Handbook on Counteracting Accent Discrimination Practices in Education

editors
Luís Guerra
Lili Cavalheiro
Ricardo Pereira
Laura Melgão
Jean Antunes

Co-funded by the European Union

CIRCE
counteracting accent discrimination practices in education

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DESIGN
António Pedro

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Edições Húmus, Lda., 2026
Apartado 7081
4764-908 Ribeirão – V. N. Famalicão
Telef. 926 375 305
humus@humus.com.pt | edicoeshumus.pt
1.ª edição: Janeiro de 2026
ISBN: 978-989-9275-86-7
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18758775

DISCLAIMER
This project has received funding from the European Union Erasmus+ programme under grant agreement n. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000087602. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them. Further information is available at https://www.circe-project.eu/.

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University of Siena, Italy
Silvia Calamai (Project Coordinator), Giorgio Carella, Letizia Cirillo, Rosalba Nodari

Institute for Computational Linguistics – National Research Council (CNR-ILC), Italy
Claudia Soria, Souzana Maria Serveta

University of Hamburg, Germany
Robert Fuchs (WP2 Leader); Tjorven Halves

University of Münster, Germany
Philipp Meer (WP2 Deputy Leader), Frauke Matz, Lena Hertzel, Phillip Köhler, Ricardo Römhild, Karoline Wirbatz

University of Évora, Portugal
Luís Guerra (WP3 Leader), Lili Cavalheiro, Ricardo Pereira, Laura Melgão, Jean Antunes

International Burch University, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Amna Brdarević-Čeljo (WP4 Leader), Vildana Dubravac

The Italian context

Silvia Calamai, Letizia Cirillo,
Rosalba Nodari, Claudia Soria

Italy represents a complex and intriguing sociolinguistic scenario: dialects, regional varieties, Standard Italian, and non-native languages co-exist and interact in everyday life.

Standard Italian is based on the Florentine speech (*variety*, in the academic jargon) and inherited its phonological system (i.e., its inventory of distinctive sounds). However, for most of its history, Italian was not the spoken language of the entire population. It became widely used only in the 20th century (De Mauro 1963). As a result, Italian has always been spoken with distinct and recognisable local or regional accents, and this is still true today.

Not all Italian regional accents share the same overt prestige. Already in the 1960s, De Mauro (1963) showed that the main regional varieties differed in their social "weight", depending on prestige and numbers of speakers: Northern Italian and the Roman variety (*romanesco*) enjoyed the highest prestige, followed by a Tuscan variety; Neapolitan and other southern dialects ranked last. Other scholars (Baroni 1983; Galli de' Paratesi 1984) confirmed that Southern Italian varieties are often associated with negative stereotypes, while Berruto (1987) noted that no regional accent has ever become a national standard. Each regional pronunciation is stable and well-received in the area in which it occurs.

More recent sociolinguistic research has used perceptual experiments to examine how speakers judge different Italian accents and varieties (Volkart-Rey 1990; De Pascale and Marzo 2016; Calamai 2019). At the same time, studies on the perception of Italian spoken have grown

significantly (see, among others, Marotta 2008; Calamai 2015; De Meo et al. 2015; Calamai and Ardolino 2021; Combei 2023).

The verbal guise test on regional and standard Italian accents

Lower and upper secondary schools are among the contexts where accent-based prejudice emerges most subtly but also most effectively, influencing students' everyday experiences. Most research focuses on students aged 11-21. Although the geographical coverage is uneven, the findings show that accent-related issues are widespread across different Italy. Particular attention is given to students with a migrant background. Chinese, Bengali, Romanian, and Albanian students are among the most studied groups, reflecting their significant presence in Italian schools. Their L2 varieties of Italian interact with local regional accents and sometimes even different English accents. This reflects the varied migratory backgrounds of students attending Italian schools and the research frequently addresses how these accents influence social dynamics, especially in regions with significant immigrant populations.

