

Opinions about Perceived Linguistic Intelligibility in Late-Medieval Italy

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Abstract

This article contributes to the historical study of intercomprehension between speakers of closely related languages by focusing on Italy in the period up to the mid-fifteenth century. After a brief introduction to the topic, the second section will be devoted to methodological questions, including certain differences between research based on experimental testing and research based on historical evidence. The third section of the article reports opinions by medieval speakers about the intelligibility of different Italo-Romance varieties, and then compares them to opinions about genealogically and/or geographically more distant languages. While the dominant view among experts on Italy's linguistic history is that speakers were trapped within mutually unintelligible vernaculars, this review of the extant evidence suggests a greater degree of intercomprehension than is usually supposed.

Keywords: Multilingualism, communication, intelligibility, speakers' judgments, language contact, languages of Italy, history of the Italian language.

1. Italo-Romance intercomprehension: towards a deeper historical appraisal

The usefulness of focusing on comprehension between speakers of closely related languages has been persuasively advocated in a number of historically-oriented publications, some of which have also begun to identify relevant research materials, questions and methodologies (Maiden 2002, Wright 2002, Braunmüller 2007, Blanche-Benveniste 2008, Lepschy 2010, Lepschy and Lepschy 2013). Nonetheless, questions of intercomprehension and cross-linguistic, or cross-dialectal, communication remain largely unexplored as far as situations of the past are concerned. This article contributes to filling this gap through a preliminary study of an exceptionally relevant case – that of Italy in the period up to the mid-fifteenth century.

In the Middle Ages, Latin evolved into a multitude of local vernacular varieties, while at the same time surviving as the written – and, on certain occasions, also spoken – language of the few educated individuals, mainly clerics, who could read and write. Until the mid-fifteenth century, koineization among the different vernaculars was patchy across Italy and mostly confined to written communication in particular domains and geographical areas (especially northern Italy).¹ A common Italian language would not emerge until the sixteenth century, when it was codified on the model of the Florentine which Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio had used in the fourteenth century. Originally one of the innumerable vernaculars spoken on the Italian peninsula, Italian only entered the everyday life of large masses of population in the twentieth century, when it finally began to replace the other Romance varieties – by now identified as ‘the dialects of Italy’ (Maiden and Parry 1997)² – in all domains of use.

¹ See Sanga (1990) and Brown (2013).

² These closely related varieties are often also called ‘Italian dialects’; however, at least from a genealogical point of view, this label is misleading in so far as it identifies what are ultimately ‘Latin dialects’, rather than ‘Italian dialects’ (see Telmon 2018 for a recent discussion). Italian language historians tend to reserve *dialetto* ‘dialect’ for the period following the adoption of Florentine-based literary Italian throughout the entire peninsula, whereas the same Italo-Romance

During the second half of the twentieth century, linguists repeatedly claimed that ‘mutual intelligibility [is] generally impossible in Italy between people speaking dialects of two non-adjointing regions’ (Mioni and Arnuzzo-Lanszweert 1979:83).³ This view was projected back onto the Middle Ages, with influential scholars suggesting that speakers must have been unable to communicate very far beyond their local area, unless they knew Latin or could rely on interpreters and translators. Dionisotti (1967) stated that Italo-Romance varieties were ‘incomunicabili ieri come oggi da un capo all’altro d’Italia’ [as incommunicable yesterday as they are today, from one end of Italy to the other] (Dionisotti 1967:79).⁴ Even when medieval literary works had represented communication between speakers of different vernaculars and therefore seemed to point towards relatively good levels of Italo-Romance intercomprehension, modern scholars remained sceptical. For instance, Serianni (2002:56-57) considered it ‘quasi impossibile’ [almost impossible] that one of Boccaccio’s characters, a woman from Genoa, could have conversations with ‘molti mercatanti e ciciliani e pisani e genovesi e viniziani e altri italiani’ [many Sicilian, Pisan, Genoese, Venetian and other Italian merchants] (*Decameron*, II, 9, 47). That Italo-Romance varieties had ‘a high degree of [...] mutual unintelligibility’ came to be widely accepted as ‘the “standard view” concerning the linguistic situation in medieval Italy’ (Vincent 2006:15).

Vincent, however, was critical of this retrospective idea of radical incomprehensibility. More recently, Tavoni (2015) has pointed out that the standard view is difficult to reconcile with what we know about economic and cultural exchanges in pre-unification Italy, where, for instance, itinerant preachers and performers travelled to different areas and used vernacular varieties to address wide audiences. Merchants from different parts of Italy used their vernaculars to communicate in person and by letter on a regular basis (see De Blasi 1982, Casapullo 1999:68-75), and so did officials and diplomats (Tavoni 1992:47-55, Lazzarini 2017). In addition, further reasons to question the conventional wisdom about intercomprehension in Italian history are now provided by the expansion of experimental research on mutual intelligibility between closely related languages (Gooskens and Van Heuven 2017, Gooskens et al. 2018). In a study conducted by testing participants in controlled conditions, Tamburelli (2014) has found that the mean intelligibility rate of Milanese to monolingual Tuscan speakers is 44.3%, well below the 75% that he considers as the minimum threshold under which communication is impaired. In the next section, I will return to the question of how intelligibility is defined. Importantly, however, intelligibility tests do not yield 0% of correct answers; even between linguistically distant Romance languages such as French and Romanian, the lowest intelligibility scores are around 10%, and can reach 60% if more communicative context is supplied.⁵ That Italo-Romance mutual intelligibility was very low, or even impossible, in medieval Italy is therefore a problematic assumption needing reconsideration.

