

Double Standards

Codified Norms and Norms of Usage
in European Languages (1600–2020)

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Oxford · Berlin · Bruxelles · Chennai · Lausanne · New York

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National
Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at
<http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025008217

Open access publication supported by the Paris Lodron University of Salzburg
Publication Fund.

Cover image: Double herm. Marble, Roman copy after a Greek original. Vatican
museums. Photographer Marie-Lan Nguyen (2009). Available under a CC-BY 3.0
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Cover design by Peter Lang Group AG

ISSN 2296-1909

ISBN 978-1-80374-940-2 (Print)

ISBN 978-1-80374-944-0 (E-PDF)

ISBN 978-1-80374-945-7 (E-PUB)

DOI 10.3726/b22873

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Published by Peter Lang Ltd, Oxford, United Kingdom
info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com

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This publication has been peer reviewed.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to analyse formal texts written by Italian university students from a sociolinguistic perspective. More specifically, the linguistic nature of these texts with respect to the two different standards coexisting in the Italian scenario will be discussed; one standard is the old prescriptive and literary one, while the other is the so-called neo-standard which is the product of a process of downward convergence. Three linguistic features will be considered and their behaviour in three different corpora will be compared. More specifically, data will be extracted from a newly built resource consisting of university students' formal productions and from two sections of the CORIS corpus (i.e. academic prose and journalistic prose). Data show that university students' texts instantiate a very heterogeneous variety, which is distant from both 'standard' poles: while it is very prone to include some deviant linguistic features, it is reluctant to accept others.

1. Introduction¹

Young speakers/writers are often considered to act as innovative agents in that they are prone to accepting and spread linguistic change. Sometimes, they are blamed for corrupting the prestigious 'good language' with their

1 This contribution is the result of the research carried out within the PRIN 2017 UniverS-Ita project Written Italian of university students: sociolinguistic framework, typological trends, didactic implications (ERC SH4, Prot. 2017 LAP429).

innovations. This is true also in the Italian scenario, where scholars started to address the issue some decades ago, focusing in particular on university students' formal productions (Lavinio & Sobrero 1991), where several substandard linguistic features were detected.

What complicates the picture is that at least from the 1980s onwards, two standards² have coexisted (see Cerruti, Crocco & Marzo 2017a for an overview) and thus, also nowadays, the presence of two models may lead to confusion, especially among young writers/speakers.

In this paper, university students' formal productions will be discussed from a sociolinguistic perspective, giving particular importance to the Italian *Architektur der Sprache* (Berruto 2012 [1987]: 23–30). Attention will be given to three linguistic features whose behaviour will be compared in university students' texts and in two corpora that exemplify the two competing standards.

After giving an account of the Italian sociolinguistic situation (Section 2), the data and the methods adopted for the analysis will be presented (Section 3). Section 4 is devoted to the data analysis, while Section 5 consists of some conclusive remarks.

2. Competing standards in contemporary Italian

In the Italian sociolinguistic scenario, two standards can be observed. The first one is the literary old standard (*italiano standard letterario*, in Berruto 2012 [1987]: 26), it is referred to as 'amended Florentine' (lit. *fiorentino emendato* in Galli de' Paratesi 1984: 10) and is the product of a standardisation process that started in the sixteenth century. It displays a number of literary features and is the variety on which the *language codices* are based: it is described by grammars and, at least ideally, taught in

2 In this paper, I will use the term *standard* not to designate an entire language but to refer to a standard variety (of a certain language), see Ammon (2004) for a thorough terminological discussion.

schools; for some authors, old-Standard Italian is ‘actually crystalised in scholastic Italian at this point’ (Antonelli 2011: 52, my translation). Thus, it is not to be considered as a Coserian norm (Coseriu 1971, *inter alia*), but rather as a prescriptive one. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that in contemporary Italian, this variety cannot be reduced to a mere abstract model, since it has been empirically proven that a cluster of its linguistic features occur coherently in the productions of educated speakers in highly formal communicative situations (Cerruti & Vietti 2022).

