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Accent matters: Material consequences of sounding local in northern Italy

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss accents as signs of ‘things in the world,’ social practices whose forms and functions matter. I move beyond the common tendency to analyze accents as just indexes of identity or phonological variables, and treat them as verbal symbols that circulate in everyday conversation and in the mass media, bridging the symbolic and the material. Focusing on the accent of Bergamo, a town in northern Italy, I look at semiotic ideologies of accent in local and national contexts, illustrating Bergamascos’ views of their own and others’ accents in the process. Drawing on Goffman, I treat accents as phonological representations of *sociogeographical characterological figures* and the qualities associated with such figures, linked to the Italian social hierarchy of place.

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1. Main text

Standard Italian – that is, Italian with no regional variations in pronunciation, lexicon, or syntax – has the distinction of being a national language that nearly

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no one actually speaks.¹ Instead, virtually all Italians speak Italian with an accent. These accents are primarily geographically distributed; each region, but also city and small town, has its own ways of speaking: its own vernacular or dialect and its own local form of Italian.² Accordingly, accents in Italy index groups of speakers from particular places, and Italians utilize them in everyday conversations to negotiate their sociogeographical landscape, a relatively common sociolinguistic phenomenon. However, in order to truly understand the multiplex ways in which accents function in Italy, it is necessary to recognize that these accents are also signs of ‘things in the world’: indexes of geographical places with social histories, and acoustical icons of the sociogeographical identities and stereotypes linked to these places, their very sounds evoking the stereotyped characteristics of their speakers.³ As signs in this sense – that is, ideologically saturated linguistic items with histories of meanings (Voloshinov, 1973) – accents are themselves objects of consumption, especially when they appear in the mass media. Accents, then, function on a number of levels, sometimes simultaneously – indexing speaking subjects, indexing concrete places, and representing iconically the qualities associated with these speakers and locales.

The primary arena of the circulation of accents is through the Italian mass media, where they co-occur with other verbal and nonverbal objects to cue people metapragmatically to certain dimensions of what they are consuming – for instance, that a certain television program is focused on social differences or situated in a particular locality; that the setting is rural; or that the characters are uneducated. In this, accents are similar to ‘brands,’ signs that guide the consumption of an object, highlighting its (allegedly) distinctive properties (Moore, 2003). In their circulation, accents are what Inoue has described as inter-indexical (2003), for they span interactional and cultural settings, calibrating indexical systems across these settings. As such, accents can be used to track meaning across multiple contexts. Moreover, accents provide a resonant bridge across familiar contrasts between the symbolic and the concrete (see Irvine, 1989; Keane, 2003; among others), being both meaningful and material.

Moving beyond the more common tendency to analyze accents strictly as social practices or as relatively stable personal attributes, I analyze accents as acoustical

¹ Agha (2003) and Inoue (2003) have recently discussed similar cases of imagined accents and registers, for British RP and Japanese ‘women’s language,’ respectively.

² Although these local varieties are referred to as ‘*dialetti*’ (dialects) or *italiano dialettalizzato* (dialectalized Italian), they are not dialects of Italian (which itself is descended from the Renaissance Florentine *dialetto* of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio), but rather share a common Romance root.

³ Peirce’s (1955) second trichotomy of signs outlined the different sign properties of icon-index-symbol. An icon signifies through resemblance (a smiley face represents happiness); an index signifies through perceived contiguity or causality (smoke indexes fire); and a symbol signifies through convention (a red traffic light directs a driver to stop). Onomatopoeia are linguistic icons (resembling the things they signify), while personal pronouns are linguistic indexes (pointing to context-dependent participant roles), and metaphors are linguistic symbols (the link between sign and meaning being entirely culturally mediated).

‘things in the world,’ indexing both speakers (subjects), as well as qualities detachable from these speakers, and at times even places themselves (objects). By ‘things in the world,’ I also mean that accents, while never totally detached from speakers, can have a social life of their own (Appadurai, 1986) as objects in their own right. Like the ‘twang’ in country-music singing that signifies rural roots no matter who is singing, accents are verbal symbols that link “the materiality of sound to the sociality of vocal practice” (Feld et al., 2004, p. 340). The twang in this case is multiply indexical, pointing to the singer’s (presumed or projected) origins, but also to rurality more generally.

I am interested particularly in the links between verbal objects and social forms, which throw into question the common representational economy that simultaneously divides and links objects and signs in Western analytical views of language. Obviously, I am far from alone in focusing on linguistic phenomena to problematize the divide between the symbolic and the material (see, among others, Irvine, 1989; Keane, 2003; Moore, 2003; Silverstein, 1996). As Irvine has argued, “linguistic forms have relevance for the social scientist not only as part of a world of ideas, but also as part of a world of objects, economic transactions and political interests” (1989, p. 263). In spite of these efforts, linguistic anthropologists and other scholars of language use have tended to see accents as immaterial representations of groups of speakers. This may be related to accents’ lack of denotational content, as well as to the fact that accents seem to fall just between disciplines. Part phonology, part sociolinguistics, the pursuit of accents tends to fall into one of two camps: looking at accents as acoustical or phonological phenomena, or considering them as sociological markers. The first viewpoint materializes accent through phoneticizing it, the latter dematerializes accent through an exclusive focus on the sociological. Here, I endeavor to marry these two points of view, through focusing on the semiotic ideologies (Keane, 2003) that pertain to particular speech sounds. Semiotic ideologies – distinct from the broader term ‘language ideologies’ – are the sets of beliefs that describe how and why meaning is achieved, and may include conceptualizations of what is significant behavior, who can be designated as actors, and which parts of the material world contain meaning. I argue that accents are particular acoustical sounds that have meaning and express properties of subjects and, further, that these sounds directly index objects and are objects themselves.