In this article I test the standard view against medieval evidence, by using sources which preserve the comments of speakers of different Italo-Romance varieties. Through their comments, these speakers tell us about their expectations and perceptions when faced with

varieties are called *volgari* ‘vernaculars’ with reference to the period up to the sixteenth century, before the literary codification of the old Florentine used by Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio (see Marazzini 2002:76, Andreose and Renzi 2011). In this article, my intention is to use a terminology that facilitates the inclusion of definitions and quotations from other authors, and I will therefore use both ‘vernacular’ and ‘dialect’ as synonyms for the more neutral term ‘variety’.

³ ‘Dialect diversity is still so marked in Italy that it usually prevents intelligibility’ (Tosi 2001:21). ‘Italian dialects are [...] mostly unintelligible to speakers of other dialects’ (Lepschy 1990:64). See also Pellegrini (1970, 1975:63-65).

⁴ See also Kristeller (1956:480-481).

⁵ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for attracting my attention to these figures.

the need to understand the varieties of other, non-adjacent parts of Italy. I will use relevant passages from these sources in Sections 3 and 4, after explaining, however, that this is but one of the types of evidence that can shed light on mutual intelligibility (see Section 2). Based on this survey of speakers' comments, I will conclude that problems of intercomprehension were probably not as radical as the received wisdom about Italy's linguistic history would lead us to expect.

I thus intend to contribute to the development of a less conventional and more thorough debate on the role of intercomprehension in Italy's linguistic history, along the lines that Maiden (2002), Varvaro (2004a, 2004b, 2010) and Vincent (2006, 2010) have prefigured in their research. While the existing histories of the Italian language thoroughly elucidate the top-down process of selection, codification and dissemination of a single model (i.e. fourteenth-century Florentine),⁶ it is becoming increasingly clear that a wider plurality of communicative needs and contacts needs to be considered in order to obtain a full historical picture (cf. similar proposals for other Romance languages, esp. Lodge 2010). Apart from cases of coercive imposition of a single language (sometimes involving the physical suppression of communities speaking other languages), linguistic unification is a process which does not only involve deliberate intervention 'from above', but also requires spontaneous consensus 'from below'. This consensus can lead to speakers shifting to a predefined unitary language, or it can manifest itself through forms of accommodation and koineization which typically emerge from the mixing and levelling of 'mutually intelligible varieties' (Tuten 2007:185).⁷ In Italy's linguistic history, the latter of these two options gained traction especially in the fifteenth century, before being supplanted by the other option – i.e. by a situation in which increasingly large numbers of speakers shifted to Florentine-based Italian as codified by normative grammarians (Varvaro 2004a:126), first in writing and later also in speaking. It is therefore interesting to ask if, and to what extent, intelligibility already existed in medieval Italy, as a precondition for the increasing levels of koineization (Maraschio and Manni 2006), and even 'pre-standardization' (Maraschio 2007), which characterise fifteenth-century Italy – not only in written communication, where they are easier to attest, but probably also in orality (see Maraschio 2007:620).⁸ Moreover, far from being relevant only to scholars in linguistics, the question of Italo-Romance intercomprehension has important implications for research on Italy's economic (Guidi Bruscoli 2014, 2015, Soldani 2017), political (Lazzarini 2014, 2015), religious (Baldelli 1988:127, Wilhelm 2009) and literary (Ahern 1997, Bellomo 2004:16-25) history, as well as for the manifold interfaces between these fields (see e.g. Delcorno 2009, Cigni 2010, Dall'Aglio, Richardson and Rospoche 2017).

2. What to study and how to study it

Some methodological and terminological clarification is necessary before we can proceed to our assessment of sources from late-medieval Italy. Although intelligibility is a gradual

⁶ Migliorini (1984) remains the most representative example.

⁷ On the difference between 'interactional accommodation' and 'long-term accommodation', and on how the latter can result in dialect convergence and koineization, see also Hinskens, Auer and Kerswill (2005) and Auer (2007). On the links between accommodation and intercomprehension, see Braunmüller (2007) and Bahtina and Ten Thije (2012).

⁸ On the political, technological and cultural transformations which took place during the fifteenth century and increased the need for linguistic uniformity, especially in the second half of the century, see also Cortelazzo (1980:39-47), Migliorini (1984:159-60), Tavoni (1992), and Brevini (1999).

property and not a binary ‘yes or no’ feature, scholars interested in this topic tend to agree that two varieties X and Y are mutually intelligible if speakers of X give c.80 per cent (or above) of correct answers in intelligibility tests on Y, and vice versa (Blanche-Benveniste 2008:41, Tamburelli 2014:263-264).⁹ Obviously, this kind of direct testing can only be carried out with living subjects. But this is not the only advantage that research on current intelligibility seems to have when compared to historical research. Thanks to a combination of experimental and statistical techniques, research on currently spoken varieties can plausibly boil intelligibility down to the grammars and lexicons of X and Y. This is done by coming as close as possible to a sort of ideal situation where monolingual speakers of X listen to Y for the first time in their lives, usually through carefully recorded samples in which speakers of Y by no means adapt their way of speaking to the linguistic habits of the speakers of X. In other words, contemporary research can, at least ideally, aim at measuring mutual intelligibility independently of factors such as writing systems and spelling conventions, linguistic accommodation, exposure to other varieties, motivation, attitudes, as well as potential extra-linguistic aids ranging from gestures to general knowledge and experience of the world. Simons (1983:3) calls this object of study ‘inherent intelligibility’ and defines it as the ‘theoretical degree of understanding between dialects whose speakers have not had contact’. Others speak of ‘intrinsic bilingualism’ or ‘inherent receptive multilingualism’ (Gooskens et al. 2018:171).