As mentioned before, alongside this old standard, a new one can be observed. Scholars started to notice this new variety in the 1980s (see Mioni 1983; Sabatini 1985; Berruto 2012 [1987]), and it can be considered as one of the outcomes of a major change that took place in the Italian sociolinguistic setting which started after World War II. As a matter of fact, it was only from the 1950s that (standard) Italian spread among a vast portion of the population that, until then, had spoken almost exclusively Italo-Romance dialects (De Mauro 1963, 2014). Italo-Romance dialects are not to be considered geographic varieties of Italian but rather, following Coseriu’s (1980) taxonomy, ‘primary dialects’ and thus sister languages of Florentine on which the standard is based. That is to say that they, as Florentine, derive from Latin and ‘evolved in parallel with Italian, and may display a noticeable degree of structural distance from it’ (Cerruti, Crocco & Marzo 2017a: 5; see also Ledgeway & Maiden 2014; Maiden & Parry 2014).

The rapid spread of the standard language across contexts in which previously only Italo-Romance dialects were spoken and the increase in its use as a principal communication code led to the emergence of new sociolinguistic varieties, including the new standard. Over decades, some structural features originally marginalised to spoken informal productions began to be used also in formal exchanges and among educated speakers and therefore changed their sociolinguistic status. In order to give an account of this ‘downward’ convergence process (‘restandardisation’, *ristandardizzazione* in Berruto 2012 [1987]: 67; see also Berruto 2017), the term *neo-standard Italian* (Berruto [1987] 2012, see also Cerruti, Crocco & Marzo 2017b, Ballarè 2020) was coined. *Neo-standard Italian* is a ‘new social norm, representing the shape of the Italian language as it is

normally spoken and written by fluent, educated speakers today' (Berruto 2017: 32). The process that led to the emergence of this new norm can be explained by referring to the notion of *demotisation* (Coupland & Kristiansen 2011; Auer & Spiekermann 2011; see also *Demotisierung* in Mattheier 1997): 'the "standard ideology" as such stays intact while the valorisation of ways of speaking changes' (Coupland & Kristiansen 2011: 28). Neo-standard Italian mainly consists of a set of linguistic features that are to be considered as 'standard by usage' (Ammon 2003: 17): it is modelled on texts produced by speakers and writers considered to be prestigious by the members of the sociolinguistic community but is not codified. For this reason, some scholars have approximated neo-standard Italian to *journalistic Italian* (Antonelli 2011: 52), as opposed to the old scholastic one. It is important to emphasise that these productions display a set of linguistic features that are 'non-standard' in all respects and, thus, are perceived as 'errors', and stigmatised by some language experts and codifiers. In the Italian *Architektur der Sprache* this new standard did not replace the old literary one but rather coexists with it (Antonelli 2011: 51; see also Berruto 2012: 24).

2.1. *University students' formal productions: between two standards*

The above-described scenario results in educated speakers having two competing standards at their disposal as a model for their (highly and moderately) formal productions. This potential conflict might be more evident for younger speakers/writers who have been more exposed to the input of the new standard and might be less aware of the sociolinguistic characterisation of its linguistic features. University students have often been considered to be among those responsible for the alleged corruption of the 'good Italian language'. For example, the public debate on this issue was particularly lively in 2017, when a group of six hundred scholars and intellectuals co-signed an open letter (the so-called *Lettera dei Seicento*,

lit. ‘Letter of the six hundred’) denouncing the lack of linguistic competence of university students and stating that three-quarters of undergraduates are to be considered ‘semi-illiterate’ (see De Santis & Fiorentino 2018 for a discussion).

