

How Did Italians Communicate When There Was No Italian? Italo-Romance Intercomprehension in the Late Middle Ages

Alessandro Carlucci

To cite this article: Alessandro Carlucci (2020) How Did Italians Communicate When There Was No Italian? Italo-Romance Intercomprehension in the Late Middle Ages, *The Italianist*, 40:1, 19-43, DOI: [10.1080/02614340.2020.1748328](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2020.1748328)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2020.1748328>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 May 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 599



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

How Did Italians Communicate When There Was No Italian? Italo-Romance Intercomprehension in the Late Middle Ages

Alessandro Carlucci 

University of Bergen

ABSTRACT

Historians (including historians of oral and written culture, and to some extent also literary historians) have long been aware of the role of Latin as a potential barrier to intelligibility, but they have very rarely considered the possibility that Italy's vernacular varieties could equally impede communication. Linguists, on the other hand, are for the most part convinced that medieval speakers were trapped in a myriad of mutually unintelligible vernaculars. In this article, these conflicting views are tested on a range of late medieval sources, which reveal how speakers perceived the lexicon as the structural level creating the main problems of intelligibility. In some cases, phonological and morphological differences were also perceived as sources of misunderstanding and as potential barriers to communication. On the whole, however, these barriers do not seem to have been as insurmountable as the traditional views of most linguists would lead us to expect.

SOMMARIO

Gli storici in senso lato (compresi coloro che si occupano di cultura orale e scritta, e in qualche misura gli stessi storici della letteratura) sono da tempo consapevoli della difficile intelligibilità del latino, ma raramente prendono in considerazione la possibilità che i volgari abbiano causato analoghe difficoltà di comunicazione. Gran parte dei linguisti è invece dell'opinione che i parlanti medievali fossero prigionieri di una miriade di volgari non intelligibili tra loro. Nel presente saggio, queste idee discordanti vengono testate su una serie di fonti tardo-medievali, dalle quali emerge innanzitutto che il lessico era percepito dai parlanti come il livello strutturale responsabile dei maggiori problemi d'intelligibilità. In alcuni casi anche le differenze fonologiche e morfologiche venivano percepite come fonti di fraintendimenti e ostacoli alla comunicazione. Nel complesso, tuttavia, non pare che questi ostacoli siano stati così insormontabili come si potrebbe pensare stando alle opinioni tradizionalmente dominanti tra i linguisti.

KEYWORDS

multilingualism; intelligibility; language contact; history of the Italian language; orality and writing; Jacopone da Todi

PAROLE CHIAVE

multilinguismo; intelligibilità; contatto linguistico; storia della lingua italiana; oralità e scrittura; Jacopone da Todi

In their 2013 essay 'Dante as a Native Speaker', Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy raise a crucial question about the linguistic situation in medieval Italy: how did Dante communicate with ordinary people from different parts of Italy? 'The degree of our

CONTACT Alessandro Carlucci  alessandro.carlucci@uib.no

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ignorance is especially worrying if we try to take into account not only literate people (who would have known Latin, perhaps together with vernacular literary traditions) but also illiterate speakers of local varieties'.¹ Had Dante lived in the second half of the twentieth century, he would obviously have used Italian (perhaps with regional Tuscan features) in order to communicate with people from other parts of Italy. The answer to the question raised by the Lepschys immediately becomes less straightforward if we go back to the period between Italy's unification (1861) and the Second World War, when Italian would probably have enabled Dante to talk only to a minority of literate people, while the rest of the population, especially in rural areas, still had difficulties in using and understanding Italian. The dominant views among linguists are that, when Italy became a unified country, around nine-tenths of its population only spoke Italo-Romance varieties different from Italian, and that these varieties or 'dialects' (see below) are very different from each other, and 'mostly unintelligible to speakers of other dialects'.² The number of people who could confidently use Italian was even smaller between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, when its use was mostly confined to literature and official communication. But it is for earlier periods that our uncertainty reaches its peak. We know that educated elites could communicate by using Latin among themselves, and that some of their members (especially those who had literary inclinations) were increasingly exposed to the prestige of Tuscan and were perhaps able to understand it, if not to use it actively. We also know that, during the fifteenth century, convergence towards Latin or Tuscan models and avoidance of the most idiosyncratic local features led to the emergence of regionally shared vernacular varieties (also known as 'koiné languages'), which were used in particular domains and especially in written texts, such as chancery documents. Yet what about farther back in time and on lower rungs of the socio-cultural ladder?

This article explores the possibility that speakers who did not know Latin or any other supra-local variety may nonetheless have been capable of overcoming barriers to communication without having to turn to interpreters or translators. Given that most of the local communities used Italo-Romance varieties descended from Latin, medieval Italy offers a particularly relevant case for the historical study of how speakers manage, or fail, to establish mutual comprehension between related languages.³ I will scrutinise various historical sources, including literary representations, which cast light on how and to what extent cross-dialectal comprehension was possible in medieval Italy. Based on this survey of the available evidence, I will identify recurrent linguistic and extra-linguistic factors which appear to have facilitated, or impeded, mutual intelligibility. My conclusion will be that, although certain factors particularly hindered comprehension, levels of mutual intelligibility were often higher than is traditionally assumed.

The period covered in this article goes from the earliest available evidence to roughly the mid-fifteenth century.⁴ I will speak of 'vernaculars' (It. *volgari*) and 'dialects' (*dialetti*) in a way which is intended to facilitate the inclusion of definitions and quotations from other authors. Italo-Romance varieties are traditionally called *volgari* with reference to the period up to the sixteenth century, before the literary codification of the old Florentine used by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, whereas *dialetto* tends to be reserved to the period following the adoption of Florentine-based literary Italian throughout the entire peninsula.⁵ In what follows, however, both terms are used as synonyms for the more neutral 'variety'.

My work is linked to recent scholarship in Italian linguistics, especially to the views of specialists who have begun to question the conventional idea of a widespread lack of intelligibility between different Italo-Romance varieties in medieval and early modern Italy (see following section). However, the material gathered in this article and the arguments that I intend to put forward are relevant to a broader set of research themes and approaches. The case of Dante is but one example. What language did Saint Francis use ‘per farsi capire dal popolo di Bologna’, when he preached there in 1222? ‘Non certo il suo volgare assisano, non comprensibile appunto dai popolani di Bologna’.⁶ Similar questions have long been posed with regard to medieval merchants, too. Although their letters showed signs of koineisation, they remained noticeably different according to the area of provenance of each sender, and yet communication among merchants from different parts of Italy did take place on a regular basis. More recently, the question of Italo-Romance intercomprehension has continued to emerge now and again because of its bearing on topics which are currently at the centre of historical research in Italian studies and cognate disciplines – from the interaction between spoken and written texts, to the forms of communication enacted by itinerant preachers and performers;⁷ from the circulation and recitation of Dante’s *Commedia* outside Florence, to the role of writing and orality in the diplomatic relations between the different states in pre-unification Italy.

Traditional Views and New Proposals

The idea that ever since the Middle Ages Italians have been trapped within mutually unintelligible dialects, and therefore unable to communicate beyond their local area unless they know Latin or other languages of wider circulation, has deep roots in Italian culture. In the eighteenth century, Goldoni wrote that ‘in nessuna parte più che in Italia parlano diversamente i Popoli delle varie Provincie, talché molti e molti fra di loro non si capiscono’, and he specified that ‘[l]a Veneta nostra lingua non è la più difficile da capirsi’.⁸ In his *Discorso storico sul testo del Decamerone*, Foscolo stated that in Italy, ‘dodici uomini di diverse province che conversassero fra di loro, ciascuno ostinandosi a usare il dialetto suo proprio, si partirebbero senza saperti dire di che parlavano’.⁹ These views were widely accepted when events such as mass migration and military mobilisation exacerbated the need to communicate between speakers of different Italo-Romance varieties. Luciano De Crescenzo, the author of numerous works of popular science and philosophy, recalled on various occasions family memories of his father acting as an interpreter during the First World War: ‘Quando il tenente, che era veneto, doveva ascoltare un caporale siciliano o un sergente napoletano, lo mandava a chiamare e si faceva tradurre tutto parola per parola’.¹⁰ For the first time in Italian history, these events brought large masses of an illiterate population into contact with each other. Italian migrants to the USA, ‘giungendo da diverse regioni della penisola e costretti a venire a contatto reciproco, per superare la barriera delle diversità dialettali preferivano ricorrere a un rozzo gergo anglicizzante’.¹¹ There is indeed no shortage of evidence to support this idea of radical unintelligibility, including the direct experience of linguists. For instance, Lepschy recalls a conversation he overheard in his hometown, Venice, between two speakers of ‘the dialect of Roseto, a town in the province of

Teramo, in the Southern Abruzzi'. He tried 'to understand what they were saying: not a single word was intelligible'.¹²

Modern perceptions and concepts have often been projected back onto the Middle Ages.¹³ The resulting 'standard view' (I borrow this label from Vincent) is that, in Italy, '[a]round the end of the first millennium AD there were [...] a myriad of local vernaculars, perhaps as many as 700 according to Muljačić, each with a high degree of autonomy and mutual unintelligibility with respect to other surrounding dialects'.¹⁴ The number of varieties differs according to different estimates, and a reduction is usually factored in for later periods, due to convergence between local varieties and especially to the spread of prestigious linguistic features from the varieties of culturally, politically, and economically prominent cities.¹⁵ However, it is widely believed that the medieval situation did not significantly change until the twentieth century, when Italo-Romance dialects began to be replaced by regional varieties of Italian in all domains of use. As pointed out by Vårvaro and other linguists, modern dialectology has reinforced this view, because of its emphasis on diatopic variation and its tacit assumption that, as far as dialects are concerned, the modern data offer a faithful picture of the linguistic and communicative situations that emerged during the Middle Ages.¹⁶

These traditional views are discussed more extensively by Vårvaro, Maiden, and Vincent, who question them and call for an alternative interpretation of the modern, and especially the medieval, situation.¹⁷ As we shall see, by combining their arguments we can formulate the hypothesis that the potential for mutual comprehension between Italo-Romance speakers from different areas was higher than traditionally thought. This hypothesis should not be confused with the far more obvious supposition that Italo-Romance varieties of adjacent localities must have been mutually intelligible (as they are today, unless they are separated by a bundle of isoglosses). Nor should it be confused with unrealistic expectations of intelligibility for non-Romance varieties (such as those used by the Germanic- and Slav-speaking minorities who have settled in various parts of Italy since the Middle Ages).