Historical research may be able to estimate this purely linguistic intelligibility by taking an internal, language-oriented approach. Based on the correlation (which has been verified by experimental research – see below) between intelligibility and linguistic distance, this structural method consists in establishing how much lexicon (not only lexical bases, but also grammatical morphemes) and grammar are shared by the two (or more) varieties whose mutual intelligibility is being studied. In fact, although this approach has been taken by some of the linguists who have explored situations of the past, they have applied it with caution and always with some integration of external evidence and broader historical considerations (Baldelli 1988:102-103, Wright 2002, Maiden 2002, Vincent 2006, 2010). Their contributions highlight the need to produce speaker-oriented accounts with which to complement internal evidence (see esp. Maiden 2002, who explicitly calls for such a course of action).¹⁰

In part, this need to add speaker-oriented accounts has to do with reasons which are specific to the Middle Ages. Travelling was then a slow activity, which involved being exposed to gradually changing varieties along the way from one’s place of origin to one’s destination (Wright 2002). This kind of gradual linguistic mediation did not only affect human mobility, it also affected the circulation of many text types. Whether copied by scribes or orally transmitted, texts would often be affected by significant levels of conscious or unconscious adaptation (Varvaro 2004a, 2010; Andreose and Renzi 2011:62). For these reasons, the ideal situation where speakers are suddenly exposed to distant varieties, of which they have no previous experience, appears most abstract when researching the medieval period. Instead, this ideal scenario may seem less remote today – in the age of printing, audio-visual recording

⁹ But see Gooskens (2018) for a cautious discussion of intelligibility thresholds and cases of asymmetric intelligibility between two varieties. As one of the anonymous reviewers points out, thresholds are expected to indicate whether the degree of mutual intelligibility is sufficient for effective communication, and they are also used for status planning (in cases where the official recognition of a variety as a separate “language” is being debated).

¹⁰ The distinction between the ‘external’ socio-cultural history of a language, and the ‘internal’ diachronic change of its structures, goes back to the seminal works of classic authors in linguistics (Brunot, Paul, Saussure). On the sources and development of this distinction, the fundamental reference remains Varvaro (1972-1973).

and, of course, the Internet. Even more important, in any case, is that a language-oriented perspective faces general problems which are not exclusive to historical research. Structural similarities, as well as differences, are often measured in research on current intelligibility, and it has thus been verified that overall measurements of linguistic distance correlate highly with the results of speakers' intelligibility tests (Gooskens et al. 2018) – that is, with the kind of direct testing which is precluded to historical research. However, at present we do not know how to predict the relative weight that single lexical, morphosyntactic or phonological features will have in favouring, or hindering, intelligibility (Gooskens 2018). In the absence of intelligibility tests, the impact of particular internal features on intercomprehension remains difficult to evaluate, and one can especially overestimate the negative impact of the most striking structural differences.

With regard to Italo-Romance varieties, for instance, Ledgeway (2008) focuses on some of the most idiosyncratic morphosyntactic features of Neapolitan, which he finds 'so exotic from a typological perspective that they [...] erect major barriers to intelligibility even when the individual lexemes are otherwise recognisable' (Ledgeway 2008:105). He goes on to speak of 'insurmountable problems of intelligibility' (2008:106) and exemplifies them by discussing the modern Neapolitan indirect object marker *vicino a*, which monolingual Italian speakers are likely to interpret as having a locative value ('close to'). The following example (from De Filippo's *Filumena Marturano*, discussed in Ledgeway 2008:107) illustrates this possible misunderstanding:

me vuó mpedí 'e dicere, vicin''e figlie mieie, ca ne so' ffiglie?

'do you want to stop me from saying to my sons that they're my sons?'

*'do you want to stop me from saying in front of my sons that they're my sons?'

Ledgeway also discusses 'the inflected infinitives, gerunds and participles of old Neapolitan' (2008:112), showing how they can be deceptive or entirely opaque to speakers of other varieties. But does this mean that the utterance in which those unfamiliar forms appear should necessarily be incomprehensible? In fact, one could even argue that the circumscribed gaps in understanding discussed by Ledgeway can only occur between speakers (or writers/readers) of varieties which, on the whole, allow relatively good levels of intercomprehension. If the two varieties were mutually unintelligible, there would be no circumscribed gaps in understanding but rather general problems of communication.

In view of all the above, in the next sections of this article I will follow an external, speaker-oriented perspective. I will focus on clerics, politicians, diplomats and merchants. In medieval society, these were the groups who typically experienced cross-dialectal communication involving speakers from distant geographical areas. They are also the ones who have left most of the relevant historical records. These records shed light on a broad type of intelligibility which does not exclude attitudes, expectations and perceptions. In each particular case, the speaker's opinions will have been influenced by variable degrees of motivation and previous exposure to the language whose intelligibility is the object of his or her judgements. Conceived in these terms, intelligibility is also affected by speakers' ability to learn how to exploit similarities between related languages and turn systematic, recognisable structural differences into helpful correspondences capable of aiding comprehension (see Section 3.1 for examples). For designating this speaker-oriented notion of intelligibility it is preferable to use the term 'intercomprehension' on the example of Francophone scholarship, where *intercompréhension* has this broad meaning (see e.g. Conti and Grin 2008). Research on the

present provides some guarantees about the reliability and relevance of this notion of intelligibility, which research on the past is largely forced to use. Not only is intercomprehension interesting in itself from a social and cultural point of view, it is also a useful criterion from a linguistic point of view. Except for cases where strongly positive or negative attitudes can result in exaggerated claims about the ability or inability to understand a certain variety,¹¹ experimental research on currently spoken varieties has shown that the results of ‘opinion testing’ (Gooskens 2013, 2018) – also referred to as ‘judged intelligibility’ (Gooskens and Van Heuven 2017, Härmävaara and Gooskens 2019) – tend to match those of intelligibility tests.¹²