However, these aspects have rarely been addressed from a sociolinguistic perspective, despite young educated speakers having a significant impact in defining which variety is to be considered prestigious and standard, both in the present and future. Linguists have often given an account of the use of non-standard linguistic features in university students’ formal productions (see Lavinio & Sobrero 1991, and, more recently, Restivo 2022 for an overview), highlighting that ‘the linguistic competence of university students is a serious problem, present – in varying degrees – in all universities and faculties’³ (Sobrero 1991: 2, my translation). Nevertheless, these productions have not (or hardly ever) been discussed from a sociolinguistic perspective, also taking into account the characteristics of the sociolinguistic scenario and the coexistence of two standards. The issue of the consequences of the presence of these two competing standards may have for young educated speakers has never been addressed organically.

3. Data and methods

In the remainder of this paper, the sociolinguistic characterisation of university students’ written and formal productions will be discussed, with respect to the old and the new standard; more specifically, the distribution of a set of three morphological and morphosyntactic features will be considered (see Ballarè 2020 for an overview). Data extracted from three corpora, which can be considered good examples of the three scrutinised varieties, will be analysed. The first corpus is a recently built

3 [la] competenza linguistica degli studenti universitari è un grave problema, presente – in vario grado – in tutte le sedi universitarie e in tutte le facoltà’.

resource (Grandi et al. 2023), consisting of over 2,000 texts written by a representative sample (in terms of geographic location of the university and disciplinary area of the degree course) of students enrolled in the second year of bachelor's degree programmes. Data was collected during the academic year 2020–2021, and selected students were asked to write a short formal text (maximum 500 words), expressing their opinions about distance learning. The corpus has a rather small dimension (895,332 tokens), but, thanks to the adopted methodology (in terms of sampling and uniformity of the assigned task), it is highly representative. The second and the third corpora are two monitor sections (2017–2020) of the CORIS corpus (<https://corpora.flclit.unibo.it/coris_ita.html>, last accessed 8 June 2024). One consists of journalistic texts (5,468,847 tokens) that, as mentioned before, are considered a prototypical example of neo-standard Italian in the literature (see Antonelli 2011, *inter alia*); the latter is made of papers and books written by scholars from various academic fields (1,707,703 tokens), and it can be considered a good example of the old standard because formal productions of highly educated speakers are the ones in which the linguistic features of the old-standard Italian have been attested in a cohesive and coherent way (Cerruti & Vietti 2022).

The aim of this study is to compare these three varieties in order to understand the nature of the university students' formal productions with respect to the two standards.

In particular, the analysis focuses on three linguistic features that can occur in a standard and (at least) a non-standard way, considering the latter typical of neo-standard texts.

Two features involve the selection of third-person singular pronouns (subject and oblique⁴), which is a point of great instability in the Italian linguistic system: as a matter of fact, they both display a complex paradigm that is going through a process of simplification in different varieties of Italian. More specifically, as far as subject pronouns are concerned, in Standard Italian there is a set of four forms that must be selected

4 In this paper, *oblique* is intended as opposed to *subject* and thus to include all the other syntactic functions (such as *direct* and *indirect objects* and *genitive*).

according to the gender and the semantic trait [+/- human] of the antecedent. If the antecedent is non-human, then the same pronouns can be employed also to express an oblique function; if it is human, the selection involves another set of pronouns differentiated for gender. Furthermore, there are some syntactic contexts (i.e. post-verbal position, coordinated clauses and focalisation) in which, even if the pronoun covers the syntactic function of the subject, the oblique form is required (see Cardinaletti 2021 inter al.). The whole picture is summarised in Table 13.1.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, *egli* and *ella* are perceived to be literary and obsolete by speakers and are almost absent in contemporary spoken productions (see Ballarè 2022). At the same time, *lui* and *lei* expanded their domains and began to be used in contexts formerly belonging to *egli* and *ella*. This overextension is far from being recent and is rather considered to be one of the key topics in the history of the Italian language: suffice to say that the issue was already addressed in the *Prose della volgar lingua* ('writings on the vulgar tongue') written by Pietro Bembo in 1525, which is considered to be the very first step of the standardisation process of Italian.