The view that cross-dialectal comprehension is not, after all, an exceptional experience has itself a long history. Machiavelli expressed it during the Renaissance period when he claimed that the languages of different parts of Italy were 'differenti [...] ma non tanto che le non s'intendino'.¹⁸ Moving to the modern period, the realist writer Federico De Roberto gave a linguistically original representation of the First World War in his short story *La paura*, where all the common soldiers speak their respective dialects.¹⁹ Although these range from Gallo-Italic to Sicilian varieties, the soldiers manage to communicate and seem to understand each other without particular problems.

Foscolo, too, realised that his above-mentioned comments about radical linguistic fragmentation are difficult to reconcile with historical information about the economic and cultural exchanges between different parts of pre-unification Italy, which involved various sectors of the population and not just intellectual elites. Foscolo appears to have considered the possibility that incomprehension may be overcome by developing passive competence in another dialect: 'un Bolognese e un Milanese non si intenderebbero fra di loro, se non dopo parecchi giorni di mutuo insegnamento'.²⁰ Yet he favoured a partly different solution to the problem of intercomprehension. Communication between speakers of different varieties may have been facilitated by an early, rudimentary knowledge of Italian. He spoke of 'un linguaggio comune, tal quale

tanto da farsi intendere, e che potrebbe chiamarsi mercantile ed itinerario'.²¹ And he argued that this kind of language existed in Italy 'anche nel medio evo',²² when it must have been used chiefly by clerics, merchants, tradespeople, and other travellers.

To an extent, these intuitions are similar to the arguments which have been put forward in more recent years. Vårvaro has suggested that the emergence of Tuscan-based Italian as a 'roof language' for the entire peninsula was possible because a sense of linguistic unity already existed in medieval Italy.²³ The perception of linguistic fragmentation was countered by the realisation that local varieties were part of regional groups consisting of fundamentally similar varieties, and that these regional groups were in turn part of a pan-Italian linguistic entity, different from other Romance languages. According to Dante, the varieties of Friuli and Sardinia could also be associated with this pan-Italian entity.²⁴ This perception was not exclusive to intellectuals, but was shared by ordinary speakers – to a greater or lesser degree, depending on how broad their cultural horizons and experience of the world were. When faced with the need to communicate with someone from a different locality, Italo-Romance speakers instinctively avoided local features which made their speech impenetrable.²⁵ In doing so, they probably relied on their familiarity with inter-dialectal equivalences – from equivalences between local and regional variants, to more extensive equivalences such as Tuscan *-aio* = non-Tuscan *-aro*, as in the type *notaio/notaro* 'notary', or northern intervocalic *voiced* stops = Tuscan and southern intervocalic *voiceless* stops, as in *figo/fico* 'fig'. Arguably, similar equivalences also aided comprehension at the other end, that is on the part of the listener.²⁶

These proposals are compatible with Maiden's and Vincent's views. Vincent argues that grammar – syntax, in particular – was not as heterogeneous as traditionally assumed. Different dialects had 'sufficient structure in common to enable speakers to move more or less freely between them, or at least while having active competence in one to acquire without problems passive competence in one or more of the others'.²⁷ In this perspective, grammatical differences would not have caused major difficulties of comprehension between two varieties (X and Y) as long as 'a speaker of dialect X [could] recognize the lexicon of dialect Y'.²⁸ Since they are largely complementary,²⁹ in the following sections of this article these arguments will be treated as forming one global hypothesis. This will be tested against historical records which contain relevant information about speakers' responses to linguistic diversity and problems of communication. This move seems essential, given that not only Maiden and Vincent, whose arguments are essentially structural (or 'internalist'), but also Vårvaro do not actually produce a comprehensive speaker-oriented account, despite the evident relevance of the speaker's perspective in substantiating or disproving their views.

Recent research has also revived the idea that the spread of Tuscan models helped to create some kind of common language – still embryonic and uneven, but nonetheless available also to speakers who had limited familiarity with the literary language of thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Florence. If not at a pan-Italian level, in the Middle Ages convergence between different varieties took place at regional level and eventually gave rise to those koiné languages which philologists and language historians have abundantly discussed with reference to Italy. The issue of koineisation in Italy's linguistic history has generated considerable disagreement on (among other things) the exact diachronic and geographic extent of the resulting koinai and their

degree of stability and homogeneity, and also on whether Tuscan models really prevailed over Latin, or purely regional, models. Disagreement has also emerged on whether the notion of koineisation should be stretched to include occasional, subconscious accommodation (of the kind hypothesised by Vårvaro and others), or should instead be reserved for situations in which speakers consciously imitate the language of groups with which they wish to be identified.³⁰ Finally, it is not clear if medieval koineisation was limited to written communication or, as suggested by Maraschio, also affected oral speech.³¹ In any case, the idea of koineisation does not contradict – but in fact implies – our hypothesis about mutual intelligibility. Koiné languages normally emerge from the mixing and levelling of ‘mutually intelligible varieties’,³² as confirmed both by general definitions of koineisation, and by historical research on medieval cases.³³

Historical Evidence: Intelligibility

Part of the support for the hypothesis of good intercomprehension comes not from comments about intelligibility, but from a lack of evidence pointing in the opposite direction – i.e. towards unintelligibility. In his studies Vårvaro repeatedly states that, generally speaking, in the Middle Ages people paid little attention to linguistic diversity and rarely mentioned barriers to communication. He also adds that this limited attention was probably due to the fact that other factors (for instance, religion) were more important in defining collective identities. Only in modern nation-states have people begun to feel strongly about linguistic diversity, which has often been involved in generating violent conflicts. Framed in these terms, an argument *ex silentio* is inevitably quite vague. Some medieval sources, however, do pay exceptionally detailed attention to linguistic differences. As we shall see in this section, these sources often stress the differences between Italo-Romance varieties and expose what their authors perceived as the flaws of the most unfamiliar varieties, in a spirit which should have made comments about their unintelligibility all the more likely.

In Salimbene de Adam’s late thirteenth-century *Cronica*, the author, a Franciscan friar from Parma, pays frequent attention to differences of register and instances of sheer mispronunciation in the way Latin is used.³⁴ At one point Salimbene even reports a conversation that a Franciscan teacher (‘lector’) had, in Latin, with a peasant possessed by the devil. When the lector mocks the devil for his bad Latin, the devil impatiently retorts that he knows Latin, and that his mistakes are to be blamed on the awful linguistic habits of the peasant.³⁵ Salimbene also expresses his preference for certain vernaculars (Florentine, most notably) over others, and in doing so he seems to be referring to minute phonological features. For instance, he endorses negative attitudes towards ‘Siculi et Apuli’ [Sicilians and Apulians] because they speak ‘[i]n gutture’ [in the throat] and, ‘quando volunt dicere: “Quid vis?”, dicunt: “Ke boli?”’ [when they want to say ‘What do you want?’ they say ‘Ke boli?’].³⁶ This example reflects the confusion between [b] and [v] (here in continuants of Latin *VOLO*) – a widely present phenomenon in southern Italy, known as ‘betacism’ in modern linguistics. Yet, despite his insistence on linguistic diversity, the well-travelled friar from Parma never argues that Italy’s vernaculars are incomprehensible. Nor does he seem to find it strange that, for instance, a prelate from Pistoia on a visit to Faenza should speak Tuscan (‘Tuscice’) to a group of presumably local friars.³⁷ The only kind of obscurity which triggers Salimbene’s

comments has to do with lexical differences, which he sometimes feels the need to overcome by providing explanatory notes and correspondences between words used in different parts of Italy.³⁸

Similar points can be made with regard to Dante, who, in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, conducts 'a sometimes scathing critical evaluation of the dialectal variants of Italy, in pursuit of an ideal literary language, but conspicuously never condemns any of them on grounds of *unintelligibility*'.³⁹ Not only does Dante's case confirm the general lack of evidence against intelligibility, it also seems to offer some evidence in favour of intelligibility, which allows us to move beyond a purely *ex silentio* argument. In particular, in his *Convivio* Dante justifies his use of the vernacular by explaining that Latin would have been understood only by the 'litterati'.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, in the same work, he speaks of 'volgare italico' (distinguishing it, for instance, from Provençal) and claims to be using it to address 'quasi [...] tutti l'Italici'.⁴¹ Although Dante's written vernacular was open to various literary influences and aimed at being as 'italico' as possible, rather than purely municipal, its core lexicon and grammatical structures are essentially Florentine. So his remarks suggest that he expected this essentially Florentine language to be intelligible throughout Italy.

A few decades later, Dante's reasons were expanded on by Boccaccio, when the latter had to justify Dante's choice not to use Latin for his *Commedia* – a choice that was coming under increasing criticism with the rise of humanism. Again, in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante* Boccaccio does not restrict the potential audience of Dante's poetry to Florence or Tuscany, arguing that Dante composed the *Commedia* in vernacular 'per fare utilità piú comune a' suoi cittadini e agli altri italiani'.⁴² If the geographical scope is similar to the one implicit in Dante's *Convivio*, here Boccaccio seems to broaden the socio-cultural scope slightly by referring to the 'idioti' – that is, to illiterates in general, and not just those who were not 'literate in Latin' (which is probably the meaning of *litterati* in Dante's remarks). Even if they could not read Dante's text, illiterates in various parts of Italy could probably still enjoy it when it was performed or simply read out loud.⁴³

With Boccaccio we have reached the second half of the fourteenth century, a period when Tuscan had already acquired a special status, particularly in literature. In an early vernacular translation of the Bible, which I shall quote from a fourteenth-century manuscript,⁴⁴ the anonymous translator – perhaps a Tuscan – explains that he has opted for 'uno chomune parlare toscano però che è il piú intero e il piú aperto e il piú apto chomunemente di tutta Ytalia e il piú piacevole e il piú intendevole di ogni lingua'.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the first half of the century, the Paduan judge and poet Antonio da Tempo claimed that 'Lingua Tusca magis apta est ad literam sive literaturam quam aliae linguae, et ideo magis est communis et intelligibilis' [the Tuscan language is more suitable for writing or literature than other languages, and is therefore more common and intelligible].⁴⁶ I shall return to the attitudes and other related factors which might limit the significance of these judgements. In any case, we have other historical evidence which is consistent with the hypothesis of good levels of Italo-Romance intercomprehension. This evidence refers to earlier periods and/or non-literary communication, and it is not restricted to Tuscan varieties.

