Is the neuter gender class really stable in Macerata? A comparison between crowdsourced and fieldwork data

This contribution aims at analyzing the present status of the gender agreement system in the dialect of Macerata. The focus will be placed on the opposition between the masculine and the neuter class.
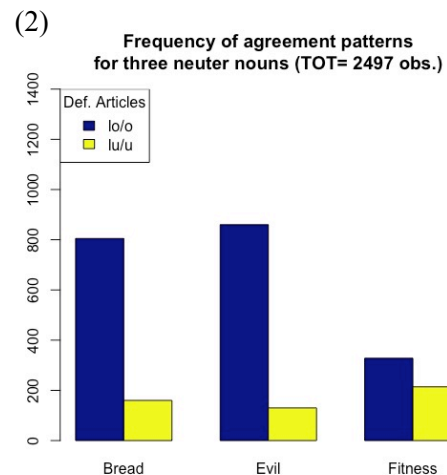
Maceratese is a variety spoken in the *area mediana* (according to the dialect classification by Pellegrini 1977), which is characterized by the "preservation of the distinction between word-final unstressed -/o/ and -/u/, and, hence, of a five-vowel inventory" (Loporcaro & Paciaroni 2016: 230). The gender system features four classes, as exemplified in (1), readapted from Paciaroni (2017: 236).

(1)

		Singular		Plural		
a.	N	lo	ˈpa	Ø		'the bread'
b.	M	lu	ˈka	li	ˈka	'the dog'
c.	A	lu	ˈvrat:ʃu	le	ˈvrat:ʃe	'the arm'
d.	F	la	ˈma	le	ˈma	'the hand'

As one deduces by confronting (1a) and (1b), the distinction between the neuter (N) and the masculine (M) relies entirely on the contrast between the etymological final vowels of the definite articles (Loporcaro 2018: 132); moreover, in Maceratese, this distinction has analogically "come to be marked on nouns […], adjectives, participles, and quite exceptionally even on indefinite articles" (Loporcaro & Paciaroni 2016: 234).

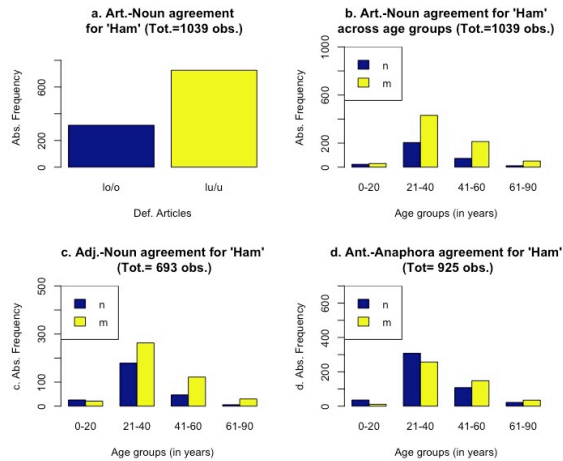Results from a crowdsourced investigation, based on online questionaries and conducted in June 2019, are reported in (2). The majority of the participants selects a N agreement pattern with 'bread'(cfr. (1a)); additionally they do the same with 'the evil' and 'the fitness', which seems to indicate that the neuter gender class is still stable and lexically[1] productive, since it hosts the results of conversions and borrowings. More puzzling, though, is the data plotted in (3): in 30% of the observations a M noun ('the ham') has selected a N target (3a) and this is more common among the younger generations (3b). The same can be observed both for the adjective and the proclitic (3c and 3d, respectively). The reason behind this behavior might be a byproduct of the loss of the -/o/ and -/u/ distinction, which has been already reported for other dialects of the same area: "since the N vs M contrast is signaled by the final vowel contrast, in the dialects of central Umbria where this contrast is on its way to being lost […], no other change rescues the distinction between the lexical pairs involved, the N merges with the M" (Loporcaro 2018: 133). Thus, the stability of the N (cfr. (2)) is only apparent[2]: the class is merging with the M,

(2)

Frequency of agreement patterns for three neuter nouns (TOT= 2497 obs.)

Def. Articles
■ lo/o
□ lu/u

Bread   Evil   Fitness

---

[1] Syntactic productivity seems also to be preserved, but for reasons of space I am not able to show the related data.

[2] And the claim made by Paciaroni (2017: 239) according to which "meno frequente, ma stabile è il neutro" is questionable.

(3)

a. Art.-Noun agreement for 'Ham' (Tot.=1039 obs.)
b. Art.-Noun agreement for 'Ham' across age groups (Tot.=1039 obs.)
c. Adj.-Noun agreement for 'Ham' (Tot.= 693 obs.)
d. Ant.-Anaphora agreement for 'Ham' (Tot= 925 obs.)

but by generalizing the N targets, due to a phonetic change[3]. During my presentation I will compare these crowdsourced results with data gathered in the field by means of face-to-face interviews and Likert scale judgements (Gibson & Fedorenko 2013) in order to shed more light on this ongoing change.

In conclusion, I will also briefly outline how this investigation is a part of a wider psycholinguistic project studying the cognitive dimension of morpho-syntatctic language change, by applying an eye tracking procedure: the visual word paradigm (Lunquist et al. 2016). Thus this presentation, by focusing on the syntax and semantics of the neuter gender and on the historical and geographical dimension of its simplification with the masculine, fits in a presentation session dedicated to the various aspects of gender agreement in Romance.

Essential bibliography

Breimaier, F., Manzari, G. & Loporcaro, M. (in preparation). *Il genere grammaticale nel dialetto di Molfetta 100 anni dopo*.

Gibson, E. & Fedorenko E. (2013). The Need for Quantitative Methods in Syntax and Semantics Research. *Language and Cognitive Processes* 28(1/2): 88–124.

Loporcaro, M. (2018). Gender from Latin to Romance: History, Geography, Typology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Loporcaro, M. & Paciaroni, T. (2016). The Dialects of Central Italy. In A. Ledgeway & M. Maiden (eds), *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 228–45.

Lundquist, B., Rodina, Y., Sekerina, I. A. & Westergaard, M. (2016). Gender Change in Norwegian Dialects: Comprehension is affected before Production. *Linguistics Vanguard* 2(1).

Paciaroni, T. (2017). *I dialetti del Maceratese: fonetica e morfologia*. Habilitation thesis, University of Zürich.

Pellegrini, G. B. (1977). *Carta dei dialetti d'Italia.* Profilo dei dialetti italiani 0. Pisa: Pacini.

---

[3] This has been already reported, for example, for Gualdo Cattaneo and urban Foligno (For more comparative evidence cfr. Loporcaro 2018: 132-134). The merging of the M and the N is well documented in the literature (Loporcaro 2018: § 7) with two main trajectories: one featuring the generalization of the N targets for both classes (as seems to be the case for Macerata), the other characterized by the generalization of the M targets, as it is the case of Molfetta (Breimaier et al. *in preparation*), where younger speakers produce u_M *lattə$_N$* instead of *rə$_N$ llattə$_N$.*