (7 F)	31.64	12.27	Spanish
Foreign respondents	30 (16 F)	24.60	4.07	Albanian, Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, Ukrainian
Italian control group	6 (3 F)	25.83	1.72	Italian

Table 1: Participants' demographics

3.1 Quantitative analysis

To answer our three research questions (see §1.3), the correlations between variables were analyzed through contingency tables where Chi-square and Cramer's V values were calculated. This section presents the results from statistically significant contingency tables¹.

For the first research question, the explicit study of Italian, length of study, and participants' self-reported proficiency levels of Italian constituted the independent variables, while audio comprehension rates and hypothetical origin of the respondents were the dependent variables. This revealed whether

1. Given the reduced dimension of our sample, besides a Chi-square test, a Fisher's test was also calculated for some correlations; two-tailed p values from the Fisher's tests are reported in the corresponding tables. However, this was only possible for those correlations where the values of the variables could be grouped in a 2x2 matrix. When the variables were on a 5-point Likert scale and presented more than two values each, the Chi-square test was chosen to keep the granularity of the measured variables. Future replications of the study should consider (i) widening the sample, if a Chi-square test wants to be applied, (ii) running additional analyses involving multiple regression modelling. Although the current results could be partially influenced by the limited size of the sample, they can still report a preliminary understanding of the topic.

foreign participants were able to distinguish between the regional Italian varieties according to their linguistic experience. The correlation between the explicit study of Italian and respondents' comprehension rates was statistically significant for all the voices except for, Latian, Sicilian, Tuscan, and mail Campanian varieties (see Table 2). In general, participants who explicitly studied Italian gave higher percentages of correct comprehension, while people who had never explicitly studied the language reported higher error rates.

Contingency table	Study Italian		Total
	No explicit study of Italian	Explicit study of Italian	
Female Lombard comprehension			
Correct comprehension	7 17.5%	33 82.5%	40 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	3 75.0%	2 28.6%	4 100.0%
Male Lombard comprehension			
Correct comprehension	5 13.5%	32 86.5%	37 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	5 71.4%	2 28.6%	7 100.0%
Female Campanian comprehension			
Correct comprehension	3 10.0%	27 90.0%	30 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	7 50.0%	7 50.0%	14 100.0%
Venetian comprehension			
Correct comprehension	1 3.8%	25 96.2%	26 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	9 50.0%	9 50.0%	18 100.0%

Table 2. Correlations between the explicit study of Italian and comprehension rates. Lombard: $\chi^2(1) = 6.846$, $p = .009$, Cramer's $V = 0.394$, two-tailed $p = .0316^2$; Venetian: $\chi^2(1) = 12.901$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .541$, two-tailed $p = .005$; Female Campanian: $\chi^2(1) = 8.696$, $p = .003$, Cramer's $V = .445$; Cramer's $V = .296$, two-tailed $p = .0062$; Male Lombard: $\chi^2(1) = 11.242$, $p = .001$, Cramer's $V = .505$, two-tailed $p = .0039$.

The correlation between explicit learning of Italian and the ability to disentangle the origin of Italian varieties was not significant for any variety. The only variety which reported significant p values with a Chi-square test was the male Lombard variety (see Table 3). However, if we group the values of the hypothetic origin in a 2x2 matrix (i.e., correct vs. incorrect origin), a Fisher's

2. For contingency tables in which a Fisher's test was run, in addition to the Chi-square values, two-tailed p -values are also provided.

test reveals that the p-value is not significant anymore ($p=0.14$). We also run a Fisher's test to see whether having received a specific linguistic input at Dante Alighieri had an impact on the detection of the Italian varieties. The results were not statistically significant for any variety. Only the Sicilian variety showed a p-value close to the significance threshold, but it did not reach statistical significance (two-tailed $p=0.071$). Table 4 shows that Dante Alighieri's students reported higher percentages of correct detection of the Sicilian variety compared to the other foreign respondents.

Contingency table	Study Italian		Total
Male Lombard origin	No explicit study of Italian	Explicit study of Italian	
North of Italy	2 20.0%	17 50.0%	19 43.2%
Centre of Italy	3 30.0%	10 29.4%	13 29.5%
South of Italy	2 20.0%	7 20.6%	9 20.5%
Islands	3 30.0%	0 0.0%	3 6.8%
Total	10 100.0%	34 100.0%	44 100.0%

Table 3. Correlation between the explicit study of Italian and the hypothetical origin of the male Lombard variety: $\chi^2(3)=11.813$, $p=.008$, Cramer's $V=.518$; two-tailed $p=0.14$.