The rich religious life of medieval Italy manifested itself in both written and oral culture. The former was developed especially in monasteries such as Montecassino (close to what is today the administrative border between Lazio and Campania), which had a leading

cultural role in central and southern Italy from the tenth century and throughout the late Middle Ages. The influence of centres such as Montecassino was bolstered by the fact that linguistic variation in nearby areas was not such as to impede intercomprehension. According to Baldelli, religious texts were written in local vernaculars ‘fra cui era certa la reciproca comprensione’, and this mutual comprehension stretched as far as Umbria and the southern part of the Marche: these areas were not separated by major bundles of isoglosses with regard to ‘fatti fonetici, morfologici e sintattici’, while ‘una delle più vistose differenze, quali il betacismo cassinese, non costituisce certo ostacolo rilevante alla reciproca comprensione’.⁴⁷ The rise to prominence of mendicant orders, especially during the thirteenth century, further supported the cross-regional circulation of written texts, which were, however, not only silently absorbed and memorised by individual readers, but also read out to others. In the fifteenth century, the Sicilian saint Eustochia Calafato was still deeply familiar with dramatic poetry, especially the *laude* of the Umbrian friar Jacopone da Todi (a near contemporary of Dante): all of his ‘dicti et rime l’avia a la mente, et spesse volte le cantava’.⁴⁸

These references to shared reading (or ‘aurality’) and singing bring us to another aspect of religious life which is relevant from the point of view of this article. I am thinking of the extensive use of orality by itinerant preachers, who often preached in public spaces in an accessible, popularising style. Saint Francis was not the only one to preach in different parts of Italy. The already mentioned Salimbene de Adam (who attended processions and sermons, and recorded precious information about them in his *Cronica*) tells us that the unconventional trumpet-blowing ‘frater Benedictus’ [Brother Benedict], a hermit ‘vel de valle Spoletana, vel de partibus Romanis’ [who came either from the valley of Spoleto or from the Rome area], preached ‘in vulgari’ [in the vernacular] in Parma in 1233 (the famous year of great processions, when penitents crowded the streets of northern and central Italy).⁴⁹ Interestingly, before ending his performance with a Latin prayer based on the Ave Maria, Benedict used an acclamation which is also recorded in the *Chronica* by Richard of San Germano.⁵⁰ The author of this chronicle was a notary at the monastery of Montecassino, and it was in this area that he heard the acclamation, still in 1233, from an itinerant preacher named ‘frater I’ (see Table 1).

These two versions differ in features such as final vowels (-u vs -o) and the form of the article (*lu* vs *lo*). By comparing them, we get a glimpse of the effects that oral circulation had on texts of this kind. Preachers probably adapted the original composition (now lost) to their own phono-morphological habits, and perhaps to those of their audience, while further alterations could be introduced by those who subsequently wrote down what they had heard.⁵¹

On similar occasions, the audience typically consisted of people who had not mastered Latin,⁵² so this was not the language normally used by preachers.⁵³ However, it would be rash to take popular comprehension of their preaching as straightforward confirmation of

Table 1. Two versions of an early *lauda*.

Richard:	Salimbene:
Benedictu laudatu et glorificatu lu Patre, benedictu laudatu et glorificatu lu Fillu, benedictu laudatu et glorificatu lu Spiritu Sanctu. Alleluia, gloriosa Donna.	Laudato et benedhetto et glorificato sia lo Patre! [Laudato et benedhetto et glorificato] sia lo Fijo! [Laudato et benedhetto et glorificato] sia lo Spiritu Sancto! Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

purely linguistic intelligibility across different Italo-Romance varieties. First, it is difficult to check to what extent comprehension was more perceived than real. Second, various sources show that preachers succeeded in conveying their message by deploying a whole series of linguistic and non-linguistic resources – including extraordinary gestural and theatrical skills, as well as their own physical appearance, which was often a very powerful reminder of their commitment to penitence and their detachment from earthly pleasures.⁵⁴ Third, Latin probably had a role in enabling real or perceived comprehension. While clerics would often use Latin among themselves, the vernacular prevailed when the target of preaching was an audience of uneducated laypersons; however, some Latin could still be thrown in, since everyone was regularly exposed to it at mass and on countless other occasions. Lay people, too, were familiar with Latin words and expressions from prayers and other common sources, and would certainly recognise them even if they distorted their form or meaning.⁵⁵ In this respect, the role of widely shared Latin expressions was probably part of a broader phenomenon whereby comprehension was facilitated by the partly formulaic nature of what itinerant preachers said, and by the relatively uniform set of topics of biblical origin which were the basis of most of their sermons.

Religious gatherings and other public performances were not the only contexts in which cross-dialectal comprehension apparently occurred. Political and economic life provided other opportunities for communication with speakers of different vernaculars. Although Latin was sometimes used, the dominant trend was towards the use of vernaculars which showed increasing traces of koineisation, especially in the letters of ambassadors.⁵⁶ At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Boncompagno da Signa already observed that merchants ‘per idiomata propria seu vulgaria vel corruptum latinum ad invicem sibi scribunt et rescribunt’ [write back and forth to each other again and again in their own dialects or vernaculars, or in corrupt Latin].⁵⁷ The archive of one of the most powerful Tuscan firms, the Datini company, now housed in the Archivio di Stato di Prato, contains letters the company received from different parts of Italy. For instance, in a letter of 4 August 1403, Antonio Contarini writes to Datini’s firm in Venetian.⁵⁸ As we shall see in the next section, however, these regular epistolary exchanges were not always smooth, and in some cases involved the realisation that the language of certain correspondents was difficult to understand.

Counter-Evidence: Lack of Intelligibility

It might be suspected that comments about linguistic intelligibility, *including the lack of it*, are simply quite rare in the surviving medieval sources. In theory, if no barriers to communication were ever mentioned at all, we could not infer anything from this silence, and an argument *ex silentio* in favour of good levels of intercomprehension would, as such, clearly be untenable. But, in reality, when the languages involved are not Italo-Romance varieties, comments about communication problems were frequently made and have survived in various sources, together with other evidence pointing towards linguistic unintelligibility. In his thirteenth-century cosmographical treatise, Restoro d’Arezzo talks about ‘genti [...] che non entende l’uno l’altro, come so’ Greci, e Ermini [Armenians], e Tedeschi, e Latini, e Saracini e molti altri’.⁵⁹ At this level of linguistic diversity, the problem of unintelligibility surfaces from the comments of

missionaries and other travellers,⁶⁰ and it clearly emerges from the historical information we have about the availability of interpreting and translation services for diplomatic, commercial, and evangelical purposes.⁶¹ While there is no clear indication that Italian itinerant preachers used interpreters to have their own vernacular translated into a different Italo-Romance vernacular, the presence of interpreters and translators becomes increasingly well documented if the preachers in question preached outside Italy, especially if they travelled to non-Romance-speaking territories.⁶²

While the foregoing supports the thesis of good levels of Italo-Romance cross-dialectal comprehension, other sources reveal that in many cases perceived intelligibility probably concealed a complex picture involving various degrees of misunderstanding and incomprehension. Faced with a verb form from the variety of Todi, the 3pl *o* 'they have' (pronounced [ɔ], or perhaps [o]), one of the scribes who copied Jacopone's *laude* probably took it to be a 1sg (as in Tusc. [ɔ] 'I have'), while in other cases he changed it to a 3sg form *à* 'he/she/it has'.⁶³ Similarly, in a Sicilian version of the *Aeneid*, based on a Tuscan version, we encounter 'casi di incompiensione linguistica, del tipo *legnaio* "caterva di legna" sovrapposto a *lignaiu* "lignaggio" e quindi reso con *matrimoniu*, o *serocchia* "sorella" frainteso in *sochira* "suocera".⁶⁴ In his Milanese-Florentine glossary, the Florentine Benedetto Dei seems to have failed to grasp some subtleties of the source language, such as the metaphonic plural *ticc* [tiʧ] 'roofs' (vs singular *tecc* [teʧ] 'roof') and the feminine plural mark *-ann* [an] 'originating in kinship terms'.⁶⁵ Hence the erroneously singular headwords *ticcio* 'roof', with the *-i-* of the plural extended to the singular, and *tosana* 'girl' instead of *tosa*.⁶⁶

While Dei's lexicography probably served erudite and artistic curiosity, rather than practical purposes, in other cases the very existence of lexical explanations testifies to the presence of perceptible barriers to communication. Most of the glossaries produced in medieval Italy provide Italo-Romance equivalents for Latin words or short sentences. In some cases, the explanatory equivalences are between a particular Italian vernacular and other languages, such as Greek, German, French, and Provençal. These combinations confirm that speakers tended to be more aware of intelligibility problems when non-Italo-Romance varieties were involved. In a few cases, however, both source and target language are Italo-Romance varieties. An interesting example is to be found in the mid-fourteenth-century *Pratica della mercatura* written by the Florentine businessman and politician Francesco Balducci Pegolotti. At the beginning of the manuscript that preserves this text,⁶⁷ we find lists of equivalents for various technical terms and other words used in the rest of the *Pratica*. Many of the equivalents listed are from the varieties used in places such as 'Ispagna', 'Persia', 'Erminia', 'Provenza', 'Francia', 'Inghilterra', and 'Barberia'; but others do belong to the Italo-Romance varieties of 'Cicilia', 'Puglia', 'Vinegia', 'Genova', etc. From these lists, and from other parts of the text, I have extracted the words used in different Italian vernaculars to indicate (approximately) the same referent, as well as the definition provided by Pegolotti. The results are presented in Table 2.⁶⁸

Barriers to Italo-Romance intercomprehension also emerge if we turn to the early reception of Dante's *Commedia*. The following simile describing Lucifer posed interesting challenges: 'Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti | un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla' (*Inf.*, XXXIV. 55–56). In his Neapolitan commentary, Guglielmo Maramauro explained that *maciulla* is a tool for breaking up flax or hemp but did not provide a

Table 2. Lexical equivalences in Pegolotti's *Pratica della mercatura*.