In order to do so, I focus on a particular accent: the one associated with the town of Bergamo in the region of Lombardy in northern Italy, known as a Bergamasco accent. I look at what this accent signifies in both local and national contexts of use, drawing on Bergamascos’ views of their own and others’ accents in the process. Although within the national media the Bergamasco accent plays a “bit part” compared to the preponderance of accents from more politically and culturally significant urban areas, such as Milan and Rome⁴ – and indeed, are at times subsumed

⁴ Bergamascos I know theorized that this was due to the geographical locations of television and radio stations, as the state-run RAI networks are located in Rome and the newer Berlusconi-owned Mediaset stations are in Milan.

as part of a more general ‘northern’ or ‘Lombardian’ accent – for Bergamascos, it is a topic of considerable discussion and consideration. Not surprisingly, they demonstrate an acutely fine-grained perception of both its phonological and social dimensions. The latter breaks down roughly into three overlapping clusters of meaning: cultural authenticity, the image of Bergamascos as hard-working manual laborers, and the close association of a Bergamasco accent with maleness.⁵ These three meaning clusters are dimensions of the stereotypical image of Bergamasco speaker, yet each set of qualities can be abstracted from this image such that the accent is directly, rather than indirectly, associated with those features. Focusing on the accent alongside Bergamascos’ views of the accent allows me to draw out the similarities and differences between what this accent signifies in the national arena – that is, what part it plays when it appears in the national media – and what it means to those who use it and hear it everyday in local arenas of circulation.

2. Accent and meaning

It is nearly a truism to say that linguistic anthropologists have become increasingly interested in the broader area of language ideologies, the dynamic sets of beliefs about language that mediate between individuals and society that are enacted and reproduced through everyday practice and interaction. Yet few studies focused on language ideologies have attended to how language *sounds* to speakers – in other words, on accents and their meanings. Studying accents, however, offers a way to pinpoint culturally meaningful sounds, and track them across multiple contexts of use. Such a focus can help tell us about how social information circulates in ways that may be hard to achieve if we think of accents only as individual or group practices. Treating accents as signs offers a way to trace what certain social categories mean, and how they are used in different arenas of circulation, as well as make apparent the overlaps and differences across these contexts. It also presents an opportunity for considering the material forms of language – the way that speaking *sounds* – as part of what speakers find meaningful.

A number of linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic studies not explicitly concerned with language ideologies have demonstrated that it matters to speakers how they sound, not just what they speak. Much of this analysis portrays accents as something a speaker has or learns, due to his or her social position or as a way to enact the same; an attribute to which other speakers respond accordingly (see for example Bernstein et al., 1997; Hinton et al., 1987; Labov, 1966; McConnell-Ginet, 1983). Alternatively, accent has been considered a function of register, or sociosituational variation (Honey, 1997). Classic works such as Labov’s *Martha’s Vineyard* study (1963) and Eckert’s (1989) work with jocks and burn-outs expand

⁵ Although these associations recall ‘covert prestige’ as described by Labov and Trudgill, as Eckert (1996) and Manning (2004), among others have demonstrated, the association of gender and class and style variables must be located within particular historical and cultural contexts of use in order to be clearly understood.

these models, indicating that the phonological shape of speech can exhibit speakers' attitudes about and orientations towards their own positions in the social landscape. Concerns about how speech sounds can also evolve into orthographical debates, as with Haitian *kréyol* (Schieffelin and Doucet, 1994), or a national obsession with verbal hygiene, as in the UK (Cameron, 1995).

Accent has, however, been the focal point of a few recent studies. Agha, focusing on the process of enregisterment of Received Pronunciation in the UK, has recently explored how accents and other features of register become culturally valued (2003). In his work on dialect stylization in Welsh radio broadcasts, Coupland argues that the social analysis of accents in general needs to get away from considering accent in light of 'cultural authenticity' and to analyze accent instead as style and performance, linked to cultural belonging, but not reducible to it (2001). Similarly, Woolard urges us to consider linguistic phenomena that are often dismissed as instances of 'interference,' such as accent, as "another form of bilingual hybridity or simultaneity that can be a resource for creating sociolinguistic meaning" (1999, p. 16). Accents – which draw on the phonological resources of one language, but the syntactic, morphological and lexical resources of another – offer a particularly rich category of linguistic simultaneity and hybridity for study, for although accents may co-occur with other dialectal speech forms, a single vowel or consonant sound (or the lack thereof) can signal a range of social positions and relationships.

