CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS: STEREOTYPES ABOUT THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE BASED ON ITS HISTORY

Herasymenko Olha Yuriivna,
PhD, Senior Lecturer of the Department of Philology and Translation
Kryvyi Rih National University
ORCID: 0000-0002-0539-1165

Mykhalchenko Kateryna Ihorivna,
3rd year student of the Department of Philology and Translation
Kryvyi Rih National University

The Italian language is the result of a combination of classical Latin, regional dialects, and the Tuscan literary tradition, which has led to its unique formation. The article examines the influence of these elements on the formation of the modern linguistic picture of Italy and the emergence of stereotypes about the Italian language, emphasizing the importance of understanding their historical roots for an objective perception of Italian culture. It has been found that widespread stereotypes, in particular the idea of easy understanding of Latin by Italian speakers, although it has a high degree of lexical similarity to Latin (89%), and the association of dialects with low social status, are historically determined. It is determined that these stereotypes, which are actively disseminated by the media and popular culture, affect the perception of the Italian language and its speakers, forming prejudices about their cultural identity. In particular, it is emphasized that the stereotype of easy comprehension of Latin by Italians is false due to significant linguistic changes over time, and dialects have historically been stigmatized due to their association with low education and social status, which dates back to the unification of Italy and the introduction of a single state language. The article describes the historical development of the Italian language from the Roman Empire to the present day, when vulgar Latin became the basis for the formation of Italian, and highlights key historical figures such as Dante Alighieri, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Pietro Bembo, whose contribution to literature and codification of the language influenced its development and stereotyping. It is emphasized that Dante's choice to write the Divine Comedy in the Florentine dialect was a decisive moment in its formation as a literary norm, and the works of other Renaissance authors contributed to the consolidation of the Tuscan tradition in the literary language. It has been found that despite the linguistic affinity, Italian speakers do not always understand Latin due to phonetic, grammatical and lexical differences that have arisen over the centuries, and the use of dialects has historically been stigmatized due to the association with low education and social status. The article summarizes the need to critically analyze these stereotypes for an objective understanding of Italian culture and linguistic diversity.

Key words: *Italian language, Latin language, history, Tuscan dialect, stereotype, dialects, stigmatization, social status.*

Герасименко Ольга, Михальченко Катерина. Крос-культурні комунікації: стереотипи про італійську мову на основі її історії

Італійська мова – результат поєднання класичної латини, регіональних діалектів та тосканської літературної традиції, що зумовило її унікальний шлях формування. У статті досліджено вплив цих елементів на формування сучасної мовної картини Італії та виникнення стереотипів про італійську мову, наголошено на важливості розуміння їхнього історичного коріння для об'єктивного сприйняття італійської культури. З'ясовано, що поширені стереотипи, зокрема уявлення про легке розуміння латини носіями італійської мови, хоча вона має високий ступінь лексичної схожості з латиною (89%), та асоціація діалектів з низьким соціальним статусом, є історично обумовленими. Визначено, що ці стереотипи, які активно поширюються засобами масової інформації та популярною культурою, впливають на сприйняття італійської мови та її носіїв, формуючи упередження щодо їхньої культурної ідентичності. Зокрема, наголошується, що стереотип про легке розуміння латини італійцями є хибним через значні мовні зміни з плином часу, а діалекти історично стигматизовано через асоціацію з низькою освітою та соціальним статусом, що бере свій початок з часів об'єднання Італії та впровадження єдиної державної мови. Описано історичний шлях розвитку італійської мови від Римської імперії до сьогодення, коли вульгарна латинь стала основою для формування італійської, виділено ключових історичних діячів, таких як Данте Аліг'єрі, Петрарка, Боккаччо та П'єтро Бембо, чий внесок у літературу та кодифікацію мови вплинув на її розвиток та формування стереотипів. Підкреслено, що вибір Данте писати "Божественну комедію" флорентійським діалектом став визначальним моментом у його становленні як літературної норми, а праці інших авторів епохи Відродження сприяли закріпленню тосканської традиції в літературній мові. З'ясовано, що попри мовну спорідненість, носії італійської мови не завжди розуміють латину через фонетичні, граматичні та лексичні відмінності, які виникли протягом століть, а використання діалектів історично стигматизовано через асоціацію з низькою освітою та соціальним статусом. Підбиті підсумки про необхідність критичного аналізу цих стереотипів для об'єктивного розуміння італійської культури та мовного різноманіття.

