

Peter Auer

# The neo-standard of Italy and elsewhere in Europe

**Abstract:** This epilogue tentatively puts the Italian neo-standard in a European perspective by outlining some of the parallel developments in other European languages, particularly German. The notion of a neo-standard is profiled against related concepts such as regional standards and regional sub-standards. The relationship between demoticization and destandardization is discussed.

**Keywords:** neo-standard, traditional standard, Italy, Germany, regional standard

The preceding chapters offer a comprehensive account of the new standard variety of Italian as it has been evolving over the last decades “below” the codified, traditional standard and “above” the regional standard and (regional) sub-standard varieties of Italian. This epilogue will discuss some of the conceptual issues around the notion of a neo-standard as put forward in this volume, and tentatively put the Italian neo-standard in a European perspective by outlining some of the parallel developments in other European languages, particularly German. Although this book is unique in providing a theoretically well-reflected and empirically rich picture of the developments in the Italian language “architecture” (which was previously unavailable, at least in English), the development of a neo-standard itself is not unique in Europe. In many other European states, we observe similar processes leading to the establishment of an “informal” standard that is distinct from the traditional standard and that is used in speaking and writing by a growing segment of the population. New standards of this type have been described and discussed particularly for Denmark (“new Copenhagen standard”; cf. Kristiansen 2001) and Belgium (cf. the debate around the so-called *tussentaal*, e.g. Grondelaers, van Hout and Speelman 2011), and have also received some attention in England (cf. the much disputed “Estuary English”, e.g. Altendorf 2003) and Germany (cf. Auer and Spiekermann 2011). Similar trends can be found elsewhere (cf. the overviews in Kristiansen and Coupland 2011). Nevertheless, these emerging neo-standards are still little understood; they are a challenge for sociolinguistics, not only because their status is theoretically and conceptually difficult to grasp, but also because for many languages, the data

---

Peter Auer, University of Freiburg

DOI 10.1515/9781614518839-013

Bereitgestellt von | De Gruyter / TCS  
Angemeldet  
Heruntergeladen am | 08.02.17 15:38

base is still weak. In both respects, the present volume represents a big step forward.

The term “neo-standard” as coined by Berruto (2012 [1987]) seems more appropriate and better suited to describe these contemporary standard language developments than the term “restandardization”, which is also used in this book. It points to the fact that we are neither dealing with language change within the established and codified standard, nor with a phase of renewed standardization after some kind of relaxation of existing standard norms (as implied by “restandardization” in one reading of the term, which presupposes prior “destandardization”). Instead, as the authors in this volume point out, the old Italian standard continues to exist alongside the neo-standard and is held in high esteem, despite its limited (and perhaps diminishing) use even in the public sphere. The standard ideology remains strong. But in addition to this traditional standard, a second variant has emerged to which various lay attributes can be applied: it is considered to be “more relaxed”, “more personal”, “more subjective”, “less formal”, “less distant”, but also “more creative” and “more modern”.

The emergence of the European neo-standards is intrinsically linked to another pan-European phenomenon: the demise of the traditional and partly also the regional dialects in favour of standard-near ways of speaking. This trend was characteristic of many parts of Europe through the twentieth century (cf. Auer 2005) and continues in the twenty-first century, despite some examples of (regional) dialects which seem to enjoy unbroken vitality, or which have become revitalized. In these latter cases, the dialectal varieties have fundamentally changed their social status and meaning; today they index local belonging often in a very conscious way (cf. the notion of “third order indexicality”, Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006), without any rural, uneducated and hence low-status connotations.