3. Late-medieval evidence

3.1. Italy’s Romance varieties

Very few comments have come down to us which refer to the ability of speakers of an Italo-Romance variety to understand other Italo-Romance varieties used in different parts of Italy. Two of these comments refer to Tuscan (the group of local varieties which includes, most notably, Florentine). In an early vernacular translation of the Bible, which I shall quote from a fourteenth-century manuscript (see Leonardi, Menichetti and Natale 2018:49-51), the anonymous translator – perhaps a Tuscan – explains that he has opted for ‘uno chomune parlare toscano però che è il più intero e il più aperto e il più apto chomunemente di tutta Ytalia e il più piacevole e il più intendevole di ogni lingua’ [a common Tuscan speech, since it is the most complete, the most open, and the most commonly suitable in all Italy, the most pleasant and most intelligible of all languages] (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Palatino 3, f.1r).¹³ The other comment is from the first half of the fourteenth century, when the Paduan judge and poet Antonio da Tempo claimed that ‘Lingua tuscia magis apta est ad literam sive literaturam quam aliae linguae, et ideo est magis comunis et intelligibilis’ [The Tuscan language is more suitable for writing or literature than other languages, and is therefore more common and intelligible] (Da Tempo 1977:99). Attitudes and other related factors, however, need to be considered when interpreting these judgements. The perceived intelligibility of Tuscan may have been favoured by its growing prestige. At the same time, our anonymous translator – and, even more likely, an intellectual such as da Tempo (see Brugnolo 1976:383-385) – may have more or less consciously wished to promote the role of Tuscan, rather than simply describe it in neutral terms. At any rate, not everyone agreed with these positive judgements. Even after Tuscan models had acquired a dominant role in many

¹¹ See Swann et al. (2004:217), Gooskens et al. (2018:169-170), Gooskens (2018:212). See also Varvaro’s (2004b:227-229) examples of speakers claiming unintelligibility for closely related varieties in medieval France, in situations where unintelligibility was in fact quite improbable.

¹² Gooskens and Van Heuven (2017) found the correlation between judged intelligibility and intelligibility scores to be higher among speakers of Germanic and Slavic languages compared to speakers of Romance languages, whose opinions showed a weak correlation with their scores on some tasks (especially ‘spoken word translation’ and ‘written cloze test’).

¹³ Engl. transl. from Richardson (2007:12-13), with adaptations. Richardson assigns this vernacular translation of the Gospels to the fifteenth century. Bruni (2003:242-243) seems to consider the translation – or, perhaps, the choice of Tuscan as the target variety by the person who copied it – even more recent. If a late dating is accepted, the translator’s attention to the particular vernacular to be chosen, and the preference accorded to Tuscan, become much more expected – and therefore less interesting – given that Tuscan models had already spread widely by the fifteenth century, and Tuscanisation was starting to combine with increasing levels of pre-standardisation. But see instead Asperti’s (1998) study of the manuscript tradition of this translation.

communicative domains, not only in literature, there continued to be people, such as the Friulian priest Pietro Edo (1427-1506), who found ‘la toschana lingua [...] troppo oscura’ [the Tuscan language ... too obscure]. Pietro preferred to write one of his works in a variety from the Veneto region,¹⁴ which he held to be ‘intelligibile da tutti’ [intelligible by all], particularly by the geographically contiguous ‘populi furlani’ [Friulian peoples] (Gobessi and Orlando 1998:104).¹⁵

Comments referring to a lack of intercomprehension between speakers of different Italo-Romance varieties are somewhat more numerous. One of them appears in a bilingual poem by the Provençal troubadour Raimbaut de Vaqueiras (1165?-1207?), *Domna, tant vos ai preiada*, which is often referred to as the earliest example of Italian vernacular literature. The author spent part of his life in northern Italy, and in *Domna, tant vos ai preiada* he has a Genoese woman turn down the advances of an Occitan-speaking minstrel by saying: ‘No t’entend plui d’un Toesco / O Sardo o Barbari’ [I don’t understand you any more than I do a German or Sardinian or Berber].¹⁶ This does not mark the end of the conversation between the minstrel and the woman, which instead goes on for a while. In any case, 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 *contrasto*. In line with the conventions of this genre, the author characterised a skeptical woman, with little patience for shabby foreign minstrels. Rather than to the category of genuinely insurmountable unintelligibility, her behaviour would seem to belong to that of feigned, or at least exaggerated, incomprehension resulting from negative attitudes and lack of motivation.¹⁷ As far as her examples of incomprehensible 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).

Another judgement can be extracted from 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 young generations who were growing up in Naples: ‘A madama Bartolomea direte che la Sismonda è fatta sì napoletana che ella non la intenderebbe’ [you will tell Lady Bartolomea (Jacopo’s wife) that Sismonda (Francesco Acciaiuoli’s daughter) has become so Neapolitan that she would not understand her] (in Sabatini 1975:103). Neapolitan influence on Sismonda’s speech must have been quite strong and, according to Zanobi, capable of disorientating Tuscan-based members of the family (see also Bianchi, De Blasi and Librandi 1993:35).

Experts on Italy’s linguistic history (most recently Tomasin 2015) have identified references to problems of mutual intelligibility between Italo-Romance varieties also in the letters of medieval merchants. A passage from a letter of the Siennese merchant Francesco Bartolomei (written nine years before Zanobi’s remarks) has been interpreted as referring to the difficulties which a Venetian would encounter when trying to understand a letter written in Tuscan (see Stussi 1963 and esp. Poggi Salani 1992:416). Francesco wrote from Crete (on

¹⁴ Identified by the author as ‘trivisana’ (from Treviso), but regarded as a Tuscanised Venetan variety by modern linguists (see Migliorini 1984:175; Trovato 1991:115).

