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A Few Notes on Conversational Patterns in Italian

Abstract

This study analyzes Italian address and small talk behavior as well as the realization patterns of the speech acts inviting/offering, turning down an invitation/offer, saying one's opinion, disagreeing, and closing a conversation. 19 Italians were questioned by way of a SICS (semi-expert interview on communicative strategies). It can be observed that Italians make a rare use of informal address pronouns first; in small talk, they talk about the weather and complain about politics and politicians. In conflict situations their actions seem to follow the principle "Don't beat around the bush; say what you think or want, but don't let the conflict be obvious for a very long time."

Sommaire

Cette étude analyse les stratégies d'adresse et de small talk ainsi que les stratégies de réalisation des actes illocutifs d'inviter/offrir. On a demandé 19 Italiens à l'aide d'un SICS (semi-expert interview on communicative strategies). On peut observer que les Italiens utilisent le pronom d'adresse informel rarement d'abord; lors du Small Talk, ils parlent du temps et se plaignent de la politiques et des politiciens. Dans des situations de conflit leurs actions semblent suivre le principe «Ne tourne pas autour du pot; dis ce que tu pense ou veux, mais ne laisse pas évident le conflit pour longtemps.»

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie analysiert das italienische Anrede- und Small-Talk-Verhalten sowie die Realisierungsmuster der Sprechakte Einladen/Anbieten, Einladungen/Angebote ablehnen, seine Meinung sagen, andere Meinung ausdrücken, ein Gespräch beenden. 19 Italiener wurden mit Hilfe eines SICS ("semi-expert interview on communicative strategies") befragt. Es lässt sich beobachten, dass Italiener das formelle Anredepronomen zunächst selten verwenden und dass sie im Small Talk über das Wetter reden und sich über die Politik und die Politiker beklagen. In Konfliktsituationen scheinen ihre Handlungen dem Prinzip zu folgen "Rede nicht um den heißen Brei; sag was Du denkst oder willst, aber lass den Konflikt nicht allzu lange offensichtlich erscheinen."

1. Background

Based on diverse literature of various kinds, a first picture of European communicative behavior, or speech-act realization patterns, was drawn by Grzega (2006: 193-254). According to the MLA, there are roughly 30 studies on speech-acts realizations in Italian. This rather small number illustrates that many speech acts have not been investigated yet for Italian. Since 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialog, this is the perfect opportunity to concentrate on such speech acts that still need analyzing. This study forms part of a larger project that aims at writing a European "language guide", dealing with a number of communicative situations that shall allow readers to see differences and similarities between Europeans. The communicative phases that are highlighted in this paper are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, and ending a conversation.

Two methods that have become common in collecting empirical data for speech-act analysis are the *discourse completion task* (DCT) and the *metapragmatic judgement task* (MPJT) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 and Hinkel 1997). In a DCT, informants, after being presented with the description of a dialogic situation, have to complete a dialog. However, this way the researcher only gets the utmost typical answer that comes to an informant's mind. Whether

the informant considered other patterns equally fine is not answered. Due to this, the metapragmatic judgment test (MPJT) was invented as a supplementary method. In a MPJT all answers gathered in a preceding DCT are listed, and informants are asked to rank the adequateness of the answers. With both methods researchers need a large amount of informants. Since the *JELiX* editors' goal is a more general and more abstract one, they have produced an alternative data-eliciting method that also requires fewer informants than in a DCT and MPJT: the semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS). Such an interview, also in form of a questionnaire, asks informants not to give their own personal communicative behavior and judgment, but the typical linguistic behavior in their nation, as told by someone who needs to explain this to a foreigner. Informants are regarded as ethnographic semi-experts due to their experience within, and observation of, the speech community. This will especially concern people who have to do with language professionally (such as students of language, linguists, journalists); they are therefore preferred as informants. While a DCT sets a situation and asks for one's typical behavior, the SICS sets typical situations and asks for possible and impossible behavior. The informants can both select from a list of communicative patterns and convey additional patterns. This way a SICS is closer to a MPJT, but the informants have to reflect on a more abstracting and generalizing level.

2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS questionnaire can be found in the introductory article to this special issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008). The questionnaire was distributed among Italian language students and researchers and eventually filled out by 19 informants. The informants come predominantly from Lombardy, but also from Lazio, Tuscany, Veneto, and Campania. 17 of the informants were female, 2 were male. Their ages vary from 17 to 50, with an average of 23.4.

3. Results

3.1. Section A: Starting a Conversation

As a general rule, like most other Europeans, Italians have an informal pronoun and a formal address pronoun, a T-form and a V-form in Brown and Gilman's 1960 terminology, namely *tu* (grammatically the 2nd person sg.) and *Lei* (grammatically the 3rd person sg.). 4 informants also gave *voi* (grammatically 2nd person pl.) as an alternative for *Lei* (according to 2 of these informants, this is something used by the elderly). The distribution of these pronouns according to the Italian informants is like this¹:

- (1) All informants agree that children would use the T-form to address parents and older relatives.
- (2) All informants agree that administration officials are typically addressed by V.
- (3) Although there may be some exceptions, clerks and customers use V to address each other (only one informant, from Lombardy, claimed that customers would use T to address clerks); likewise, strangers in the street are normally given V.
- (4) Strangers in the street are also addressed by V (unless the addressee is very young).
- (5) Students typically address their teachers by V—according to 7 informants, T can also occur, predominantly at primary school. Teachers, in contrast, typically use T, although V may be used if the students are no longer underaged.
- (6) Views on conventions between business partners and conventions between employers and employees are mixed. There is obviously no strict rule for these relationships—at least not on a supraregional level.