These changes in the dialectal part of the repertoires have gone hand in hand with equally important changes in the standard part of the repertoires. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, and in many regions of Europe well into the twentieth century, oral speech was more or less identical with dialectal speech for the largest part of the population; only a small elite also mastered and used the standard in speaking. It was only during the twentieth century that all layers of society began to have full access of the spoken standard. Today, an increasing number of speakers even choose the standard variety for many, if not all, formal and informal speech events in their everyday lives, and often they no longer have any competence in the dialect. The shift from dialect to standard as the dominant oral variety was a slow one, and it proceeded in different ways and under different circumstances in the European states, but it left only very few of them unaffected (cf. the famous exceptions of German-speaking Switzerland and, to a

certain degree, Norway). Obviously, it was caused by fundamental social transformations such as the diminishing relevance of the agricultural sector of the economy, as well as the subsequent (post-World War II) weakening of the traditional industrial sector and the concomitant emergence of a service-based “New Economy”. The linguistic changes of the repertoire were part and parcel of the big project of nation building and national state formation which continued well into the twentieth century. This project not only established an efficient educational system which helped to spread the standard variety, but was also supported by the developing mass media which, for the first time, made the standard in its spoken form known to the masses.

Mattheier (1997) coined the term “demoti[ci]zation” for this popularization of the standard variety. The “appropriation” of the standard went through various phases and took different forms. I suggest distinguishing between at least three of them, two of which only were of limited success: (a) *regional sub-standards* that came into being when the lower strata of the population were confronted with and attempted to learn the standard but only partly succeeded in doing so; (b) *regional standards* which differ from the (traditional) national standard mostly in terms of phonetics, to a lesser degree also with regard to lexicon and syntax, and were mostly used by the middle classes; and (c) *neo-standards*. While (a) and (b) show a strong or weak substrate influence of the dialects in the area, this is typically not the case for (c). Neo-standards are the most radical outcome of demoti[ci]zation, and the most recent one.

Regional sub-standards as the outcome of imperfect acquisition are best represented in Italy by *italiano popolare* and by *Missingsch* in Germany (the northern German variant of the standard spoken by lower-class speakers of Low German who partially acquired the High German standard). They are typical of the transition period at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the industrial work force. Some of these learners’ varieties found a more permanent place in the linguistic repertoires. For instance, some German regional sub-standards seem to have merged already in the nineteenth century with the “oralization norms” (Schmidt and Herrgen 2011: 63) of the written (!) standard language in the area, as they were common among the leading, educated classes before the establishment of the national norm for the spoken standard. These forms of *landschaftliches Hochdeutsch* showed a heavy influence from the substrate dialects, particularly in their sound shape. When the national standard spread, their status and prestige lowered and they became a regional sub-standard. It was this sub-standard which was often acquired by the non-educated classes, particularly in highly industrialized parts of Germany such as the Berlin area, Upper Saxony and the Ruhrgebiet. (In all these areas, the original dialects disappeared a long time ago, so that the regional sub-standards

now represent the “lowest” way of speaking – i.e. the most regional one which is the most distant from the standard).<sup>1</sup>

Regional standards are also comparatively old. Despite the codification of a national standard of German and Italian in the late nineteenth century, this national standard was not used for speaking by most of the educated classes well into the twentieth century. Instead, both in Italy and Germany, regional variants of the standard language enjoyed high prestige; hence, the spoken standard was different in Milano and Naples, in Hamburg and Munich. These regional standards still exist, and it is not always easy to tell them apart from the neo-standard nor to determine the precise relationship between the two. The best distinguishing criterion is perhaps age: the regional standards clearly preceded the neo-standards of Italy and Germany.

Regional standards are spoken in an area in which the dialects provide their substrate. The neo-standard, I suggest, is not regionalized in the same way, although it may contain (traditionally) regional features. However, these features are becoming “de-localized”. Consequently, features such as (formerly northern German standard) split pronominal adverbs of the type *Da hab ich nichts von* (instead old standard and southern regional standards *davon hab ich nichts* lit. ‘thereof I have nothing’ ~ ‘this is no good to me’) have spread southward in Germany; likewise, (supposedly) northern Italian standard phrasal verb constructions of the type *tirare via* (instead of *staccare* ‘tear off’) have spread southward in Italy (cf. Amenta, this volume; Berruto, this volume). It seems that what determines a neo-standard is its difference from the old standard (in the national language space), while what determines a regional standard is its difference from the dialects (within a given area). The neo-standard clearly is not a vehicle for the transportation of regional identities. I therefore suggest a more radical view than the one taken by many authors in this volume<sup>2</sup> by defining the neo-standard as a non-regionalized variety.