Studies conducted in Tuscany (Calamai et al. 2020; Nodari et al. 2021, 2023; Nodari and Calamai 2023; Piccardi et al. 2022) highlight how regional and non-native accents profoundly shape students' self-perception, and how they are perceived by peers and teachers.

In the CIRCE project, we carried out the most recent research on the evaluation of non-native and regional accents in Italy. The study was run in the school year 2024-2025 and involved 195 high school students from Pisa, Arezzo, and Milan, who were asked to listen to nine male and female voices representing different varieties of Italian: five regional accents (Milanese, Roman, Neapolitan, Sicilian, and Sardinian), three foreign accents (Moroccan, Chinese, and Ukrainian), and one neutral standard accent. The students were told that the voices belonged to classmates reading a report aloud; after listening to each voice, they were asked to evaluate each speaker by assigning a score from 1 to 5 (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") to nine adjectives: *friendly*, *pleasant*, *arrogant*, *competent*, *educated*, *prestigious*, *correct*, *fluent*, and *intelligible*,

selected to capture overt attitudes towards accents and languages according to psychological and sociolinguistic literature. The first three adjectives belong to the warmth dimension, which captures how friendly and approachable a speaker is perceived to be; the second group of three adjectives refers instead to how capable and competent a speaker is perceived to be (competence dimension). The last three adjectives concern perceived linguistic ability, that is, how accurate, skilled, and easily understandable a speaker is judged to be in their use of language.

The data reveal a multifaceted perception of accents, which form distinct profiles depending on whether one considers relational warmth, perceived competence, or speech quality.

In terms of warmth, no major differences emerge in the perception of regional versus foreign accents. Southern accents (Neapolitan and Sicilian, and to a lesser extent Sardinian) are rated more positively than the Milanese and Roman accents in terms of friendliness and pleasantness. As stated by a Tuscan student during a focus group collected in the project: "I prefer the accents of central and southern Italy to those of the north. They seem much more intelligent to me. It's not that I like them that much"[1]. Foreign accents are rated slightly lower, but in a very similar way to the Milanese and Roman accents (and in the case of the Ukrainian accent, even more positively). Foreign accents are also generally perceived as less arrogant, similarly to the southern accents.

The dimension of competence outlines a clearer hierarchy. Standard Italian serves as the main reference point, receiving the highest values for *competent* (≈ 4.6) and *educated* (≈ 4.1). It embodies the idea of speech that is correct, well-educated, and authoritative. The differences between regional and foreign accents are much more pronounced, with regional accents maintaining a generally positive profile, though slightly below the standard. In terms of competence, education, and cultural level, the Roman and Milanese accents are rated slightly higher than the other regional accents, while in terms of popularity, the Neapolitan accent

1 io preferisco più [gli accenti] del centro sud che quelli del nord, mi sembrano molto più quasi di testa, non è che mi piacciono tanto.

ranks above the Milanese one, and both are rated higher than the standard accent. It appears that nowadays regional accents are perceived as legitimate variants of the national repertoire rather than indicators of low prestige. The situation differs for foreign accents, which record much lower values: between 2.75 and 3.14 for *competent* and *educated*, and the lowest values for prestige.

Regarding speech traits, Standard Italian again dominates, with the highest values for *correct*, *fluent*, and *intelligible* (≈ 4.7), and is perceived as the most accurate, smooth, and understandable form of speech. Regional accents hold medium-to-high scores, confirming a process of perceptual normalization: regional speech is now recognized as part of the continuum of standard Italian. Foreign accents, however, obtain lower scores, indicating a perception of lesser formal control and greater listening effort.

In short, data collected by the CIRCE project show a nuanced stratification in the perception of different regional accents. The standard maintains its normative role in competence and quality; regional varieties approach it in prestige and reliability; while foreign accents remain at the margins, marked by a dual distance (both affective and formal) that places them at a lower level of favorability, particularly regarding perceived linguistic competence.