Ключові слова: *італійська мова, латинська мова, історія, тосканський діалект, стереотип, діалекти, стигматизація, соціальний статус.*

Introduction. Italian, as one of the most melodic and expressive languages in the world, has a rich cultural and historical context that shapes its perception in English-speaking countries. Of course, relying on stereotypes, it is much easier for speakers of two different languages to imagine at least something about their interlocutor.

28

Слобожанський науковий вісник. Серія: Філологія, випуск 9, 2025

This helps individuals hear another language, perceive information, and, by comparing stereotypes with the real picture, conclude for themselves. That is why research on language stereotypes is important. In addition, they help us to better understand the linguistic and cultural aspects of language, as they allow us to consider it not only as a communicative tool but also as a carrier of cultural information that reflects historical, social and regional contexts. Another important aspect is that stereotypes about the Italian language are actively disseminated through the media and popular culture, which emphasizes the need to critically analyze these images better to understand the cultural diversity of the Italian community.

Materials and methods. In modern studies of the history and development of the Italian language, we can single out Martin Maiden's A Linguistic History of Italian [1], which is a fundamental study of the development of the Italian language, from its Latin origins to its current state; Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio C. Lepschy's The Italian Language Today [2], an article that explores the current state of the Italian language, including its dialectal variation and use in various social contexts; Emma Wall's articles, in particular, «Bilingualism in the Classroom: Using Latin as an Aid to the Learning of Modern Italian» [3], where the author argues that Latin, as the basis of the Romance languages, has a direct impact on the study of Italian, as much of its vocabulary comes from Latin or has common roots, etc. This study employs a comprehensive methodological approach to analyze the historical development of the Italian language and the formation of linguistic stereotypes. A combination of qualitative and historical-linguistic methods is used to achieve the research objectives. The comparative-historical method is applied to trace the evolution of the Italian language from its Latin origins to its modern form and also helps to identify key linguistic shifts and their influence on contemporary perceptions of the language. The diachronic analysis examines language changes over time, particularly the transformation of Vulgar Latin into various regional dialects and the subsequent standardization of Italian. This method enables a deeper understanding of how historical events and socio-political factors contributed to linguistic modifications. A sociolinguistic approach is employed to explore the relationship between language and society, focusing on how stereotypes about Italian and its dialects have been shaped by cultural and historical contexts. This analysis considers the role of mass media and popular culture in reinforcing or challenging linguistic prejudices. And, finally, discourse analysis is used to investigate how linguistic stereotypes about the Italian language are constructed and disseminated in academic literature, media, and public discourse. This method provides insight into the socio-cultural mechanisms that contribute to the perception of Italian as a "classical" or "prestigious" language while marginalizing its dialectal diversity.

The objective of the present article is to study the process of formation of the Italian language through the analysis of its historical sources, in particular the influence of classical Latin, regional dialects and the Tuscan literary tradition, to identify how these elements contributed to the formation of the modern linguistic image of Italy and influenced the emergence of stereotypes about the Italian language; to identify and overcome language stigma.

Discussion. The historical context of the Italian language is complex and multilayered, starting with its origins in the Roman Empire. Italian, as we know it today, evolved from Vulgar Latin, a language spoken by the common people, as opposed to Classical Latin, which was used by the elite. By the time the Roman Empire collapsed, Latin had spread and was imposed throughout the Empire as the «lingua franca», or common language [4].

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, Vulgar Latin became the dominant form of communication on the Apennine Peninsula. Over the following centuries, the language underwent significant changes under the influence of numerous conquests and cultural exchanges. However, it was Italy, as the historical center of the Roman Empire, that retained a special status in the minds of Europeans, which greatly influenced the formation of stereotypes about the "classical" nature of the Italian language. It is often viewed as the least corrupt descendant of vulgar Latin, due to Italy's central role in Roman civilization and relative isolation from external influences compared to other Romance languages such as Spanish or French [5].