Contingency table	Female Sicilian origin		Total
Participants	Incorrect	Correct	
Foreign	28 93.3%	2 6.7%	30 100.0%
Dante's students	10 71.4%	4 28.6%	14 100.0%
Total	38 86.4%	6 13.6%	44 100.0%

Table 4. Judgements on the origin of the Sicilian variety from Dante Alighieri's students (i.e., Dante's students) and the rest of the foreign group (i.e., Foreign). $\chi^2(1)=3.89$, $p=.049$, Cramer's $V=.297$; two-tailed $p=.071$.

The correlation between the length of studying Italian and comprehension rates was significant only for the male Lombard, the Venetian, and the Campanian varieties. As Table 5 shows, a few weeks of linguistic input seemed to positively affect comprehension abilities.

Contingency table	Time studying Italian					
Male Lombard comprehension	Never	Few weeks	Few months	Years	More than 3 years	Total
Correct comprehension	5 13.5%	5 13.5%	7 18.9%	12 32.4%	8 21.6%	37 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	5 71.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 14.3%	1 14.3%	7 100.0%
Total	10 22.7%	5 11.4%	7 15.9%	13 29.5%	9 20.5%	44 100.0%
Venetian comprehension	Never	Few weeks	Few months	Years	More than 3 years	Total
Correct comprehension	1 3.8%	4 15.4%	6 23.1%	9 34.6%	6 23.1%	26 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	9 50.0%	1 5.6%	1 5.6%	4 22.2%	3 16.7%	18 100.0%
Total	10 22.7%	5 11.4%	7 15.9%	13 29.5%	9 20.5%	44 100.0%
Female Campanian comprehension	Never	Few weeks	Few months	Years	More than 3 years	Total
Correct comprehension	3 10.0%	4 13.3%	4 13.3%	11 36.7%	8 26.7%	30 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	7 50.0%	1 7.1%	3 21.4%	2 14.3%	1 7.1%	14 100.0%
Total	10 22.7%	5 11.4%	7 15.9%	13 29.5%	9 20.5%	44 100.0%
Male Campanian comprehension	Never	Few weeks	Few months	Years	More than 3 years	Total
Correct comprehension	6 20.0%	3 10.0%	7 23.3%	11 36.7%	3 10.0%	30 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	4 28.6%	2 14.3%	0 0.0%	2 14.3%	6 42.9%	14 100.0%
Total	10 22.7%	5 11.4%	7 15.9%	13 29.5%	9 20.5%	44 100.0%

Table 5. Correlations between comprehension rates and length of study of Italian; male Lombard: $\chi^2(4)=11.768$, $p=.019$, Cramer's $V=.517$; Venetian: $\chi^2(4)=13.693$, $p=.008$, Cramer's $V=.558$; female Campanian: $\chi^2(4)=10.832$, $p=.029$, Cramer's $V=.496$; male Campanian: $\chi^2(4)=10.386$, $p=.034$, Cramer's $V=.486$.

Regarding the correlation between respondents' self-reported proficiency and correct comprehension answers, only Venetian had significant results (see Table 6). In general, results showed a positive interaction between language proficiency and comprehension abilities, except for the "beginner" and "near native" levels. However, the absence of statistical significance for all the other varieties suggests low reliability of self-reported measures of proficiency.

Contingency table	Self-reported proficiency						
Venetian comprehension	Zero	Beginner	Advanced	Intermediate	Native	Near native	Total
Correct comprehension	2 7.7%	10 38.5%	5 19.2%	5 19.2%	4 15.4%	0 0.0%	26 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	5 27.8%	10 55.6%	0 0.0%	1 5.6%	0 0.0%	2 11.1%	18 100.0%

Table 6. Correlation between self-reported proficiency and comprehension rates for Venetian: $\chi^2(5)=13.959$, $p=.016$, Cramer's $V=.563$.

The same can be said for the correlation between self-reported proficiency and hypothetic origin attributed to the varieties, which was significant only for the Sicilian variety, as Table 7 shows.

