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Norm-setting authorities for a weakly pluricentric language: the case of Italian in Switzerland

Abstract

Italian has the status of an official language in quadrilingual Switzerland. In spite of its minority position, it is used in administrative and political contexts on a federal level and official documents are systematically translated into it. Due to this fact, the Swiss variety of Italian can be considered as a partially autonomous standard of Italian, at least at a rudimentary stage (Ammon 1989). This paper focuses on a list of lexical and morphosyntactic items which have been identified as typical features of Swiss Italian and tracks their presence in ‘model texts’ (Ammon 2017). These texts can influence language use by reinforcing the status of regional forms through usage in controlled contexts. The survey takes into account two major authorities (the press and daily news on TV) as well as non-professional literary texts. How do standardisation processes occur? Which trends of implicit standardisation can be observed?

1. Which are the norms for a non-dominant variety of Italian?

Thursday morning, at the secondary school of Lugano (Switzerland). Alice walks around in the classroom while her pupils are writing an essay on learning methods. She notices that Flavio has written a sentence containing the word *clasatore* – the expression used in Italian-speaking Switzerland for file folder, a calque on French *classeur*. Alice, who has lived in Rome for one year, knows that the Italian name of this object is *raccoglitore*. Nobody in Italy would have understood her if she had talked of a *classatore*. Thus, is *raccoglitore* the right name and the only valid one? Is there a language academy or some other entity that can establish that? Alice is confused; should she stigmatise the regional form and thus correct Flavio, who has probably heard only the word *classatore* during all his school years? Is it his right to use this word? Can she influence the language use of Flavio – and does she want to do it?

In this paper, we investigate some potential norm-setting authorities that influence the national variety of Italian used in Switzerland, from now on called

ISIT (Italiano della Svizzera italiana, ‘Italian of the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland’). The starting point of this work is the proposal of some authors (Pardolfi, Berruto, Moretti) to consider Italian as a weakly pluricentric language, having one minor centre of codification in Switzerland. Since the existence of an additional centre of standardisation of Italian implies the existence of a number of norm-setting authorities, our aim is to verify this status of ‘norm authority’ examining some ‘model texts’ (Ammon 2017) in order to track the presence of lexical and morphosyntactic items which have been identified as typical features of Swiss Italian. Examining some major authorities that legitimate and diffuse a national standard allows proposing some hypotheses on the role and influence of specific model authors on this variety of Italian.

2. Italian in Switzerland – a brief overview

As is well known, Switzerland has four official languages at the national level: *German, French, Italian and Romansh* (the latter with semi-official status). The four language communities occupy territories of different size, as shown in Fig. 1.