Italian retains a high degree of lexical similarity with Latin – about 89%, which is one of the highest rates among the Romance languages. For comparison, this figure is 89% in French, 87% in Catalan, 85% in Sardinian, 82% in Spanish, 80% in Portuguese, 78% in Ladino, and 77% in Romanian. This similarity can be seen in the vocabulary: many Italian words retain the almost unchanged form of their Latin counterparts, for example, mano (hand), terra (land), libro (book) [5]. In addition to lexical similarities, modern Italian makes extensive use of Latin expressions that have become commonplace: "a priori" – 'in advance', 'a posteriori' – 'from experience', 'ad hoc' – 'for this purpose', 'bis' – 'twice', etc. [6]. This preservation of Latin expressions strengthens the perception of the Italian language as a "successor" to the classical tradition and contributes to the spread of the idea of its sophistication and authenticity.

The phonological system of Italian also reflects the influence of Latin. For example, the preservation of the distinction between short and long consonants is one of its distinctive features that many other Romance languages have lost. This not only gives Italian a special sound, but also reinforces its image as the language that has remained closest to Latin. However, despite all these similarities, Italian is significantly different from its ancestral language. While Latin did not use articles, Italian uses them as an integral part of its grammar. Also, Latin had three grammatical genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), while modern Italian recognizes only two [3, p. 33]. These peculiarities of the Italian language have contributed to the stereotype of its "nobility" and closeness to the classical tradition, which, in turn, has influenced its perception as a language of art, music, and literature. The idea of Italian being "classical" has become a cultural construct supported

Слобожанський науковий вісник. Серія: Філологія, випуск 9, 2025

29

by both linguistic features and the historical heritage of Rome.

It is a common stereotype that Italians can easily understand Latin texts due to their linguistic heritage. However, although Italian has a lot in common with Latin, this does not mean that the two languages are interchangeable. A modern native Italian speaker will not be able to communicate effectively with someone who speaks classical or even vulgar Latin because of the significant changes that have occurred over time. In addition, we should not forget the diversity within Italy itself, with numerous dialects influenced by historical invasions and local cultures, which can obscure the understanding of how closely Standard Italian is related to its Latin roots. For example, Sardinian is often considered to be phonetically closer to Latin than Standard Italian.

In the Middle Ages, the Italian language continued to evolve, enriched by new words and expressions due to the invasions of Germanic tribes, Arabs, and Normans. In the 13th and 14th centuries, Tuscany, particularly Florence, became Italy's important cultural and economic centre [7]. Economic development contributed to the rise of culture, leading to outstanding writers' emergence. The attempt to establish common language norms and codify the Italian language, known as the «questione della lingua» (language question), sparked debate among representatives of different cultural and ideological backgrounds. A key moment in the formation of the modern Italian language was the Renaissance when Dante Alighieri decided to write his Divine Comedy in Florentine [8, p. 119]. His choice of language was revolutionary: instead of Latin, which was considered the language of the elite, he chose a language that was understandable to the general public. This decision catalysed the Tuscan dialect's widespread recognition as the basis of the literary Italian language. Petrarch and Boccaccio continued this tradition. Petrarch, known for his sonnets, contributed significantly to the development of poetic language, and Boccaccio, with his Decameron, became the first great prose writer of Italian literature [1, p. 4]. While Latin continued to dominate as the language of scholarship and official communication, the Florentine dialect was considered the language that could unite the country's literary and cultural elite. Philologists and writers such as Pietro Bembo proposed a normative grammar and vocabulary that emphasized the classical texts of the Tuscan tradition of the fourteenth century. They tried to codify vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation based on the language of Dante's Divine Comedy and Petrarch's sonnets. This desire for classicism created the risk of Italian becoming a «dead language» similar to Latin, as it could lose touch with the real language practice of a living people. However, this approach underwent significant changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when it became apparent that a living language constantly evolves and adapts. The vocabulary expanded by introducing numerous words featuring prefixes and suffixes, such as -issimo and -one. Additionally, many scientific terms were derived from Latin, including cellula (cell), condensare (condense), iniezione (injection), iperbole (hyperbole),

prisma (prism), and scheletro (skeleton). Legal terminology also saw significant influence from Latin, with words like aggressione (aggression), consulente (counselor), and patrocinio (patronage) becoming part of the lexicon [8, p. 119]. Thanks to the efforts of later linguists, grammarians, and writers, Italian incorporated organic changes that reflected its use in different social and regional contexts. The Enlightenment thinkers sought to spread truth and the light of reason universally, aiming to eliminate superstition and prejudice to foster humanity's spiritual and material advancement. This philosophy is reflected in their written language, which prioritizes substance over stylistic elegance.