Contingency table	Self-reported proficiency						
Sicilian Origin	Zero	Beginner	Advanced	Intermediate	Native	Near native	Total
North of Italy	0 0.0%	3 50.0%	0 0.0%	3 50.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	6 100.0%
Center of Italy	1 5.9%	10 58.8%	0 0.0%	2 11.8%	4 23.5%	0 0.0%	17 100.0%
South of Italy	5 33.3%	6 40.0%	2 13.3%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	2 13.3%	15 100.0%
Islands	1 16.7%	1 16.7%	3 50.0%	1 16.7%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	6 100.0%

Table 7. Correlation between self-reported proficiency and hypothetic origin for Sicilian: $\chi^2(15)=35.495$, $p=.002$, Cramer's $V=.519$.

Another objective of our first research question was to see whether foreign speakers present linguistic stereotypes towards regional Italian varieties. For this purpose, the correlations between the hypothetic origin of the speaker (i.e., the independent variable) and the hypothetic work, the pleasantness, and the Italianity values of the voices (i.e., the dependent variables) were observed.

The only significant results concerned the rates of pleasantness for the female Lombard variety (see Table 8).

Contingency table	Pleasantness rates from 1 to 5					
Female Lombard origin	1	2	3	4	5	Total
North of Italy	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	6 20.7%	15 51.7%	8 27.6%	29 100.0%
Center of Italy	0 0.0%	1 8.3%	6 50.0%	2 16.7%	3 25.0%	12 100.0%
Tuscany	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 100.0%	1 100.0%
Islands	0 0.0%	1 100.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 100.0%
I don't know	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 100.0%	0 0.0%	1 100.0%

Table 8. Correlation between hypothetic origin and pleasantness values for female Lombard: $\chi^2(12)=32.118$, $p=.001$, Cramer's $V=.493$.

As Table 8 shows, high pleasantness rates were mainly associated with origins supposed to be from the north of Italy, from the center of Italy, and from Tuscany. Correlations between the hypothetic origin of the voice and both the hypothetic work of the speakers and Italianity values did not reveal any statistically significant result, suggesting that specific linguistic stereotypes about the prestige and the social status of Italian varieties are lacking in foreign respondents.

We further investigated the existence of linguistic stereotypes in foreign respondents by comparing the judgements given to the voices by participants who attended the Italian course at Dante Alighieri to the judgements given by foreign respondents who did not, in order to distinguish linguistic stereotypes from possible familiarity effects of the linguistic input. Results highlighted only two significant correlations, which concerned the comprehensibility rates attributed to the female Lombard voice and the Italianity values for the female Campanian variety, as shown in Tables 9 and 10 respectively. Indeed, Lombard and Campanian varieties were the linguistic input that Dante Alighieri's students received during the Italian classes.

Regarding female Lombard comprehensibility rates, students at Dante Alighieri showed higher rates compared to the rest of the group. About the judgements on how Italian the female Campanian variety sounded, both Dante Alighieri's students and the other respondents gave high rates, but students' judgements were concentrated in higher values. These findings can be traced back to the linguistic input received by the students. About the

hypothetic work ascribed to the speakers, once again there were no statistically significant correlations. This result corroborates the possibility that the judgements of the respondents are linked to the received linguistic input and not to structured linguistic stereotypes.

Contingency table	Female Lombard comprehensibility Rates from 1 to 5					
Participants	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Foreign	9 27.3%	10 30.3%	4 12.1%	5 15.2%	5 15.2%	33 100.0%
Dante's students	0 0.0%	1 9.1%	2 18.2%	6 54.5%	2 18.2%	11 100.0%
Total	9 20.5%	11 25.0%	6 13.6%	11 25.0%	7 15.9%	44 100.0%

Table 9. Comparison between hypothetic origin and pleasantness values for female Lombard voice given by Dante's students and the other foreign respondents: $\chi^2(4)=9.88$, $p=.043$, Cramer's $V=.474$.

Contingency table	Female Campanian Italianity Rates from 1 to 5					
Participants	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Foreign	0 0.0%	6 18.2%	9 27.3%	13 39.4%	5 15.2%	33 100.0%
Dante's students	1 9.1%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	4 36.4%	6 54.5%	11 100.0%
Total	1 2.3%	6 13.6%	9 20.5%	17 38.6%	11 25.0%	44 100.0%

Table 10. Comparison between hypothetic origin and Italianity values for female Campanian voice given by Dante's students and the other foreign respondents: $\chi^2(4)=13.1$, $p=.011$, Cramer's $V=.546$.

About our second research question, contingency tables included comprehension rates as the independent variable, and both pleasantness and hypothetic origin of the voices as dependent variables. This revealed whether higher values of pleasantness ascribed to the voices were linked to better comprehension rates and whether better comprehension rates entailed the correct detection of different Italian varieties. The only two significant results concerned the correlation between comprehension rates and pleasantness of the voice for the male Lombard and the Sicilian varieties (see Table 11). Correct comprehension was generally associated with higher pleasantness values.

