A Linguistic History of Italian

Martin Maiden

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A LINGUISTIC HISTORY OF ITALIAN

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Preface

It is a curious observation that structural histories of Italian of the kind offered in this book have generally been executed by non-Italians. We find, for example, a German (Rohlfs), a Swiss (Meyer-Lübke), a Pole (Manczak), a Hungarian (Fogarasi) and a Croatian (Tekavčić). Perhaps it is the case that such histories are best essayed by outsiders, who are less acutely sensitive to (but not necessarily any less aware of) the complex social and cultural milieux in which the language lives and from which the linguistic facts have to be brutally extirpated. At any rate, this book is another 'outsider's' view of what he perceives as the major elements in the structural evolution of the Italian language, and it aims to be accessible to those who know the modern language and seek the historical rationale behind some of its more idiosyncratic features, and to those who know something of the history of other Romance languages, and would like a detailed account of the place of Italian in the wider Romance picture.

I do not anticipate that all readers will pick up this book and read it straight through from cover to cover. An 'internal' structural history of a language such as this one does not easily lend itself, unlike 'external' histories, to presentation in the form of a chronologically linear narrative. But this volume is more than a work of reference. It aims to present a complex array of factual data, closely interconnected and, I hope, illuminated, by cross-referencing (so that readers may easily use the book for reference purposes). Into this framework is woven a series of extended discussions of topics which are particularly problematic or controversial (such as diphthongization, or auxiliary selection). I have attempted to be as comprehensive as possible within the space available, but there remain, no doubt, lacunae, and I have not hesitated to give particularly extensive treatment to certain topics (in morphology

and phonology) on which I have conducted research myself.

A large number of people have helped me in a wide variety of ways in the preparation of this book. I wish to express particular gratitude to Thomas Cravens, Joseph Cremona, Giulio Lepschy, Peter Matthews, John Charles Smith and Nigel Vincent for the stimulating and truly invaluable comments they have made on the text at various stages of its emergence. If, on some occasions, I have waywardly failed to follow their sound counsel as closely as I might have, it will be entirely on my head. I thank, also, the editors of the Longman Linguistics Library series for their advice.

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Downing College
Cambridge
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</div>

Abbreviations and symbols

*	Indicates a form which is unattested but is assumed to exist or to have existed.
**	Indicates a hypothetical form whose existence is denied.
*(?)	Indicates a form which is unattested but whose existence is considered unproven yet possible.
1Sg./2Pl. etc.	First person singular / second person plural, etc.
Acc.	Accusative
Cast.	Castilian
CL	Classical Latin
Conj.	Conjugation
Dec.	Declension
DO	Direct object
F.	Feminine
Fr.	French
Fut.	Future
Gen.	Genitive
Ind.	Indicative
Inf.	Infinitive
IO	Indirect Object
It.	Italian
Lit.	Literally
M.	Masculine
N.	Neuter
Nom.	Nominative
O	Old
Pers.	Person
Pl.	Plural
PP	Past participle

PPr.	Passato prossimo (perfect)
PR	Passato remoto (past historic)
Pres.	Present tense
Ptg.	Portuguese
RS	*Rafforzamento sintattico*
Sg.	Singular
SOSD	Stressed open syllable diphthongization
Subj.	Subjunctive
TR	Trapassato remoto

Chapter 1

Introduction

1 Perspectives and aims

The history of a language may be explored from two complementary
perspectives, the 'internal' and the 'external'. An external history
examines that language within the wider context of the social and
cultural history of the people who use it, and in relation to other
languages and dialects with which these users come into contact. An
internal history is concerned with the detailed study of the evolution of
the grammatical (and phonological) system of the language.[1] The two
perspectives are not only complementary, they are usually inextricably
interlinked – and this is most certainly true of Italian. This book bears
the title *A Linguistic History of Italian* – rather than *A History of the
Italian Language* – precisely because it takes the perspective of the
'linguist' in the narrow, but widely used, sense of one who is interested
in the internal, grammatical and phonological, structure of languages.
We focus primarily, and in close detail, on the internal history of
Italian, without neglecting the crucial role played in many structural
changes by 'external', cultural and social, factors. The 'external'
history of the Italian language impinges profoundly on its structural
development,[2] and we have given particular attention to the influence
upon Italian of other Romance dialects with which it has been in
contact, the linguistic effects of the emergence of Italian as a *literary*,
rather than a *spoken* language, and of structural variation within Italian,
present already in the fifteenth century, yet especially prominent in the
modern language as a result of the acquisition of Italian by a
predominantly dialect-speaking population in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. No attempt has been made to explore in depth the
external history of the language, but there exist some excellent general
histories of Italian in which external history is treated in detail.[3]