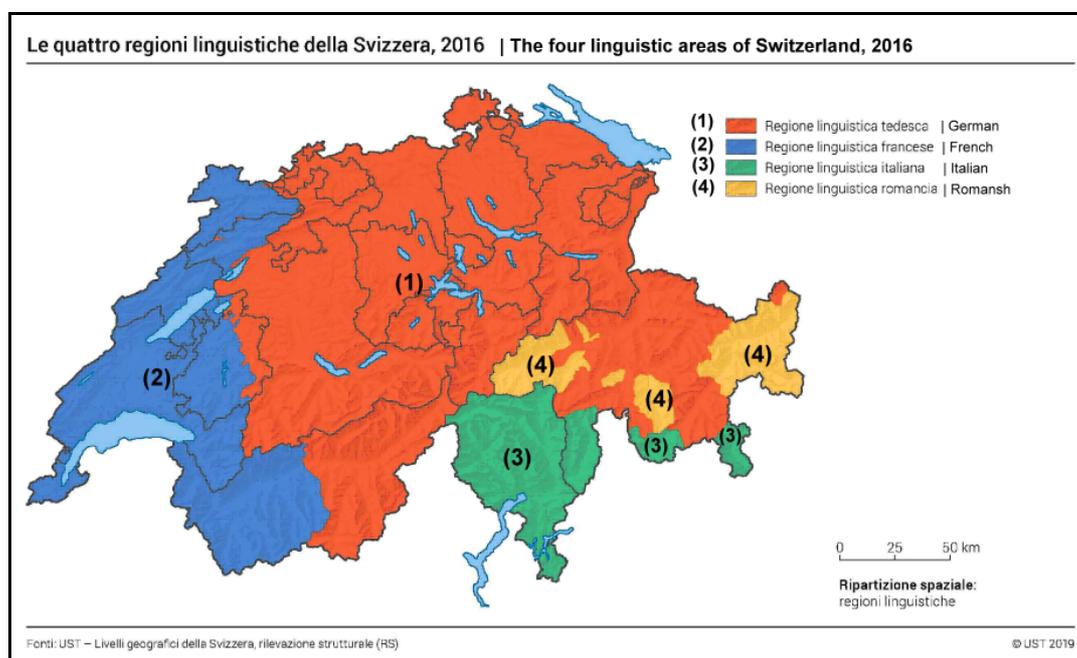


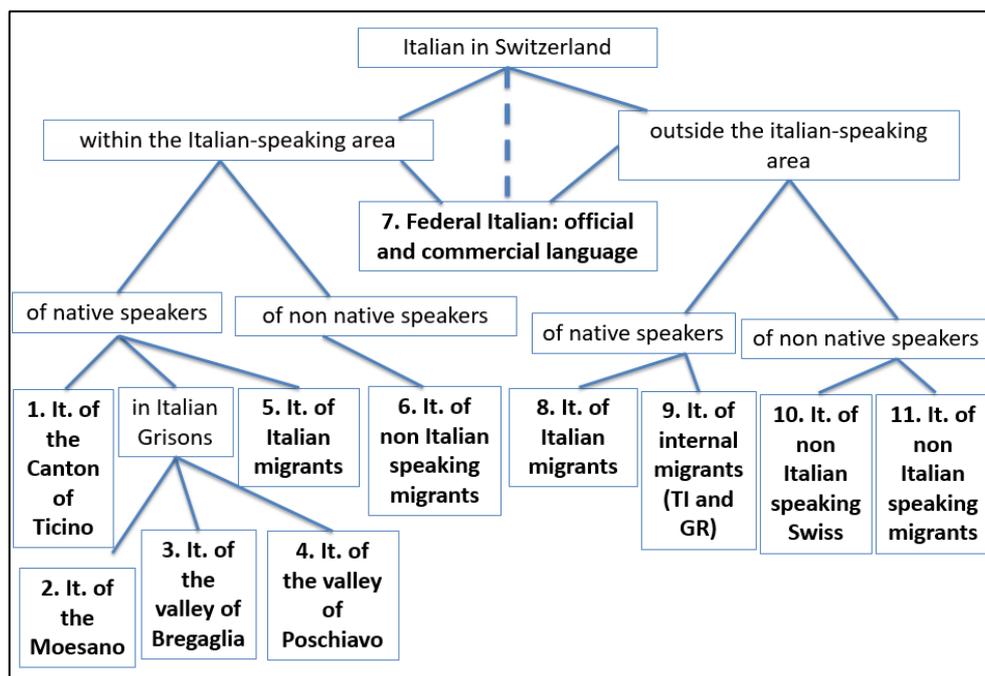
Figure 1. Linguistic areas of Switzerland (© Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2019).

The three main linguistic areas relate geographically to the neighbouring nations that have the same language as the only national language: Germany and Austria for German, France for French and Italy for Italian. However, the dispro-

portion between the Italian speakers in Switzerland and those in Italy is considerable (600.000 people versus 60 million).

In truth, this map shows a simplified and somewhat monolithic representation of linguistic reality; statistical data show that speakers of the different languages are spread all over the country. At a cantonal level, Italian has an official status only in the Cantons of Ticino and Grisons; quite paradoxically, though, the majority of Italian speakers (around 53%) live outside of the traditional Italian-speaking region (Janner, Casoni & Bruno 2019:32), which includes the Canton of Ticino and three non-contiguous areas in the Canton of Grisons (the green area (3) in Figure 1). Since in every canton only the cantonal language(s) are official, Italian in Zurich or German in Geneva have a status that is comparable to that of Arabic or Swedish. The situation of Italian within the traditional area is quite stable, whereas the number of Italian speakers in the rest of Switzerland varies significantly depending on migration fluctuations. Almost 60% of all Italian speakers in Switzerland have a migration background (Janner, Casoni & Bruno 2019:130).