This cultural dominance of the Florentine dialect in literature has given rise to the misconception that modern Italian dialects are offshoots of the early Italian language. The opposite was true. Modern Italian, as a standard language, emerged from one particular dialect, Florentine, one of many linguistic varieties that formed based on Vulgar Latin in Italy during the first millennium AD [9]. The Italian dialects that exist today are not «dialects of Italian» in the traditional sense. They are independent language systems that developed in parallel from Vulgar Latin in different regions of the country. These dialects have deep historical roots and reflect the richness of cultural influences specific to each region. For example, the northern dialects are influenced by Germanic languages, while Arabic and Greek influence the southern dialects. That is why Italian is not the «mother» of dialects but rather one of the many «descendants» of Vulgar Latin, which, due to historical, cultural, and political circumstances, became the standard [1, p. 4]. Today in Italy, more and more attention is paid to the preservation and popularization of regional language variants. Dialects, which have long been considered a sign of provincialism, are now perceived as an important element of cultural heritage. They preserve unique linguistic structures, words and phrases that reflect the historical characteristics of individual regions. In some parts of Italy, dialects are actively used in everyday communication, as well as in music, theater and cinema. This approach contributes to renewed interest in the country's linguistic diversity and helps to understand that Italian is only one of many possible forms of linguistic expression within Italy. This confirms that the country's linguistic identity is multifaceted, and that dialects are not a relic of the past but a living part of contemporary culture [9].

Only in the nineteenth century, the language used by the educated elite of Tuscany began to spread and gradually became the official language of the newly created nation. The unification of Italy in 1861 was not only a political turning point but also brought about significant social, economic, and cultural changes. Introducing compulsory schooling increased literacy rates and the spread of standard Italian. As a result, many speakers of local dialects gradually began to switch to the common state language [10]. Numerous grammars and dictionaries appeared during this period, contributing to forming a single language standard [8, p. 120]. From there, the stereotype that dialects

30

Слобожанський науковий вісник. Серія: Філологія, випуск 9, 2025

are a sign of ignorance originated. Due to the low literacy level in the nineteenth century, the use of dialects became associated with illiteracy, lack of education, and low social status. It was believed that the transition to standard Italian was a necessary step to achieve social and economic success. An interesting fact: during World War II, Mussolini, who led the Italian government, launched a campaign to «clean up» the Italian language. It included the persecution of linguistic minorities and the forced exclusion of words of foreign origin from the lexicon [8, p. 116]. This step further supported the stereotypical opinion of Italians that dialect users are a socially more unacceptable minority.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, standard Italian gradually became more widespread while the use of dialects declined. One of the key factors in this process was the growth of literacy. It can be assumed that only educated people could master standard Italian, while illiterate people mostly used only their native dialects. The literacy rate in Italy increased significantly from 25% in 1861 to 60% in 1911 and to 78.1% in 1951 [2, p. 35].

It was only in 2007 that the Italian parliament officially recognized Italian as the state language, enshrining its status in legislation (The fascinating journey of the Italian language). However, diglossia is still common in Italy today, when people use both the standard language and local dialects. In Italian immigrant communities, especially among the older generation, triglossia is often observed when the language of the country of residence is also used alongside standard Italian and a dialect. In such cases, people usually switch between languages depending on the situation (language alternation) or even combine elements of different languages in one sentence (language mixing) (Italian language). This sometimes creates the stereotype that Italians are simultaneously the bearers of «official culture» through the standard language and «local authenticity» through dialects. In immigrant communities, this stereotype was further complicated by the influence of the languages of the country of residence.

Results. The article reveals several major stereotypes associated with the Italian language that significantly affect the perception of its speakers and cultural identity. First, we have identified the stereotype that Italian speakers have a sufficient understanding of Latin. Many people believe that due to linguistic affinity, modern Italian makes it easy to understand Latin texts. However, despite this similarity, there are significant differences between these languages that do not provide a full understanding of the peculiarities of this language.