It is hoped that what follows will be accessible, and of interest, not only to those with a specialist knowledge of Italian, but also to those concerned with the historical evolution of Romance and other languages. We have been at pains to make comparison with developments in other Romance varieties wherever these help to throw light on the history of Italian – or vice versa.

The 'linguistic' perspective, in our sense, has a distinguished pedigree in studies of the history of Italian. Among these, Rohlfs' encyclopaedic *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana e dei suoi dialetti* remains unsurpassed as a compendium of historical data. It is a reflection of the sheer vastness and complexity of the field that the three volumes of this work (around 1400 pages) in some respects only scratch the surface of the subject, yet still make forbidding reading for the novice. The other major linguistic history, that by Tekavčić (1980 – also in three volumes), is less detailed than Rohlfs', but offers a more transparent presentation of the facts, set in a broadly structuralist framework. The present *Linguistic History of Italian* aims to be complementary to such studies, and references to Rohlfs' work, in particular, abound. While we cannot match the breadth of these earlier histories, particularly where dialectological references are concerned, a wide range of phenomena brought to light or re-evaluated by more recent scholarship have been included here.

This book takes no particular theoretical stance, but frequently introduces, with due explanation, insights from various branches of general linguistic theory, when these help illuminate the nature and causes of changes in the history of Italian grammar. In particular, we try to provide some answers to the question 'Why is Italian grammar the way it is?', by laying bare the historical structural principles which account for many of the apparent idiosyncrasies of modern grammar. The historical perspective can also help to reveal patterns and structures which are present in the modern language, but are not always apparent to those who know only modern Italian. For example, the root alternation (cf. Ch.2: 4.6.3 and 5.2) between *muoio* 'I die' and *muori* 'you die', that between the agentive suffix *-aio* (e.g., *sellaio* 'saddlemaker') and the locational suffix *-eria* ('place where some activity is carried out' – e.g., *selleria* 'saddlemaker's shop'), and that between the infinitive stem and the future stem of first conjugation verbs (*parlare* 'to speak' vs. *parlerò* 'I shall speak') may appear superficially unrelated; but we shall see later that they reflect the effects of two sound changes which are characteristic of the dialect of Florence (and clearly proclaim the Florentine origins of Italian). The exceptional occurrence of the reflexive pronoun to the right of the verb in a few expressions such as *vendesi* 'for sale' (rather than *si vende*) seems arbitrary in modern Italian, but reflects a once general principle – still

abundantly represented in classical Italian literature, but now largely abandoned – governing the syntax of unstressed pronouns. The riddle of the use of the auxiliary verbs *essere* and *avere* with intransitive verbs (why *è andato* 'he has gone' but *ha viaggiato* 'he has travelled'?) will become a little less opaque when we take into account a superficially quite disparate phenomenon, namely the rules governing the use of the pronoun *ne*. We should stress that 'historical' principles are not necessarily 'extinct' principles. Often (as in the last example), the relevant factors may still be at work in the grammar.

A number of technical terms of linguistic analysis are used in this book. As an aid to readers for whom these may be unfamiliar, we give a brief account of some of them later in this chapter. In general, we have sought to give as clear a definition as possible of the relevant notions when they are first introduced in the text. These references are marked in bold in the index.