Figure 2. The 11 varieties of Italian in Switzerland (adapted from Moretti 2005 and Berruto 2012).



The components of territoriality and migration background alone are not enough to explain the complex composition of *ISIT* (Moretti & Casoni 2016:398); in fact, there is not only one Italian in Switzerland. *ISIT* is just one of many varieties of Italian – the territorial and traditional one. Hajek (2012:160) underlines that “Italian speakers in Switzerland do not form a single cohesive community – whether historically, socially or geographically”.

The diagram in Figure 2 represents the most prominent attempt to account for the varieties of Italian in Switzerland, combining different criteria: geographic distribution, biographical data, situational context, etc. All of these eleven varieties could potentially set the norm, but actually only a small number of them fulfil this role. According to Hajek (2012:161), the two groupings of L1 speakers in Ticino, a compact area where Italian is the dominant and the only official language, and Federal Italian (as an L1, but also as an L2) are the only ones with potentially norm-setting influence on Italian. In this paper, we will only focus on *ISIT*, the variety used in the traditionally Italian-speaking area.

3. Specific features of *ISIT* and where they come from

In the last ten years, some authors (in particular Pandolfi 2009, 2011, 2017; Berruto 2011) have proposed to consider Italian as a weakly pluricentric language, having one ‘rudimentary centre’ (Ammon 1989) of codification in Switzerland. Pandolfi (2017:321) defines *ISIT* as “partially autonomous with respect to Italian of Italy”. According to this view, there would be two (slightly different) standard national varieties of Italian. Of course, as Hajek (2012:155) puts it, “Swiss Italian is in a clearly non-dominant relationship with Italian in Italy, but also with official languages in Switzerland”. However, as Ammon (2017:32) observes, “centers in countries, which have no codification of their own, but where the language has official status in the country, nationally or regionally, can be called ‘half centers’. The official status, as a rule, guarantees the existence of rather rich model texts, both administrative and in the media.” In spite of its minority position (8.2% of the Swiss population declares Italian as their main language, 2016 data), Italian is used in administrative and political contexts on a federal level and official documents are systematically translated into this language, with equal legal bases as is the case in German and French, which are guaranteed by the Federal Constitution (art. 4 and 70).

Thus, the political border separating Switzerland from Italy contributes to create a partially independent standard with regard to Italy. *ISIT* is not simply a regional variety of Italian. By introducing the acronym *ISSI* (Italiano statale della Svizzera italiana, ‘national Italian of Italian-speaking Switzerland’), Pandolfi (2009) highlights that the notion of ‘statality’ is a characteristic feature of the Swiss variety and a necessary condition to define Italian as pluricentric.

We would like to point out here that this defining feature is not merely political or symbolic, but structural. It is in fact the “national status” of *ISIT* that allows it to include a whole range of formal registers – related to administration or

to political and social reality – into the dimension of diatopic variation, thus differentiating it from the other variations of Italian that are to be found within Italy. Therefore, some of the specific features of *ISIT* are not perceived as alternative forms, being precisely ‘official’ linguistic forms.

As Pandolfi (2006), Berruto (2011), Moretti (2011), Baranzini & Casoni (2020), among others, show, the linguistic differences of *ISIT* concern mostly lexis and pronunciation, but also morphosyntax, textual and pragmatic aspects, within a productive system. Its typical features originate from three main sources:

- the contact with the two bigger national languages – i.e. German and French –, for example via the translation of official documents by federal authorities;
- the dialectal substratum;
- the tendency to be a more conservative variety (maintaining a number of archaisms) because of its politically and geographically decentralised nature.