Contingency table	Pleasantness rates from 1 to 5					
Male Lombard comprehension	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Correct comprehension	0 0.0%	4 10.8%	11 29.7%	9 24.3%	13 35.1%	37 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	1 14.3%	0 0.0%	3 42.9%	3 42.9%	0 0.0%	7 100.0%
Sicilian comprehension	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Correct comprehension	1 2.6%	2 5.1%	9 23.1%	17 43.6%	10 25.6%	39 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	0 0.0%	2 40.0%	3 60.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	5 100.0%

Table 11. Correlations between comprehension rates and pleasantness values for male Lombard and Sicilian. Male Lombard: $\chi^2(4)=9.562$, $p=.048$, Cramer's $V=.466$; Sicilian: $\chi^2(4)=11.733$, $p=.019$, Cramer's $V=.516$.

Regarding comprehension rates and the hypothetic origin of the voice (see Table 12), only the male Lombard variety reported statistically significant results, suggesting that comprehension skills are not always associated with the ability to detect diatopic varieties in the foreign language.

Contingency table	Male Lombard Origin				
Male Lombard comprehension	North of Italy	Center of Italy	South of Italy	Islands	Total
Correct comprehension	19 51.4%	10 27.0%	7 18.9%	1 2.7%	37 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	0 0.0%	3 42.9%	2 28.6%	2 28.6%	7 100.0%

Table 12. Correlation between comprehension rates and hypothetic origin for male Lombard: $\chi^2(3)=10.139$, $p=.017$, Cramer's $V=.480$, two-tailed $p=.0139$.

Lastly, to see whether motivational factors affect language comprehension (i.e., our third research question), the correlations between the reason for studying Italian, activities conducted in Italian, and the number of stays in Italy (i.e., independent variables), and both comprehension rates and hypothetic origin of the voice (i.e., dependent variables) were observed. About motivational factors and comprehension rates, the number of stays in Italy and the frequency of activities conducted in Italian turned out to be statistically significant. Higher numbers of stays in Italy were associated with better comprehension skills for male Lombard and Venetian varieties (see Table 13).

Contingency table	Stays in Italy			
Male Lombard comprehension	Never	Once	More than once	Total
Correct comprehension	7 18.9%	1 2.7%	29 78.4%	37 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	3 42.9%	2 28.6%	2 28.6%	7 100.0%
Venetian comprehension	Never	Once	More than once	Total
Correct comprehension	2 7.7%	1 3.8%	23 88.5%	26 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	8 44.4%	2 11.1%	8 44.4%	18 100.0%
Latian comprehension	Never	Once	More than once	Total
Correct comprehension	6 40.0%	2 13.3%	7 46.7%	15 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	4 13.8%	1 3.4%	24 82.8%	29 100.0%

Table 13. Correlations between comprehension rates and number of stays in Italy for male Lombard, Venetian, and Latian. Male Lombard: $\chi^2(8)=19.427$, $p=.013$, Cramer's $V=.470$; Venetian: $\chi^2(2)=10.070$, $p=.007$, Cramer's $V=.478$; Latian: $\chi^2(2)=6.232$, $p=.044$, Cramer's $V=.376$.

The correlation between the frequency of activities in Italian and comprehension rates, instead, was statistically significant only for the Venetian variety, as Table 14 shows.

Contingency table	Frequency of activities in Italian					
Venetian comprehension	Never	Rarely	Quite often	Often	Always	Total
Correct comprehension	2 7.7%	8 30.8%	4 15.4%	7 26.9%	5 19.2%	26 100.0%
Wrong comprehension	10 55.6%	4 22.2%	1 5.6%	2 11.1%	1 5.6%	18 100.0%

Table 14. Correlation between comprehension rates and frequency of activities in Italian for Venetian. $\chi^2(4)=12.882$, $p=.012$, Cramer's $V=.541$.

Positive correlations were also found between the detection of the origin of different Italian varieties and both the reasons for studying Italian and the number of stays in Italy. Table 15 shows the significant correlation between motivation for studying Italian and the hypothetic origin of the speaker for Tuscan and Latian varieties. In general, people who studied Italian for their own pleasure seemed to be better at attributing the correct origin (i.e., center of Italy) to the observed regional Italian varieties.

