Chapter 2

Italian at the crossroad of internationalization

Language policy discourse of an expanding language

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1 Introduction

This chapter draws inspiration from some recent studies concerning the impact of European political macro-strategies on supranational and national language policies and the internationalization of Higher Education (Gaspard, 2013; Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2011; Tudor, 2004; Wodak & Fairclough, 2010). As it can be seen from these studies, European language policies in the last decade have been given an overall economic orientation as a result of the European Lisbon Strategy, an action and development plan devised in 2000 which aimed "to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by 2010 (European Council, 2000, point no. 5). The Strategy rested on three main pillars: economic, social, and environmental, for the transition to a competitive, dynamic, knowledge-based economy. To achieve its goal, the Lisbon Strategy required not only an enhancement in research infrastructure and funding but also a major transformation of education and training. The global trend of economization *via* the knowledge-based economy has also had a major impact on the language ideologies influencing debates on recent language policies, as is the case in other policy fields, such as higher education (Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2011; Wodak & Fairclough, 2010). Likewise, Gaspard (2013) gives extensive evidence to show that the neoliberal ideology, which is inspired by the Lisbon Strategy and which has been driving European policies in

the last decade, is also reflected in the Higher Education system, re-orienting both academic practices and the promotional discourses of European universities.

The redefinition of the role of universities induced by globalization and European macro-strategies is clearly based on the unchallenged principle of competitiveness. This has led to the emergence in universities of unprecedented practices and forms of procedure that traditionally belonged to companies, such as an increasingly quantitative approach to research and tuition assessment, the internationalization of a large part of its activities (including student recruitment, teacher exchange and research projects), a greater emphasis on the quality of services / products and so on. This means that it is now possible to define them as *entrepreneurial* or *corporate universities* (Gaspard, *op. cit.*, p. 54).

As we argue in this chapter, these economy-driven policies are apparently reflected in Italy's language policy abroad and in the promotional discourse of its institutions, but they also seem to have a deeper impact.

Three main dimensions are at play in the internationalization of higher education:

(a) the *macro-level* explores the relation between European political macro-strategies and supranational policies concerning language education in the framework of internationalization;

(b) the *meso-level* focuses on the impact of the above-mentioned policies on the Italian higher education system through its recent language policies for the dissemination of the Italian language and culture abroad, as well as language education policies for international students in Italian institutes of higher education;

(c) the *micro-level* critically discusses the implementation of these policies locally, as well as the possible risks that they may entail for higher education programmes of Italian as a non-native language.

In this chapter, we will focus in particular on the second and third levels. As far as the meso-level is concerned, the critical examination of Italian language dissemination strategies will be addressed by the analysis of its promotional discourse as emerging from institutional documents and Websites, as opposed to its actual implementation on a local level. On the micro-level, a case study on the educational offer of Italian as a non-native language at a medium-sized Italian university will help us to discuss the *applications*, *implications* and, sometimes, *contradictions* of the still-uncertain language policy of Italian language and to consider their potential impact on the teaching environment.

2 Italian as an expanding language

Italian is the heritage language of large communities of Italians of different generations living all over the world, as well as the second language of many "new Italians" who decided to settle and work in Italy. As a consequence of the internationalization of

higher education, Italian, like other European languages, is increasingly becoming a language of higher instruction for a growing number of students who choose to study Italian and enrol in Italian universities. This new trend is clearly the result of European policies concerning internationalization, but also the effect of Italy's recent language policy, which sees the made-in-Italy branding and tourism as major factors of promotion.

In the light of geopolitical changes and the ensuing modified economic landscapes, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, or MAE) has recently invested in these growing trends by implementing strategic measures for the dissemination of the Italian language and culture abroad, so as to attract a greater number of students to study Italian in their countries and/or to increase the presence of international students in Italian universities.

In the following sub-sections, after considering the reasons for the appeal of the Italian language abroad, we will discuss how language learning is at the core of the so-called "Country-system" strategy for the promotion of Italy and Italian culture abroad.

2.1 The appeal of Italian, a language of "cultures"

Unlike other countries such as the United Kingdom, France or Spain, Italy cannot count on its historical, political or economic power for the expansion of its language and culture abroad. As it is a language without a real empire, the fortune of the Italian language all over the world has mostly relied on its past and present emigration fluxes as well as its long cultural tradition in its various manifestations rather than on the action of strong institutions (Bruni, 2002).