While archaisms are often part of formal Swiss Italian, as *fuoco* (‘fireplace’) to designate a household, terms of dialectal origin (as *stincata* for ‘abrupt braking’, from dial. *stincà* ‘to brake’) usually belong to a rather colloquial variety of *ISIT*. The daily contact with German and French makes it more likely for Swiss Italians to have a less purist approach and to accept calquing and lexical translations. An example of lexical translation is *piazza di giro*, from Swiss German *Kehrplatz* (literally ‘a place to turn (the car)’), meaning an empty space at the end of a street. The adjective *evidente*, used with the meaning ‘simple, easy’ – and not only ‘evident’, as in Italian of Italy –, is a semantic calque influenced by French *évident*. An example of a loanword is *schlafsack* (from German: ‘sleeping bag’).

This is a fundamental point; since Switzerland is a small nation with four national languages, linguistic contact on a daily basis is very common and doesn’t rely on the proximity of the speaking communities. Loanwords and literal translations from German or French are easily accepted and not perceived as regional, but as national. Constant exposure of *all* Italian-speakers to other national languages enforces this perception of normality. Moreover, in many cases, political and administrative language reflects a different political and administrative reality, for which terminology in standard Italian is missing (for example, *corso di ripetizione* ‘periodic military training of the Swiss Armed Forces’).

Another important question concerns the fact that the perception of the *ISIT* variety influences the relationship between the reality of *ISIT* and the norm. A study by Antonini & Moretti (2000) investigates how different regional varieties of Italian are perceived by native speakers of *ISIT*. The study shows a complex picture; the local variety is judged the most beautiful and the most suitable for teach-

ing, but at the same time the Milanese variety is recognised as being closer to standard than Swiss Italian.

This perception is a clue that has fostered our hypothesis. If we consider what has been said until now – the objective difference between *ISIT* and other Italian varieties, the presence of a political and administrative border separating Switzerland and Italy, and the ambivalence of speakers' perception – we ask to what extent this is reflected within linguistic contexts where adequacy to a socially accepted norm is required, that is, “neutral or unmarked behaviours” (Pandolfi 2017:7).

In his considerations about pluricentric Italian, Berruto (2011) mentions three conditions in order to speak of pluricentric languages:

having more than one standard national variety;
 having more than one centre of standardisation;
 the non-coincidence with one national identity for its native speakers.

As for c), here it can be enough to observe that a native Italian speaker can relate to an Italian as well as to a Swiss national identity (albeit to a much lesser extent). As for the other two points that mostly concern us here, we can see that in the case of Swiss Italian condition a) is partially accomplished; we can take for granted that a different national variety of Italian exists, as many works of Pandolfi and other scholars have shown. As for b), if we acknowledge a different standard for *ISIT*, this would mean that Italian has more than one standardisation centre. We are interested in the link between the criteria a) and b); if *ISIT* is a standard in its own right, then as a consequence there would be a centre of standardisation for it. Based on these considerations, we can postulate the existence of potential language norm authorities.

4. Potential norm authorities in Italian-speaking Switzerland

To summarize, our investigation has its foundations on three assumptions with different degrees of concreteness:

- 1) in the case of *ISIT*, the variation also operates at a formal level;
- 2) there is a weak awareness of the regional character of many specific terms;
- 3) regional media, official documents, etc. have in fact a *national* status.

Such assumptions legitimise the hypothesis about the occurrence of typical *ISIT* features in controlled – or even formal – written and oral discourse. In order to verify this hypothesis it is first necessary to identify the Italian-speaking Swiss

entities that can be perceived as norm-setting authorities. In other words, we ask which sources might contribute to establish a standard for the *ISIT* variety.

According to Ammon (2005, 2017), among potential language influencers one can distinguish between “model speakers and writers”, “codifiers” (especially dictionaries), “language experts” (mostly linguists) and “language norm authorities”, for example, school teachers and their role as language correctors. *ISIT* (still) has only very rudimentary explicit linguistic codes: since 1995 the Italian *Zingarelli* dictionary mentions some 34 Helvetisms (Pandolfi 2017:339); the Federal Chancellery issues a terminology database in the four national languages and in English (www.termdat.ch), which, however, has only a minimal influence on most speakers; language experts and language norm authorities seem to turn mostly toward the standard of Italy. In this setting, model speakers and model writers play an important role, producing texts that function as language norms and establish a standard variety (see the notion of “standard by mere usage” by Ammon 2017:24).