2 The emergence of Italian

2.1 The dialectal background

There is much in the structural history of Italian that can be properly understood only within the wider context of the evolution of the Italian dialects, and extensive reference to dialectal developments is made throughout this book. A structural outline of the dialects will be offered in Chapter 5, but it is important at the outset to understand the nature of the relationship between Italian and the 'Italian dialects'. The Italian dialects are not 'dialects of Italian'. And they are not 'daughters' of Italian, in the sense of being regional variants of Italian historically descended from the Italian language. Rather, Italian has its roots in one of the speech varieties that emerged from Latin in the Italy of the first millennium A.D., namely that of Tuscany, and more precisely the kind of Tuscan spoken in Florence. Historically, then, the Italian language is simply a 'sister' of the other dialects of Italy. Indeed, the Florentine of the Middle Ages might be said to have been merely 'one of the crowd'. This linguistic 'crowd' is 'Romance', a group of speech varieties related by their common descent from spoken Latin, and spoken over large areas of the former Roman Empire (Iberia – modern Portugal and Spain; Gaul – modern France; Italy; Switzerland (the Cantons of Grisons and Ticino); Romania. The now extinct Dalmatian dialects were once spoken along the Dalmatian coast of Croatia. European colonial expansions led to the extensive introduction of Romance (Spanish, Portuguese and French – but not Italian) into the Americas.

We should stress that, from a structural perspective, there is really no difference between 'a dialect' and 'a language'. What is normally meant by 'a dialect' in the parlance of Italian dialectology is the

characteristic speech of the natives of a particular town or region (although it could also be applied to the speech of a particular social group), as contrasted with the characteristic speech of other places, where all the speech varieties concerned are 'cognate' (descended from a common linguistic source, namely Latin). The label 'language' is usually attached to those Romance dialects which have acquired political and/or cultural prestige, are recognized as superordinate, within some territory (often, but not necessarily, a nation-state), to other related speech varieties, are imitated by those seeking to speak or write 'correctly' and, usually, are set down in prescriptive grammars. We cannot here explore further the issues involved in defining the notion of 'a language' (and the intimately related one of 'standard' language). Readers are referred particularly to the work of Muljačić (e.g., 1985), for Romance languages, and Joseph (1987), for illuminating accounts of the relevant conceptual problems. Among the Romance varieties usually recognized as 'languages' are the national idioms of nation-states, such as Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian and Romanian. Italy and Romania are latecomers, in this respect, having become nation-states only in the nineteenth century. Others, such as Catalan, Sardinian, Dalmatian, and Rhaeto-Romance in Switzerland, are also traditionally recognized as languages, because of their cultural importance, because they have also been accorded official recognition by the state in which they are used, because of their sharp distinctness from other Romance varieties, or through any combination of these factors.

The subgroup of Romance to which Florentine belongs is often labelled 'Italo-Romance'. This term is primarily geographical, and refers to the Romance dialects of Italy, usually excluding certain Romance varieties spoken principally outside Italy (such as the Franco-Provençal of Val d'Aosta, and parts of north-western Piedmont, and the Occitan of south-western Piedmont, both classified as Gallo-Romance dialects, the Rhaeto-Romance Ladin spoken in parts of Trentino and Alto Adige). The affinities of Friulian, spoken around Udine in north-western Italy but classified by many linguists as belonging to the Rhaeto-Romance grouping (represented also in the Grisons area of Switzerland), are moot, as are those of Sardinian, which has many distinctive structural features, yet also much in common with southern Italian dialects. From the point of view of linguistic structure, it is notoriously the case that the so-called Italo-Romance dialects have no single feature which distinguishes all of them from all other Romance dialects, and that there are rarely sharply defined boundaries separating 'Italo-Romance' and other Romance varieties. A degree of linguistic unity exists, however, in dialects to the south of a line running roughly between La Spezia and Rimini (cf. Ch.5: 2), among them those of