¹⁵ On the presence of Venetan and Tuscan varieties in medieval Friuli, including difficulties in understanding the latter on the part of the locals, see Cadorini (2015: 330).

¹⁶ Text and Engl. transl. from Linskill (1964:98-107). See also Brugnolo (2009).

¹⁷ According to Lombardi (2018:51), the point is not ‘that the woman does not literally understand Occitan (she has proven before that she does)’, but that the minstrel’s ‘poetic culture [...] is nonsense – an utterly foreign language’.

27 October 1345) to Pignol Zucchello, another Tuscan merchant who originally came from Pisa but was based in Venice, and in his letter he included a passing comment about the reading difficulties of a friar called Pacino. While Bartolomei clearly writes in Sieneſe (see Castellani 2000:182, 353), our limited and unsound knowledge of Fra Pacino’s linguistic background does not allow us to identify exactly which other variety was involved in this instance of cross-dialectal communication. More details, including extra-linguistic information, would be needed in order to understand fully the following passage from Bartolomei’s letter, which is nonetheless intriguing:

Fra Pacino s̀ no’ credo che ſapia legiare e per̀ io s̀ gli mando una lettara la quale ſar̀ leghata con queſta e per̀ vi pregho che la diate bene in ſuo propria mano peroch̀ v’è dentro una chomesione ch’è di gra’ biſogno e quand’egli date, s̀ dite: Fraciescho ſcrive al modo toſchano e per̀ e’ può eſſare che voi no’ ſaprete be’ legiare le ſuo lettare, e per̀ e’ mi ſcrive che ſe vi piace io vi legha la ſuo lettara, acioché per altri no’ ſi ſapia quello che vi ſcrive [I do not think brother Pacino can read, ſo I ſend him a letter which will be attached to the preſent letter and I kindly aſk you to hand it to him perſonally becauſe it contains much-needed inſtructions. When you give it to him, ſay this to him: ‘Francesco writes in the Tuſcan way and ſo it might be that you cannot eaſily read hiſ letters, and for thiſ reaſon he aſks me that, if you like, I ſhould read hiſ letter to you, ſo that no one elſe may know what he iſ writing to you’] (in Morozzo della Rocca 1957:45-46).

According to the archiviſt who published theſe letterſ, Pacino waſ able to read (Morozzo della Rocca 1957:ix; ſee alſo Eufe 2007:137). In any caſe, even if we take an exceedingly cauſious approach by aſſuming that thiſ friar waſ illiterate, we ſtill need to acknowledge that Bartolomei muſt have looked for a plauſible excuſe in order to help the friar without embarrassing him.¹⁸ In other wordſ, it muſt have been plauſible to ſuggeſt that a non-Tuſcan, ſuch aſ Pacino, could find it difficult to understand a letter written in Tuſcan.

During the fourteenth century, merchantſ from northern Italy certainly experienced problemſ of intercomprehenſion in their correſpondence with Tuſcan firmſ. The letterſ now houſed at the Datini Archive, in Prato, offer inſtructive exampleſ.¹⁹ On the one hand, ſome non-Tuſcanſ felt the need to apologize 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 perdone’ [Every Genoeſe thiſkſ that I am alſo Genoeſe and believeſ that I waſ born in Genova ... ſo, if I do not write intelligibly

¹⁸ The other reaſon mentioned by Bartolomei, in order to juſtify hiſ help to Pacino, iſ that it waſ potentially damaging to diſcloſe information to third partieſ. Thiſ waſ indeed a genuine and frequently felt concern, in buſineſſ tranſactionſ aſ well aſ in diplomatic communication. See the following letter of June 1402, written by Francesco Novello da Carrara, Lord of Padua, to the Ferrareſe ſoldier and politician Uguccione dei Contrari: ‘ve prego che ve piaça ſcriverme per vulgari, perché, ſcrivando per letera, jo non ſo tanto, ch’el no me converna andare per le man de altri a farnele leçere [with reference to Uguccione’s letterſ]’ [please write to me in the vernacular, becauſe, if you write in Latin, I do not know it well enough and ſo I will have to ſhow your letterſ to otherſ in order to have them read to me] (in Andreoſe and Renzi 2011:61). See alſo Guidi Bruſcoli (2014) and Soldani (2017).

¹⁹ Led by Francesco di Marco Datini and well-eſta bliſhed aſ one of the moſt powerful Tuſcan firmſ, the Datini company received letterſ from different partſ of mediæval Italy and Europe (Melis 1962).

or in your way, I beg your pardon].²⁰ On the other hand, the Milanese merchant Giovannino da Dugnano asked his Tuscan correspondents to write in a more intelligible way. On 21 January 1398 he wrote: ‘E perché eyo no sonto da uxo lezere le vostre letere, ve piazze di scrivere pyù intelegibelle per my chi potiti’ [And since I am not used to reading your letters, please write in the most intelligible way that you can for me];²¹ and on 26 January he repeated his request: ‘anchora e ve scrisse, perché eyo non son da uxo lezere le vostre letere in vorgalle, che me voliaty scrivelle più intelegibelle che se poy per me’ [I wrote to you once again that, since I am not used to reading your letters in the vernacular, you should write them as intelligibly as possible for me].²²