Secondly, the use of local dialects in Italy is often associated with a low level of education and social status. This stereotype stems from historical circumstances when standard Italian became a symbol of education and success while dialects were marginalized. This leads to the fact that speakers of dialects may feel stigmatized because of their linguistic affiliation.

The third important point is the cultural dominance of the Florentine dialect, which became the basis for literary Italian. This has created the impression that other dialects are less important or even offshoots of the standard language. In reality, however, each dialect has its historical roots and cultural value.

Thus, linguistic stereotypes about the Italian language shape the speakers' perception and reflect complex historical and social processes. Understanding these stereotypes is important for a deeper understanding of Italy's cultural identity and diversity. Therefore, a critical analysis of these images becomes necessary to promote a more open and tolerant perception of the cultural characteristics of the country's various regions.

Bibliography:
1. Martin M. A Linguistic History of Italian. Taylor and Francis, Hoboken. 2014. 4 p.
2. Lepschy A, Lepschy G. C. The Italian language today (2nd ed.). New York: New Amsterdam. 1988, pp. 35.
3. Wall E. Bilingualism in the Classroom: Using Latin as an Aid to the Learning of Modern Italian. Cambridge University Press. The Journal of Classics Teaching 19 (38). 2018. p. 33. URL: https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/DC8F801C7E417F02F5CEA5E162F002FB/S2058631018000193a.pdf/bilingualism_in_the_classroom_using_latin_as_an_aid_to_the_learning_of_modern_italian.pdf
4. History of the Italian Language. URL: https://www.europassitalian.com/learn/history/
5. Italian's similarities to Latin. URL: https://www.polilingua.com/blog/post/italian-similarities-to-latin.htm
6. Latin words and expression used in Italian. URL: https://danteinlinea.com/blog/en/latin-words-used-in-italian/
7. Timeline of Italian language history. URL: https://www.dilit.it/en/doc/learn-Italian-language/italian_language_history_timeline.html#:~:text=Italian%20language%20history-,Timeline%20of%20Italian%20language%20history,-Learning%20Italian%2C%20like
8. Baldoli C. History of Italy. Macmillan Essential Histories. Vol. 34. 2009, 256 p.
9. The Fascinating Journey of the Italian Language. URL: https://www.dynamiclanguage.com/the-fascinating-journey-of-the-italian-language/
10. Italian Language History. URL: https://www.todaytranslations.com/files/2019/03/Italian-Language-History.pdf

References:
1. Martin, M. (2014). A Linguistic History of Italian. Taylor and Francis, Hoboken. 4 p. [in English].
2. Lepschy, A., Lepschy, G. C. (1988). The Italian language today (2nd ed.). New York: New Amsterdam. pp. 35. [in English].
3. Wall, E. (2018). Bilingualism in the Classroom: Using Latin as an Aid to the Learning of Modern Italian. Cambridge University Press. The Journal of Classics Teaching 19 (38). p. 33. Available at:https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/

Слобожанський науковий вісник. Серія: Філологія, випуск 9, 2025

31

aop-cambridge-core/content/view/DC8F801C7E417F02F5CEA5E162F002FB/S2058631018000193a.pdf/bilingualism_ in_the_classroom_using_latin_as_an_aid_to_the_learning_of_modern_italian.pdf [in English].

4. History of the Italian Language. Available at: https://www.europassitalian.com/learn/history/ [in English].

5. Italian's similarities to Latin. Available at: https://www.polilingua.com/blog/post/italian-similarities-to-latin.htm [in English].

6. Latin words and expression used in Italian. Available at:https://danteinlinea.com/blog/en/latin-words-used-in-italian/ [in English].

7. Timeline of Italian language history. Available at:https://www.dilit.it/en/doc/learn-Italian-language/italian_ language_history_timeline.html#:~:text=Italian%20language%20history-,Timeline%20of%20Italian%20language%20 history,-Learning%20Italian%2C%20like [in English].

8. Baldoli, C. (2009). History of Italy. Macmillan Essential Histories. Vol. 34. 256 p. [in English].

9. The Fascinating Journey of the Italian Language. Available at: https://www.dynamiclanguage.com/the-fascinating-journey-of-the-italian-language/ [in English].

10. Italian Language History. Available at: https://www.todaytranslations.com/files/2019/03/Italian-Language-History.pdf [in English].

Слобожанський науковий вісник. Серія: Філологія, випуск 9, 2025

32