	Tuscany	Genoa	Marches	Venice	Naples	Apulia	Sicily	Friuli	Sardinia	
'export duty'						<i>tratta</i>	<i>tratta</i>		<i>tratta</i>	'diritto che si paga di biada'
'porters'	<i>portatori</i>	<i>borgognoni</i>								'gente che portano in sul loro collo mercantie'
'toll'	<i>gabella</i>	<i>spedicamento</i> <i>pedaggio</i>		<i>dazio</i>	<i>doana</i>	<i>doana</i> <i>piazza</i> <i>fondaco</i> <i>bindanaio</i>	<i>doana</i> <i>piazza</i> <i>fondaco</i> <i>bindanaio</i>	<i>munda</i>		'diritto che si paga di mercatantia e di merce e altre cose che l'uomo mette e trae o passa per li luoghi [...]'
'warehouse'	<i>fondaco</i> <i>bottega</i>	<i>volta</i>								'luogora dove si mette a guardia la mercatantia e ove stanno e riparano e' risedenti mercatanti [...]'
'market'	<i>mercato</i> <i>fiera</i>	<i>bazarra</i> <i>raba</i>								'luogora dove le mercatantie si vendono nelle cittadi e nelle castella e nelle ville'
'dyer's rocket' (?)	<i>erba gualda</i>		<i>erba</i> <i>panicciuola</i>			<i>erba</i> <i>luccia</i>				['Reseda Luteola' (<i>Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini</i>)]
'broker'	[<i>sensale</i>] [<i>mezzano</i>]			<i>messetto</i>						'genti che si tramettono di fare mercati di mercatantie o d'altre cose che si comperano o vero vendono da uno mercatante ad un altro [...]'

local equivalent, probably because the Neapolitan verb *maciulljà* and noun *macinàla* are only partly different from Dante's form, with which they share the remote etymon *MACHINULA*, a diminutive of *MACHINA*.⁶⁹ Instead, in the north of Italy, comparisons had to be made with different tools, such as Lombard *spadula* in the commentary by the Anonimo Lombardo.⁷⁰ When Dante used a uniquely Florentine word, as in the case of *ramarro* 'European green lizard (*Lacerta viridis*)' (*Inf.*, XXV. 79), commentators from northern Italy and also Tuscans such as Francesco da Buti, Guido da Pisa, and Bartolomeo Nerucci da San Gimignano provided explanations and geo-synonyms (*rogio*, *ràcano*, various reflexes of *LANGURUS*, etc.).⁷¹

As observed by Franceschini, who has extensively compared Dante commentaries with modern dialectological data, the richest lexical explanations are triggered by two factors: (i) the absence of a common extra-linguistic referent, whereby words need to be explained not only because they are different in various parts of Italy, but also because they designate different objects or practices (as in the case of *maciulla/spadula*); and (ii) the absence of a clearly recognisable Latin antecedent (as in the case of *ramarro*). The second point suggests that comprehension problems were more readily perceived when the words involved came from different etyma, or if they had been radically transformed by diachronic changes despite descending from the same Latin etymon. The need to add explanatory glosses would seem to have been less pressing when cognate words from different Italo-Romance varieties had undergone sound changes which had not radically obscured their common origin. In synchronic terms, certain phonological differences must have been easy to work out and had little or no effect on overall intelligibility, especially if they gave rise to recurrent, recognisable correspondences (as in the case of the northern lack of word-final vowels, or the aforementioned presence of voiced consonants, instead of voiceless ones, in intervocalic position).⁷² Interestingly, on this point the lexical explanations which accompanied a literary text such as Dante's *Commedia* seem largely consistent with Pegolotti's commercial instructions, notwithstanding the different functions and socio-cultural milieus that informed these works. In Pegolotti's *Pratica*, too, a greater wealth of Italo-Romance equivalents is provided when the terms involved are substantially different and cannot easily be related to one another or to a Latin counterpart (as confirmed by Table 2).

It is important to recognise, however, that some of the lexical explanations contained in the early commentaries on the *Commedia* sit ill with widely shared assumptions about Italy's linguistic history as a process of linear progression from high levels of fragmentation, typical of the Middle Ages, to increasing unification and mutual intelligibility as we move into the modern period. Nowadays, Italian has three main lexical options signifying 'now': *ora*, *adesso*, and *mo*. The last one is typical of informal registers and is mainly restricted to central and southern Italy. Standard notions of linear evolution would lead us to expect those three options to have ousted a pool of radically different competitors – each of them exclusive to a particular region, if not to a particular town or village. In fact, in the Middle Ages, *mo* was used also in the north of Italy and in parts of Tuscany, and it was probably understandable, even if not actively used, in the rest of Tuscany. In the first half of the fifteenth century, when Guiniforte Barzizza explained Dante's *Inferno* at the Visconti court in Milan, he could go as far as to define *mo* as a 'general vocabolo italiano'.⁷³ Other options which are today confined to

conservative areas, and unintelligible to the average Italian speaker, circulated much more widely in medieval Italy. Such was the case with *issa*, another word for 'now' (see *Inf.*, XXIII. 7 and *Purg.*, XXIV. 55) which is currently confined to small parts of northern Italy. In Dante's time, this word was used in Lucca, as confirmed by Francesco da Buti, and was also recognised by Guido da Pisa as a word used in Pisa.⁷⁴ This evidence from early commentaries on the *Commedia* bears some similarity to the history of the (above-mentioned) agentive suffix *-aio*. Conventional assumptions about Italy's linguistic unification suggest that this form only spread outside of Tuscany with the expansion of Tuscan-based Italian from the sixteenth century onwards, and especially after Italy's political unification in the second half of the nineteenth century. But again, medieval evidence shows that *-aio* was originally used in Umbria, in parts of the Marche and, alongside *-aro*, in the north of Lazio.⁷⁵ During the Middle Ages and later, *-aio* must have receded from these non-Tuscan parts of central Italy,⁷⁶ before spreading again with the expansion of Italian. Moreover, we have evidence of *-aio* having been borrowed by Sardinian varieties already in the Middle Ages.⁷⁷

Let us now turn to speakers' overt comments on problems of intelligibility. An example of this occurs in a letter written by the Tuscan literary scholar Zanobi da Strada, who worked as an adviser to Niccolò Acciaiuoli following the latter's appointment as Grand Seneschal at the Angevin court in Naples. The letter in question was written in Naples on 25 May 1354 and is addressed to another member of the powerful Acciaiuoli family, Jacopo, who had remained in Tuscany. The following passage refers to the younger generations who were growing up in Naples: 'A madama Bartolomea [Jacopo's wife] direte che la Sismonda [Francesco Acciaiuoli's daughter] è fatta sì napoletana che ella non la intenderebbe'.⁷⁸ The Neapolitan influence on Sismonda's speech must have been quite strong and, according to Zanobi, capable of disorientating Tuscan-based members of the family.

Some scholars have identified references to problems of mutual intelligibility between Italo-Romance varieties also in the letters of merchants.⁷⁹ Merchants from northern Italy certainly experienced problems in their correspondence with Tuscan firms. Some of the letters in the Datini Archive offer instructive examples. On the one hand, some non-Tuscans felt the need to apologise for their way of writing, which they suspected might be difficult to understand. Interestingly, this need was also felt by Tuscans who had moved to northern Italy during their childhood. One of them, the Prato-born Piero Benintendi, explained that he had been trained in Genoa, and had spent enough time there to be potentially unintelligible: 'Ogni genovese me reputa e tene genovese e nato sia in Genova [...] e pertanto, se no scripvo intendevele et a vostro modo, dimando perdono'.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the Milanese merchant Giovannino da Dugnano asked Datini and his partners to write in a more intelligible way.⁸¹ It is not always easy, however, to ascertain whether these problems of intelligibility were caused by language as such, or by different ways of representing language in writing. Collective graphic habits varied considerably along geographical and socio-cultural lines,⁸² while sometimes our merchants attributed intelligibility problems to the individual graphic performance of certain colleagues.⁸³

Finally, it is important to reflect on the role of speakers' attitudes. Given that someone's perception of mutual intelligibility is not always a pure reflection of his or her direct communicative experience, speakers' judgements can contain distorted or exaggerated

views. ‘Sociocultural factors may lead to speakers claiming unintelligibility for closely related language varieties’.⁸⁴ Conversely, some people may have various reasons to convince themselves and others that they can understand a particular language, even when their comprehension is dubious. Medieval commentators were struck by the behaviour of satisfied audiences who left as soon as interpreters started to translate what preachers had said in areas where their language was certainly unintelligible, as in the case of Giovanni da Capestrano’s preaching in Germany, Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary.⁸⁵ Other cases involve more complex ideologies. Educated individuals who are attracted to languages of wide circulation, and who certainly understand these languages, tend to present them as intrinsically more transparent than less widespread languages.⁸⁶ To an extent, Antonio da Tempo’s statement (quoted in the previous section) about the intelligibility of Tuscan may fall within this category, in the light of two intertwined factors. First, the growing prestige of Tuscan may have favoured its perceived intelligibility; second, da Tempo’s intention was probably that of further promoting – and not simply of neutrally describing – the role of Tuscan. As shown by Brugnolo, when French was used as a prestigious language in various parts of Italy (especially in the thirteenth century), Italian authors praised French as the most intelligible language, just as da Tempo would later do with Tuscan.⁸⁷

Literary Representations

One might fairly question the representativeness of the material surveyed so far by pointing out that, for instance, commercial and religious communication both revolved around a relatively small set of purposes and topics; and that, together with the existence of conventions and fixed models for communication in both domains, their relatively limited scope made intercomprehension easier. Historical records may not hold sufficient information concerning larger strata of the population or a wider range of communicative situations and goals; however, this gap can in part be filled by turning to literary sources.