Before drawing any conclusions about this evidence, however, we should recognise the possibility that problems of comprehension may have been due to a combination of linguistic and graphic differences. It is plausible to interpret the word *modo* ‘way’, used by both Bartolomei and Benintendi, as referring to language as such.²³ Nonetheless, in the case of handwritten correspondence, we should factor in the difficulties caused by different *modi* of representing language through writing, according to the different geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds of senders and addressees (see Ceccherini 2009).²⁴ In the previously mentioned collection of letters to Pignol Zucchello, the only letter attributable to the indefinable Fra Pacino (see Morozzo della Rocca 1957:119 and Tomasin 2016) is written in a traditional chancery hand, which is strikingly different from the mercantile script used by Bartolomei.²⁵ That similar graphic differences could hamper comprehension is confirmed by a letter of Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, to a fellow Siense, the merchant Ambrogio Spannocchi, dated 3 May 1454. Here Piccolomini complains that he could not understand a single word (‘Non intellexi unicum verbum’) in a letter he had previously received from Spannocchi. The future Pope blames his difficulties on the mercantile cursive used by his correspondent, who gets a bit of a brush off: ‘scias, me deinceps Latinas litteras non uncinos mercatorios didicisse’ [so bear in mind that I have learned Latin letters, not mercantile hooks].²⁶

The last document that deserves to be discussed in this section is particularly interesting not only for what it tells us about perceived intelligibility, but also because it gives us some clues

²⁰ Piero di Giusto Benintendi to Francesco di Marco Datini, 24 September 1392, Archivio di Stato di Prato, Fondo Datini, busta 1091, inserto 28, codice 134825. This apologetic attitude was quite common: see the material discussed by Tomasin (2015:279-282).

²¹ Archivio di Stato di Prato, Fondo Datini, busta 780, inserto 10, codice 416389.

²² Fondo Datini, busta 780, inserto 10, codice 416390. On Dugnano’s letters see Brown (2012, 2017).

²³ Cf. the following sermons delivered by Saint Bernardino (in Siena, in 1427) and Giacomo della Marca (in Padua, in 1460) respectively: ‘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’ [when I arrive in a place, I always try to speak according to their own words; and I had learned and know how to say many things in their way] (Bernardino da Siena 1989:672-673); ‘cia, al modo de Toscana, ma a lo modo di qua vegniria chiamata *ameda*’ [*cia* (‘aunt’, pronounced [‘tsia]) in Tuscany, whereas here she would be called *ameda*] (quoted in Bruni 2003:172).

²⁴ Not to mention the difficulties caused by individual graphic performance. For instance, Datini complains about the illegible handwriting of some members of the Florence branch of his firm, and tells them to write ‘per modo ch’io possa meglio intendere’ [in such a way that I can understand better] (busta 700, inserto 17, codice 309551). Datini’s partner in Florence, Stoldo di Lorenzo, is also reproached by Domenico di Cambio in a letter written from Florence in which Domenico encourages Stoldo to learn how to write ‘per modo che tu sia inteso’ [in such a way that you will be understood] (busta 1112, inserto 190, codice 6000498).

²⁵ I have checked the originals at the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Sant’Anna di Castello, busta 48, documents 19 and 64 respectively.

²⁶ Wolkan 1918:475. Cf. Petrucci 1995:198. There may have been some exaggeration in Piccolomini’s claim not to be able to understand the script used by Spannocchi, probably due to the desire of the humanist prelate to distance himself from mercantile culture.

about the strategies that speakers adopted in order to achieve intercomprehension. The expansion of mendicant orders favoured a sustained, cross-regional circulation of texts which were not only silently absorbed and memorised by individual readers, but also read aloud to others. For instance, the Sicilian saint Eustochia Calafato (1434-1485) was deeply familiar with the dramatic song-form known as *lauda*, which had been used and improved especially by the Umbrian friar Jacopone da Todi (1236?-1306). According to the *Leggenda della beata Eustochia da Messina*, Eustochia ‘avia a la mente’ [knew by heart] all of Jacopone’s poems ‘et spesse volte le cantava’ [and she often sang them] (Catalano 1950:273). It is within this historical context that we should place a copy of Jacopone’s *laude*, the Plut.90 inf.27, housed at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana of Florence. This manuscript was prepared in 1438 (Leonardi 1988:13), possibly for circulation and recitation in northern Italy (Bruni 1991:21-22). It contains an introduction aimed at facilitating the enjoyment of Jacopone’s religious poetry in a different linguistic environment, followed by a bilingual wordlist. It is worth recalling that, in this period, similar bilingual glossaries (or “proto-dictionaries”) usually comprised Latin or French in combination with an Italo-Romance variety.²⁷ Here, instead, the two varieties are indicated as ‘Spoletanum’, literally the variety of the Umbrian town of Spoleto, and ‘Longobardus’ [Lombard] (f.3v),²⁸ which arguably stands for ‘northern Italo-Romance’; that is, they are two Italo-Romance varieties.

This glossary shows that the lexicon was perceived as a barrier to intercomprehension. In some entries, a Latin equivalent is added, probably in the hope that basic knowledge of Latin would help at least some of the readers for whom the Italo-Romance equivalents were insufficiently transparent. See for instance the entry for ‘today’:

*Hogi = Anchoy (hodie) (f.4r)*²⁹

One of the entries in the list, however, does not provide lexical equivalents, but equivalences between letters and so probably sounds:

Gli, glie, glia = Ly, ye, ya (ibid.)

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

Famiglia = Fameya (ibid.)

And similar equivalences appear in many other entries, such as:

Battaglia = Battaia ‘battle’ (f.3v)
Consiglio = Conseyo ‘opinion, decision, support’ (ibid.)
Moglie = Muyere (uxor) ‘wife’ (f.4v)
Paglia = Paya ‘straw’ (ibid.)
Vermiglio = Vermeio ‘vermilion’ (f.5r)

²⁷ Glossaries are lists of equivalents – usually a Latin word and its Romance equivalent from a particular area. Some glossaries were compiled as lists, others have been assembled by modern editors by extracting glosses which were originally written between the lines or in the margins of the pages in order to facilitate the comprehension of Latin texts.

²⁸ In the late Middle Ages, *Longobardia* ‘came to refer to the whole of Northern Italy’ (Zancani 1998:217).