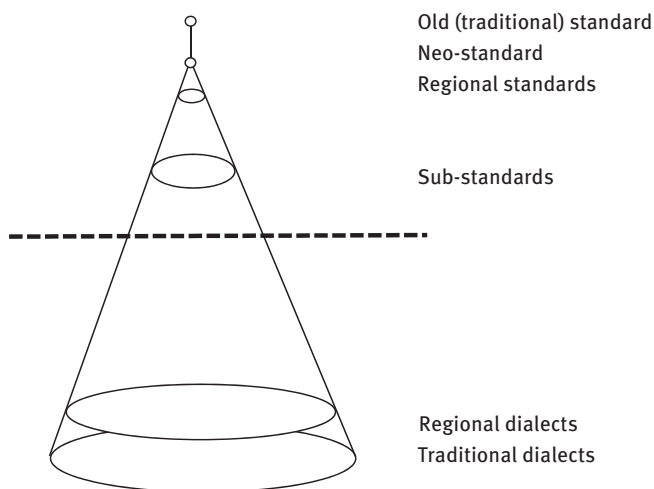
---

**1** Note that these regional sub-standards should not be equated with the regional dialects. The latter are a consequence of interdialectal leveling by which the most salient features of the traditional dialects were eliminated. The difference is also reflected in lay terminology. Speakers of the regional sub-standard in Berlin or the Ruhrgebiet would not refer to their own way of speaking as a dialect.

**2** For instance, while Crocco (this volume) and De Pascale, Marzo and Speelman (this volume) describe every day spoken Italian as “strongly regionalized”, Cerruti, Crocco and Marzo (this volume) foreground the oral and informal features in neo-standard Italian, where regional features only play a secondary role. Berruto (this volume) in turn underlines that regional/dialectal features in the neo-standard do not necessarily/typically correspond with the region the speaker comes from.

The picture is complicated in Italy by the fact that some regional standards have more prestige than others (e.g. Northern Italian pronunciation with Milan as its centre, cf. Crocco, this volume; De Pascale, Marzo and Speelman, this volume; Vietti, this volume); these regional standards may therefore appear to be becoming the neo-standard, particularly with regard to their sound shape. In Germany, no such privileged area exists and all regional standards lose their regionally distinctive features (more salient ones first) once their speakers switch to the neo-standard. Thus, neither the neo-standard nor the old standard can be used to locate the speaker in space.

The structure of a repertoire which includes a neo-standard in addition to the old standard would then be as follows (cf. Figure 1):



**Figure 1:** The cone model of dialect/standard variation.

The “cone model” is of course an abstraction, as every model is. Its ground circle stands for the traditional dialects as spoken in a territory “roofed” by a particular standard variety, here the traditional (old) standard as well as the neo-standard. The traditional standard’s “top” position expresses its (official, overt) prestige. In a language community in which a strong standard ideology exists, the standard is “above” the dialects. The horizontal dimension refers to diatopic variation. The heterogeneity of the traditional dialects along the diatopic dimension is usually very large, and gets smaller the further we go up the cone. The standard by definition reduces diatopic variability, ideally to minimum: the same standard holds for the entire territory. The intermediate levels show more variation

than the standard, but less variation than the traditional dialects in the diatopic dimension; hence, the intermediate circles have a smaller diameter. For instance, regional standards show a limited amount of variation, regional sub-standards (usually) a larger one. Regional dialects are due to the levelling of the traditional dialects and are therefore less heterogeneous than the traditional dialects, but more heterogeneous than any layer above them.

