Language and dialect in north-west Italy
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Only recently has Italian come to replace regional dialects as the main language of the home in Italy, but not in all homes. Almost half the population of Italy still uses dialect in the family, at least with some members (according to self-evaluation responses to the ISTAT survey of 2006). Passive competence in one of the many dialects is even more widespread and there is evidence of increasing bilingual use (Italian and a dialect or a ‘minority language’) in the family. So-called ‘dialects’, such as Piedmontese, Ligurian, Neapolitan, Sicilian, are not debased or ‘corrupt’ versions of Italian, but separate linguistic systems that evolved directly from Latin, alongside Florentine, the variety that forms the basis of the standard language. Some can be as different from Italian as Spanish, for example, and mutually incomprehensible. At the time of political Unification in 1861, for most Italians dialect was the only language of the home and it has been estimated that only 2.5% of the population could actually speak Italian (De Mauro 1972; other scholars have suggested up to 12%), but in the last 150 years, the situation has been reversed, as most Italians now speak a variety of Italian. A decline in dialect usage is especially apparent in the north-west of Italy, where according to the 2006 statistics in Liguria only 25.9%, in Piedmont 35.2%; and Lombardy 35.7% of respondents said they used any dialect in the home (vs. 69.9% in the Veneto, 74.4% in Calabria). However, after a century of negative evaluation (even repression under Fascism), attitudes to the dialects have in the last few decades become more positive, to the extent that most people now say they are concerned about the possible loss of a unique part of their heritage (although few are prepared to do anything about it), and some even lobby the state for language status to be given to their regional dialect, e.g. to Piedmontese.

My talk will consider issues of language status, bilingualism, language contact and code-switching / -mixing.

Bibliography

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