From a different point of view, scholarship on vocal anthropology and the anthropology of sound has focused on the importance of sound itself, as well as the commodification and circulation of linguistic and musical forms. Among other topics, this area has explored the iconic relation between particular sounds and the meanings they carry (Jakobson, 1990; Weiner, 1991), the connections between voice quality and aesthetic experience (Barthes, 1977), and the relationship between music and language (Feld and Fox, 1994; Feld et al., 2004). The work of Feld (1990, 1994) has emphasized the multiplex links between sound, voice, sentiment, and meaning, moving the analytical focus beyond the denotational content of sound. This work suggests several new paths of inquiry, challenging linguistic anthropologists to consider the sound forms of language, as well as their circulation in and across mass media.

Indeed, Lippi-Green's work on media representations of accents (1997) suggests that the circulation of accents in the media is a rich arena for investigation, as does Feld et al.'s discussion of the adoption (or not) of the 'twang' in country music performances and recordings (2004). At the same time, both Coupland (2001) and Woolard (1999) have stressed that the use of accents or other types of hybrid uses of language in the mass media complexly interact with speakers' everyday practices. Further, Coupland has also pointed out that contemporary cultural production is often linked to mass-mediated representations and performances (2001; see also Inoue, 2003). Indeed, it is in the mass media that accents and stereotypes circulate most widely, and the continual and consistent reappearances of accent in mass-mediated contexts contributes to what Agha describes as "a gradual sedimentation of habits of speech perception and production across particular social domains of persons" (2003, p. 269).

If speakers can use accents as a sort of social currency to position themselves and others in their social landscape, and the circulation of accents helps to form this symbolic landscape, it can also be asserted that when accents are socially salient, what matters are the specific speech sounds that carry social meaning. The form of the sign vehicle, in other words, is significant as well as its function. Indeed, **Baudrillard** notes that “it is certain that objects are the carriers of indexed social significations, of a social and cultural hierarchy – and this in the very least of their details: form, material, colors, durability, arrangement in space” (1988, p. 37). To this list of qualisigns – qualities which are signs (**Peirce, 1955**) – can easily be added the pronunciations of particular vowel and consonant sounds, which form a potentially infinite array of indexical qualisigns not related to the denotational phonology of the sign. These qualisigns are ‘bundled’ together, such that each individual dimension seems ‘inescapably’ related to every other, even as they may “shift in their relative value, utility, and relevance across contexts” (**Keane, 2003, p. 414**).

When semiotic links are indexical, the object itself has a direct determinative influence on the sign – hence the familiar example that smoke is an index of fire. When linguistic features index social groups and their practices, however, then these indexes become the ground for other ideological connections and relationships to develop. In other words, people take these indexical associations and make them add up, make them seem natural and transparent. Contingent associations between language and speakers can thus become naturalized, and made to seem necessary and true when indexes become icons through the process of iconization as described by **Irvine and Gal (2000)**. Hence, we might find ‘rough’ languages being spoken by ‘rough’ speakers, and ‘refined’ languages spoken by ‘refined’ speakers. This has been the case with the Bergamasco accent – indeed, with Italian accents in general – as we will see. Whatever the particular indexical and iconic associations that exist about linguistic variation, such as accents, people experience these sociolinguistic icons as specific linguistic features, such as sounds or written symbols. These sounds are not just detected and used to understand who speakers are and what is happening – they are seen as transparent reflections of personal, social characteristics. Word final consonant deletion of [g] for English words ending in /-ing/ does not just signal where a speaker originates – for other speakers of English, it can make him or her sound more approachable or ‘down-home,’ as well as less sophisticated.

In Italy in particular, where accents emerge from the interplay of local dialects and spoken Italian, this is a particularly rich area of inquiry. Here, speakers may display phonological dialectal influence, but not necessarily morphological and syntactic influence (**Maiden, 1995**). In past decades, dialectologists have argued that regional forms of Italian, which include locally accented Italian, are the linguistic result of speakers whose first language is one of the dialects learning Italian imperfectly (**Cortelazzo, 1972; Trumper, 1989**). More recently, scholars have argued that while this may be true for some speakers, many who do not speak dialect (or who may speak it to varying degrees) also speak regional forms of Italian (**Berruto, 1990; Maiden, 1995**). As noted above, this latter group comprises nearly all Italians. Indeed, the very concept of a Standard spoken Italian with a standard pronunciation has been described as “controversial” (**D’Imperio, 2002**), and the debate surrounding

it “very tormented” (Jacquemet, 1992).⁶ Language scholars from phonologists to dialectologists to Italian language teachers have long debated the issue, and although Tuscan is most often held up as the ‘best’ variety, there is currently wide-spread acknowledgment that even in the high reaches of academia, everyone speaks with an accent that betrays their geographical origin.