¹ Other studies on Italian address pronouns go back to the 1970's (Bates/Benigni 1977 & 1979).

In brief: teenagers and family members can be safely addressed by T, others are first more safely addressed by V.

The most typical answer when you pick up the receiver is *Pronto*. 'Ready.' (mentioned by 15 informants), maybe followed by an additional phrase such as 'Yes' or 'Who is speaking?'. In business telephone openings, mentioning the company's name is typical, while other elements such as last name, greeting and a phrase such as 'How can I help you?' seem to vary a lot (none of these is considered typical by a majority of the informants).

3.2. Section B: Keeping Up a Conversation

Small talk can be defined as the part of a conversation that are not the greeting, the closing and leave-taking phase and a "hard core" topic, or potentially face-threatening phase, of a conversation (cf. also Malinowski 1923, Laver 1975, Ventola 1979). Viewing the answers in the SICS's small talk is rather common among people who already know each other, but there seems only one truly typical small talk context, namely meals. The rest of the answers is very mixed; and so are the answers concerning taboo situations for small talk; as a matter of fact, there is not one single context mentioned by more than two informants; not even the contexts listed are seen as taboo situations by a majority of the informants (elevators by 36.8% and toilets by 42.1%). For no single situation is small talk considered typical by a majority of our informants.

The most salient small talk topic is the weather (17 informants = 89.5%). It was the only topic considered typical for small talk by a majority of the informants. Two others that come close to that is the general complaint about politics and/or politicians (9 = 47.4%) and talking about recent political events (8 = 42.1%). A clear taboo topic for Italians is religion. The other topics given were ticked by less than half of the informants, although money comes close with 9 informants (47.4%). 6 informants added sex as a taboo topic.

There is also no rule in Italy for the percentage of small talk in private and business conversations. 10 of the informants claim that Italians do more small talk in private conversations than in business conversations, 7 claim the opposite and 2 that there is roughly the same percentage of small talk in private and in business conversations.

3.3. Section C: Being Nice in a Conversation

How do Italians typically present their opinion on a topic? According to the informants, the most typical strategy clearly is "first you say your opinion, then you give reasons related to the issue" (15 informants [78.9%] viewed this strategy as typical).

The next item asked the informants whether invitations or offers made by an interlocutor can reasonably be assumed to be honest or to be just a politeness phrase. A clear majority of 14 informants said that one can reasonably assume that an invitation or an offer can be taken literally, as an honest offer. 3 more informants claim that it depends on the relationship. So ostensible invitations and offers (cf. Isaacs/Clark 1990) are not typical in Italian culture.

3.4. Section D: Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

In item #9 of the SICS informants are asked: "If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistic means are used to say "no" in a polite way in your nation?"² Luckily, some informants commented their selection of strategies for this speech act

² The act of turning down an invitation to a meal was also analyzed for Italian by Frescura (1997).

with the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes” and “rarely”. If these labels are converted into points from 4 to 1 and multiplied with the corresponding number of ticks, then we get the following picture (p. = points):

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “some-times”	
48	15	a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again
34	11	a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time” or “I have something else to do.”
34	11	a concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants. So a vague excuse or a concrete brief and true excuse are clearly seen as the dominant, common, normal strategies to turn down an offer.

Item #10 consisted of the question “If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?” If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following picture of typical strategies in Italy:

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “some-times”	
53	17	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”
39	12	a phrase like “(No), I disagree.”, “(No), I have a different opinion.”

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants.

3.5. Section E: Ending a Conversation

As there are no valuable cross-cultural pragmatic studies on closing conversations, this part of the conversation was also included in the SICS questionnaire³: “what do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?”. If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following picture of typical strategies in Italy:

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “some-times”	
38	13	say what they have to do now (if there really is something)
35	13	a phrase like “I have to go now, I have something else to do”

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants.

³ The first study to analyze closing strategies is the one by Schegloff/Sacks (1973). Aston analyzed closings in English and Italian service encounters.

After this question a logical thing to follow was to ask for the interlocutor's reaction. Only a slight majority of 10 informants (52.6%) considered it more typical that the other person lets you go, for 6 it was typical that the other person first tries to persuade you to stay, 1 said both are possible and 2 informants didn't answer the question.

4. Concluding Remarks

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terminology Italians are rather bald-on record when it comes to uncomfortable situations or potential conflicts. This seems the way to respect especially the Gricean maxim (1975) of manner. If we want to transfer these observations into a "pragmatic stage direction" for conversations with natives of Italian in these situations, we could formulate it in the following way: "If there is an conflict in interests, don't beat around the bush; say what you think or want, but don't let the conflict be obvious for a very long time."

Of course, this principle is restricted to the speech acts analyzed. Held (2005: 303) observed that there is "a striking difference between written and spoken Italian politeness. The former is still trapped in formalities and formal routines unconsciously reflecting centuries-old scales and social hierarchies and their regulative impact [...]. The latter represents a mobile innovative area [...], in line with global trends toward orality."

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