In the contemporary scenario, the employment of *lui/lei* as subject pronouns has been systematically counted among the key features of neo-standard Italian (Sabatini 1985: 159, 1990: 96; Berruto 2012 [1987]: 83–4). In these texts, *lui/lei* are occasionally used also to refer to a non-human antecedent, as has been noted. At the same time, *esso* and *essa* are sporadically employed when referring to a human antecedent. The whole paradigm seems to be involved in a variation process: case distinction between subject and oblique pronouns is nearly lost, and the semantic distinction between human and non-human antecedent is weakening.

Table 13.1 Third-person singular pronouns in Standard Italian.

	subject		obliques	
	+ hum	- hum	+ hum	- hum
M	<i>egli</i>	<i>esso</i>	<i>lui</i>	<i>esso</i>
F	<i>ella</i>	<i>essa</i>	<i>lei</i>	<i>essa</i>

The second feature linked with third-person singular pronouns involves singular dative clitics. Prescriptive grammars state that there is a form (*gli*) that must be used for male antecedents and another one (*le*) that is to be selected for female antecedents. However, it has been noted that in several varieties of Italian, *gli* is often used also with feminine antecedents. Furthermore, the masculine singular *gli* is often employed instead of the plural form *loro*, which is not marked by gender (Berretta 1985; Sabatini 1985: 158, 1990: 91–4, 97; Berruto 2012 [1987]: 84). That is to say that, at least in some varieties of Italian, the dative clitic *gli* can be used as a sort of ‘general dative’, with singular (feminine and masculine) and plural antecedents.

The last feature is the alternation between the indicative and the subjunctive mood in subordinate clauses introduced by a factive governor, namely *il fatto che* (‘the fact that’). Even though grammars are not always clear about the correct mood choice for this context, subjunctive is systematically and explicitly described as conveying a meaning of uncertainty; as a consequence, factive contexts should arguably select the indicative.

Nevertheless, scholars have recently noticed an overextension of the subjunctive mood in subordinate clauses introduced by factive governors in non-standard varieties (Renzi 2012, 2019; see also Cerruti & Ballarè 2023). This expansion appears to be in line with the grammaticalisation process involving the subjunctive, which is leading to ‘lexical routinization [...] and structural conventionalization’ (Poplack et al. 2018: 217; see also Digesto 2019, 2021). It should also be mentioned that, in general, Italian speakers are well aware of the fact that the subjunctive mood should be preferred over indicative in formal contexts (see Digesto 2021): this sociolinguistic characterisation could help us understand why this pattern of variation is attested in moderately formal productions, whereas it is very rare in lower varieties.

These three linguistic features have been selected because they show substantial differences in their sociolinguistic distribution and characterisation, even though all three involve neo-standard Italian.

As mentioned before, the first two can be considered outcomes of a simplification process, despite displaying differences. The first feature concerns literary forms (i.e. *egli* and *ella*) that are perceived as such by the speakers and have thus been almost completely replaced by *lui/lei* in neo-standard Italian. The second is very frequently attested in lower varieties and, only sporadically, in the higher ones; however, it involves a process that takes place below the level of speaker's awareness. Finally, the over-extension of the subjunctive mood may have to do with its grammaticalisation process but also with being generally considered to be more appropriate in formal contexts. In other words, following the Labovian taxonomy (Labov 1994), we could say that while the first two linguistic features can be considered 'changes from below', because they are attested (also and originally) in lower varieties, the latter can be treated as a 'change from above', in that it can be observed only in (medium) high varieties. The whole picture must be kept in mind in the analysis phase.

In order to analyse the distribution and the behaviour of these three linguistic features in the three corpora, data were extracted as summarised in Table 13.2:

Table 13.2 Extracted data.

	extracted forms	university students' texts	CORIS corpus (journalistic and academic prose)
third-person subject pronouns	<i>egli, ella, esso, essa, lui, lei</i>	all occurrences	maximum 100 (randomised) occurrences per form
dative clitics	<i>gli</i>		
<i>il fatto che</i> + subj./ind.	<i>il fatto che</i>		

Finally, data were manually cleaned, and every occurrence was annotated according to its function and its being *standard* or *non-standard*. The only options that are accepted by prescriptive grammars were labelled as *standard*, while all the others, regardless of their frequency, were classified as *non-standard*.