Moreover, geographical groupings are also social groupings in Italy, which Italians rank according to socioeconomic status and educational background, as well as other more personal characteristics, such as trustworthiness, friendliness, and authoritativeness (Galli de’ Paratesi, 1977, 1985).⁷ These are all common dimensions of social judgment that research on language attitudes has shown to be regularly associated with dialect varieties (Coupland, 2001). The use of accents, then, through their indexical connections between speakers’ positions across geographical landscapes and social hierarchies, can also refer to social tensions among groups, especially in the mass media, perhaps re-enacting and playing off of well-established distinctions between sociogeographical groups, for as Hastings and Manning argue “stereotyped, essentialized voices of exemplary others are crucial to anchoring the linguistic system by which speakers index their own situational and social positions” (2004, p. 301; see also Agha, 2003; Irvine, 1990; Inoue, 2003; Silverstein, 2003).

Most Italians demonstrate an extensive and fine-grained knowledge of the socio-geographical stereotypes associated with local ways of speaking that populate everyday life in face-to-face encounters as well as via the media. Indeed, these stereotypes may be the extent of what they know about a place or the people from that place (Galli de’ Paratesi, 1977, 1985). Further, many Italians link specific linguistic features to particular social meanings, such that social attributes seem to be displayed in the very phonemes of accented Italian speech. The connections between social stereotype or image of personhood and ways of speaking makes these sociogeographical stereotypes similar to what Agha, drawing on Goffman (1974), has recently referred to as ‘characterological figures,’ that is, “any image of personhood that is associable with a semiotic display of itself” (2003, p. 243, fn. 8).⁸ This concept is useful in its linkage of semiotic display and projected personal image, as well as in its refusal to simplify this link as being reducible to ‘identity.’ Such figures are detachable from particular speakers and thus may circulate – in the mass media, and in everyday interactions. Here, I further expand on this concept, discussing accents as involving *sociogeographical characterological figures*, linked to the Italian social hierarchy of place.

Take for example the following case: stereotypes maintain that people from Naples are emotional and loud, and people from Milan are business-like and reserved.

⁶ While I hesitate to assert that there is a single print standard of Italian, it seems clear that this issue has been much less debated than the issue of spoken Standard Italian.

⁷ Galli de’ Paratesi carried out matched blind tests demonstrating these associations, which I have found to be true in my experiences in Italy.

⁸ Goffman (1974) introduced the concept of figure in recognition of the multiple relationships that abide between speakers and utterances, thus distinguishing between the ‘animator’ of an utterance (the one who does the uttering), its principal (the originator of the utterance), the strategist (the one in charge of choosing how, when, where, etc. it is uttered), and the figure (the projected character animated by the speaker).

When I asked Bergamascos what made them sound like this, they often pointed to differences in patterns of gemination, that is, the use of long or double consonant sounds. So, for instance, in standard Italian one would differentiate phonologically between ‘*nonno*’ (grandfather) and ‘*nono*’ (ninth). In fact, distinctive gemination patterns are well-documented traits of southern and northern dialect varieties (Giannelli and Cravens, 1997; Maiden, 1995). Southern dialect varieties like Neapolitan tend to ‘over-geminate’ – have double consonant sounds where in standard Italian there are single consonant sounds – whereas northern dialect varieties like Milanese (and Bergamasco) tend to ‘degeminate’ – insert single consonant sounds where there would be a double consonant sound in Italian. These dialectal patterns carry over into Neapolitan and Milanese accents, such that the length of the consonant sounds in Neapolitan Italian seems to reflect the very largesse of the Neapolitan character, just as the brevity of the Milanese consonants reflects the social reserve of Milanese in general.

3. Accents in action in the media

This northern–southern distinction is one of the most perduring of the social divisions that are often played up in the media. This might be surprising in the face of the rise of the European Union and the new waves of immigrants from beyond the confines of the Italian nation-state, which intensified over the 1990s. However, while there are occasions when northerners and southerners may consider themselves a united group in the face of newcomers or a larger European community, the Southern Question, as it is commonly referred to, has remained not only a political issue, but also a cultural divide.

One has only to watch a few episodes of “*Grande Fratello*,” the Italian “Big Brother” reality television show, in order to see that northern and southern remain pertinent and lively social categories. In the first run of *Grande Fratello* in the fall of 2000, it seemed that regional differences were perhaps the biggest if not only differences between contestants, who were all otherwise equally young, attractive, and middle-class. The contrast between north and south in particular was embodied in the many comparisons drawn between one of the participants, Cristina, from Iseo, a small town in the central north, and another participant, her erstwhile lover, Pietro from Caserta, just outside of Naples in the south. Cristina’s personal reserve and unsophisticated ways were often contrasted to Pietro’s easy-going sensuality; both might have sounded unsophisticated (as both of these accents are often judged to be), but at least Pietro sounded likable and friendly, common characteristics linked to southern accents. Viewers I spoke to in Bergamo, which is just a few kilometers from where Cristina grew up, often pointed to how their character differences seemed embodied in their speech, flinching with embarrassment at how rough or ‘*grezza*’ Cristina sounded. One Bergamasco youth exclaimed that: “*a me fa cadere le braccia quando parla. Dico questa è un ignorante quando parla!*”⁹ (It just makes me drop

⁹ Transcription conventions throughout: *italics* = Italian, **bold** = Bergamasco.

my arms when she speaks. I say, this one is an ignoramus when she speaks!”). This was a common evaluation of Cristina and her accent.