The dotted line is used here to demarcate the dividing line between standard and dialect from a historical linguistic perspective. However, although this line may be obvious to the linguist, it is often blurred for the speakers. For instance, sub-standard regional speech in Upper Saxony, Germany is often considered dialectal by speakers from other parts of Germany, and even regional standard speech in the southern part of the German language area (for instance in Switzerland) is regularly considered dialectal by many northern Germans.<sup>3</sup>

The neo-standard is “below” the traditional standard in terms of its official prestige. Although it is more variable than the traditional standard in the diaphasic and diastratic dimension, its regional variability is small – in the extreme case (which is depicted here) as small as that of the national standard. It might be added here as a caveat that in pluricentric languages such as German and Italian (following Pandolfi, this volume, who discusses the situation in Switzerland), the neo-standards do not seem to transcend the state borders. This may be an important difference between the old standard and the new standard. For instance, the German neo-standard spoken in Germany may be different from the Austrian neo-standard, and the Italian neo-standard of Italy different from that of Switzerland.

---

**3** It is sometimes claimed (for instance by Regis, this volume) that when applied to Italy, the cone model needs to be changed into a double cone model, with one cone representing variation within the standard part of the repertoire, and the other representing variation within the dialectal part. This is justified by historical reasons, as the Italo-Romance dialects preceded standard Italian. However, the same holds for all European dialects – certainly for the German ones which also preceded standard German in language history. We should not be misled here by the fact that in Italian linguistics it is customary to speak of “the Italian language” and exclude the dialects, while in German linguistics it is customary to speak of “the German language” and include them. These different terminologies probably reflect ideological differences but should not make us believe that the historical facts were different.

The cone model as suggested here is not a historical one; rather, it represents the speakers’ perspective on their repertoire. Whether they think that the standard and the dialectal part of their repertoire are clearly distinct (as for instance in a diglossic situation) is an empirical question. For the same reason, the ‘slices’ in the cone should not necessarily be seen as separate varieties. Again, the question of the existence of separate, clearly defined varieties within the repertoire needs to be established on empirical grounds.

The model as shown here represents the German and (in my reading of the studies in this volume also) the Italian situation. In other European countries where a neo-standard has emerged, it may look different. For instance, Denmark does not seem to have regional standards, and the traditional dialects (as well as most of the regional dialects) are almost extinct. The neo-standard is identified with new Copenhagen standard speech. Consequently, the model when applied to Denmark would not have dialects, regional dialects, regional sub-standards or regional standards.

Let us now turn to the neo-standard itself, i.e. to its linguistic features and their linguistic sources. As Berruto (this volume) points out, the model speakers for the old and the new standard are different; in the first case, newsreaders on national TV and radio may be among the few remaining cases. The vast majority of mass media talk follows the neo-standard. The news on national TV are still to a large degree scripted speech, i.e. they are tied to the written modality, although some changes can be observed here as well. (For instance, German newsreaders today often use the analytic past tense – *Perfekt* – instead of the traditionally required synthetic past tense – *Präteritum*). Most mass media talk, on the other hand, is presented as non-scripted speech and pretends to express a personalized and subjective viewpoint. This is one of the reasons why the neo-standard is further away from the written mode (*konzeptionelle Schriftlichkeit*) and comes across as less formal/more personal/more subjective than the traditional standard. More important for the shape of the neo-standard than these model speakers and the media through which they exert their influence, however, are its usage domains. The neo-standard is not restricted for ordinary speakers to peripheral usage domains as the old standard was, but it is used throughout their everyday life. It therefore needs to be flexible enough to deal with manifold situations, differing in terms of co-participants, topics, speech activities, etc. This adaptability can only be reached if there is a considerable amount of internal variability; it is therefore only natural that neo-standards show more internal (diaphasic and diastratic) variation than the traditional standards with their restricted usage domains. The stylistic resources formerly provided by a rich repertoire in which various forms of dialectal speech were available in addition to the standard must now be provided by standard-internal variation alone. Neo-standards provide the means for informal (not only formal) and subjective/personal (not only objective/impersonal) ways of expression; they function both as a *Sprache der Nähe* ('language of closeness') and a *Sprache der Distanz* ('language of distance', cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985).