Several relatively recent studies (De Mauro & Vedovelli, 2002; Società Dante Alighieri, 2003; Turchetta, 2005) appear to show that the significant spread of the Italian language outside Italy is still closely linked to its important and illustrious past, even though the motivation as to why Italian is studied abroad varies greatly according to each individual country and tuition levels. Nowadays, a major factor for its diffusion abroad is that it is the symbol of an attractive "everyday culture" (Galisson, 2000), which leads a large number of foreigners to visit Italy or to study its language.

Language policy makers have always invested in this type of appeal, which is still a central goal of the Italian government diffusion policies. In this "bottom-up" language policy, one cannot find a real disjunction between what is generally considered "high culture", or *culture savante* (comprising of literature, arts, opera and so on), and a more anthropological concept of culture or *culture courante* (food and wine, design, fashion and, widely speaking, all things made in Italy) (*ibid.*). Rather, it is the interpenetration of these two dimensions that has been a strategy for the promotion of the Italian language and culture abroad for a long time (Società Dante Alighieri, 2003, p. 22) and still continues to be at the core of Italian language dissemination strategies overseas as well as of syllabus design and teaching materials.

These general trends are confirmed by the recent research *Italiano 2010* (Giovanardi & Trifone, 2012) on what motivates foreigners to study the language of Dante in their

countries. The study substantially confirms the results of previous research (De Mauro & Vedovelli, 2002, among others), even though two new observations can be recorded: on the one hand, there is a strong increase in "free time and various interests" as a source of motivation (23% more), confirming that Italian is increasingly a language of culture or, better, a language of *cultures* in the above-described extended sense. On the other hand, there is a sharp decrease in motivations related to "personal and family reasons" (15.4% less), which dropped from the second to the last place. Giovanardi and Trifone (2012) interpret this drop in the ranking as the gradual advent of new models and needs in place of the traditional attachment to their roots by second and later generations of Italians abroad. However, "personal and family reasons" are still rated highly as a strong motivation (37%) for studying Italian as a heritage language for the numerous Latin Americans of Italian origin (*ibid.*, p. 29). A significant decline can also be highlighted as far as the motivation due to "work" is concerned (9.6% less) —evidently as a consequence of the worsening of Italian socioeconomic conditions and the rise in unemployment in the last decade— while "study" as a motivation remains substantially unchanged, with only a slight increase (3% more).

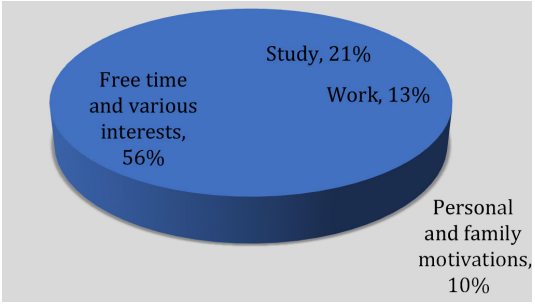


Figure 1: Main motivations for studying Italian abroad (Giovanardi & Trifone, 2012, p. 27)

While students from Western Europe, Oceania and North America mainly choose Italian for reasons concerning "free time and various interests" (100%), "work" is still the main motivation for studying Italian for 50% of African students. Moreover, Italian is mainly a medium of instruction for 75% of students from the Middle East who choose it for "study" reasons, followed by students from Eastern Europe (35%) and from India and the Far East (28,5%) (Giovanardi & Trifone, 2012, pp. 29–30).

2.2 The promotion of the Italian language as part of the "Country system" strategy

Italian can be considered an expanding language not only for the increasing number of language courses abroad or of students choosing it around the world, but also for its latest language policy which aims to make Italian competitive on the global market with more widespread languages. Especially in the last few years, the MAE has in fact made the dissemination of the Italian language and culture an area of priority commitment. The promotion of the Italian language and culture abroad has been formally strengthened by a declared systemic approach based on the cooperation with a network of institutions both in Italy and abroad. Among its most recent actions

we can find the organization of the States-General of Italian language in the world, which took place in Florence in October 2014. An integral part of the MAE's strategic activity, the States-General was hailed as an opportunity to examine the strategies for the dissemination of the Italian language abroad and engage in a constructive discussion of the new challenges to be faced (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2014).