The verbal guise test on English accents

The same experiment was also carried out with English accents: during the 2024-2025 school year, 191 Italian secondary school students listened to and evaluated nine different English accents across the three dimensions described above: competence, warmth, and speech traits.

Students found it challenging to recognise accents and, as expected, the easiest one to identify was Italian English. Alongside the expected recognisability of British English, our data reveal that Indian English was recognized at the same rate as American English, closely followed by African American English. This suggests that while students tend to be more familiar with varieties typically included in educational curricula,

their exposure to media, entertainment, and online content, also plays a major role in shaping their knowledge of global English varieties.

American and British English received the highest ratings for competence and speech traits. Italian and African American English scored highest for warmth. On the contrary, Nigerian and Ukrainian English were rated lowest, indicating the persistence of racialised and linguistic hierarchies. The study also found that familiarity with English accents significantly improved evaluations of competence and speech traits, while appreciation of linguistic diversity positively influenced warmth ratings. Overall, the findings underscore the need for inclusive English language teaching that embraces linguistic diversity and challenges native-speakerist ideologies in Italian schools.

The textbook analysis

Even though the internet now offers teachers an enormous variety of ready-to-use materials, the textbook still plays a central role in school life. A textbook is not just a teaching aid: it is a *dispositif*, a tool that shapes how language is understood and taught. A grammar book, for example, does not simply describe how Italian works, it also helps to define what counts as "good" Italian and sets the foundations and goals of language education. For this reason, analysing textbooks allows us to see which language varieties, cultures, images, and voices are included in students' learning pathways. It also helps us understand how these choices may influence the development of identities, linguistic practices, desires, and ideologies. Textbooks can reveal underlying language ideologies, as well attitudes and stereotypes toward varieties.

As part of the CIRCE project, we examined ten textbooks used for teaching Italian as an L1 in Italian upper-secondary schools. These are comprehensive grammar books designed to help students master the language. We selected the ten most widely used textbooks in Tuscany, so that our analysis would reflect what students and teachers actually encounter in their everyday classroom routine. Our main question was: to what extent do these textbooks acknowledge Italy's intrinsic

multilingualism? In practice, we checked which languages were mentioned and whether any attention was given to non-standard varieties of Italian (dialects, regional varieties, non-native varieties), as well as to other languages spoken in Italy.

Our analysis shows that textbooks devote very little space to non-standard Italian varieties. Only a few textbooks stand out as exceptions: they pay considerable attention to Italy's dialectal landscape, including historical overviews that trace how dialects evolved from Latin to present. In these cases, regional varieties of Italian are also used to explain possible sources of interference in Italian spelling. For instance, some regional varieties differ phonetically, especially in the pronunciation of double consonants (a well-known and particularly challenging feature of Italian phonology). One textbook includes a specific box titled "*Why do we get double consonants wrong?*", which explicitly discusses how pronunciation differs across Italy and how this may affect students' writing.

In all the other textbooks, the only reference to non-standard varieties concerns vocabulary, usually in the form of brief notes about words of dialectal origin. Overall, there is a clear absence of phonetic and phonological discussion, with a strong emphasis on written Italian.

Equally significant is what the textbooks do *not* include. There is no mention of Italian spoken by people with a migration background, nor of the many languages brought to Italy by immigrant communities. The model of Italian presented is strongly oriented toward the standard, with no pluricentric perspective. One limited exception involves occasional references to the languages from which certain Italian words originate and to lexical borrowings, but these are presented simply as historical curiosities. The only foreign language consistently mentioned is English, which appears frequently in two ways: as a point of comparison, to encourage reflection on structural differences between the two languages, or as a "dominant", "colonizing" language. Several textbooks even include short notes warning students against the excessive use of English words.

Native-speakerist ideologies are also present in ESL textbooks. An in-depth analysis of three widely used textbooks in Italian secondary schools (*Both*

Sides B2/B2+, *Identity* B2, and *Language for Life*) shows that they expose learners mainly to British English, especially in pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary.