In the novella tradition, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* confirms the idea of relatively good levels of Italo-Romance intercomprehension.⁸⁸ The ninth novella of the second day begins with a conversation between Italian merchants in Paris, which results in Ambrogiuolo da Piacenza questioning the conjugal fidelity of the wife of the Genoese Bernabò Lomellin. The conversation will eventually have dramatic consequences on the life of the unjustly vilified woman. She is forced to quit Genoa and move to several places, including the port of Acre (today an Israeli city), where she spends time with ‘molti mercatanti e ciciliani e pisani e genovesi e viniziani e altri italiani’.⁸⁹ This episode seems particularly at odds with modern perceptions, so much so that linguists have questioned the realism of Boccaccio’s fiction by claiming that Bernabò’s wife – whose name is Zinevra – could not really ‘riconoscere come sparse membra d’un organismo comune dialetti tanto diversi tra loro; ed è quasi impossibile che potesse chiacchierare amabilmente con gli altri mercanti, mantenendo il genovese nativo’.⁹⁰

Once again, this silence about communication difficulties might be voided of its probative value by arguing that medieval authors were simply inattentive to linguistic differences and potential incomprehension. Both this idea of a lack of attention to linguistic variation and the idea of an unrealistic depiction of such variation may hold

true for some authors and genres.⁹¹ However, counterexamples are not at all difficult to find. When Boccaccio's characters are speakers who have recently reached Europe from the Muslim world, their radical communication problems are explicitly portrayed (most notably in the seventh novella of the second day) or implicitly acknowledged by explaining, for instance, that '[i]l Saladino e' compagni e' famigliari tutti sapevan latino [the Italian vernacular], per che molto bene intendevano e erano intesi'.⁹²

Attention to linguistic differences is evident in many novellas from the *Decameron*,⁹³ as well as in another important fourteenth-century collection, Franco Sacchetti's *Trecento novelle*. For instance, the demonstrative *cest* 'this' used by a Friulian character is jokingly linked to *canestre* 'baskets', presumably because of its similarity to Tuscan *cesto* 'basket'.⁹⁴ Although introduced for comic purposes, this confusion is realistic in that it resembles the mistakes that scribes made when copying texts written in varieties different from their own. Moreover, the allusions to Friulian as a distinctive and potentially obscure language in Sacchetti's work are consistent with the structural distance between this language and the Tuscan used by the author, and with the peripheral position of Friulian with regard to Italo-Romance in general. Later – when Tuscan models had already acquired a dominant role in many communicative domains, not only in literature – the Friulian priest Pietro Edo still found 'la toschana lengua [...] troppo oscura' and preferred to write in a variety from the Veneto region (identified by Pietro as 'trivisana', but regarded by modern linguists as a Tuscanised Venetan variety) which he held to be 'intelligibile da tutti', particularly by the geographically contiguous 'populi furlani'.⁹⁵

In the early fifteenth-century collection of novellas attributed to 'Gentile Sermini da Siena', a woman and her lover move from Perugia to Milan, where the woman learns the local vernacular, and when back in Perugia she pretends to be Milanese by virtue of her way of speaking.⁹⁶ In another novella we encounter a mayor (*podestà*) who is not from Pisa, where the novella is set, but from the northern town of Mantua. This character communicates with characters from other parts of Italy, despite the fact that, when the narrator reports his speech, dialectal features clearly and copiously appear. For instance, he says: 'Voi savi' quel che porta rason, fasilo pur che mi non ne vo' affanno, né 'npazo negun',⁹⁷ where we notice, among other things, the voiced fricative [v] instead of Tuscan [p] in intervocalic position, in 2pl *savi* 'you know', and the subject pronoun form *mi* instead of Tuscan *io*. The same *mi* appears in a contemporary dialogue which San Bernardino recited in front of fellow Tuscans, during one of his sermons:

uno [...] va per camino, e truova un altro, il quale nol vidde mai più. L'uno non sa chi sia l'altro, né l'altro l'uno, né donde è. L'uno di costoro per sapere qualche cosa di lui, dice: Donde se', compagno? – So' da Milani, mi.⁹⁸

Bernardino's linguistic characterisation of the Milanese character rests on the equivalence – which must have been familiar to his audience – between Tuscan *io* and northern *mi* 'I'.⁹⁹ The fact that Tuscan has *mi* as an unstressed non-subject form does not seem to have created problems, at least not in these contexts.

When problems of intelligibility do emerge, they seem to involve mostly lexical differences, and are usually overcome by providing equivalents.¹⁰⁰ A more radical form of unintelligibility seems to emerge from Raimbaut de Vaqueiras's poem

Domna, tant vos ai preiada, in which a Genoese woman turns down the advances of an Occitan-speaking minstrel by saying that she does not understand him any more than she does a German, or Sardinian, or Berber.¹⁰¹ But apart from the fact that the conversation between the minstrel and the plebeian woman goes on for a while, it would be unwise to attribute a general value to the exchange that takes place in the poem, which belongs to the genre of the *tenso* (or contrast). In line with the conventions of this genre, the author characterised a particularly narrow-minded local woman, with little patience for interlocutors such as the poor foreign minstrel. Her behaviour would seem to fall into the category of feigned, or at least exaggerated, unintelligibility resulting from negative attitudes and lack of motivation, rather than into that of genuinely insurmountable unintelligibility. As far as her examples of unintelligible varieties are concerned, two of them are non-Romance varieties, while Sardinian is structurally and geographically 'on the margins' of Italo-Romance (similarly to Friulian).

Strategies to Overcome Unintelligibility

In order to communicate across geolinguistic boundaries within medieval Italy, speakers performed lexical substitutions, in some cases with a full awareness of the need to do so. Bernardino explains:

Io ti prometto ch'io non direi in Lombardia queste parole per buona cosa. Quando io vo predicando di terra in terra, quando io giogno in uno paese, io m'ingegno di parlare sempre sicondo i vocaboli loro; io avevo imparato e so parlare al lor modo molte cose. El 'mattono' viene a dire el fanciullo, e la 'mattona' la fanciulla, etc.¹⁰²

Likewise, speaking in Padua in 1460, Giacomo della Marca says that Bernardino himself, when he was a child, 'romaxe [...] a governo de una sua *cia*, al modo de Toscana, ma a lo modo di qua vegniria chiamata *ameda'*, and then sticks to the latter term in the rest of his sermon.¹⁰³ Even if they do not generate this kind of overt metalinguistic discussion, examples of lexical convergence are also found in the language of merchants, chanceries, and diplomatic communication. For instance, writing to the Datini firm on 15 January 1406, the Sicilian Giovanni Abbatelli uses the distinctively Tuscan deictic *costà* 'over there, near the addressee', alongside Sicilian *izà* 'here'.¹⁰⁴

Other sources confirm that certain speakers were familiar with cross-dialectal equivalences, not only in the lexicon but also in phonology and morphology. In this respect, particularly intriguing evidence is provided by a fifteenth-century copy of Jacopone's *laude*, now kept at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. This manuscript was probably prepared for circulation and recitation in northern Italy.¹⁰⁵ It contains an introduction aimed at facilitating the fruition of Jacopone's religious poetry in a different linguistic environment, followed by a list of words which is interesting in its own right.¹⁰⁶ It might be worth recalling that, in this period, bilingual dictionaries were still relatively rare and usually comprised Latin or French in combination with an Italo-Romance variety. Here, instead, the two varieties are indicated as 'Spoletanum', literally the variety of the Umbrian town of Spoleto, and 'Longobardus', which arguably stands for 'northern Italo-Romance' (fol. 3^v); that is, they are two Italo-Romance varieties.

If we look more closely, we notice something potentially even more interesting. One of the entries in the list does not provide lexical equivalents, but equivalences between letters and so possibly sounds:

Gli, glie, glia = *Ly, ye, ya* (fol. 4^r)¹⁰⁷

The letters in question appear in the entry for ‘family’:

Famiglia = *Fameya* (fol. 4^r)

And similar equivalences appear in many other entries. It seems to me that we are in the presence of an ‘automatic conversion formula’,¹⁰⁸ which helps to explain how people from different parts of medieval Italy could talk to each other. In this particular case, however, the conversion pattern is not unconsciously automatic, but reaches the level of conscious awareness and is explicitly taught to others in order to facilitate intelligibility.¹⁰⁹ Most of the equivalences seem to be based on the observation of the different outcomes which had emerged from the diachronic development of Latin [j]. In much of central and southern Italy, this sequence of sounds had led to the emergence of palatal sonorants ([ʎ:], [j:] and other variants), indicated by the digraph *gl*, whereas in northern Italy the same sequence had yielded sounds such as [j] or [ɟ], which seem to be represented by *y* in the examples above.¹¹⁰

Other entries show how the attention of the person who compiled the glossary was also attracted by the different ways of conjugating verbs. An equivalence is established, for instance, between different ways of forming the first-person future indicative of ‘to be’:

Serayo = *Saroe* ‘I will be’ (fol. 5^r)

Other cases concern the present conditional, as in:

Converia = *Conuengnereue* ‘It would be necessary’ (fol. 3^v)

Seria = *Seraue* ‘I/he/she/it would be’ (fol. 4^v)

Teria = *Tegneraui* ‘I/he/she/it would hold’ (fol. 5^r)

Veria = *Vegneraui* ‘I/he/she/it would come’ (5^r)

Çiria = *Andraui* ‘I/he/she/it would go’ (5^r)

While in the language of the poems *-ia* functions as both a first- and a third-person singular ending,¹¹¹ the use of *-i* and *-e* in the ‘Lombard’ forms might indicate a differentiation between the two persons. This differentiation (which, among other things, makes it difficult to provide a univocal English translation) will require further philological investigation, which might also reveal misunderstanding on the part of the scribe. In any case, what is essential here is that those entries capture the equivalence between two major types of conditional: the conditional formed with endings descended from the imperfect *HABEBAM* (a type typical of southern and central Italy, but stretching into medieval Tuscany) and the conditional formed with endings descended from the preterite *HABUI* (typical of northern Italy and of medieval Florentine, hence Standard Italian *-ei* and *-ebbe*).