Tuscany. Tuscan dialects (of which Florentine is one) have been notably conservative in their linguistic evolution, and have failed to acquire many of the distinguishing features of the remaining dialects of central and southern Italy. The geographical distribution and structure of the Romance dialects of Italy will be examined more closely in Chapter 5. But to seek to impose the geographical label 'Italo-Romance' on the Romance of Italy (or on part of it) is simply to do violence to the linguistic facts, to impose rigid and discrete divisions on a continuum. In so far as we use this label in the rest of this book, it should be remembered that it is just a useful shorthand for something essentially ill-defined. Mention should be made of an alternative approach to the classificatory problem, in which the label 'Italian dialects' is more appropriate than 'Italo-Romance', which involves taking a wholly 'external' perspective and recognizing as Italian dialects those Romance varieties for which (or rather for whose speakers), the standard Italian language, based on the dialect of Florence, constitutes a 'guiding' (cf. Pellegrini (1975b: 56f.)), prestigious, superordinate speech variety.[4] For further exploration of the nature of the relationship between 'standard languages' and 'their' dialects, readers might consult the work of Muljačić (e.g., 1986).

The profundity of the linguistic difference between Italian dialects (however we define these) should not be underestimated. For nearly two millennia there has been very little to restrain the dialects from divergence. Measurement of degrees of linguistic difference is a tricky enterprise, not least because of the problem of deciding what relative 'weight' to give to different divergent features, but it is by no means far-fetched to assert that the difference between some Italian dialects, especially those more geographically distant from each other (say Turinese and Potentino), is equal to or greater than that between modern Italian and modern Spanish, and anecdotes of incomprehension between speakers of different Italian dialects abound (cf. also Pellegrini (1970: 222f.)).

2.2 Some observations on linguistic variety in ancient Italy

Regional linguistic variation within spoken Latin was probably present from the moment Latin became diffused among the various peoples of Italy and the wider Roman Empire. The languages spoken by the inhabitants of ancient Italy included a number of now extinct sisters of Latin (belonging, like Latin, to the 'Italic' family of Indo-European languages), notably the Umbrian of the upper Tiber valley, and Oscan of much of southern Italy, the Celtic languages (another branch of the Indo-European family, once spoken over vast areas of Europe and surviving in modern Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh and Breton) of much of northern Italy (excluding what is now the Veneto). Greek , once widely

spoken in Sicily, Calabria and southern Puglia, may well have survived
in these regions into the early Middle Ages, and there are still Greek-
speaking villages in Salento and southern Calabria. Etruscan, a
language of uncertain linguistic affinities, generally held not to be of
Indo-European origin, was spoken in an area bounded roughly by the
Arno to the north and the Tiber to the south and east. For a succinct
account of the various languages of Italy at the time of the expansion of
Latin, see Devoto (1977: 38–64).

It is difficult to imagine that the native speech habits of the
populations newly speaking Latin would not have impinged on their
use of Latin. However, it is also virtually impossible, at a remove of
some two thousand years, to say which features of Italo-Romance
dialects might be attributable to the influence of such early linguistic
'substrates'. This is not because such influence is implausible, but
because it is almost impossible to verify, and the possibility that the
relevant developments are due to spontaneous 'internal' linguistic
change can rarely be reasonably excluded. We have consequently given
little attention to 'substratist' explanations of linguistic phenomena in
this book (but see Ch.2: 7).[5] Another external source of regional
variation is the influence of languages with which Romance speakers in
Italy have, over the centuries, come into contact. A distinction is
sometimes made between 'adstrate' influences, arising from contact
between neighbouring speech communities, and 'superstrate' influences
reflecting the language of some conquering or dominant social group. A
possible example of an 'adstrate' influence, with some interesting
structural repercussions, is the syntactic influence of Greek on certain
dialects of southern Italy (Ch.5: 2.3.2.9). The various Germanic
invaders (Goths, Longobards and Franks) who, from the third to the
ninth century held power in Italy, also left their linguistic stamp on the
Italo-Romance dialects, although the influence of Germanic is almost
exclusively a matter of introducing new *words*, rather than grammatical
or phonological structures, into Italo-Romance dialects (but see Ch.2:
5.1). For further details of Germanic influences on Italo-Romance see
Devoto (1977: 205–12) and Migliorini and Griffith (1984: 50–4).