Although these textbooks include some multicultural depictions and interculturally oriented topics – including references to multilingual settings and migration-related bilingualism – that may suggest the possibility of a shared ownership model or a shift toward a more Global English Language Teaching (GELT) oriented perspective, their actual representation of other varieties tells a different story. Non-British varieties are poorly represented and when other varieties do appear, they are often presented in ways that reinforce the idea that British English is the norm, and that native speakers hold linguistic authority. The dominant message remains aligned with a Standard Language ideology and a traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) model centred on native speakers, especially British ones.

Teachers' and students' voices

During the 2024-2025 school year, the CIRCE researchers also carried out interviews with both students and teachers to collect their perspective on language use at school, linguistic discrimination, and accentism. While the teacher interviews cannot be considered representative in a statistical sense, they offer invaluable insights into the everyday challenges teachers face when they walk into increasingly multilingual classrooms. At the same time, the interviews highlight the creative strategies teachers develop to overcome communication barriers in increasingly multilingual classrooms. The following excerpt, for example, comes from a secondary school with a very high percentage of non-native students:

Chinese students in my class had difficulty speaking and expressing themselves in Italian, due to shyness and difficulty speaking in public. They may be fluent in Chinese, but they struggled with Italian. So, what did I do? I have a friend who speaks Chinese. I have a friend who speaks Chinese and who taught me a few words such as "Good evening", "Hello everyone", "Hi guys", "Well done". Or "Don't sleep", because I had some

students who were sleeping in class. Okay? And I said them in Chinese. And to these Chinese students, to encourage them to speak Italian, I said a few words in Chinese. Okay? To the Chinese kids. But then I thought: if I only say it to the Chinese, it's discriminatory, so if I saw any Italians sleeping, I would say the same thing to them in Chinese. And the Chinese laughed. This evolved over time, because at first I only spoke Chinese to the Chinese; then I also spoke Chinese to the Italians, with phrases like "Don't sleep", "Good evening everyone", nothing more. [The Chinese students reacted] well, because when you speak another person's language, you create an emotional connection. I know this because I have studied various languages. I am not a native speaker, but I have studied English, French and Spanish, so I know. It creates an emotional connection, and that's why I think they reacted well. The students are good[2].

Similar strategies are at work even in monolingual contexts, where the standard Italian (often defined as "pure/clean Italian") is not equally accessible to all students. One Italian teacher reflects on this very issue:

Last year I taught Italian at this school in Naples, and when I spoke that pure Italian, the children, unfortunately, being used to speaking their

2 I ragazzi cinesi che ho io in classe facevano fatica a parlare, a verbalizzare in italiano, per timidezza, per difficoltà di parlare in pubblico, perché magari in cinese se la cavano agilmente, ma in italiano facevano fatica. Allora, cosa ho fatto? Ho un amico che parla cinese. C'è un amico che parla cinese e che mi ha detto un po' quali sono alcune parole tipo "Buonasera", "Salve a tutti", "Ciao ragazzi", "Bravo". Oppure "Non dormire", perché avevo dei ragazzi che dormivano in classe. Va bene? E le dicevo in cinese. E a questi ragazzi cinesi, per invogliarli a parlare italiano, qualche parola in cinese l'ho detta. Va bene? Ai ragazzi cinesi. Però ho pensato che: se lo dico solo ai cinesi, è discriminante, quindi se vedevo qualche italiano dormire, dicevo la stessa cosa a lui in cinese. E i cinesi ridevano. Questa cosa si è evoluta nel tempo, perché all'inizio parlavo cinese solo ai cinesi; poi ho parlato cinese anche agli italiani, con frasi tipo "Non dormire", "Buonasera a tutti", niente di più. [Gli studenti cinesi hanno reagito] Bene, perché quando parli la lingua di un altro si crea un contatto emotivo. Io lo so, ho studiato varie lingue, non sono madrelingua, ma ho studiato inglese, francese, spagnolo, e lo so. Quindi si crea un contatto emotivo, e quindi secondo me hanno reagito bene. I ragazzi sono bravi.

dialect, didn't understand it. So we spoke a kind of Neapolitanised Italian, let's say, a bit rough, and they understood you that way[3].