Cross-dialectal equivalences of this kind could aid comprehension by giving rise to conversion formulae. At the same time (as already suggested by the two versions of the 1233 Alleluia acclamation), such conversion formulae enabled speakers to adapt a text from a different area to the features of their own variety, or, conversely, to adapt their own speech to that of other areas, and to do this not only in writing but probably also

orally. Finally, the glossary in this manuscript confirms that, in the religious circles where most of the transmission and circulation of the *laude* took place, some basic knowledge of Latin could help to overcome potential barriers to intelligibility. A Latin equivalent is indeed added to some entries, arguably as a safety net for those readers who found the Italo-Romance equivalents insufficiently transparent, as in the entry for ‘today’:

Hogi = Anchoy (hodie) (fol. 4^r)

This is consistent with other contemporary evidence showing that, if people did know Latin, this language could be considered a better way of communicating than the vernacular.¹¹² When the Florentine Dominican Giovanni Dominici wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs for the members of a Venetian nunnery, he chose to write in Latin. He explained his choice by saying that the nuns would understand Latin better than an uncertain mixture of Lombard, Marchigiano, Romagnolo, and Tuscan, which is what he thought his vernacular speech looked like, at least in writing, after he had spent years in northern Italy.¹¹³

Conclusions

The evidence analysed in this article shows that, in medieval Italy, speakers perceived the lexicon as the structural level that created the most significant and practically disruptive problems of intelligibility. In some cases, phonological and morphological differences were also perceived as sources of misunderstanding and as potential barriers to cross-dialectal communication. From a speaker-oriented point of view, it is difficult to confirm whether the main problems of intelligibility were created by the abstract features of morphosyntax,¹¹⁴ or by the relatively more concrete linguistic items – essentially words and sounds – that pertain to the lexicon, phonology, and also morphology, insofar as this last structural level is perceived by speakers not in its abstract paradigmatic nature, but through its ‘lexical’ products (as in the case of the different verb forms listed in the *laudario* of the Biblioteca Laurenziana). Were morphosyntactic differences really of lesser practical importance? Or were lexis and phonology more salient because these two linguistic levels are more accessible to speakers’ observation and conscious control? In any case, our external, speaker-oriented approach strongly suggests that Italo-Romance varieties had enough structure in common, and therefore enough potential for mutual intelligibility, to enable those speakers who wished to communicate to devise means of doing so.

These means probably included forms of accommodation based on systematic, recognisable structural differences, of the kind which modern research has observed in speakers of different varieties of English or different Scandinavian languages.¹¹⁵ If and when they left their local area, late medieval Italo-Romance speakers could rely on their ability to understand – or even actively use – a range of lexical and grammatical variants, and could further expand this range by developing passive competence in the varieties of the localities to which they travelled. Communication would be easier if their interlocutors were accustomed to interacting with speakers of different varieties – an experience which was not uncommon in major political, commercial, and cultural nodes such as Milan, Bologna, Venice, or Naples; whereas more substantial difficulties were likely to emerge in small villages or in areas, such as Friuli, that were geographically and linguistically more remote. The level of this ability must have

depended on circumstances, with the best results being achieved by those speakers whose walk of life regularly put them in contact with many different varieties – either through oral or written communication with speakers, or through the circulation of texts. This does not mean, however, that medieval speakers could communicate as easily and effectively as modern Italians can thanks to the post-unification spread of Italian as an increasingly common language.¹¹⁶ As we have seen, degrees of comprehension varied depending on the varieties involved, on the different topics, types of text and communicative situations (for instance, the ritualistic elements of preaching and diplomatic exchanges could facilitate comprehension), and on the speakers' motivation and attitudes.

Finally, a few words are needed in order to account for the different ways in which Italo-Romance intercomprehension manifests itself in our contemporary society, compared to the late Middle Ages. Modern technologies (transport, printing, audio and video recording) expose us much more to the sudden sense of linguistic strangeness which Giulio Lepschy described with reference to Abruzzese-speaking tourists in Venice, and which we can all experience if, for instance, we listen to previously unheard music sung in one of Italy's dialects (from Fabrizio De André's Genoese, to Pino Daniele's Neapolitan). In the Middle Ages, by contrast, travelling was a slow activity which involved being exposed to gradually changing varieties along the way from one's place of origin to one's destination.¹¹⁷ This kind of gradual linguistic mediation did not only affect human mobility, it also affected the circulation of texts. Whether copied by scribes or orally transmitted, texts were subjected to significant levels of conscious or unconscious adaptation. Petrarch and others were offended by how Dante's poetry was altered, mispronounced, and not fully understood 'in tabernis et in foro' [in pubs and in the square].¹¹⁸ But, as we have seen, more down-to-earth communicators such as preachers and merchants were keen to make the most of cross-dialectal adaptation and partial understanding for their own purposes.

Notes

1. Giulio Lepschy and Laura Lepschy, 'Dante as a Native Speaker', in *Legato con amore in un volume: Essays in Honour of John A. Scott*, ed. by John J. Kinder and Diana Glenn (Florence: Olschki, 2013), pp. 309–19 (p. 313).
2. Giulio Lepschy, 'How Popular Is Italian?', in *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Robert Lumley (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 63–75 (p. 64). For a recent discussion see Pietro Trifone, *Pocoinchiostro: Storia dell'italiano comune* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2017).
3. For an overview of recent research on this topic see Charlotte Gooskens, 'Dialect Intelligibility', in *Handbook of Dialectology*, ed. by Charles Boberg, John Nerbonne, and Dominic Watt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2018), pp. 204–18. On the usefulness of focusing on intelligibility also in historical research see Roger Wright, 'Early Medieval Pan-Romance Comprehension', in *A Sociophilological Study of Late Latin* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), pp. 175–90; Martin Maiden, 'The Definition of Multilingualism in Historical Perspective', in *Multilingualism in Italy: Past and Present*, ed. by Anna Laura Lepschy and Arturo Tosi (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), pp. 31–46; Kurt Braunmüller, 'Receptive Multilingualism in Northern Europe in the Middle Ages', in *Receptive Multilingualism: Linguistic Analyses, Language Policies and Didactic Concepts*, ed. by Jan D. ten Thije and Ludger Zeevaert (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007), pp. 25–47; Claire Blanche-Benveniste, 'Comment retrouver l'expérience des anciens voyageurs en terres de langues romanes?', in *S'entendre entre langues voisines: Vers l'intercompréhension*, ed. by Virginie Conti and François Grin (Chêne-Bourg: Georg, 2008), pp. 33–51.

4. On the political, technological, and cultural transformations that took place during the fifteenth century and increased the need for linguistic uniformity, especially in the second half of the century, see Bruno Migliorini, *The Italian Language*, abridged, recast, and revised by T. Gwynfor Griffiths (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 159–60; Nicoletta Maraschio and Paola Manni, 'Il plurilinguismo italiano (secc. XIV–XV): Realtà, percezione, rappresentazione', in *L'Italia alla fine del Medioevo: I caratteri originali nel quadro europeo*, ed. by Francesco Salvestrini and Federica Cengarle, 2 vols (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2006), II, 239–67.
5. See e.g. Alvise Andreose and Lorenzo Renzi, 'Dai volgari ai dialetti: Schizzo di storia linguistica dell'Italia medievale', *LabRomAn*, 4.1 (2011), 59–77.
6. Ignazio Baldelli, *Conti, glosse e riscritture: Dal secolo XI al secolo XX* (Naples: Morano, 1988), p. 127.
7. See e.g. *Voices and Texts in Early Modern Italian Society*, ed. by Stefano Dall'Aglio, Brian Richardson, and Massimo Rospocher (London: Routledge, 2017).
8. Carlo Goldoni, *Tutte le opere*, ed. by Giuseppe Ortolani, 14 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1935–56), VII (1946), 619.
9. Ugo Foscolo, *Opere* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1933–), X (1953), 337.
10. Luciano De Crescenzo, *Il caffè sospeso* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), p. 140. For a coeval episode involving Sardinian soldiers and local workers in Turin, see Alessandro Carlucci, *Gramsci and Languages: Unification, Diversity, Hegemony* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 38–50. The use of interpreters is also mentioned by Giovan Battista Pellegrini, *Saggi di linguistica italiana* (Turin: Boringhieri, 1975) and Trifone, *Pocoinchiostro*.
11. Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), p. 42.
12. Lepschy, 'How Popular Is Italian?', p. 63. See also Pellegrini, pp. 64–65, and Marco Tamburelli, 'Uncovering the "Hidden" Multilingualism of Europe: An Italian Case Study', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35 (2014), 252–70.
13. Most notably by Carlo Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), p. 79, and Luca Serianni, *Viaggiatori, musicisti, poeti: Saggi di storia della lingua italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002), pp. 56–57. More recently, Ledgeway has also argued for the existence of insurmountable problems of intelligibility; however, he applies a particular notion of unintelligibility, which refers to the misunderstandings and subtle interpretative errors that students can incur if they approach modern or medieval dialectal texts without sufficient knowledge of the varieties in which they were written. See Adam Ledgeway, 'Understanding Dialect: Some Neapolitan Examples', in *Didattica della lingua italiana: Testo e contesto*, ed. by Adam Ledgeway and Anna Laura Lepschy (Perugia: Guerra, 2008), pp. 99–111.
14. Nigel Vincent, 'Languages in Contact in Medieval Italy', in *Rethinking Languages in Contact: The Case of Italian*, ed. by Anna Laura Lepschy and Arturo Tosi (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), pp. 12–27 (p. 15). See Zarko Muljačić, 'The Relationship between the Dialects and the Standard Language', in *The Dialects of Italy*, ed. by Martin Maiden and Mair Parry (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 387–93.
15. See e.g. Muljačić, p. 391.
16. See Alberto Vàrvaro, 'Per lo studio dei dialetti medievali', in *Storia della lingua italiana e dialettologia*, ed. by Giovanni Ruffino and Mari D'Agostino (Palermo: Centro di studi filologici e linguistici siciliani, 2010), pp. 161–71.
17. See Maiden, 'Definition of Multilingualism', and also Alberto Vàrvaro, 'La tendenza all'unificazione dalle origini alla formazione di un italiano standard', in Vàrvaro, *Identità linguistiche e letterarie nell'Europa romanza* (Rome: Salerno, 2004), pp. 109–26 [ch. 5], and Nigel Vincent, 'Language, Geography and History in Medieval Italy', in *Ciò che potea la lingua nostra: Lectures and Essays in Memory of Clara Florio Cooper*, ed. by Vilma De Gasperin, special supplement to *The Italianist*, 30 (2010), 44–60.
18. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua*, ed. by Paolo Trovato (Padua: Antenore, 1992), pp. 16–17.
19. Federico De Roberto, *De Roberto*, ed. by Luigi Russo (Milan: Garzanti, 1950), pp. 769–98.
20. Foscolo, *Opere*, XI.1 (1958), 153; my emphasis.
21. *Ibid.*, 153; see also X, 337.