2.3   From Florentine dialect to Italian

The political and cultural fragmentation of Italy favoured linguistic
fragmentation not only negatively, in failing to provide any centripetal
force which might restrain linguistic divergence, but also positively, in
that the rise of municipal centres of power, during the late Middle
Ages, tended to confer prestige on the speech of the relevant towns,
which speakers throughout the respective spheres of influence sought to
imitate, thereby accentuating the linguistic differences between rival
areas of political and cultural influence. Political and economic power

often favoured the blossoming of influential literature in the relevant
dialects. But in the first half of the thirteenth century Florentine still did
not stand tall in the crowd of Romance dialects, and as yet enjoyed
none of the cultural importance, as a *literary* language, of Sicilian or
Bolognese, whose influence had spread widely beyond their place of
origin,[6] or of non-Italo Romance varieties such as French and
Provençal.

What primarily determined the pre-eminence of Florentine in Italy
was the flowering of Florentine culture, and particularly the literary
prestige – rapidly diffused throughout Italy and beyond – of writers
such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, who wrote in Florentine.
Florence's status as a major commercial power undoubtedly also
served to promote and diffuse its speech. But the acceptance of
Florentine as the basis of the Italian language, and its codification
(e.g., the production of dictionaries, and of grammars, serving to fix
and prescribe norms of correct usage) is of rather later date. Long after
the Latin of imperial Rome had ceased to be anybody's native
language, it continued to be universally accepted, and employed, in
literature, philosophy, theology, history, medicine and other
intellectual activities, as well as the writing of legal and administrative
documents. By the early sixteenth century, there had emerged a
general recognition in Italy that some form of the 'lingua volgare' (i.e.,
some form of the indigenous spoken language of Italy, as opposed to
Latin) should supplant Latin as the medium of written cultural
discourse. The *Questione della Lingua*, the debate about *which* form of
the 'lingua volgare' should be employed for this purpose, was a
complex one which continued, in various forms, well into the
nineteenth century.[7]

The view which prevailed was that espoused by the Venetian Pietro
Bembo (see particularly his *Prose della Volgar Lingua* (1525)), who
proposed Florentine.[8] But, believing it inappropriate for a literary
language to be too close to everyday speech, Bembo favoured as the
basis of the literary language not the Florentine of his time, but the
prestigious literary language of two centuries earlier. In other words,
Bembo (and his followers), helped fix as the literary language a variety
which, already in the sixteenth century, was structurally divergent from
all contemporary Italian dialects, even from Florentine. Indeed, the
'Florentineness' of literary Italian in the sixteenth century should not be
overstated – as has been acutely observed by Weinapple (1983). Already
in the fifteenth century a literary language was gaining ground
throughout Italy whose basis was undoubtedly Florentine, but which had
acquired general characteristics which could be said to be 'Italian', but
were *not* typical of Florence, and which on occasion were capable of
opposing and ousting features exclusive to Florence (among these are,

probably, the change from the type *lo mi dà* 'he gives it to me', to *me lo dà* (Ch.3: 9.4.2), the triumph of the structure *non facendolo* 'not doing it' over *non lo facendo* (Ch.3: 9.4.1), the establishment of the type *presero* 'they took' over *presono* (Ch.3: 8.3.3), and other phenomena).

Over the ensuing four centuries, the gulf between the literary language of Italy, and the speech of the Italians, tended to widen. Calculation of the proportion of the Italian people that could have been said to know Italian in the 1860s, at the time of the political unification of Italy, is fraught with difficulty.[9] In so far as Italian was principally a written language, only the functionally literate – a minute proportion of the populace – were likely to be able to acquire a full command of the language. On the other hand, any native speaker of an Italo-Romance dialect, and particularly those who spoke Tuscan or another central Italian dialect, would have been able, given sufficient attention, to understand at least something of the Italian language, so that a degree of *passive* knowledge of Italian need not have been the exclusive preserve of the literate. Estimates of the numbers of those able to speak Italian at the time of Unification range between 2.5% of the population, according to De Mauro (1976), through 9.52% (or about two and a quarter million persons), according to Castellani (1982), to 12%, suggested by Serianni (1990: 18 n6). It should be added that a small proportion of Italians used speech varieties other than Italo-Romance. Indeed, their numbers increased after the First World War, due to border changes: De Mauro (1976: 10f.) estimates them at 2.1% of Italians (or about 800 000 souls) in 1921. In addition to the other Romance varieties (Ladin, Occitan, Franco-Provençal), there were also German dialects (spoken in Val Canale (Udine), parts of Trentino, and the Val de Gressoney (Aosta)), Slovenian (around Gorizia, Val di Resia and the upper Torre and Natisone valleys, and the area around Trieste), Greek (in clusters of villages in Salento to the south of Lecce and the Aspromonte area of Calabria), Albanian (scattered in villages in Abruzzo, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily), and Serbo-Croat (in a few villages in Molise). At Alghero in Sardinia a variety of Catalan was spoken. These speech communities all persist to this day.[10]