I suggest that the linguistic features found in the neo-standard can be linked to one or more of the following four of its characteristics: orality, informality, subjectivity/personalization and modernity. The sources from which the

neo-standard draws (in addition to those provided by the old standard) vary accordingly.

*Orality* means that the neo-standard displays typical features of a spoken language. Although these features are also found in other dominantly oral and less prestigious varieties (such as sub-standards or dialects), they do not carry a strong negative prestige in these varieties, perhaps because they are highly functional. It is therefore easy to use them in the neo-standard as well. Among them, topicalization strategies such as hanging topics, left dislocations, presentational clause constructions, etc. figure prominently. These are resources largely absent from the traditional standard. They make the neo-standard suited for its many functions in everyday face-to-face communication.

While oral features are usually perceived as informal, the *informal* character of the neo-standard is not restricted to them. Rather, its main source are features of the sub-standard. Auer and Spiekermann (2011) investigate some of these features “upgraded” from the sub-standard which are typical of the German neo-standard. Their frequency has increased while at the same time regional features (typical of the older regional standard) have been lost. In phonology, what makes the neo-standard informal are phonological processes previously considered to represent “sloppy speech”, among them assimilations and deletions such as, for instance, assimilated /ham, ge:m, ho:ln, zaŋ/ instead of /habən, ge:bən, ho:lən, za:gən/ ‘to have’, ‘to give’, ‘to fetch’, ‘to say’ in the old standard; or final schwa-deletion in the first-person singular from (*ich*) /ge:bə/ > (*ich*) /ge:b/ ‘I give’. Many grammatical neo-standard features having their source in the sub-standard are simplifications (such as, in the case of Italian, the loss of the subjunctive, the use of a generalized relative clause marker, cf. Cerruti, this volume, or the generalization of the masculine dative pronoun *gli* to the feminine *le* and plural *loro*).

Among the features that contribute to the *subjective* and *personalized character* of the neo-standard innovations figure prominently. Many of its features cannot easily be shown to have their source in the sub-standard (let alone in the dialects or the traditional standard). Important examples are the increasing use of direct speech instead of hypotactic constructions and the increasing use of the second- (or even first-) person singular pronoun instead of impersonal constructions for generic statements. Another example pervasive among the neo-standards of Europe is the use of a vagueness (or topic) marker such as *tipo* in Italian, *so* in German, *genre* in French, *like* in English, etc., as in Italian *ma tipo se faccio un caffè?*, lit. ‘but like if I make a coffee?’ ~ ‘how about making a coffee?’ (from Berruto, this volume).

Finally, the *modernity* of the neo-standard can be linked to a group of features discussed in this volume which are not often linked to the emergence of



neo-standards in the literature; rather, they are explained as consequences of English language contact. There are obvious cases among them, such as lexical loans and calques (cf. Asnaghi, this volume), but in the case of confix formations such as those with *maxi-*, *mega-*, *super-*, etc. (discussed by Berruto, this volume), or in the case of re-analyses such as *cafeteria* → *snacketeria*, *luncheteria*; *astronauta* → *gastronauta* (from Bombi, this volume), we are dealing with new types of word formation which, although they have parallels in English, have long become a productive part of the morphology of German and Italian (as well as many other European languages). An essential surplus value of these words is that they are often neologisms which puzzle and surprise the reader/hearer; usually they are short-lived, and only few of them make it into everyday vocabulary.

Despite its oral and informal, subjective and innovative character, the neo-standard has a relatively high prestige which distinguishes it from the (regional) sub-standard. Arguably, the neo-standard receives this prestige by being associated with situations and typified speakers different from those associated with the old standard: by using the new standard, the speaker presents himself or herself as a modern, dynamic, up-to-date, well-informed and capable of dealing with a globalized and quickly changing world.