22. *Ibid.*, xi.1, 210.
23. See Vårvaro, 'La tendenza all'unificazione'.
24. See the first book of *De vulgari eloquentia*, in Dante Alighieri, *Opere*, ed. by Marco Santagata, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 2011–14), I (2011), 1125–363.
25. See Alberto Vårvaro, "'La tua loquela ti fa manifesto": Lingue e identità nella letteratura medievale', in Vårvaro, *Identità linguistiche e letterarie*, pp. 227–42 [ch. 13], and Vårvaro, 'Per lo studio dei dialetti medievali'.
26. See also Andreose and Renzi, 'Dai volgari ai dialetti', p. 62.
27. Vincent, 'Languages in Contact', p. 20.
28. Maiden, 'Definition of Multilingualism', p. 42.
29. See, however, Vincent, 'Languages in Contact', pp. 15–21, on how his views partly differ from Vårvaro's on a few secondary points, including Vårvaro's negative stance on koineisation. There is clearly a difference also between Vincent's and Maiden's views. The former, in 'Language, Geography and History', p. 46, argues for 'a greater degree of geographical intelligibility [...] than is usually supposed' on the basis of 'syntactic uniformity across medieval dialects' (p. 57), whereas the latter believes that the lexicon (including 'recurrent grammatical morphemes'), rather than syntax, is what essentially matters when it comes to intelligibility: 'It is often the case that a very high degree of intelligibility can be acquired if just the lexicon can be recognized' – Maiden, 'Definition of Multilingualism', pp. 41–42. On this point, see also Wright, who agrees about the crucial role of the lexicon and sees syntax as being of 'almost no practical importance' (p. 186), and Ledgeway, 'Understanding Dialect', who instead views morphosyntax as the main barrier to intelligibility.
30. See *Koinè in Italia dalle Origini al Cinquecento*, ed. by Glauco Sanga (Bergamo: Lubrina, 1990).
31. Nicoletta Maraschio, 'Il plurilinguismo italiano quattrocentesco e l'Alberti', in *Alberti e la cultura del Quattrocento: Atti del convegno internazionale del Comitato Nazionale VI Centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti, 16–18 dicembre 2004*, ed. by Roberto Cardini and Mariangela Regoliosi (Florence: Polistampa, 2007), pp. 611–28 (p. 620).
32. Donald N. Tuten, 'Koineization', in *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*, ed. by Carmen Llamas, Louise Mullany, and Peter Stockwell (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 185–91 (p. 185).
33. See Frans Hinskens, Peter Auer, and Paul Kerswill, 'The Study of Dialect Convergence and Divergence: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations', in *Dialect Change: Convergence and Divergence in European Languages*, ed. by Peter Auer, Frans Hinskens, and Paul Kerswill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1–48 (p. 46); and Vincent, 'Languages in Contact', pp. 17–19.
34. See Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, ed. by Giuseppe Scalia (Parma: Monte Università Parma, 2007), p. 85 and pp. 714–16.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 1572; see also p. 1594.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 1002.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 1114. The prelate in question is Filippo, Archbishop of Ravenna. Interestingly, Salimbene informs us that Filippo was 'de districtu civitatis Pistorii' [from the district of the city of Pistoia], but then also refers to him as a Lombard (Lombardus), perhaps in the sense of '(someone) from northern Italy' (see pp. 1090–92). While it is possible that some of the friars were not from Faenza, it would be quite implausible to imagine that they were all from Tuscany.
38. As when he talks about a vessel of wine 'quod illi de Tuscia flasconem dicunt, Lombardi vero botacium' [which Tuscans call *flasco* and Lombards *botacium*] (Salimbene, *Cronica*, p. 308). Occasionally, pragmatic aspects also attract his attention – such as the different conventions regulating the use of pronouns of address (*tu* and *voi*) in the south, as opposed to the north, of Italy (p. 330).
39. Maiden, 'Definition of Multilingualism', p. 44; emphasis in the original.
40. Dante, *Opere*, II (2014), 144.
41. *Ibid.*, II, 126–38.
42. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere*, ed. by Vittore Branca, 10 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1964–98), III (1974), 486, my emphasis.

43. Ibid., III, 486.
44. See *Le traduzioni italiane della Bibbia nel Medioevo: Catalogo dei manoscritti (secoli XIII–XV)*, ed. by Lino Leonardi, Caterina Menichetti, and Sara Natale (Florence: Galluzzo, 2018), pp. 49–51.
45. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (BML), MS Palatino 3, fol. 1^r.
46. Antonio Da Tempo, *Summa artis rithmici vulgaris dictaminis*, ed. by Richard Andrews (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1977), p. 99.
47. Baldelli, *Conti, glosse e riscritture*, pp. 102–03.
48. *La leggenda della beata Eustochia da Messina: Testo volgare del sec. XV restituito all'originaria lezione*, ed. by Michele Catalano (Messina: D'Anna, 1950), p. 273.
49. See Salimbene, *Cronica*, pp. 194–96 (p. 194).
50. See *Laude dugentesche*, ed. by Giorgio Varanini (Padua: Antenore, 1972), pp. 5–8.
51. According to Baldelli, Benedict followed his own phonetic habits by pronouncing word-final [u]’s which Salimbene wrote down, instead, as o’s. See Ignazio Baldelli, ‘Francesco d’Assisi e il volgare’, in *Francescanesimo in volgare (secoli XIII–XIV): Atti del XXIV Convegno internazionale* (Spoleto: Centro di studi sull’alto medioevo, 1997), pp. 3–39.
52. In addition to Dante and Boccaccio, many other medieval sources confirm that Latin was unintelligible to ordinary people. See e.g. Anonimo Romano, *Cronica: Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, ed. by Ettore Mazzali (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 91; and Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, ed. by Giuseppe Porta (Parma: Guanda, 1990), I, 4. Under particular circumstances, however, Latin could be regarded as more effective than the vernacular for preaching to clerical audiences, and possibly also to lay audiences. See Vittorio Coletti, *Parole dal pulpito: Chiesa e movimenti religiosi tra latino e volgare nell’Italia del Medioevo e del Rinascimento* (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1983), p. 63. In the thirteenth century, the Archbishop of Pisa occasionally preached in Latin: see *Les sermons et la visite pastorale de Federico Visconti archevêque de Pise, 1253–1277*, ed. by Nicole Bériou and others. (Rome: École française de Rome, 2001).
53. See also the evidence discussed by Franco Morenzoni, ‘Les prédicateurs et leurs langues à la fin du Moyen Âge’, in *Entre Babel et Pentecôte: Différences linguistiques et communication orale avant la modernité (VIIIe–XVIe siècle)*, ed. by Peter von Moos (Zürich and Berlin: Lit, 2008), pp. 501–517.
54. Francesco Bruni, *La città divisa: Le parti e il bene comune da Dante a Guicciardini* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2003), pp. 167–201.
55. See Coletti; and Gian Luigi Beccaria, *Sicuterat: Il latino di chi non lo sa* (Milan: Garzanti, 1999).
56. See Maraschio, ‘Il plurilinguismo italiano quattrocentesco’, pp. 619–20, and Isabella Lazzarini, ‘Orality and Writing in Diplomatic Interactions in Fifteenth-Century Italy’, in *Voices and Texts*, pp. 97–109 (esp. pp. 99–100). On convergence between different local varieties, and between Neapolitan and Tuscan, in Angevin Naples, see Patricia Bianchi, Nicola De Blasi, and Rita Librandi, *’I te vurrìa parlà: Storia della lingua a Napoli e in Campania* (Naples: Pironti, 1993).
57. Quoted by Migliorini, *The Italian Language*, p. 59.
58. Archivio di Stato di Prato (ASP), Fondo Datini (FD), busta 928, inserto 3, codice 515130.
59. Restoro d’Arezzo, *La composizione del mondo*, ed. by Alberto Morino (Parma: Guanda, 1997), p. 297.
60. See e.g. Rembert Eufe, ‘Marco Polo veneziano e le lingue’, in *L’impresa di Marco Polo: Cartografia, viaggi, percezione*, ed. by Cosimo Palagiano, Cristiano Pesaresi, and Miriam Marta (Rome: Telemedia, 2007), pp. 124–48.
61. On the presence, in major cities, of interpreters, translators, and other multilingual speakers, see also Lorenzo Tomasin, ‘Sulla percezione medievale dello spazio linguistico romanzo’, *Medioevo romanzo*, 39 (2015), 268–92, and Tomasin, ‘Urban Multilingualism: The Languages of Non-Venetians in Venice during the Middle Ages’, in *Mittelalterliche Stadtsprachen*, ed. by Maria Selig and Susanne Ehrich (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2016), pp. 63–76; Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, ‘I mercanti italiani e le lingue straniere’, in *Comunicare nel medioevo: La conoscenza e l’uso delle lingue nei secoli XII–XV*, ed. by Isa Lori Sanfilippo and Giuliano Pinto (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medioevo, 2015), pp. 103–31; Maria Elisa Soldani, ‘“E perché costui è uxo di qua e intende bene la lingua”: Remarques sur la