Which model speakers and model writers can be observed for *ISIT*? On the one hand, there is the Federal and cantonal administration that produces model texts; on the other hand, there is a national TV and radio company broadcasting in all four national languages. This accounts for the specificity of the Swiss case. In Italy, the television of a particular city is peripheral (and is perceived as such), while the Italian-speaking Swiss TV company (RSI) is both specific to the Italian-speaking area and national, it is broadcasting throughout Switzerland and has no higher national competitor. Such a double status – both regional and national – concerns almost all public events and institutions in Italian-speaking Switzerland that involve language, since the local political reality almost coincides with the national Italian-speaking reality. This is a different situation with regard to Italy, where the two levels, regional and national, do not overlap.

5. Analysing preliminary data

According to the above considerations, this research focuses on media of Italian-speaking Switzerland as potential norm-setting authorities reflecting a formal use of the Italian variety. The data are taken from two main sources: the local daily news on the main TV network RSI (*Il Quotidiano*,¹ abbreviated *Quot*) and one of the two main newspapers in Italian-speaking Switzerland (*La Regione*,² abbreviated *LaR*). Both sources share a controlled use of the language, with the partial exception of (almost spontaneous) interview excerpts in the editions of *Il Quo-*

¹ www.rsi.ch/la1/programmi/informazione/il-quotidiano/.

² www.laregione.ch.

tidiano. A third source completes the analysis: a collection of short stories by non-professional writers taking part in a literary competition held annually in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, in Bellinzona (*Castelli di carta*³). These texts allow checking whether specific features of the *ISIT* variety can be observed in controlled texts with literary ambitions.

The following overview on *ISIT* phenomena – *ISITisms* – collected in the three mentioned sources shows examples that illustrate the categories that were taken into account and which kinds of features recognised as typical of *ISIT* occur in these model texts. A first impressionistic review of the data – collected through reading/listening as well as through guided search – indicates whether typical *ISIT* features are accepted by model writers and speakers.

As for lexical features, a first category concerns the so-called absolute Helvetisms (“*elvetismi assoluti*”, see Petralli 1990; Pandolfi 2006; Moretti & Pandolfi 2019; “*Sachspezifika*”, see Ammon 1995). In this case, neither the expression nor the entity it refers to are known in Italy: for instance, expressions that designate social, political or administrative bodies. Examples are *Granconsiglieri* (*Quot*) ‘members of the cantonal parliament’, *scuola reclute* (*LaR*) ‘bootcamp’, *centri d’asilo* (*LaR*) ‘centres for people asking for asylum’. Semantic Helvetisms, on the other hand, are potentially ambiguous expressions, since the same signifier in Italy designates another referent. In peninsular Italian, the word *container* is used for ships, whereas in the *ISIT* source (*LaR*) it has the meaning of ‘waste container’ and alternates with the word *cassonetti* (Italy standard). Lexical Helvetisms are words that do not occur in Italian of Italy at all. The same concept is designated differently: a *deponia* (*LaR*) ‘waste deposit’ is a *deposito di rifiuti* in the standard of Italy; *vallerano* (*LaR*) ‘valley resident’ is called *valligiano*. As a subset of lexical Helvetisms, diachronic Helvetisms are Italian expressions that are no longer used in (neo)standard Italian of Italy, but are very frequent in the *ISIT* variety, as *pigioni* (*LaR*) ‘house rents’ instead of *affitti*.

At the interface between morphology and pragmatics, a special feature of *ISIT* is the feminine inflection of profession names, as noticed already by Pescia (2010, 2011; see also Pandolfi 2009; Moretti & Pandolfi 2019). In *LaR* we find for instance *avvocata* ‘(female) lawyer’ and *la consigliera di Stato* ‘the (female) member of the cantonal government’, while *Quot* mentions *la ministra della Giustizia* ‘the (female) minister of justice’.