4. Analysis

This section is devoted to data analysis. A short paragraph is dedicated to each linguistic feature, while an overall look at the university students' formal productions is provided in the last one.

4.1 *Third-person subject pronouns*

The first linguistic feature that is taken into consideration is third-person singular subject pronouns. Before moving on to the analysis of the distribution of their functions, some light will be shed on their sociolinguistic characterisation by discussing their (normalised) frequencies per million tokens in the three corpora. Data are shown in Figure 13.1.

First of all, not surprisingly, *egli* and *ella* are the less frequent pronouns. *Egli* is attested almost exclusively in the old standard, while it is quite rare both in neo-standard and in university students' texts. *Ella*

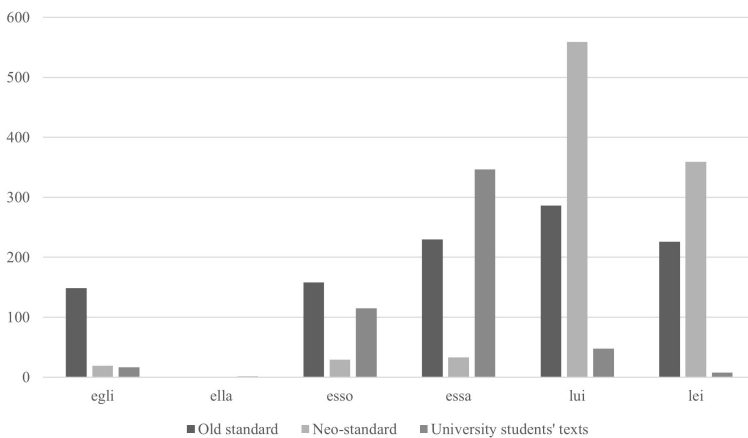


Figure 13.1 Third-person subject pronouns – frequencies (normalised per million tokens).

is nearly absent in all three corpora. *Esso* and *essa* are more frequent in the old standard than in the new one. As far as the masculine form is concerned, university students show a value that is placed almost in the middle between the other two; the high frequency of *essa* may be due to students very often referring to a feminine noun that was included in the assignment and is the key-topic of every text, i.e. *didattica a distanza* ('distance learning'). As expected, *lui* and *lei* are by far the most frequent forms in neo-standard texts, while their values are lower in the old one and, especially, in university students' texts.

Let us now consider the behaviour of the scrutinised forms in the three corpora. Data are shown in Table 13.3. As mentioned before, all the occurrences were manually annotated and, thus, we excluded cases in which the form did not behave as a third-person singular pronoun; for example, there were five cases in which *ella* was employed as a proper noun (as in *Ella* Fitzgerald) and two cases in which *lei* was selected as a courtesy form.

Table 13.3 Third-person subject pronouns – distribution.

	university students		neo-standard		old standard	
	standard	non-standard	standard	non-standard	standard	non-standard
<i>egli</i>	15 (93.75%)	1 (6.25%)	97 (97%)	3 (3%)	100 (100%)	0 (0%)
<i>ella</i>	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
<i>esso</i>	94 (91.26%)	9 (8.74%)	99 (99%)	1 (1%)	100 (100%)	0 (0%)
<i>essa</i>	309 (99.68%)	1 (0.32%)	98 (98%)	2 (2%)	100 (100%)	0 (0%)
<i>lui</i>	32 (74.42%)	11 (25.58%)	52 (52%)	48 (48%)	53 (53.54%)	46 (46.46%)
<i>lei</i>	4 (50%)	4 (50%)	42 (53.85%)	36 (46.15%)	54 (55.10%)	44 (44.90%)

Globally, the distribution indicates that, as expected, *non-standard* uses are more frequent when *lui* and *lei* are involved, in that they are often employed as subject pronouns. However, as mentioned before, even though this function is not prescribed by *ancien régime* grammars, it is widely accepted even in highly formal texts that should be an example of the old standard. If we take into account *egli/ella* and *esso/essa*, we can note that, at least in neo-standard and in university students' texts, there are some deviant uses, especially in the latter.