But if Cristina and Pietro’s accents brought the north–south distinction into sharp focus for many viewers in Bergamo, such attention to accent was far from unusual. Although there was a period in Italy when most voices in the media were trained to betray no regionalisms, more recently this has changed, and listeners can nearly always pick out where a speaker is from when they watch television. People in Bergamo watch television always with an ear cocked for accents, just as the outraged youth did for Cristina’s. They might observe that one can tell that newswoman is Bergamasca from her vowels, or comment disdainfully that they could scarcely understand those Roman announcers with their strong accents.

These examples demonstrate that Bergamascos interpret the presence of accents in the mass media as meaningful. They additionally show us two other dimensions of how accents matter. First, the comment about the newswoman’s Bergamasco vowels demonstrates the extreme delicacy involved in discerning accents, and speakers’ ability to pick out what might to the untrained ear sound like rather minor differences in pronunciation.¹⁰ Second, the implicit negative judgment involved in the evaluation of the Roman announcer’s accent shows that speakers have different affective relations to various accents, which in turn influence how ‘understandable’ such accents are to them. Just as Bergamascos may claim to be stumped by a strong Roman accent, Italians from outside of Bergamo often react to a strong Bergamasco accent with bafflement and negative feelings.

Historically, when dialects and accents have appeared in media in Italy, they have done so to make a point (Coveri, personal communication, 2000). This is especially true in comedy, which Coveri refers to as “*il gioco del dialetto indispensabile*” (the indispensable game of the dialect) (Coveri, personal communication, 2000). The great Italian comics, such as Vittorio Gassman, Alberto Sordi, and Roberto Benigni have produced a form of comedy that is less situational (as is so much comedy in the American mass media) and more grounded in sociogeographical differences, utilizing their own local accents to create memorable characters and humorous situations. This tendency was inherited from the *Comedia Dell’Arte*, which used accents to draw on stereotypes of places, where the drunkard sounded Venetian and the efficient bureaucrat spoken in Milanese (Brevini, 1999; Coveri, personal communication, 2000). In piazzas across Italy for many centuries, puppet shows and traveling theater companies made their audiences laugh with performances built on these dialectal characters, and they helped to produce a remarkably consistent ideology of sociogeographical difference across the peninsula. While audience members in diverse locales might have differed in their affective stances towards these characters (valorizing their own over others, for instance), the depictions themselves were highly

¹⁰ Although I am fluent in standard Italian, it was only after extensive effort and time that I was able to pick out a Bergamasco accent as well as some of the other more commonly heard accents (such as Roman, Milanese, and Florentine). One thing that helped was when people (from Bergamo and elsewhere) started to comment on my own accent, which sounded ‘Bergamasco’ to many ears.

uniform. This continues to be true in contemporary appearances of these figures on Italian television, radio, and in the cinema.

In the Italian mass media, then, Italian accents are at once a resource for tapping into social categories and divisions, but also a way that social knowledge circulates. That is, accents both presuppose and help to create these categories and divisions. The Bergamasco woman who complained about the Roman announcer's accent described above did not know any Romans personally; this certainly did not stop her from forming strong opinions on the strength of what she had experienced through the media.

4. What is a Bergamasco accent?

Given the importance of the sound shapes of accents, it is worth a moment to briefly discuss what comprises a Bergamasco accent. All Italian dialects phonologically impact on how Italian is spoken by speakers of those dialects (or in those regions – they need not be first language dialect speakers) in several ways, based mostly around phonological and phonetic ‘interference.’ Sounds that are generated by ‘productive’ phonological processes operating in the dialects are more easily transferred to Italian. In northern dialects, for instance, there is a tendency to lenite intervocalic voiceless consonants, which is often transferred into northern speakers’ Italian, such that, for example, /k/ in Italian /formika/ (ant) becomes /g/ in the regional Bergamasco accent of Italian Bergamasco /furmi:ga/ (Maiden, 1995).

Other distinctive features of Bergamasco dialect which influence Bergamasco accented Italian include: shortening of long consonants, except for dental affricates; deletion of vowels in word-final position except [a]; Bergamasco [s] in all contexts > [h]; deletion of final [r] in infinitives; traces of metaphony (conditioned raising of mid-height vowels) caused by final *-[i] : [kɛl] ‘that’ (m. sg.) to [ki:]; postverbal negation; and a loss of Romantic intervocalic ‘v’, both word internally and in cases of sandhi (*‘cavallo’* ‘horse’ becomes *‘caàl’*, *‘la vita’* ‘the life’ becomes *‘la éta’*). Like a Milanese accent (and a number of other northern dialects), a Bergamasco accent also involves the tendency to degeminate consonant sounds. In terms of prosody, Bergamasco has been described as sounding like the terrain in which many of its speakers live: hilly and full of highs and lows. Bergamascos claim to recognize one another outside of their province just by hearing the contours of each other’s speech, across a crowded restaurant or in a train station. Bergamascos call it a *‘cantilena,’* a sing-song, or lullaby-like intonation.¹¹

There is another set of sounds that does not appear in the regional Bergamo accent of Italian sounds, but occasionally appears in the Italian of Bergamasco figures portrayed on television: the two front vowels present in Bergamasco dialect and a number of other northern dialects but absent in Italian: [y] and [œ] or [ø]. These

¹¹ It is outside the parameters of this paper to offer a definitive outline of the prosodic contours of spoken Bergamasco, except to say that its rises in pitch and intonation differ from those of Italian.

sometimes appear just as isolated sounds, acting as emphatic markers (see below discussion of Dracula's speech). These front vowels act as particular phonological flags that indicate the Bergamasco-ness of the speaker, completely empty of referential content.