A typical syntactic feature of *ISIT* (Cerruti & Pandolfi 2015; Moretti & Pan-

³ www.castellidicarta.ch. The corpus is not available online.

dolfi 2019) is the position of adverbs in sentences, preceding the verb instead of following it, as it would be common in the standard of Italy. This is the case for *già* in the following sentence (LaR): “*Le classi infatti già rendono visita alle nostre aule*” (‘In fact, the classes already visit our classrooms’). The non-marked sentence would be “*rendono già visita*”. In Quot an interviewee answers to the question “E dunque cosa può fare la Regio Insubrica?” (‘So what can the Regio Insubrica do?’) by saying “*Nuovamente richiamare il DATEC*” (‘Calling the DATEC back again’), where the adverb precedes the infinitive verb. Another feature concerning syntax is the particular form of verb government in the case of *aver bisogno qualcosa*, ‘to need something’, which is used transitively, without the preposition *di*: “*Emergenza freddo: chi ha bisogno aiuto può chiedere vitto e alloggio*” (LaR, headline), ‘Cold emergency: people needing help can ask for board and lodging’.

Other phenomena noticed in literature (Cerruti & Pandolfi 2015; Petralli 1990) are the typical expression *chinarsi su qualcosa* ‘to deal with something’ (a calque on French *se pencher sur quelque chose*, literally ‘to bend over something’), the use of *settimana scorsa* ‘last week’ without article and a very peculiar use of the adverb *rispettivamente* ‘respectively’, introducing an addition or a specification, which leans on German *beziehungsweise*:

“Però è chiaro, se il Dipartimento ci richiede di fare un certo tipo di lavoro, dobbiamo *chinarci sulla problematica* e dare delle risposte concrete” (Quot, interview) [But it is clear, if the Department requires us to do a certain kind of work, we have to bend over the issue and give concrete answers.]

“*Settimana scorsa* ancora le divisioni sembravano profonde” (Quot) [Only last week the divisions seemed deep.]

“Nei primi derby di hockey, *rispettivamente* anche in ambito calcistico, di questa prima parte di stagione 2018-2019, di grossi problemi non ce ne sono stati” (Quot, interview) [In the first hockey derbies of this first part of the 2018-2019 season, respectively also in football, there were no big problems.]

In the short stories that constitute the third source taken into consideration, the most remarkable fact is the substantial absence of *ISITisms*. A punctual search of some of the statistically most widespread forms (see among others Pandolfi 2009) provides results close to zero. Some occurrences, however, can be observed. With regard to lexicon, for example, one can find *mantello* (‘coat’, in the standard of Italy *cappotto*), *autopostale* (‘bus’, Italy standard *autobus*) or *bucal lettere* (‘mailbox’, Italy standard *cassetta delle lettere*). As for the constructions, there are occurrences of *a dipendenza di* (‘depending on’, Italy standard *a seconda di*), *a corsa* (‘running’, Italy standard *di corsa*), etc.

Even if this preliminary analysis does not allow concluding remarks, since the corpus could be extended to other potential norm sources, this first glance already allows some general observations.

(1) In the reduced corpus taken into account, we have found examples of *ISIT* features from all categories mentioned in literature, from lexis to syntax. In Italy a cultivated speaker would avoid regional features like these while writing or speaking in formal contexts, thus following an implicit norm, while this doesn't apply to these examples.

(2) At the same time, the two media sources (the printed press and the daily news on TV) are analogous as far as the typology of *ISIT*isms occurring in the documents is concerned – they are mostly terms for “variety-specific objects”, as *Granconsigliere* (see the above category of absolute Helvetisms terms designating referents that do not exist in Italy). As we have seen, however, other *ISIT* features are present, too, even if they are not as frequent as those of the first type are. Two aspects favour the presence of this second category of *ISIT*isms. The first aspect is the fact that they are also used in official texts, thus they are unmarked from the point of view of the register. The second aspect (related to the first) concerns the *ISIT* speakers' knowledge of the alternative term of the Italy standard; in most cases, this knowledge is only passive. The more marked forms – e.g. the ones with a dialectal origin – coexist with a more standard form even within one speaker's idiolect, whereas for the less marked forms the variant usually exists, but the speakers generally do not actively use it.