²⁹ I have checked Tenneroni’s (1888) transcription 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.

Giglio = Cyio (lilyum) ‘lily’ (f.5v)

Here, it seems to me, we are in the presence of an ‘automatic conversion formula’ (Weinreich 1968:2). Conversion formulae typically emerge ‘among genetically related systems’ (Weinreich 1968:2) and are followed by speakers as a crucial aid to cross-dialectal accommodation and comprehensibility (Trudgill 1986:1-81).³⁰ 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 the introduction to the poems (ff.1r-3v) which immediately precedes the glossary, we find the following remark: ‘ubicumque invenies istas sillabas *gli, glo, gla, gle*, longobardus dicit et scribit *li, io, ia*, vel *ga, ie*, vel *ge*, sive ipse sillabe sint sole sive ipse sillabe composite cum aliis’ [Wherever you (i.e. the reader) find the syllables *gli, glo, gla, gle*, Lombards say and write *li, io, ia* or *ga, ie* or *ge*, irrespective of whether these syllables appear on their own or in combination with others]. Once presented with these systematic differences, and with a selection of words in which they appear (‘quaedam ex ipsis vocabulis’), northerners will be able to apply the conversion pattern to other words which might otherwise prove unintelligible (‘non bene intelliguntur ab eis’).

Most of these equivalences seem to be based on the observation of the different outcomes which had emerged from the diachronic development of Latin [lj]. 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 graphic sequence *gl(i)*; whereas in northern Italy it had yielded [j] or [dʒ] (Rohlf 1966:396-397; Stussi 1994:81), which here seem to be represented by *i* (also *y* in the glossary) and *g* respectively. The inclusion of *l*, however, is more difficult to explain. It might be based on the observation of the outcomes of a less wide-ranging sound change – namely, the palatalisation of [l:] before final [i] in local varieties of southern Tuscany and Umbria, including medieval Todino (Mattesini and Vignuzzi 2007:571; cf. Castellani 2000:397). This change seems to lie behind the following entries:

*Ly[b]elgli = Lybelli ‘legal documents’ (f.4v)*³¹

Kiuegli = Kiuelli ‘anyone’ (ibid.)

Quigli = Quelli ‘those’ (ibid.)

Perhaps these matches fed the identification of a more general equivalence between the *gl*’s of Umbrian texts and the *l*’s used further north.

Other entries focus on verb forms. An equivalence is established, for instance, between different ways of forming the first person future indicative of ‘to be’:

Serayo = Saroe ‘I will be’ (f.5r)

Some present conditional forms 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*):³²

³⁰ See also Bahtina and Ten Thije (2012), and Thomason’s (2001:144-146) discussion of what she terms ‘correspondence rules’.

³¹ ‘Lylelgli’ in the ms.

³² On the geographical distribution and genre-based patterns of attestation of the two types between 1200 and 1400, see Parkinson (2009).

Converia = *Conuengnereue* ‘would be necessary 3SG’ (f.3v)
Seria = *Seraue* ‘would be 1/3SG’ (f.4v)
Terria = *Tegneraui* ‘would hold 1/3SG’ (f.5r)
Verria = *Vegneraui* ‘would come 1/3SG’ (ibid.)
Çiria = *Andraui* ‘would go 1/3SG’ (ibid.)

While in the language of the poems *-ia* functions both as a first and a third person singular ending (Mattesini 1992:517), the presence of *-i* and *-e* in the ‘Lombard’ forms might indicate a differentiation between the two persons. This differentiation makes it difficult to provide univocal English glosses and will require further philological investigation, which might also reveal misunderstanding on the part of the scribe.

3.2. Latin and other varieties

If taken on its own, the evidence discussed in the previous section does not provide a conclusive answer to the question of intercomprehension among medieval Italo-Romance varieties. Further research, moreover, may add other judgements to the ones I have been able to find. However, the significance of the judgements discussed thus far becomes clearer if we compare them to opinions about the perceived intelligibility of other varieties – especially non-Romance varieties.

In his thirteenth-century cosmographical treatise *La composizione del mondo colle sue cascioni*, Restoro d’Arezzo talks about linguistic diversity ranging from variation between different parts of the same city to more radical cases of ‘provinzie che non entende l’uno l’altro’ [provinces that do not understand each other] (d’Arezzo 1997:294). Revealingly, his examples of ‘genti [...] che non entende l’uno l’altro’ [peoples ... who do not understand each other] refer to clearly distinct language communities ‘come so’ Greci, e Ermini, e Tedeschi, e Latini, e Saracini e molti altri’ [such as Greeks, Armenians, Germans, Italians (or, perhaps, Romance speakers), Saracens and many others] (p. 297). Comments mentioning mutual unintelligibility are indeed much easier to find for this level of linguistic diversity than they are for Italo-Romance varieties.

The unintelligibility of certain languages was commented upon so many times that it almost became a trope. One of these languages (or groups of varieties, more precisely) was German, which we have already seen mentioned by Restoro d’Arezzo and also by the Genoese woman in Raimbaut de Vaqueiras’s *contrasto*. The Perugino poet Cucco di Gualfreduccio Baglioni (1265?-1331?) echoes them when he writes ‘Io non entendo el tuo parlar tedesco’ [I do not understand your German talk], in response to a sonnet by another Perugino poet which contained a line in German (Mancini 1996, I:145). That unintelligibility was mutual is confirmed by the *Cronaca senese dall’anno 1202 al 1362*, with reference to the devastation that German soldiers caused during an attack on the northern Tuscan city of Lucca: ‘questi Todeschi [...] arseno molte chase e amazoro molta gente, e non valeva a dire: io m’arendo, perchè none intendevano nostra lenghua’ [these Germans burned down many houses and killed many people, and it was no use saying ‘I surrender’, because they did not understand our language] (Lisini and Iacometti 1939:98).

