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Language Attitudes in Liguria: Effects of Gender on the Perception of Genoese

The study of language attitudes is crucial for understanding the ideologies that inform efforts of language restoration and revitalization. For example, impediments to intergenerational language transmission may be explained by members of a social category avoiding a perceived stigmatized or nonstandard variant or variety (Eckert, 2008). Relatedly, perceptions of said varieties or variants may also be influenced by certain social qualities of the speakers, such as gender. Labov's gender paradox (2001:261-293) maintains that when variants or varieties are in competition, women tend to conform to the prestige forms when they are overtly prescribed but avoid those that are stigmatized. Recent investigations corroborate Labov's theory, for example the non-standard use of Galician in Spain (Loureiro-Rodriguez et al., 2013) as well as non-standard intervocalic /s/ voicing in Costa Rica (Chappell, 2016), where gender-related trends were found, namely that nonstandard forms excluded female speakers from positively indexing them. Given the scarcity of empirical work on Genoese, a highly endangered Romance variety, this study aims to reveal if attitudes toward Genoese are similarly conditioned by speaker gender and/or listener gender, and to empirically assess modern attitudes towards Genoese that may act as either barriers or gateways for its revitalization.

This study elicits covert and overt attitudes towards Italian and Genoese by utilizing the matched guise technique (cf. Lambert et al. 1967) followed by direct questioning. Ten native Italian and Genoese speakers (five female, five male) were recorded reading passages from *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupéry) in Italian and Genoese, with one male speaker and one female speaker (the guises) reading the same passage in Italian and Genoese for a total of twelve voices. The recordings were then placed in strategic order, allowing for the guises to be separated so that listener-participants would think they were hearing four unique speakers instead of two. Sixty-five listener-participants completed the matched guise survey and direct questioning in Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Listener-participants listened to each voice and consequently rated each on a Likert scale of social qualities that include: solidarity (i.e., commonality or unity with speaker); rurality (i.e., how city-like or rural the speaker seems); locality (i.e., if the speaker was from Liguria or not); power (i.e., socioeconomic status of the speaker), gender (i.e., how masculine/feminine the speaker seems), and speech quality (i.e., how well the speaker speaks). Likert scale results were z-score normalized and subsequently submitted to mixed-effects linear regression modeling in R (R Core Team, 2018), whereas the free responses elicited from the direct questioning were analyzed qualitatively.

Quantitative results reveal that listener-participants rate Italian speakers higher for solidarity ($p < 0.01$) and speech quality ($p < 0.001$), and additionally male speakers in both languages were afforded higher ratings for speech quality ($p < 0.001$) over females. With respect to listener-gender, males give higher ratings for solidarity. In reference to listener-gender and guise-gender, male Italian speakers receive higher speech quality scores ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that female speakers are penalized in the speech quality category in particular when speaking Genoese. However, the qualitative results of direct questioning demonstrate that while participants think that Italian should be spoken in formal domains (75%), nearly all participants (> 95%) believe that intergenerational transmission is necessary to maintain Genoese and that its linguistic vitality is important to Ligurian identity. What's more, just over half of participants

would like to see Genoese language programs integrated into schools from kindergarten to high school.

These findings are argued to corroborate Labov's gender paradox (2001:261–293), whereby women adhere to (and thus are identified with) the standard variety (Italian) over the nonstandard (Genoese) when positive indexicality of the latter is limited, as opposed to male speakers who may positively index both. I argue that this poses immediate threats for language vitality, as women are still the primary caretakers of children and thus most influential in language socialization, especially in the early years of acquisition (Potowski & Matts, 2008:156). The quantitative and qualitative data results present an ideological paradox of negative covert attitudes and positive overt attitudes towards Genoese, an endangered variety with no official status. While the former attitudes present a genuine threat to vitality, the latter give signs of hope for revitalization and institutional change that may curtail any damaging impact.

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