In order to provide a deeper understanding of the situation, there are some examples worth discussing. In neo-standard texts, *egli* is used two times in a post-verbal position and once with reference to a non-human antecedent, as shown in example (1). By contrast, in the non-standard occurrence of *egli* in university students' texts, the pronoun behaves as an oblique, as shown in example (2).

(1) C'è di peggio e di più, perché un programma nucleare iraniano fuori controllo va a incidere sulla sicurezza di Israele, che con un solo colpo atomico nella parte geograficamente più stretta del Paese potrebbe essere messo fuori causa pur disponendo *egli stesso* (mai negato, mai ammesso) di armamenti nucleari.

'There is more and worse, because an out-of-control Iranian nuclear programme affects the security of Israel, which with a single atomic strike in the geographically narrowest part of the country could be put out of action even though *it itself* has (never denied, never admitted) nuclear weapons'.

(2) A distanza vengono meno le interazioni con i professori, in quanto non si instaura più un colloquio diretto *con egli* ma sempre tramite uno schermo.

'Remotely, interactions with professors cease, because direct conversations are no longer established *with him* but always through a screen'.

Esso and *essa* are sporadically used with a human antecedent, both in the neo-standard example (3) and in university students' texts, see example (4). In order to explain these uses, one could say that this is a way of avoiding the choice between *egli/ella*, which are perceived to be highly formal, and *lui/lei* that, conversely, can be considered too informal. To support this hypothesis, it is worth mentioning that, in contemporary Italian and especially in formal production, examples of other strategies employed to avoid this selection, such as demonstrative pronouns (especially

questo/questa ‘this’) used as personal pronouns are not rare. Interestingly, in one case, *esso* is used in the place of the demonstrative pronoun *questo* (‘this’) as an anaphoric encapsulator, see example (5).

(3) Si era sposato da poco con *Clara Wieck*, figlia del suo maestro di pianoforte e grandissima pianista *essa* stessa.

‘He had recently married *Clara Wieck*, daughter of his piano teacher and a great pianist *herself*.’

(4) Anche per quanto riguarda il rapporto con *il professore*, per quanto *esso* sia bravo, non è come averlo fisicamente in aula.

‘Even with regard to the relationship with *the professor*, no matter how good *he* is, it’s not like having him physically in the classroom’.

(5) Tra i benefici della didattica online possiamo includere i seguenti: dormire un’ora in più al mattino, seguire l’intera lezione in pigiama, *bere una tazza di tè o mangiare mentre il professore spiega* (*esso* è inammissibile in presenza: non solo è vietato mangiare all’ interno dell’aula, ma risulterebbe maleducato da parte di chiunque mangiare durante la spiegazione!).

‘Among the benefits of online teaching, we can include the following: sleeping an extra hour in the morning, following the entire lesson in pyjamas, *drinking a cup of tea or eating while the professor explains* (*this* is unacceptable in presence: not only is eating inside the classroom forbidden, but eating during the explanation would be rude for anyone!’).

4.2 Dative clitics

In this second section, we focus on the behaviour of the dative clitic *gli*. The distribution of its values is shown in Table 13.4.

In this case, as is shown, there is a relevant difference between the values attested in the old and neo-standard texts and the one detected in university students’ productions, in that in the latter, the non-standard uses are by far more frequent. Furthermore, considering the functions covered by *gli* in the three corpora is relevant for the analysis. The whole picture is portrayed in Table 13.5.