The perception of a linguistic gulf between the literary language and the speech of the Italian people, particularly where vocabulary is concerned, is keenly articulated in the nineteenth century by the Milanese Alessandro Manzoni, for whom the *Questione della Lingua* was no longer a debate about a *literary* language, but about the best means of extending knowledge of the language to the Italian people at large. But not only was Italian structurally remote from the everyday speech of most Italians, it was also functionally remote, in that it had remained elevated above the needs of everyday life, and was ill-equipped for use in everyday discourse. Part of Manzoni's solution was

to propose that contemporary spoken Florentine (or a cultivated variety thereof), rather than archaic literary Florentine, should form the basis of the national language, and the final version of his novel *I promessi sposi* (1840) was intended, among other things, as an exemplar thereof. The culmination of a lifetime's meditation on this problem was Manzoni's report, commissioned by the Ministry of Education and published in 1868, on the unity of the Italian language and means of diffusing it, in which he proposed, *inter alia*, the teaching of Florentine in schools, and the publication of a modern Florentine dictionary. When the latter, even the first word of whose title – *Novo vocabolario della lingua italiana secondo l'uso di Firenze* – was distinctively Florentine (Ch.2: 4.2), began to appear in 1870, it provoked a memorable and insightful response from a scholar of linguistic history, Graziadio Ascoli. Ascoli (1873) cogently pointed out the impracticalities of a number of Manzoni's proposals, and above all that of overturning the established literary tradition in favour of a variety of Florentine many elements of whose structure were unfamiliar to the great majority of educated people. Ascoli also expressed his opposition to the imposition of inflexible linguistic models of any kind, whether archaic or modern. For him, the traditional literary language must be the basis of Italian, but its evolution as the national language of the Italians could only be the *product* of an increased and intensified cooperative intellectual activity on the part of the Italian people, a condition which he regarded as still lacking.[11]

In fact, political unification helped promote the expansion of Italian (the Italian of the literary tradition – not contemporary Florentine) along two major dimensions. The first was social: the Italian language was gradually acquired by the Italian populace at large. The mechanisms of this expansion, and the roles variously played by migration, military service, the educational system, the mass media, and other factors, have been explored, for example, by De Mauro (1976).[12] In the late twentieth century, we find that the overwhelming majority of Italians understand and use Italian, although the *way* in which they use Italian may be divergent from the standard language based on the literary tradition, as we shall see. It is very difficult to obtain a true estimate of the proportion of the populace which remains substantially ignorant of the language, but we may safely say that it is minute, restricted to rural areas (especially of the far south and Sardinia), and to older generations. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the penetration of Italian among the Italians is whether they use the language at home, that is to say in the most intimate sphere of their lives. A recent survey (Doxa (1988)), in which a sample of Italians were asked to report on their own linguistic behaviour, suggests that about 34.4% of the population use only Italian, even in the home, while

the remainder continue to use dialect at least with some members of
their families, in addition to Italian. The proportion of those claiming to
employ Italian at home (as well as in the wider world) at least some of
the time was 60.4%.

The second, accompanying, type of expansion concerns the domains
of discourse in which Italian is used. As the language was acquired by
the populace at large, so Italian was put to use in an ever widening
range of domains, in casual conversation, in military life, in
bureaucracy, in civil administration, and so forth. These expansions of
Italian have resulted in structural diversity within Italian. The once
remote and relatively homogeneous literary language has begun to
show systematic variation according to region, social group, topic and
context of discourse, and so forth. It is with such variation that shall be
concerned in Chapter 5.