Contingency table	Reason for studying Italian				
Tuscan origin	Personal pleasure	Erasmus	Scholastic CV	Work	Total
North of Italy	10 31.3%	1 50.0%	2 33.3%	0 0.0%	13 100.0%
Center of Italy	13 40.6%	0 0.0%	1 16.7%	3 75.0%	17 38.6%
South of Italy	5 15.6%	0 0.0%	2 33.3%	0 0.0%	7 15.9%
Islands	2 6.3%	0 0.0%	1 16.7%	0 0.0%	3 6.8%
Spain	1 3.1%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 25.0%	2 4.5%
Not Italian	1 3.1%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 2.3%
I don't know	0 0.0%	1 50.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 2.3%
Total	32 100.0%	2 100.0%	6 100.0%	4 100.0%	44 100.0%
Latian Origin	Personal pleasure	Erasmus	Scholastic CV	Work	Total
North of Italy	9 28.1%	0 0.0%	2 33.3%	2 50.0%	13 29.5%
Center of Italy	14 43.8%	1 50.0%	4 66.7%	2 50.0%	21 47.7%
South of Italy	6 18.8%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	6 13.6%
Islands	3 9.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 6.8%
I don't know	0 0.0%	1 50.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 2.3%
Total	32 100.0%	2 100.0%	6 100.0%	4 100.0%	44 100.0%

Table 15. Correlations between hypothetical origin and reason for studying Italian for Tuscan and Latian; Tuscan: $\chi^2(24)=38.918$, $p=.028$, Cramer's $V=.470$; Latian: $\chi^2(4)=12.882$, $p=.012$, Cramer's $V=.541$.

About the hypothetical origin of the voices and the number of stays in Italy, only the female Lombard variety reported significant results, as shown in Table 16. People who had already been to Italy seemed to better detect the origin of the variety (i.e., north of Italy). However, also 50% of respondents who had never been to Italy were able to guess the correct origin of the voice.

Contingency table	Stays in Italy			
Female Lombard origin	Never	Once	More than once	Total
North of Italy	5 50.0%	2 66.7%	22 71.0%	29 65.9%
Center of Italy	4 40.0%	0 0.0%	8 25.8%	12 27.3%
Tuscany	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 3.2%	1 2.3%
Islands	0 0.0%	1 33.3%	0 0.0%	1 2.3%
I don't know	1 10.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 2.3%
Total	10 100.0%	3 100.0%	31 100.0%	44 100.0

Table 16. Correlation between hypothetic origin and number of stays in Italy for female Lombard. $\chi^2(8)=19.427$, $p=.013$, Cramer's $V=.470$

3.2 Qualitative analysis

The judgements of foreign respondents about the influence of the voices on the comprehensibility of the message, pleasantness values, and Italianity values were observed and compared to the ones of the Italian control group. Table 17 shows comprehension rates for each variety. The variety which received the highest number of right comprehension answers (90.9%) was the female Lombard, while Venetian, Tuscan, and Latian recorded the highest percentages of wrong comprehension responses (40.9%, 36.4%, and 34.1% respectively).

Frequency of female Lombard comprehension			Frequency of Latian comprehension		
Levels	Counts	% of Total	Levels	Counts	% of Total
Correct comprehension	40	90.9%	Correct comprehension	29	65.9%
Wrong comprehension	4	9.1%	Wrong comprehension	15	34.1%
Frequency of male Lombard comprehension			Frequency of female Campanian comprehension		
Levels	Counts	% of Total	Levels	Counts	% of Total
Correct comprehension	37	84.1%	Correct comprehension	30	68.2%
Wrong comprehension	7	15.9%	Wrong comprehension	14	31.8%

Frequency of Venetian comprehension			Frequency of male Campanian comprehension		
Levels	Counts	% of Total	Levels	Counts	% of Total
Correct comprehension	26	59.1%	Correct comprehension	30	68.2%
Wrong comprehension	18	40.9%	Wrong comprehension	14	31.8%
Frequency of Tuscan comprehension			Frequency of Sicilian comprehension		
Levels	Counts	% of Total	Levels	Counts	% of Total
Correct comprehension	28	63.6%	Correct comprehension	39	88.6%
Wrong comprehension	16	36.4%	Wrong comprehension	5	11.4%

Table 17. Percentages of correct and wrong comprehension rates of the whole foreign sample for each regional Italian variety.

About the influence of the varieties on comprehensibility, foreign speakers tended to give higher values compared to the Italian control group and rated the male Campanian variety as the most influential on comprehension (see Table 18).