Eastern European and Asian languages are also judged unintelligible in several sources (see Eufe 2007), including punchy verses such as ‘Y, perché greco, | non si intende meco’ [because

the letter Y is Greek, it is not understood by me] (Contini 1960, II:312). Symmetrically, speakers of these languages are not expected to understand Italian vernaculars. Niccolò da Poggibonsi's fourteenth-century *Libro d'oltramare* mentions some Arabs who 'non intendevano niente nostra lingua' [did not understand our language at all] (da Poggibonsi 1990:127). When the characters in Boccaccio's *Decameron* are speakers who have recently reached Europe from the Muslim world, radical communication problems are explicitly portrayed (most notably in *Dec.*, II, 7) or their absence is explained, as in the following case: '[i]l Saladino e' compagni e' famigliari tutti sapevan latino, per che molto bene intendevano ed erano intesi' (X, 9, 16) [Saladin and his companions and attendants all knew the Italian vernacular, so they understood and were understood very well].³³

The problems of intercomprehension created by Romance languages were probably perceived as less radical than those created by the languages mentioned in the previous paragraphs. While this is generally confirmed by the evidence discussed in a number of recent studies (Bruni 2003:167-201, Morenzoni 2008, Guidi Bruscoli 2014, 2015, Soldani 2017), comments about the scarce intelligibility of Romance languages are by no means absent. Tomasin (2015:289) interprets a passage in the *Fioretti di San Francesco* as showing that Italians did not expect to be able to understand Spanish. And for French we have, for instance, the first lines of a fourteenth-century French-Venetian glossary published by Baldelli (1988:159-168), where the person who compiled the glossary explains: 'En questo libro è scritto paraule en romanço le qual eo no entendo, et perçò, cui no lo sa (et) cui no lo entende cerca i(n) quisti capitoli qua de soto (et) lo saverà' [This book contains French words which I do not understand, so those who do not know or understand French should search the following sections and they will know it] (p. 164).

Finally, there are plenty of sources from medieval Italy where Latin is judged unintelligible. Some scholars and literary men would appear to have found this language more intelligible than the vernaculars (see the cases discussed by Kristeller 1956 and Brugnolo 1976:384), and under particular circumstances, especially within the clergy, using Latin could be considered the most effective way of communicating. 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.³⁴ In general, however, Latin clearly posed major problems of comprehensibility to socially and culturally diverse groups of speakers in various parts of the Italian peninsula. As can be inferred from the works of Dante and Boccaccio among others, these problems were especially acute for women,³⁵ probably as a result of lower exposure to Latin, and their more limited access to literacy and education in general, compared to men. Artisans and merchants also had problems with Latin, as confirmed by the request of the Bolognese guild of masons (dated 1302) that the vernacular be used instead of Latin in official documents, 'açò che sia publico et certo a ciaschuno de intendere' [so as to make understanding public and certain for everyone] (quoted in Foresti, Marri and Petrolini

³³ See Tomasin (2011:52-53) for evidence ruling out the possibility of *latino* meaning 'Latin' in this context.

³⁴ 'Nam nec Lombardus neque Marchianus, neque Romandiolus nec etiam Tuscus sum in lingua vulgari, sed in hiis ydiomatibus, cogente consuetudine multa, est meus sermo confusus' [My vernacular is indeed neither Lombard, nor Marchigiano, nor Romagnolo, nor is it Tuscan either. Yet my speech mixes these languages through force of considerable habit] (Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Lat. I 43, 2190, f.1r; cf. Bruni 2003:171).

³⁵ See e.g. Dante, *Convivio*, Treaty I, Ch. VII, and *Vita nova*, XXV. See also Daniels (2009) and Lombardi (2018) for discussion.

1992:374). In an anonymous Roman chronicle, written in the fourteenth century, we read that ‘vulgari mercatanti e aitra moita bona iente [...] per lettera non intenne’ [ordinary merchants and many other good people ... do not understand Latin] (Anonimo Romano 1991:91),³⁶ and a fifteenth-century letter studied by Bec (1967:429) reveals the desire of some merchants to learn Latin, along with their admiration for those who knew it: ‘Maximamente mi saranno chare [le tue lettere] in latino, con tutto che né a intenderle né al rispondere io sia atto. Ma per avere chagione di sforzarmi al poterlo qualche volta fare. Della qual chosa con ogni studio mi ingegnerò’ [Above all, your letters in Latin will be dear to me, even though I am not suited either to understand them or to reply. But they will give me the opportunity to try and do so some time, and I will strive with all my effort to do this].³⁷

4. Concluding remarks

Only a few individual judgements by medieval speakers concur with the modern ‘standard view’ critically summarised by Vincent (2006). Comments about the difficulty of understanding Italo-Romance varieties, such as the one about Neapolitan by the Tuscan Zanobi da Strada, appear to be rare; and, even in the present limited state of our knowledge, such rarity seems significant if compared to the greater availability of comments about the incomprehensibility of Latin and other languages. This comparison suggests that the shortage of evidence pointing towards Italo-Romance intercomprehension problems is not simply due to linguistic barriers in general being rarely mentioned in medieval sources. We can therefore argue that, in medieval Italy, barriers to Italo-Romance intercomprehension were often perceived as less insurmountable than the views of modern linguists would lead us to expect. This perception, however, was not evenly spread. The instructions accompanying the collection of religious poetry of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana alert us to the existence of audiences with little experience of cross-dialectal communication – that is, of people who probably needed explicit intercomprehension support or would otherwise struggle to understand varieties other than those spoken in their local area.

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³⁶ Engl. transl. from Campanelli (2013:89).

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