- communication entre marchands au bas Moyen Âge', in *Les langues de la négociation: Approches historiennes*, ed. by Dejanirah Couto and Stéphane Péquignot (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017), pp. 129–61.
62. Bruni, *La città divisa*, pp. 173–95.
 63. Marcello Ravesi, 'Sondaggi sulla lingua del laudario oliveriano', in *La vita e l'opera di Iacopone da Todi*, ed. by Enrico Menestò (Spoleto: Centro di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2007), pp. 603–24 (pp. 621–22). See also Brian Richardson, 'The First Edition of Jacopone's *Laude* (Florence, 1490) and the Development of Vernacular Philology', *Italian Studies*, 47.1 (1992), 26–40 (p. 38, n. 30), on how the prefix *ar-* still created intelligibility problems for early sixteenth-century editors despite its presence in various dialects – as in modern Romagnol *a m'arcord* ('I remember'), famously used by Fellini as the title of one of his films (spelt *Amarcord*).
 64. Ivano Paccagnella, 'Uso letterario dei dialetti', in *Storia della lingua italiana*, ed. by Luca Serianni and Pietro Trifone, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1992–94), III (1994): *Le altre lingue*, pp. 495–539 (p. 510).
 65. Glauco Sanga, 'Lombardy', in *Dialects of Italy*, pp. 253–59 (p. 255).
 66. See Gianfranco Folena, *Il linguaggio del caos: Studi sul plurilinguismo rinascimentale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), p. 26.
 67. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Riccardiano 2441. Modern edition: Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La pratica della mercatura*, ed. by Allan Evans (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936).
 68. When a cell contains more than one item, all the items in the cell are assumed to be synonyms and are given in the order in which they appear in Pegolotti's *Pratica*.
 69. See Fabrizio Franceschini, *Tra secolare commento e storia della lingua: Studi sulla Commedia e le antiche glosse* (Florence: Cesati, 2008), p. 168.
 70. *Ibid.*, pp. 167–70 (and the image on p. 175).
 71. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–66.
 72. For example, variants such as *sapere/saver* ('to know, knowledge') must have posed minimal problems of intelligibility. Both forms of this word became part of the language of poetry and were used by Dante and Petrarch.
 73. Quoted by Francesco Bruni, "'Istra": Una falsa ricostruzione dantesca?', in *Omaggio a Gianfranco Folena*, 3 vols (Padua: Programma, 1993), I, 419–28 (p. 424).
 74. See Franceschini, pp. 187–201.
 75. See Arrigo Castellani, *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2000), p. 263.
 76. See Alberto Vàrvaro, 'L'italiano dell'anno Mille: Le origini dell'italiano', in *Italia linguistica anno Mille: Italia linguistica anno Duemila*, ed. by Nicoletta Maraschio and Teresa Poggi Salani (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003), pp. 19–35 (p. 34).
 77. See Max Leopold Wagner, *La lingua sarda: Storia, spirito e forma* (Bern: Francke, 1951), pp. 354–55.
 78. Collected in Francesco Sabatini, *Napoli angioina: Cultura e società* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1975), p. 103.
 79. See e.g. Teresa Poggi Salani, 'La Toscana', in *L'italiano nelle regioni: Lingua nazionale e identità regionali*, ed. by Francesco Bruni (Turin: Utet, 1992), pp. 402–61 (p. 416), and Tomasin, 'Sulla percezione'.
 80. Piero di Giusto Benintendi to Francesco di Marco Datini, 24 September 1392, ASP, FD, b. 1091, i. 28, 134825. This apologetic attitude was quite common – see the material discussed by Tomasin, 'Sulla percezione', pp. 279–82.
 81. See his letters of 21 and 26 January 1398, in FD, b. 780, i. 10, 416389 and 416390, respectively. See also Joshua Brown, 'Evidence for Early Tuscanization in the Commercial Letters of the Milanese Merchant Giovannino da Dugnano (?–1398) in the Datini Archive in Prato', *Italica*, 89.4 (2012), 464–88.
 82. See Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy*, ed. by Charles M. Radding (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), and Irene Ceccherini, 'Merchants and Notaries: Stylistic Movements in Italian Cursive Scripts', *Manuscripta*, 53.2 (2009), 239–83.
 83. See e.g. ASP, FD, b. 700, i. 17, 309551, and b. 1112, i. 190, 6000498.

84. Joan Swann and others *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 217. See Vårvaro, 'La tua loquela ti fa manifesto', pp. 227–29, for medieval examples.
85. See Bruni, *La città divisa*, p. 185.
86. Today, this is often the case with English as a global language. English is praised as a particularly efficient language, which everyone can easily and usefully learn. See Arturo Tosi, *Language and Society in a Changing Italy* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), p. 211.
87. Furio Brugnolo, 'I toscani nel Veneto e le cerchie toscaneggianti', in *Storia della cultura veneta*, ed. by Girolamo Arnaldi and Manlio Pastore Stocchi, 5 vols (Vincenza: Neri Pozza, 1976–81), II: *Il Trecento* (1976), pp. 369–439 (pp. 383–85).
88. See also an interesting episode from Giovanni Gherardi da Prato's *Paradiso degli Alberti*, in which two characters talk to each other using, respectively, Florentine and 'lombardo', discussed by Francesco Bruni, *Testi e chierici del medioevo* (Genoa: Marietti, 1991), p. 17. In addition, see Boccaccio's *Trattatello*, in *Tutte le opere*, III, 465, where Dante hears and understands a group of women talking about him in Verona.
89. Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere*, IV (1976), 214.
90. Serianni, *Viaggiatori, musicisti, poeti*, p. 57.
91. In this respect, Vårvaro's chivalric examples, in 'La tua loquela ti fa manifesto', p. 227, may not be very helpful.
92. Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere*, IV, 924. For evidence ruling out the possibility of *latino* meaning 'Latin' in this context, see Lorenzo Tomasin, *Italiano: Storia di una parola* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), pp. 52–53.
93. If we compare it to the Tuscan variant Ginevra, the very name of the character Zinevra, mentioned above, turns out to be an indication of attention to phonological variation (Tuscan [dʒ] = northern [dʒ], later [z] in most varieties), which in this case was probably promoted by Dante's comments about the frequency of z in Genoese, in *Opere*, I, 1290–92. Compared to Tuscan Margherita, the name of the Bolognese character Malgherida (in the tenth novella of the first day) would seem to reveal the same attention to linguistic variation (including Tuscan [t] = northern [d] in intervocalic position).
94. Franco Sacchetti, *Le trecento novelle*, ed. by Michelangelo Zaccarello (Florence: Galluzzo, 2014), p. 2017.
95. *Costituzioni della patria del Friuli nel volgarizzamento di Pietro Capretto del 1484 e nell'edizione latina del 1565*, ed. by Anna Gobessi and Ermanno Orlando (Rome: Viella, 1998), p. 104. See also Giorgio Cadorini, 'Friulano, veneto e toscano nella storia del Friuli', in *Manuale di linguistica friulana*, ed. by Sabine Heinemann and Luca Melchior (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 317–37, especially pp. 326–30.
96. Pseudo Gentile Sermini, *Novelle*, ed. by Monica Marchi (Pisa: ETS, 2012), pp. 79–82. On the author's attention to linguistic differences, see Alfredo Stussi, *Lingua, dialetto e letteratura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p. 146, and Monica Marchi, 'Le novelle dello Pseudo-Sermini: Un novelliere senese?', *Studi di grammatica italiana*, 29–30 (2010–11), 53–90.
97. Pseudo Gentile Sermini, *Novelle*, p. 155.
98. Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena (1427)*, ed. by Carlo Delcorno (Milan: Rusconi, 1989), p. 190.
99. See Gerhard Rohlfs, *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana e dei suoi dialetti*, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1966–69), II (1968): *Morfologia*, p. 131.
100. See *Il novellino*, ed. by Alberto Conte (Rome: Salerno, 2001): 'In Lombardia e nella Marca si chiamano le pentole, "ole"' (p. 143); and Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Florence: Sansoni, 1957), where we find a Milanese gentleman asking for mustard in Naples: 'io vorrei un poco de salsa del sinapo, che vui la nominate mostarda, senza la quale non porrei mangiar lo rosto stamani' (p. 128).
101. *The Poems of the Troubadour Raimbaut De Vaqueiras*, ed. by Joseph Linskill (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), pp. 98–107.
102. Bernardino, pp. 672–73. *Mattone* and *mattona* refer to a lexical type which is found in Lombard and Piedmontese varieties. Its presence in Piedmontese dialects – see Gianfranco Gribaudo, Pinin Seglie and Sergio Seglie, *Dissionari piemontèis* (Turin: Ij Brandé, 1972), s.v. *mat* – does

- not necessarily suggest a different geographic distribution in comparison with Bernardino's reference to Lombardy, given that this toponym probably designated northern Italy in general. Salimbene had written that Turin, nowadays Piedmont's capital, was 'in confinibus Lombardie' [on the borders of Lombardy]. *Cronica*, p. 538; see also p. 524.
103. See Bruni, *La città divisa*, pp. 172–73.
 104. FD, b. 999, i. 42, 126344. See Mirko Tavoni, *Il Quattrocento* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1992), p. 344.
 105. See Bruni, *Testi e chierici del medioevo*, pp. 21–22.
 106. See Alda Rossebastiano Bart, 'Alle origini della lessicografia italiana', in *La lexicographie au Moyen Age*, ed. by Claude Buridant (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1986), pp. 113–56.
 107. BML, MS Plut. 90 inf. 27, fol. 4^r. I have checked the transcription provided by Annibale Tenneroni, 'Antico glossarietto umbro-lombardo', *Rivista critica della letteratura italiana*, 5 (1888), 28–30, against the original. As a rule, I follow Tenneroni's transcription criteria, but I use the symbol = (instead of his combination of roman and italic) to match the equivalents, which appear in two different columns in the MS.
 108. Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems*, 2nd edn (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1964), p. 2.
 109. See also the introduction, especially fol. 3^v.
 110. See Rohlfs, I (1966): *Fonetica*, pp. 396–97, and Alfredo Stussi, *Introduzione agli studi di filologia italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1994), p. 81.
 111. See Enzo Mattesini, 'L'Umbria', in *L'italiano nelle regioni*, pp. 507–39 (p. 517).
 112. As already suggested by Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The Origin and Development of the Language of Italian Prose', in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1956), pp. 473–93.
 113. See Bruni, *La città divisa*, p. 171.
 114. As suggested by Ledgeway, 'Understanding Dialect'.
 115. See especially the section on 'Comprehensibility' by Peter Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 21–23.
 116. See Trifone, *Pocoinchiostro*.
 117. As observed by Wright.
 118. Francesco Petrarca, *Prose*, ed. by Guido Martellotti and others (Milan: Ricciardi, 1955), p. 1008. Giovanni del Virgilio expressed similar concerns about public performances of the *Commedia* 'in triviis' [in the crossroads]; see Dante, *Opere*, II, 1636.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Martin Maiden, who leads the strand of the 'Creative Multilingualism' programme with which I was affiliated (Strand 3: 'Creating Intelligibility across Languages and Communities'), and also Jane Everson, Simon Gilson, Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, Peter Hainsworth, Nick Havely, and Isabella Lazzarini for their comments and suggestions. Responsibility for any mistakes contained in this article rests solely with the author.

Funding

Research for this article was financially supported by the Modern Humanities Research Association, and was conducted within the University of Oxford's 'Creative Multilingualism' programme, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

ORCID

Alessandro Carlucci  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5104-9715>