The diffusion of the Italian language is thus one of the main objectives of the MAE's policy in the cultural field and currently represents one of the key factors in the so-called "Country system" strategy, which aims at the promotion of the productive, economic, cultural and scientific systems of the Country as a whole. As stated in a recent parliamentary document (Camera dei Deputati, 2014), in order to promote the Italian "Country system", this network has the duty to "transmit a coherent and global image of the Country" and to create an "ever-greater integration between the economic, cultural and scientific dimensions" (*ibid.*, p. 5). This strategy is envisaged as a way to trigger a "drag effect" in the System, by investing in cultural tourism as well as in the inclination for the made-in-Italy branding in all its forms. Among the most recent responses to this goal is the institutional unification of language certifications of Italian as a foreign language. This is described as a necessary step in overcoming the fragmented image of the teaching of Italian to foreign learners and a way of presenting abroad a unified system of certification as a "brand of the linguistic quality" of Italian (*cf. ibid.*, p. 16).

Given the evidence that "culture" as well as "language" are envisaged as potential commodities in the field of higher education (*cf.* Grin, 2005), the Italian "Country system" approach seems to be a perfect application of the Lisbon Strategy philosophy of a knowledge-based economy but maybe goes even further since it promotes an *economy-based language policy*, often applying to language programmes the promotional techniques and discourses of international commerce.

3 The promotional discourse on higher education Italian language programmes

The meso-level of our research is aimed at reflecting on the impact of EU political macro-strategies and the related internationalization of the higher education system on national language education policies, with particular reference to Italian programmes for international students.

Investing in the above-described trends and prospects, in the last decade some specific higher education programmes have been implemented so as to attract international students to come and study in Italy. On the basis of an intergovernmental agreement between Italy and China, since 2004, the "Marco Polo" programme has enabled Chinese students to enrol in Italian universities, while the "Turandot" programme gives them access to institutes of higher education for arts, music and design. Thus each academic year, over 4 000 Chinese students enter an Italian higher education institution where a special quota has been reserved for them. The offer of a place comes with the proviso that they attend a preparatory long-term language course of 8 months in one of the Italian universities or language schools involved in the programmes.

The "Marco Polo" programme, in particular, was intended as one of the main initiatives in the promotion of the appeal of the international Italian university system in the world. Furthermore it was an opportunity to outline —perhaps for the first time— a shared national action-model between universities, so that the Italian System could become a reference point for a potentially very large audience of the same origin (*cf.* Vedovelli, 2011).

Despite its well-meaning intent, the "Marco Polo" programme has revealed a certain number of fallacies which, as Vedovelli points out, are rooted in the centralist, interventionist and regulatory vision of national Italian language policy, thus entailing the evident risk of excessive bureaucratization or, on the contrary, a pseudo-privatization of higher education intervention (*ibid.*, p. 9) (see also Part 4). The need for efficiency in the programme has therefore been emptied of its qualitative content in the name of an alleged *managerialism* which seems to inspire most of the Italian language policy, from promotional strategies abroad to national and local programmes and actions for international students (see Part 4).

A discourse-analysis approach (Maingueneau, 1996) to institutional media communication may help to reveal the strong interplay between this neoliberal ideology and higher education language policies as far as the above-mentioned programmes are concerned:

> *Nuovo* fortissimo incremento *delle iscrizioni di studenti cinesi nelle università italiane per l'anno accademico 2012–2013, in linea con il trend di questi ultimi anni, attraverso i programmi Marco Polo e Turandot. [...] Le iscrizioni hanno raggiunto la* cifra record di 2489 studenti *con un* incremento del 46% *rispetto all'anno precedente. [...] Secondo i dati dell'anno precedente le iscrizioni per il contingente estivo potrebbero essere* circa 1500–2000*, che porterebbero il totale per l'anno accademico 2011–2012 ad* oltre 4 000 studenti. *Il* maggior numero di iscrizioni *si è registrato nella circoscrizione consolare di Pechino (1569) con un* aumento *del 46% rispetto all'anno precedente, seguita da Shanghai (689, +51%) e Canton (231, +94%).* [Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2012.]
>
> [There has been a further *marked increase* in the numbers of Chinese students enrolling in Italian universities for the academic year 2012–13 through the Marco Polo and Turandot programmes. The rise is in line with the trend for recent years. [...] Enrolments have reached *a record figure of 2,489 students*, with a *46% increase* over the previous year. [...] According to the *data* for the preceding year, the enrolments for the summer *quota* may be around 1500–2000, which would bring the *total* for the 2011–2012 academic year to *more than 4 000 students.* The *highest number of enrolments* was registered in the consular district of Beijing (1569), with a 46% *increase* over the previous year, followed by Shanghai (689, + 51%) and Canton (231, +94%). [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2012.]