Our observations go in the same direction as one of the few works investigating the use of Helvetisms in the Italian-speaking Swiss press; Ricci (2009) also shows that the presence of Helvetisms in the press is determined by the category to which they belong. In other words, there is

- a systematic presence of expressions that concern the political-administrative area (expressions that are ‘necessary’, since no alternative term is available in peninsular Italian),
- co-presence of Helvetisms and their equivalents in the Italy standard for the second category (‘unnecessary’ but unmarked terms), and
- presence of terms or constructions not perceived as regional (‘unconscious Helvetisms’).

On the contrary, all terms that are strongly marked as regional and used alternatively by the speakers in parallel to the Italy standard in their more formal language, are absent.

Category c) – unconscious *ISITisms* – is the only one occurring in the third source (non-professional literary texts), and this seems to be a significant finding. It is not surprising that all the strongly marked *ISITisms* are missing in these texts, as they are colloquial and therefore missing in the first two sources, too. This is consistent with the general tendency of controlled texts to avoid forms perceived as being regional and for which a familiar alternative is available. The absence of expressions of category a) can be easily explained by the genre of texts we are dealing with (literary texts), since this category concerns expressions related to the field of politics and public administration. Terms belonging to category b), which are not marked as regional, are also not used in the literary texts of lay writers. Their absence can be attributed to the conscious will to adapt to a standard that is considered to be more prestigious and secondly to the fact that the majority of literary models come from Italy. Significantly, traces of ‘Swissness’ remain where *ISITisms* are not perceived as such (category c); it is the strongest stage of standardisation, which concerns the most formal registers and the most cultured speakers, too. This category resists any conscious adaptation of the Swiss linguistic variety towards peninsular Italian.

5. Conclusion

This paper is based on the observation that Italian is an official language in Italy as well as in Switzerland and on the shared hypothesis that Italian is (at least) a weakly pluricentric language. If there is a Swiss Italian standard, it is necessary to identify norm-setting entities. Based on this assumption, as well as on the objective lack of explicit codification of the Swiss national variety of Italian, we investigated possible sources of implicit standardisation, that is, linguistic models that can influence language use by reinforcing the status of regional forms through usage in more ‘formal’ contexts. A first look at three sorts of potential models – printed press, daily news on TV, non-professional literary texts – has provided a number of data revealing indications for further studies⁴. These data essentially confirmed the results of earlier studies in this field (e.g. Ricci 2009).

ISITisms are quite common in the printed press and the daily news on TV, but they are limited to terms common in the political and administrative field, which do not have an equivalent in the Italy standard, because they refer to nation-specific objects.

⁴ We refer in particular to the need to conduct a systematic study leading to quantitative data on a fairly large corpus of texts.

Other *ISIT* features that are present as well are not perceived as regional variants. This is due to two main reasons: i) these words are apparently not different from the Italy standard ones, only showing semantic widening or partial drift (e.g. *evidente*); ii) the components of morphosyntactic constructions and locutions are clearly belonging to the standard lexicon of Italian, despite the fact that the locutions themselves are specific for Swiss Italian (e.g. *a dipendenza di* or the transitive use of *avere bisogno*).

In literary texts, the presence of *ISIT*isms is near to zero. A possible explanation for this could be that these texts usually do not deal with the political or administrative realm. Finally, we would like to add two concluding remarks:

1. The direction of the investigation is legitimate and needs to be deepened. In particular, further quantitative studies that compare the presence of regionalisms in formal/controlled texts in *ISIT* and in peninsular Italian would be useful to complete the description of the pluricentricity of Italian (based on already existing quantitative studies, such as Pandolfi 2009).

2. A second outcome is that a stratification of Swiss Italian seems to emerge that adds a further level of variation. A first level of variation overlaps with the one that *ISIT* shares with all linguistic regions of Italy: these variants, marked as 'non-standard' and occurring especially in informal language, behave just like any other regional variant in Italy. Nonetheless, in *ISIT* another variation at a second level exists. This concerns the official language, is unmarked and is perceived as standard language. This second level of variation strongly contributes to the specificity of *ISIT*. It can be assumed that in the long term it could also influence the speakers' perception about the whole range of variation, introducing other more endogenous elements of variation into the norm and further contributing to the development of *ISIT* into an autonomous linguistic variety.

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