Of the features outlined above, there are certain ones that Bergamascos themselves frequently pick out as comprising a Bergamasco accent. They point to the lack of consonant gemination, the deletion of word final vowels and intervocalic /v/, as well as substitution of /h/ for /s/. They rarely refer to these phenomena in technical terms, but instead may offer imitations of particular sounds, perhaps referring to "the Bergamasco 's'" or listing similar words or phrases and pronunciations in Bergamasco dialect. They also frequently discuss the lengthening of vowel sounds as another feature of a Bergamasco accent.¹² The co-occurrence of many of these features adds up to a strong – referred to in Italian as a *stretto* or *duro* (literally, narrow or hard, respectively) – Bergamasco accent, while the appearance of only a few (loss of consonant gemination and deletion of vowels in word-final position except [a] seemed to be the ones most frequently present) is deemed less of an accent, or *un accento meno stretto* (literally, a less strict or narrow accent).

As we will see below, Bergamascos – like most Italians – demonstrate extreme delicacy in their perceptions of accents and other regional speech differences. The distinction between accents proves to be pertinent when Bergamascos use them to point to divergences between how they speak and how others speak, divergences that often illustrate the diverse characteristics associated with being Bergamasco or of another regional identity. Discussions of accents often expand to include noting the use of particular words, phrases or personal names, which are treated as additional evidence of where that speaker is from. It is important to note, however, that accents – sometimes even a single vowel sound – may stand alone as the sole evidence of a speaker's origins. To Bergamasco ears, a lone /e/ can speak volumes about where a speaker is from and what they are like.

5. Accents across arenas of circulation

It is not surprising that accents mean different things in diverse contexts of use. For Bergamascos, a Bergamasco accent heard during everyday conversation in Bergamo among friends will mean something rather different – and far more complex – than a Bergamasco accent heard on television or on the radio. Bergamascos have a complicated relationship with their own accent (and dialect), as has been hinted at by the reactions to *Grande Fratello*.

¹² Scholarly work on Bergamasco offers a few explanations for this tendency (such as the shortening of long consonants and the deletion of intervocalic consonants) (Giannelli and Cravens, 1997; Sanga, 1997), but as there is little work that focuses specifically on accents per se, it is hard to line up this particular flashpoint with a single linguistic phenomenon.

5.1. *Accent and locality*

Across these national and local arenas, the signification of a Bergamasco accent breaks down into three clusters of meaning. The first cluster of meaning centers around the notion of cultural authenticity, in which locality plays an essential role. Indeed, the term *campanilismo*, which stands for the close community of people who live within sight of the same bell-tower (*campanile*), captures the importance of locality as an organizing category of social identity in Italy.¹³ Local accents index these campanilistic identities, helping those who perceive them to identify and locate those around them, and those who use them (again, nearly all Italians) to display their origins. In the national mass media, this means that a Bergamasco accent invokes a real, meaningful locality and the cultural stereotypes associated with it. In local Bergamasco contexts, however, the issue of cultural authenticity often involves discussions of practices that demarcate in-group/out-group differences within the Bergamasco community. In other words, the issue of locality is taken for granted when speakers are all Bergamasco, and the issue of a speaker's orientation towards being Bergamasco is interpreted through how Bergamasco they sound. A strong Bergamasco accent is most often interpreted as a positive orientation to a local Bergamasco identity, while a lighter accent may be more ambiguous.

Whether light or strong, however, Bergamascos tended to pay attention to when their accent appeared in the media. Sometimes Bergamasco accents were heard as being hidden, as with the newswoman commented on above. Other times the accent was more obvious, as with a cellular telephone television commercial that played in 2000. This commercial featured a grumpy old man opening his shutters and yelling in a strong Bergamasco accent at revelers in the street (who were celebrating how easy it was to talk on their cellular phones) that some people have to work around here. Bergamascos of all ages often pointed me towards this commercial as an example of a Bergamasco accent on television, which drew on certain cultural stereotypes about Bergamascos as hard workers.