The extract above, retrieved from the Website of the MAE, is paradigmatic of a self-celebrating institutional communication which privileges a quantitative approach to the phenomenon. As in the analyses of other institutional Websites, it is easy to find lexical units such as "marked increase", "record figure", "data", "quota", "highest number" and "total" as well as a great number of figures and percentages, which create the conditions for what economists define as *benchmarking*. Originally a managing technique based on the comparison between rival companies, *benchmarking* seems actually to be also widely applied in the media communication of institutes of higher education as an effect of internationalization (see Gaspard, 2013).

A clear example of *localization* —another business technique widely applied by international companies— can be found in the Website of *Uni-Italia*, which was originally an association founded by Italian and Chinese institutions in 2008 with the aim of promoting Italian Higher Education abroad and the mobility of foreign students and researchers towards Italian universities. *Uni-Italia* is now cooperating also with other Asian and South-American countries to assists students when they arrive in Italy and for the length of their stay with the aim of facilitating their integration into the new social, academic and cultural environment. *Localization* is generally implemented by international companies to sell their products abroad and entails the adaptation of a product's functional properties and characteristics to accommodate the language, cultural, political and legal differences of a foreign market or country. As far as graphics are concerned, the whole Chinese version of the Website concerning the study of Italian is localised, as one can find only photos of Chinese students and Chinese teachers and no reference to an Italian or multicultural classroom setting. Interestingly, the Italian, English and Portuguese versions of the Website show a smiling female western teacher writing on the blackboard the exhortative sentence "*studiare l'italiano*" (learning Italian), whereas the Chinese version only shows a detail of the same image, namely the Italian phrase and a part of the teacher's hand (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Uni-Italia Website: Italian, English and Portuguese vs. Chinese versions (Uni-Italia, n.d.)

Another example of *localization* can be detected in the use of language in the English version of the Website, where it is possible to find a clearly idealised image of Italian to suit students' expectations and representations. The means of describing Italian to attract foreign students to enrol in Italian universities and study the language is through promotional discourse, which attempts to convince prospective students that

Italian is the best option within a competitive global market of languages, because of some of its intrinsic and most appealing characteristics:

(a) *Easiness*: "[...] understanding Italian is easier than other foreign languages. This is due to its redundancy: in the masculine and feminine, in the singular and the plural, both articles and adjectives, verbs and nouns." Italian is represented as an *easy* or *easier language*, because of its redundancy due to its grammatical categories which, actually, are not easy at all for any student of a non-Latin language and, least of all, for eastern students;

(b) *Musicality* and *creativity*: "Italian is a musical language, ideal for creating and expressing artistic and musical concepts [...] it is a *lingua franca* in the field of classical music and some of its expressions are not translated into other languages: *andante con moto, larghetto...*" This image clearly stems from the widespread stereotype that Italian is a musical language and that Italians are all artists and singers, but it is also an attempt to capitalise on the well-known fondness for arts and music of many foreign students of Dante's language;

(c) *Dynamism*: "It is a language in continuous development, a living language, one capable of renewing itself and enriching itself with new connotations, possibilities and cultural and linguistic specifics." Thus, not only is Italian presented as the language of a traditional culture, or *culture savante*, but also as a dynamic linguistic and cultural capital in which it is worth investing one's future.

4 Applications and contradictions of higher education Italian language policy

The main objective of the micro-level of our study was to analyse how the above-described policies have been applied locally and what their impact on language teaching and learning might be. The language offer for Italian L2 at a local university has been made the object of a longitudinal case study to observe the applications, implications, and sometimes the contradictions stemming from this "bottom-up", neo-liberal language policy.

As a consequence of internationalization and of the increasing number of foreign students enrolling in its programmes, in the last decade several Italian language and culture courses have been offered for international students at the University of Macerata, a medium-sized university in central Italy. With the exception of Erasmus-student classes offered at the Language Centre, most of these courses, however, were not organised on a regular basis or were often too limited in time to satisfy the students' specific needs. Sometimes they were promoted by single Departments or Faculties for the foreign students attending their curricula only. Other times Italian was taught through English as a medium of instruction or, surprisingly, it was a curricular but optional course within a totally English-taught Master's degree.