Other interviews show how teachers try to maintain a reasonable balance between the demands of teaching and the expectations of real world (especially the job market), where the Standard language is perceived as the safest choice:

Even when it comes to pronunciation, we must always try to stick to standard pronunciation, because otherwise it could become a problem. If we are to offer students minimum standards of Italian language, including pronunciation, otherwise they could be at a disadvantage in the job market. Let's try to give them every opportunity so that this flexibility does not backfire on them[4].

However, the interviews also provide clear evidence of linguistic discrimination, which often becomes visible when students are asked to work in pairs or small groups:

And many of these kids were born in Italy. They arrive at secondary school unable to speak Italian. And so there is a bit of discrimination: "I'm not working with him", if they have to do a task in pairs or in a group, "why?", "I'm not working with him because he can't speak", or "so he's making it difficult for me"[5].

3 L'anno scorso ho insegnato italiano in questa scuola di Napoli, e quando parlavo quell'italiano pulito, i ragazzi purtroppo, abituati a fare il loro dialetto, non lo capivano. E allora si parlava un po' quell'italiano napoletanizzato, diciamo, sguaiato, diciamo, e loro ti capivano così.

4 Anche nella pronuncia si deve sempre cercare di attenersi a una pronuncia standard, anche perché altrimenti potrebbe diventare una difficoltà. Se dobbiamo offrire a una popolazione studentesca degli standard minimi di lingua italiana, quindi anche di pronuncia… altrimenti nel mondo del lavoro potrebbero essere svantaggiati. Cerchiamo di dar loro tutte quelle opportunità affinché questa elasticità non si ritorca contro di loro.

5 E tanti di questi ragazzi sono nati in Italia. Arrivano alle superiori che non parlano italiano. E quindi c'è un po' di, insomma, di discriminazione: "io con lui non ci lavoro", se si deve fare un lavoro a coppie o in gruppo, "perché?", "non ci lavoro perché non sa parlare", oppure "quindi mi mette in difficoltà a me".

Some interviews even reveal episodes of linguistic racism among teaching staff:

I remember that two colleagues, one of whom was a support teacher in my class and the other colleague, I don't know why, were chatting a bit animatedly and one said to her "terrona" (southerner), really offending her[6].

Altogether, these findings highlight the urgent need for more inclusive language policies and teaching practices that acknowledge and value the linguistic diversity present in Italian schools. At the same time, they also show how much work is still required in raising awareness about the subtle phenomenon of linguistic discrimination. On one hand, language discrimination and accentism are still under-researched, especially from the perspective of teachers. This is illustrated by the reaction of one teacher during our fieldwork: "One thing I had never thought about: this, the issue of pronouncements, but actually, this is an interesting topic"[7]. On the other hand, the issue is very real and deeply felt, as expressed by one of the students interviewed: "I definitely pay a lot of attention to accents, because accents are very noticeable, and in my opinion, accents are something that belong to us, they are part of us and they help people understand where we come from, our culture and things like that"[8]. *Such things* are the core of our work.

6 Mi ricordo che fra due colleghe, di cui una era di sostegno nella mia classe eh l'altra collega, non so perché stavano un po' chiacchierando un po' animatamente e una le disse "terrona" proprio offendendola.

7 Una cosa non ci avevo mai pensato di riflettere: su questo, sul discorso delle pronunce, però in effetti, ma è interessante questo argomento.

8 Io sicuramente faccio molto caso agli accenti, perché comunque un accento si sente tanto, nel senso, e secondo me gli accenti sono una cosa che ci appartengono, cioè fanno parte di noi e fanno capire da dove veniamo, la cultura che abbiamo e queste cose

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Co-funded by the European Union

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