3   Chronology and historical sources

3.1   Chronology

It is as difficult to divide Italian into chronological periods as it is to
divide Italo-Romance dialects into geographical areas. From an
'internal' perspective we are inclined to think that such division is a
counterproductive distraction. We shall not, then, be particularly
concerned with periodization here, although we would not wish to deny
the importance of this complex issue from a perspective which is
primarily 'external'. See particularly Weinapple (1983) and D'Achille
(1991) for further discussion of problems of periodization. In this book
we have preferred simply to state the (approximate) date for which the
linguistic phenomena in question are attested. From an internal
perspective, there is no historical moment of dramatic, structural
upheaval which would allow us to distinguish 'old' and 'modern'
Italian. Indeed, it is probably better for our purposes in this book to
avoid the term 'old Italian' altogether, and to date the emergence of
'Italian', with quite deliberate vagueness, from the 'fifteenth or
sixteenth centuries', the centuries during which a form of Tuscan
dialect (based principally on Florentine) was becoming generally
accepted as the literary language of Italy. In the history of 'Italian' thus
defined, there is little need for further periodization. It would be a gross
exaggeration to say that the structure of modern Italian had already
assumed its present form by the fourteenth century. Indeed, we shall be
at pains to underline the many changes – such as the rise of the
progressive tense form of the type *sto facendo* 'I am doing', or the
abandonment of interrogative structures of the type *viene egli?* 'is he
coming?' (Ch.4: 3), etc. – which have occurred in Italian ever since the
fifteenth century. But it is also true that Italian – primarily a literary

idiom remote from spontaneous, everyday, language – has changed strikingly little since the time of Boccaccio and Petrarch, particularly in the domains of phonology and morphology. Before the fifteenth century, it might be more accurate to talk of 'old Tuscan' rather than of 'old Italian',[13] since Tuscan was not universally accepted as the Italian *lingua*, even though the perception of the prestige and primacy of Tuscan was gathering ground from the time of Dante onwards. In the fifteenth century we find the terms *fiorentino*, *toscano* and *italiano* being used sometimes interchangeably. And, so far as one can determine, there was relatively little divergence between written Tuscan dialect and spoken Tuscan dialect.

3.2 Early texts
The earliest concrete attestations of Italo-Romance are, of course, written texts. The first surviving continuous texts uncontroversially written in an Italo-Romance dialect, and not in Latin, are certain brief, formulaic, legal depositions dating from the 960s (the so-called *Placiti cassinesi*), written in a variety of Campanian.[14] There is a hiatus of a century before the appearance, towards the end of the eleventh century, of the next Italo-Romance texts which have come down to us from Sardinia and central Italy. Romance texts (usually of a practical or religious nature) become increasingly frequent through the twelfth century, but our direct knowledge of OTuscan only commences with a text (a Pisan naval account register) written no earlier than the early twelfth century, while the first surviving text from Florence is a bankers' book of 1211. It is only from the mid thirteenth century that Tuscan texts (including the first literary texts, for example, the *Novellino*) begin to appear with any frequency.

3.3 'Proto-Romance' and 'Classical Latin'
For our knowledge of the Romance of Italy as it emerged before the year 1000, we are dependent principally on reconstruction of 'Proto-Romance'[15] forms on the basis of comparison of the modern dialects, supported by our knowledge of their Latin antecedents, and of certain general principles of linguistic change. We cannot enter here into a critical discussion of the technique of comparative reconstruction. Suffice it to say that there are many cases where it is beyond reasonable doubt that a particular change in the structure of Latin underlies all or most of the modern Romance varieties of Italy, and that systematic differences between those varieties are wholly consistent with the postulation of a common historically underlying system; the evolution of the 'western' Romance vowel system, discussed in (Ch.2: 2.1) is a nice case in point. We follow in this book the convention of signalling forms whose existence is postulated, but unattested, by means of an

asterisk; note that a double asterisk denotes some putative linguistic form whose existence is *denied*.