Descriptives					
	Participants	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Female Lombard comprehensibility	Foreign	2.53	1.432	1	5
	Dante's students	3.71	0.994	2	5
	Control group	1.83	0.983	1	3
Female Sicilian comprehensibility	Foreign	3.17	1.289	1	5
	Dante's students	3.79	1.477	1	5
	Control group	2.33	1.506	1	4
Venetian comprehensibility	Foreign	3.43	1.233	1	5
	Dante's students	3.93	1.439	1	5
	Control group	3.50	1.761	1	5
Female Campanian comprehensibility	Foreign	3.97	1.217	1	5
	Dante's students	3.86	1.167	1	5
	Control group	2.33	1.633	1	5
Latian comprehensibility	Foreign	3.07	1.461	1	5
	Dante's students	3.86	1.231	1	5
	Control group	2.50	1.761	1	5
Tuscan comprehensibility	Foreign	2.67	1.373	1	5
	Dante's students	3.93	1.072	2	5
	Control group	2.33	1.633	1	5
Male Lombard comprehensibility	Foreign	3.03	1.450	1	5
	Dante's students	3.71	1.204	1	5
	Control group	2.67	1.966	1	5
Male Campanian comprehensibility	Foreign	3.43	1.251	1	5
	Dante's students	4.21	1.188	1	5
	Control group	2.50	1.761	1	5

Table 18. Average values of the influence of the regional Italian varieties on stimuli comprehension by foreign respondents and the Italian control group. Judgements were elicited on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was the minimum value and 5 was the maximum value.

For the pleasantness of the voices, judgements from foreign respondents and Italian respondents were similar, with Lombard being one of the most pleasant varieties for both foreigners and Italians, while male Campanian received the lowest values (see Table 19).

Descriptives					
	Participants	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Female Lombard pleasantness	Foreign	3.87	0.937	2	5
	Dante's students	4.00	0.679	3	5
	Control group	3.00	1.095	2	5
Female Sicilian pleasantness	Foreign	3.53	1.074	1	5
	Dante's students	4.07	0.730	3	5
	Control group	4.00	0.894	3	5
Venetian pleasantness	Foreign	3.00	1.232	1	5
	Dante's students	3.64	0.745	3	5
	Control group	3.00	1.414	1	5
Female Campanian pleasantness	Foreign	2.93	1.081	1	5
	Dante's students	3.64	0.745	2	5
	Control group	3.00	1.414	1	5
Latian pleasantness	Foreign	3.57	1.223	1	5
	Dante's students	3.86	0.770	3	5
	Control group	4.50	0.548	4	5
Tuscan pleasantness	Foreign	3.77	1.040	1	5
	Dante's students	4.07	0.730	3	5
	Control group	4.00	0.894	3	5
Male Lombard pleasantness	Foreign	3.60	1.163	1	5
	Dante's students	4.00	0.784	3	5
	Control group	4.50	1.225	2	5
Male Campanian pleasantness	Foreign	2.77	1.073	1	5
	Dante's students	3.29	0.726	2	5
	Control group	2.67	1.336	1	5

Table 19. Average values of pleasantness attributed to the regional Italian varieties by foreign respondents and the Italian control group. Judgements were elicited on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was the minimum value and 5 was the maximum value.

About the Italianity attributed to the varieties, Table 20 shows that the Italian control group tended to give high rates to all the voices except for Venetian. Foreign respondents, instead, presented greater variability, and rated the Sicilian variety as the most Italian, while the Venetian variety was rated as the less Italian.

Descriptives					
	Participants	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Female Lombard Italianity	Foreign	3.80	1.215	1	5
	Dante's students	4.43	0.646	3	5
	Control group	4.33	1.033	3	5
Female Sicilian Italianity	Foreign	4.17	0.986	2	5
	Dante's students	4.57	0.646	3	5
	Control group	4.33	0.816	3	5
Venetian Italianity	Foreign	2.90	1.494	1	5
	Dante's students	3.14	1.351	1	5
	Control group	1.33	0.516	1	5
Female Campanian Italianity	Foreign	3.50	1.009	2	5
	Dante's students	4.14	1.009	1	5
	Control group	4.50	0.837	3	5
Latian Italianity	Foreign	3.93	1.258	1	5
	Dante's students	4.14	1.099	1	5
	Control group	4.50	0.837	3	5
Tuscan Italianity	Foreign	3.57	1.073	1	5
	Dante's students	3.50	1.454	1	5
	Control group	4.50	0.837	3	5
Male Lombard Italianity	Foreign	4.03	1.098	1	5
	Dante's students	4.43	0.514	4	5
	Control group	4.67	0.816	3	5
Male Campanian Italianity	Foreign	3.67	1.155	1	5
	Dante's students	4.21	0.893	2	5
	Control group	4.50	0.837	1	5

Table 20. Average values of the Italianity attributed to the regional Italian varieties by foreign respondents and the Italian control group. Judgements were elicited on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was the minimum value and 5 was the maximum value.