Table 13.4 Dative clitics – distribution.

	university students		neo-standard		old standard	
	standard	non-standard	standard	non-standard	standard	non-standard
<i>gli</i>	50 (52.08%)	46 (48.92%)	98 (98%)	2 (2%)	97 (97%)	3 (3%)

Table 13.5 Functions of *gli*.

syntactic function	dative		direct object
	F.SG	M/F.PL	M.PL
university students	2	38	6
neo-standard	0	2	0
old standard	0	3	0

As shown, in the five non-standard occurrences attested in journalistic and academic prose, *gli* behaves like a plural dative and thus replaces *loro*. What is striking is that in university students' productions, *gli* covers this function in almost 40% of the cases. An example is provided in example (6), where the author correctly selects *loro* the first time and then, after a few words, opts for *gli*. Furthermore, it is only in this corpus that *gli* sporadically replaces *le* (dative feminine clitic), as shown in example (7), and, more surprisingly, *li* (plural dative object clitic), as in example (8). This last case, which is easier to observe in written than in oral production due to the phonetic similarity of the two elements (i.e. [ʎi] and [li]), has traditionally been considered to have a low sociolinguistic characterisation.

(6) *Molti studenti* grazie alla DAD sono riusciti a laurearsi nei tempi previsti, per chi si trova fuorisede sicuramente questa tipologia di didattica è stata molto utile, evitando *loro* spostamenti anche di lunga durata dalle loro abitazioni, *gli* ha permesso di seguire i corsi e procedere al sostenimento degli esami.

'Thanks to the distance learning, *many students* have managed to graduate on time, for those who are away from home this type of teaching has certainly been

very useful, avoiding *them* even long-term travel from their homes, it has allowed *them* to follow the courses and proceed to take their exams’.

(7) Quest’ anno, durante il periodo di pandemia ho assistito alle lezioni tramite *didattica a distanza* e sostenuto esami. Un vantaggio che *gli* si può attribuire è sicuramente la possibilità di poter rivedere le lezioni tramite la loro registrazione.

‘This year, during the pandemic period, I attended lessons via *distance learning* and took exams. An advantage that can be attributed *to it* is certainly the possibility of being able to review the lessons from recordings’.

(8) *Gli esami* orali a distanza *gli* trovo meno difficili, questo non riguarda il carico didattico, ma è soltanto il fatto che mi vergogno meno.

‘I find remote oral exams less difficult (lit. *Remote oral exams* I find *them* ...), this doesn’t concern the study load, but it’s just the fact that I’m less embarrassed’.

4.3 Il fatto che + *subjunctive/indicative*

This section is dedicated to the alternation between the subjunctive and the indicative mood in subordinate clauses introduced by the factive governor *il fatto che* (‘the fact that’). The behaviour of the investigated feature is summarised in Table 13.6.

In this case, the non-standard uses (i.e. the use of the subjunctive mood) are consistently attested in the three corpora. However, it is possible to note that, while in university students’ productions and in old-standard texts the non-standard occurrences are less than 30% of the total, in neo-standard texts this value exceeds 50%. An example of these non-standard uses is provided in (9).

Table 13.6 *Il fatto che* – distribution.

	university students		neo-standard		old standard	
	standard	non-standard	standard	non-standard	standard	non-standard
<i>Il fatto che</i> + subj/ind	79 (78.22)	22 (21.78)	46 (46%)	54 (54%)	71 (71%)	29 (29%)

(9) *Il fatto che* la pandemia *sia avvenuta* nel 2020, o comunque in un momento storico di forte sviluppo tecnologico, ha facilitato lo svolgimento di alcune attività che sarebbero state impossibili da svolgere in altre epoche, come appunto andare a scuola o all' università.

'*The fact that* the pandemic *took place* in 2020, or in any case in a historical moment of strong technological development, has facilitated carrying out some activities that would have been impossible to carry out in other eras, such as going to school or university'.