Another dimension of Bergamasco accents evoking cultural authenticity entails the integration of a Bergamasco accent into a broader northern or perhaps Lombardian accent. In the 1990s, this often involved Bergamascos being portrayed as the quintessential members of the Northern League, a relatively new political party which made its name through promoting the secession of the economically robust north from the more economically challenged south. The League based its arguments on cultural, not only economic, grounds, claiming that northern and southern Italians have such different world views, priorities and (perhaps most importantly) work habits, that they should rightly belong to different nation-states. More recently, their rhetoric has moved away from the more extreme forms of this argument in favor of increased autonomy for the regional governments. It has also begun to rail against the groups of immigrants who have come to Italy seeking employment over

¹³ Sociolinguistic, anthropological and historical work has often emphasized the salience of local and regional forms of identity in Italy (Galli de' Paratesi, 1985; Kertzer, 1980, 1998; Levy, 1996; Mack Smith, 1988; Pratt, 1980; Riall, 1994; Sciolla, 1997; Silverman, 1975).

the last decade, such that Northern Leaguers are popularly caricatured as close-minded xenophobes who speak in an accent that draws from a number of northern accents; the Bergamasco accent is certainly one of them, as it is widely known that Bergamascos have disproportionately voted pro-League.¹⁴

A striking (and hilarious) example of this can be found in a comedy sketch performed on television by the popular comedy team Aldo, Giovanni and Giacomo,¹⁵ in which Dracula, who has a strong southern accent, stumbles into the abode of a couple of “Transylvanian” peasants. These peasants speak with strong northern/Bergamasco accents and sing Northern League songs, and are not, in fact, afraid of him at all. Once they realize who Dracula is, it is plain that they will cut off his head and mount it on the wall alongside numerous other specimens of ‘**terrù**,’ the Bergamasco word for ‘*terroni*’ – ‘earth-workers,’ a northern derogatory slang term for southerners. Once Dracula recognizes them for what they are – through their speech as well as from the heads on the wall – he attempts to protect himself from them by trying to adopt their accent in order to obscure his own southern-ness. His attempt involves adopting an outrageously northern sounding name, Brembilla Fumagalli,¹⁶ and affecting a number of the accent features described above, including shortening long consonants, eliminating final vowels other than [a]; the use of [ki:] rather than the Italian [kɛl] for ‘that’ (m. sg.); and losing the Romantic intervocalic ‘v.’ For instance, at one point, when asked where he is from, he answers “*Da, d’un, d’un canton, du qua, de P-Paragg – [paradj]*” (from, from a, from a province, from here, from Paragg), deleting the [-o] in *uno* and *d’uno*, the [-e] in *cantone*, and apparently making up the name of a town that conforms to this final vowel deletion pattern (Paragg). He also produces a few tokens of the two dialectal front vowels as fillers, trying to buy time while he figures out what to say next and how to say it. His interlocutors are not fooled, however, and he is eventually forced to flee into the night. This obvious reversal of the usual Dracula scenario, in which the vampire fears his victims more than they fear him, depends on the accents of the players in order for viewers to understand what is going on, but also depends on the overplaying of these accents (in both the speech of the ‘Transylvanians,’ and Dracula’s attempts to mimic them) for it to be ‘funny.’ This resonates with Inoue’s discussion of translated textual speech forms in Japanese (2003), as the accents here act to calibrate the indexical systems at work in this sketch, such that “Transylvanian” can be read as “northern” and more specifically, “Northern Leaguer,” while “Dracula” can be read as “southern.” This interindexicality functions due to the underlying characteristics associated with each of these two stereotyped images: northerners as close-minded and discriminatory against “**terrù**”; southerners as bumbling, though potentially dangerous. It also plays upon an always present, though less frequently remarked upon, element

¹⁴ This appears to be changing, however. See Cento-Bull (1996, 2000) and Wild (1996) for discussions.

¹⁵ This sketch also appeared in Aldo, Giovanni and Giacomo’s movie, *Tre Uomini e Una Gamba* (Three Men and a Leg) (Poccioni et al., 1997).

¹⁶ Brembilla is the name of a town in the province of Bergamo, and is, as far as I know, an extremely uncommon boys’ name. Fumagalli is one of the most common Bergamasco surnames (L’Eco di Bergamo, 2000).

of the north–south division: though northerners are the ones who complain about the dangerousness of southerners (to their jobs, their way of life, etc.), it is northerners who have the real power (through their economic dominance). At the same time, this interindexical redeployment of accents associated with geographically grounded stereotypes allows these emphatically *local* accents to be utilized in the media to index certain properties of characters in situations that have nothing to do with locality per se.

Local accents of all sorts are often used for humor like this on Italian television; in everyday life, however, accents are simply how people speak. In conversation in Bergamo, Bergamasco accents rarely elicit comment, but when Bergamascos are face to face with speakers from elsewhere the way their speech sounds matters, as a Bergamasco accent soon renders them “*inquadrati*,” or ‘placed’ in the sociogeographical landscape of Italy. As one young Bergamasca told me, a Bergamasco accent is “a type of identity card” (“*una specie di carta d’identità*”), always telling her interlocutor where she is from.