Splitting the foreign sample between Dante Alighieri's students and the rest of the foreign participants allowed us to compare the two groups in rates of comprehensibility, pleasantness, and Italianity of the voices. In general, Tables 18, 19, and 20 show a general tendency: even if the two subgroups showed similar trends in the choice of the most comprehensible, pleasant, and Italian variety, Dante's students recorded higher values with respect to the other foreign respondents. Once again, this result could be traced back to the greater linguistic input received during the Italian course by the students.

To observe the potential effect of gender on foreigners' linguistic perception, male and female Lombard and Campanian varieties were compared on both comprehension rates and judgements about the Italianity, the influence, and the pleasantness of the varieties (see Table 21, 22).

Frequency of female Lombard comprehension			Frequency of female Campanian comprehension		
Levels	Counts	% of Total	Levels	Counts	% of Total
Correct comprehension	40	90.9%	Correct comprehension	30	68.2%
Wrong comprehension	4	9.1%	Wrong comprehension	14	31.8%
Frequency of male Lombard comprehension			Frequency of male Campanian comprehension		
Levels	Counts	% of Total	Levels	Counts	% of Total
Correct comprehension	37	84.1%	Correct comprehension	30	68.2%
Wrong comprehension	7	15.9%	Wrong comprehension	14	31.8%

Table 21. Comparison between male and female Lombard and Campanian varieties. Comprehension rates correspond to the percentages of correct answers of the whole sample.

Descriptives					
Levels	Mean	SD	Levels	Mean	SD
Female Lombard Influence	2.91	1.411	Male Lombard Influence	3.25	1.400
Female Lombard Italianity	4.00	1.100	Male Lombard Italianity	4.16	0.963
Female Lombard Pleasantness	3.91	0.858	Male Lombard Pleasantness	3.73	1.065
Descriptives					
Levels	Mean	SD	Levels	Mean	SD
Female Campanian Influence	3.93	1.19	Male Campanian Influence	3.68	1.272
Female Campanian Italianity	3.70	1.07	Male Campanian Italianity	3.84	1.098
Female Campanian Pleasantness	3.16	1.03	Male Campanian Pleasantness	2.93	0.998

Table 22. Comparison between male and female Lombard and Campanian varieties. Judgements about Italianity, influence of the variety, and pleasantness of the voice correspond to the average rates of the sample elicited on a 5-point Likert Scale.

Results were similar for male and female voices for both varieties and across all the variables. In general, Italianity values were slightly higher for male voices, while pleasantness rates were higher for female voices.

4. Discussion

Data analysis showed the suitability of the verbal-guise technique to answer our research questions and inquire about the linguistic perception of foreign speakers towards different regional Italian varieties.

About the first research question, which concerned the ability to detect the origin of Italian varieties by foreign speakers, results showed that while the explicit study of Italian enhances comprehension skills, it doesn't seem to boost the ability to detect the correct origin of the varieties. The difficulty in recognizing linguistic varieties which differ from the standard is in line with previous findings (Kim, 2012 *inter alia*) and suggests the absence of diatopic varieties representations in foreign language courses. The only case in which a positive trend between the explicit study of Italian and the correct detection of the variety was found concerned the Lombard varieties. This finding is particularly significant and could be explained by the input received by most of the respondents: indeed, participants who attended Italian classes at Dante Alighieri (31.82% of the foreign sample) had an Italian teacher who came from Lombardy. This could have led to a familiarity effect for students who were used to listening to the professor's variety and received the regional Italian from Lombardy as linguistic input.

The general difficulty in disentangling the origin of regional varieties could also explain the lack of specific linguistic stereotypes in our foreign respondents, who reported a significant correlation between the origin of the voice and values of pleasantness only for Lombard. Our hypothesis about the familiarity effect of the linguistic input was further corroborated by the comparison between Dante's students and the other foreign participants on the judgements given to the varieties. The only significant difference between the two foreign groups concerned the Lombard and the Campanian varieties, which were the input received by Dante's students.