It is worth noting that, in addition to the sociolinguistic characterisation of the subjunctive, considered to be more suitable in formal contexts, the information structure of the sentence has been argued to be one of the reasons behind the overextension of the subjunctive in these cases (see Cerruti & Ballarè 2023 for a discussion). In fact, the subjunctive mood is more frequent in clauses whose content is thematic and given (as in the provided example): the subjunctive ensures that the complement clause is put in the background, while the content of the matrix clause – i.e. the speaker's stance – is foregrounded.

4.4 *An overall look*

In Table 13.7, the percentages of non-standard uses of some of the analysed linguistic features in the three corpora are reported. Some of them (i.e. *ella* and *lui/lei*) were excluded because they are not relevant to highlight the differences of the three varieties being analysed.

The first thing that can be noticed is that university students seem to be prone to accepting linguistic features that are considered 'changes

Table 13.7 Percentages of non-standard features.

	<i>egli</i>	<i>esso</i>	<i>essa</i>	<i>gli</i>	<i>il fatto che</i>
university students	6.25%	8.74%	0.32%	4.6%	2.2%
neo-standard	3.00%	1.00%	2.00%	2%	5.4%
old standard	0	0	0	3%	2.9%

from below'. The percentages of non-standard uses of third-person subject pronouns are almost always higher in these productions than in the other corpora. However, significant differences must be highlighted. In fact, frequencies are quite low with respect to non-standard uses of *egli*, *esso/essa* and *gli*. In this case, deviant uses are sporadic and students' behaviour is still quite conservative. The use of these pronouns can be explained taking into account the already discussed sociolinguistic markedness of the forms. *Egli*, as mentioned before, is perceived to be a literary form, while *esso/essa* are considered to be more suitable than *lui/lei* in formal contexts. As a result, they are sporadically overextended to functions that they are not intended to cover. If we now move to *gli*, it is strikingly not only the university students' value that is very high (46%) with respect to the other two (2% and 3%), but the range of functions that are covered by this form in these texts is widening. Students are less aware of the sociolinguistic characterisation of these features and the simplification of the paradigm here seems to be at a more advanced stage.

Finally, if we consider the only 'change from above', students surprisingly behave in a conservative way, in that their productions show percentages of 'non-standardness' lower even than the old-standard ones. In this case, the neo-standard texts display non-standard features more frequently.

Globally, the behaviour of these three features conveys an image of high heterogeneity: university students' productions are both conservative (see *il fatto che*), but also prone to accepting deviant features (*pronouns*).

5. Concluding remarks

The focus of this paper has been the comparison between university students' formal productions and the two competing standards that have been detected in the Italian sociolinguistic scenario. The analysis of the behaviour and the distribution of the three scrutinised linguistic features has revealed a rather complex picture. However, it must be borne in mind that, since the discussion is based on a rather small set of linguistic

features, further studies may be required in order to provide a deeper understanding of the entire situation.

If we consider ‘changes from below’, university students’ texts display more deviant values. In one case, it can be explained as an attempt to raise the formality of the productions: in order to avoid the selection of *lui/lei*, students prefer forms that are perceived to be more suited to the context, but they use them in a deviant way (i.e. *egli* as an oblique and *esso/essa* with human antecedents). In the other case, the dative clitic *gli* expands massively its functional domain as it is used with feminine and plural antecedents, and even with another syntactic function (i.e. direct object), as observed in considerably lower varieties.

Alongside this pattern, which places university students’ productions below not only the old but also the new standard, there are cases in which these texts are more conservative; surprisingly, that is the case with the so-called ‘changes from above’ (i.e. *il fatto che* + subjunctive).

Overall, the scrutinised texts are hard to profile from a sociolinguistic perspective owing to the different characterisation of the detected linguistic features. This variety can be considered a sort of ‘third way’: students do not adapt to either of the two linguistic models. Over time, it will be possible to establish whether the current situation, which sees two competing standards coexisting, will result in a new and more stable scenario with a new linguistic model that differs from both of the old ones.

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