The most convenient historical starting point, in terms of which to consider the subsequent evolution of Tuscan and other Italo-Romance dialects, is Classical Latin. But some caveats are in order. It is easy to fall into the trap of treating Classical Latin as if it represented a primordial state of linguistic neatness and cohesion which subsequently fragmented into the various Romance dialects. In reality, the Latin of the Roman Empire already displayed a vast range of variation according to region, social stratum, register of speech, and so forth. It is extremely unlikely that Classical Latin as represented by writers such as Vergil, Cicero or Caesar is the *direct* ancestor of Romance. While we are unconvinced by the hypothesis that Proto-Romance might have existed as a structurally distinct 'sister' of Classical Latin spoken in southern Italy already in the imperial period (cf. Hall (1950)), it seems very probable that Romance descends from the everyday, uncultivated, and already regionally variant, Latin of the Empire. That is to say that it has its origins in speech forms by no means wholly identical to those of Classical Latin. We shall take Classical Latin as the 'starting point' of our analysis, but it should always be borne in mind that we do this *faute de mieux*, because Classical Latin is probably the best approximation we have to the structure of the forebear of the Romance languages.[16]

4   A note on phonetic transcription

In this book, where possible, we have given Latin and Italian words in their conventional orthography. When, as is often the case, this is inadequate for our purposes, we have transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet. However, certain phonological characteristics can be represented by means of minor adjustments to orthography. Latin orthography represents neither stress nor vowel length; we have signalled these by giving stressed syllables in bold type, and marking length with a colon (:) after the vowel. Stress in Italian words has been indicated, where necessary, by placing a grave accent over the stressed vowel (e.g., *àmano* **'amano** 'they love'); where no stress is indicated, it should be assumed that the penultimate syllable is stressed (e.g., *ama* **'ama** 'he loves'). As is conventional, stress in IPA transcriptions is indicated by the symbol ' immediately to the left of the stressed syllable (e.g., **man'dare**).

Particular attention should be drawn to a transcriptional practice followed in this book which deviates from standard practice, and reflects our methodological scepticism (explained in our comments on the 'phoneme' in section 5.4) about the value of the traditional distinction between 'phonemic' and 'phonetic' representations. We

shall not use at all the slashes (/ /) normally associated with the representation of 'phonemes'. Transcriptions of speech sounds will be indicated in bold face, and square brackets ([ ]), normally associated with 'phonetic' or 'allophonic' (and, therefore, 'non-phonemic') transcriptions. They will be used only where speech sounds are cited in isolation from the words in which they appear. In other words, '[e]' means 'this is the speech sound **e** (and not the *letter* 'e')'.

5   Some concepts in linguistic change

Without attempting to provide even an outline of the theory and principles of language change (see, for example, McMahon (1994)), we sketch here, with some very brief illustrations, certain concepts which will be particularly useful in studying the history of Italian. Among these are

- The inherent variability of language
- The notion of 'learnèd' forms
- Hypercorrection
- The regularity and irregularity of sound change
- Phonetically conditioned variation in speech sounds
- Allomorphy
- Grammaticalization (including morphologization)
- Analogy
- Emergence of analytic structures
- Spoken vs. written language

5.1   Variation

That language is spoken by human beings in human societies should be a statement of the obvious, but it is all too easy in charting the 'internal' linguistic history of a language, to talk as though the structural changes which have taken place were the result of ineluctable laws on a par with those of physics, operating on an abstract and homogeneous linguistic structure in which humans were merely the mindless conduit of change. Indeed, it is difficult not to talk in this way when discussing historically remote periods in the history of a language, of which our knowledge is, perforce, sketchy. But in reality, the way in which a speaker uses language may vary according to a wide range of factors (e.g., speed of speech, formality of the speech situation, and so forth); and social groups within a wider speech community may be distinguished by the systematically different ways in which their members use a common language. Speakers can be extremely sensitive even to minute patterns of variation, both within their own speech, and between social groups, and can choose to adopt, reject or modify aspects of the variation they