Despite the lack of robust linguistic stereotypes, the qualitative analysis revealed some general tendencies: the Campanian variety was judged as the most influential on audio comprehension, the Sicilian was evaluated as the most Italian and the female Lombard was assessed as the most pleasant. Although the absence of statistically significant correlations between the regional varieties and their evaluations of different social and personal traits does not replicate the findings of perceptive studies conducted on Italian participants (Pistolessi & Schwarze, 2007; De Pascale & Marzo, 2016; Masullo & Meluzzi, 2020), the higher pleasantness values associated with the female Lombard speaker could partially resemble positive values associated to the Italian northern varieties by native speakers of Italian (De Pascale & Marzo, 2016). The positive trend toward the Lombard varieties is partially in line also with the findings of Galli de' Paratesi (1976), which reported higher popularity judgements for northern varieties compared to the southern ones. At the same time, the high pleasantness rates ascribed to the female Lombard speaker by

our foreign sample do not correspond to the results reported by Baroni (1983), where regional traits tended to be more stigmatized in female than in male speech. Regarding (socio)economic status, the absence of significant correlations between the voices and the hypothetical work ascribed to the speakers does not allow to highlight specific patterns of social prestige associated with different Italian varieties. The tendency of perceiving Italian northern varieties as more prestigious which was found in Italian respondents by De Pascale & Marzo (2016) does not apply to our foreign respondents, probably because they lack the ability to distinguish among regional varieties. Once again, we prefer to interpret the positive rates associated with the pleasantness of the female Lombard variety as a consequence of the received linguistic input rather than structured linguistic stereotypes.

Regarding our second research question, a positive correlation between comprehension rates and pleasantness of the voices was found, in line with previous research (Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Morinaga Shearman, 2002; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006). Significant results were observed for the Lombard varieties, supporting our interpretation of the role of linguistic input in language comprehension and perception. Significant results were also found for Sicilian, which was the regional variety of a professor who occasionally taught some classes to the Dante Alighieri's students. Once again, this could be linked to the role of specific linguistic input received by a relevant number of foreign participants.

Lastly, about our third research question, motivational factors such as the reason for studying Italian, the number of stays in Italy, and activities done in Italian were found to help both linguistic comprehension and, more slightly, the detection of the origin of the varieties. About linguistic comprehension, there were considerable differences between the varieties: Venetian, Tuscan, and Latian recorded the highest percentages of wrong answers, while Lombard and Sicilian reported the highest rates of correct comprehension. Although these percentages concerned the whole sample, if we consider that a large part of the respondents was attending Italian classes where the linguistic input concerned the Lombard and Sicilian varieties, we could assume that stronger difficulties in comprehension of Venetian, Tuscan, and Latian, which were not part of the linguistic input received by the students, could derive from a lack of representation of such varieties during Italian classes.

5. Conclusion

The present study focused on how foreign people perceive Italian linguistic diversity in order to improve Italian glottodidactics and favor the integration of new immigrants in Italian society. Results showed the difficulty of detecting regional differences by foreign speakers and the pivotal impact of linguistic input on language learning and comprehension. Thanks to the

variety of our sample, we observed differences between foreign people who attended Italian classes and those who did not: the explicit learning of Italian proved to help language comprehension, which was also supported by positive motivational factors. However, it did not entail a better detection of regional Italian varieties, suggesting the tendency of Italian programs to lack diatopic varieties' representation. The absence of varied linguistic input turned out to have negative outcomes for language comprehension, with stronger comprehension difficulties for those varieties which were absent in the linguistic input received by part of the respondents. In practical terms, this could cause integration difficulties for foreign speakers who cannot understand the varied linguistic input which they find when they arrive in Italy.

This work does not come without limitations, which mainly concern the dimension of the sample. Future studies should replicate the work by recruiting a higher number of participants and by involving foreign migrants with different linguistic backgrounds. Indeed, besides including foreign respondents who are not leaving in Italy, the analysis of specific migration groups residing in the Italian Peninsula could reveal the role of different sociocultural and linguistic factors both in the perception of different Italian varieties and in Italian language learning.

To conclude, our results suggest the importance of representing the complexity of Italian diatopic variation in programs of Italian as a foreign language. This could help foreign learners in understanding the Italian language in all its varieties, leading to positive outcomes for the integration of new immigrants in the Italian society.

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