This brings me to a last issue, the impact of the neo-standards on the traditional (old) standards. Sociolinguists who see demoti[ci]zation as the opposite of destandardization often claim that the old standard remains unaffected by the emerging neo-standard. This of course depends first of all on what we mean by destandardization. There are various alternatives: one is that the standard loses its high prestige; the second is that it integrates features from the sub-standard (which might be indistinguishable from language change); the third is that a standard dissolves into regional standards. Usually, destandardization is understood in the first sense. If we follow this definition of destandardization, it is independent from demoti[ci]zation, as demoti[ci]zation of the standard can lead to a loss of prestige, but this is not always the case. Of course, the two may also go together, i.e. demoti[ci]zation can be accompanied by the old standard losing its prestige. In Italy and Germany, there is good evidence that the traditional standard is still held in relatively high esteem. However, is it really true that attitudes attached to it have remained the same over the last 100 years? Since the values of the neo-standard stand in opposition to those of the traditional standard, this cannot be true. The prestige of the neo-standard, as I have tried to argue above, is based on values such as modernity, informality, personalization and innovation. It follows that the traditional standard – by being constructed as the ideological counterpart of the new one – becomes associated with the opposite: tradition, formality, depersonalization, conservatism. Depending on how these features are estimated in a society, this can be tantamount to a devalorization of the traditional

standard and hence to destandardization. Whether this is in fact the case in Italy or Germany needs to be investigated empirically.

The present volume sets an agenda for future research in Europe. We can only hope that more research will follow in other states and on other languages so that we may come to a better understanding of what is going on in the standard varieties of contemporary Europe.

## References

- Altendorf, Ulrike. 2003. *Estuary English. Levelling at the interface of RP and South-Eastern British English*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Auer, Peter. 2005. Europe's sociolinguistic unity, or: A typology of European dialect/standard constellations. In Nicole Delbecque, Johan van der Auwera & Dirk Geeraertes (eds.), *Perspectives on variation*, 7–42. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.
- Auer, Peter & Helmut Spiekermann. 2011. Demotisation of the standard variety or destandardisation? The changing status of German in late modernity (with special reference to south-western Germany). In Tore Kristiansen & Nikolas Coupland (eds.), *Standard languages and language standards in a changing Europe*, 161–176. Oslo: Novus Press.
- Berruto, Gaetano. 2012 [1987]. *Sociolinguistica dell'italiano contemporaneo*. 2nd edn. Roma: Carocci. (1987: Roma: La Nuova Italia Scientifica).
- Grondelaers, Stefan, Roeland van Hout & Dirk Speelman. 2011. A perceptual typology of standard language situations in the Low Countries. In Tore Kristiansen & Nikolas Coupland (eds.), *Standard languages and language standards in a changing Europe*, 199–222. Oslo: Novus Press.
- Johnstone, Barbara, Jennifer Andrus & Andrew J. Danielson. 2006. Mobility, indexicality, and the enregisterment of “Pittsburghese”. *Journal of English Linguistics* 34(2). 77–104.
- Koch, Peter & Wulf Oesterreicher. 1985. Sprache der Nähe – Sprache der Distanz. Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im Spannungsfeld von Sprachtheorie und Sprachgeschichte. *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 36, 15–43. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kristiansen, Tore. 2001. Two standards: one for the media and one for the school. *Language Awareness* 10(1). 9–24.
- Kristiansen, Tore & Nikolas Coupland (eds.) 2011. *Standard languages and language standards in a changing Europe*. Oslo: Novus Press.
- Mattheier, Klaus 1997. Über Destandardisierung, Umstandardisierung und Standardisierung in modernen europäischen Standardsprachen. In Klaus J. Mattheier & Edgar Radtke (eds.), *Standardisierung und Destandardisierung europäischer Nationalsprachen*, 1–9. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Schmidt, Jürgen & Joachim Herrgen. 2011. *Sprachdynamik*. Berlin: Schmitt Verlag.