An even greater contradiction is given by the fact that the teaching staff of all the courses did not have, and still do not have, any fixed-term contracts but are generally hired from time to time, even though professional competencies for the teaching of

Italian L2 are widely available and despite there is an increasing demand on the students' part.

Moreover, although this is fortunately a goal for the next academic year, the University of Macerata has not yet implemented a stable and long-term offer of Italian courses for international students. This is surprising since it has more than 20 bilateral agreements with foreign countries and annually reserves a special quota for Chinese students, who could potentially be much more numerous if only the university and its surrounding area would adopt a real "systemic approach". The city of Macerata hosts two important institutions —the Confucius Institute and the Matteo Ricci Institute— as a result of which the local municipality and university have a thriving cooperation with Chinese universities and other institutions. Macerata also boasts a renowned Academy of Fine Arts which, through the "Turandot" programme, annually reserves a quota for 100 Chinese students who, however, generally attend their 8-month preparatory course of Italian in other local institutions, sometimes even in a different town.

The list could certainly continue, but it is already clear that the "systemic approach" widely advocated by the Italian language policy, nationally and abroad, is here replaced by an *asystemic and asystematic approach* to the teaching of Italian L2, despite the local university's advanced process of internationalization.

This state of affairs, which is common enough among medium- and small-sized Italian universities, is clearly a consequence of the Italian national policy concerning these specific programmes in particular, but it is also the effect of a wider language *non-policy* for Italian L2, which is continuously suspended between bureaucratization and wild privatization (*cf.* Vedovelli, 2011). Thus, it sometimes happens that these preparatory language courses are assigned to private schools or universities with no real competencies or expertise in the field of Italian L2 teaching. As a consequence of the "Marco Polo" and "Turandot" programmes, some of these schools have "specialised" in the teaching of Italian to Chinese students, mostly giving tuition in monolingual classes, generally with the aid of bilingual teaching textbooks and staff. They also offer tailored out-of-class activities and dedicated assistance services —sometimes even including a Chinese cook— with the evident risk of providing an overprotective environment. It is true perhaps that the linguistic and cultural distance between Italian and Chinese language and culture advocate the need for specific teaching strategies and materials, especially at the very beginning of their stay in a foreign country. In our view, however, this kind of tuition consigns the students to living in a glass case rather than representing an opportunity to learn a language-culture in all its authenticity, the ultimate result of this approach being generally observable in the unsatisfactory language proficiency level of eastern students attending Italian institutes of higher education.

5 Conclusions

As we have tried to make clear, the contradictions here discussed cannot be interpreted as depending only on the distraction or dysfunctioning of local institutions, but are also partly a consequence of supranational and, most importantly, national policies concerning language instruction and the internationalization of Higher Education.

As discussed regarding the Italian case, the neoliberal ideology often driving these policies and actions is not only to be found in the national language policy and the promotional dimension of its strategies and discourse, but may also affect the micro-level of teaching practices.

The local contradictions as well as the limits of higher education programmes such as "Marco Polo" and "Turandot" can be thus interpreted as a part of the wider issue concerning the still-uncertain status of the teaching of Italian in the world and in Italy itself. Despite the advanced state of academic research in this field, Italian L2 is in fact still lacking an autonomous scientific disciplinary sector and thus formal recognition both in Italy and abroad.

Given the uncertain status of Italian and the non-systemic nature of Italian Higher Education, the language policy or *non-policy* for Italian L2 seems to be subjected to "bottom-up" actions, improvisations or parochial concerns, which are promoted from time to time as a solution to critical situations or as a response to real needs emerging from society (*cf.* Vedovelli, 2011).

If only institutes of higher education could adopt a real knowledge-based economic orientation, internationalization and the ensuing new mobility / migration of students would perhaps not only offer a considerable quantitative occasion for universities, but might also become a qualitative opportunity for reciprocal enrichment both for foreign and Italian students as well as teachers.

The increasing presence of international students at universities should also lead researchers to re-think relatively consolidated categories such as "foreign language" and "second language" in the field of language teaching methodology, since for these students the language of the host country is or should become both. Although Italian may be a "foreign" language (FL) at the beginning of their stay, it should gradually become a "second" language (L2) during their period in Italy. This is because it is a language studied where it is spoken but also a way to come in contact with the local environment and university, to socialise with other students from all over the world and, most importantly, to become familiar with the Italian academic environment so as to understand its overt and covert rules which students would otherwise learn by trial and error.

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