Where Bergamasco accents do elicit comment in Bergamo, however, is in their absence. For many listeners, it sounds inauthentic and insincere to speak without any of the locally salient features of the Bergamasco accent, as Bergamascos rely upon these cues in order to position a speaker within their sociolinguistic landscape; to know, in other words, whether the speaker is ‘one of us’ or not. Roberta, a middle-aged woman who owned and ran a travel agency and directed plays performed in the Bergamasco dialect in her free time, asserted during an interview that,

Da noi qui a Bergamo quando qualcuno parla correttamente, correttamente [exaggerated correct pronunciation of the ‘e’] – perchè si chiude, correttamente – dicono “Té, te parlèt ricamàt incö?” “Tu, parli ricamato, oggi?” Cioè con un ricamo, vuol dire che parli bene oggi. E allora noi parliamo tutti così come ci viene.

Here in our Bergamo when someone speaks correctly, correctly – because it’s closed [the ‘e’], correctly – they say, “**You, you’re speaking fancy today?**” [literally “embroidered”] “*You, you’re speaking fancy today?*” That is, with a flourish [lit. “an embroidery”], which means that you’re speaking well today. And so we all speak just as it comes to us.

In commenting how one should sound in Bergamo, Roberta iconically produces a hypercorrect form of the second /e/ in her pronunciation of ‘*correttamente*’ [koremente] (correctly), instead of the more Bergamasco pronunciation [koremente], thereby demonstrating how this particular /e/ should sound in standard Italian and how it never does in Bergamo unless someone is putting on airs. She supplies the local mode of condemnation for such an act of snobbery – that the speaker is guilty of ‘fanciness’ or un-necessary frills (Bergamascos frequently assert the value of straightforwardness and simplicity of expression). She does this in Bergamasco initially, suggesting that such a display of hyper-Italian-ness would be met with its opposite: a phrase in Bergamasco dialect, which she then repeats

emphatically in Italian. She makes it clear that this type of censure works – that ‘we’ just talk as we do, so speaking without local markers is relatively rare. She also presents speaking with an accent as more ‘natural’ than standard Italian, as being that which is ‘just as it comes,’ without monitoring.

Whether accented Italian is monitored or not is context-specific, however. Take the case of Martina, a college-age Bergamasca, during the defense of her *tesi di laurea* (similar to a Master’s thesis) on modern German philosophy, at a prominent Milanese university. I attended this defense with a group of her family and friends, and witnessed her cool composure and authoritative responses to the wide-ranging and daunting series of questions posed by the jury of several professors. Although she was subsequently awarded the highest honors, she worried later that the panel might have heard her (barely discernible) Bergamasco accent, and thought that she was stupid. No matter how intelligent the referential content of her answers proved her to be – or how successful the many other features of her performance as a well-prepared, well-educated young woman were – she worried that her accent signified not just her place of origin, but also indexed the second cluster of meanings associated with a Bergamasco accent: the stereotype of Bergamascos as working-class manual laborers with little or no education. The signifying link between working class ignorance and a Bergamasco accent was strong enough for Martina to fear that her accent would connect her to a system of associations beyond her control.

5.2. *The Bergamasco porter: hungry and hardworking*

The association of a Bergamasco accent with the stereotype of Bergamascos as hard-working manual laborers and peasants – the second cluster of associations – is currently linked to the economic boom in industry that characterized the northern Italian economy in the post-war years, but it also predates this boom by several centuries. The Bergamasco porter, a stock character in the Venetian *Comedia Dell’Arte*, embodied these characteristics; *Arlecchino* (Harlequin) – uneducated yet wily, driven by his constant hunger – is just one incarnation of this character. Bergamascos are not the only northerners who currently share the label of hardworking but uneducated, diligent but simple and unsophisticated (nor are they the only ones to have enjoyed the more recent economic boom), although they seem to stand as the epitome of these characteristics. Italian ethnolinguist Glauco Sanga has described the vernaculars of Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona, Crema and Mantua (all close neighbors) as sharing a number of characteristics, although he ultimately declares that “with the linguistic stereotype of the Bergamasco porter, they come to typify rustic language” (1997, p. 257).

In the national mass media, this often involves the depiction of Bergamascos as manual laborers who work with their hands, but not with their brains. Examples of this include the grumpy old man in the cellular phone commercial described above (remember that he was yelling about having to get up early to work), and a recurrent series of comedy sketches that featured three Bergamasco construction workers (*muratori*, literally, “wall-builders”). These three characters, who spoke with a strong Bergamasco accent, while waiting for a bus or similarly idle, would spontaneously proceed to build small structures by the side of the road, just to pass the time. Likewise,

the suspicion that Cristina, the young woman from *Grande Fratello*, was ignorant was surely linked to her accent, which is Brescian and very similar to a Bergamasco accent. Her speech, as it were, gave her away (although it must be noted that in spite of – or perhaps because of – her accent, Cristina ultimately triumphed and won the show).

Locally, this characteristic of hardworking but uneducated is central to discussions about education and the value of work itself, and such discussions are invariably underlain by concerns about class.¹⁷ Although many Bergamascos were peasants in the past, these days most belong solidly to the middle class, and many have become extremely wealthy (Cavanaugh, 2004). Their accent, however, still indexes if not the poverty itself, then the ethic of hard work that is still embraced as an essential Bergamasco value. This ethic often receives positive evaluations, as some Bergamascos assert that it can be applied to all sorts of work, not just the relatively independent (at least in spirit) manual labor of the peasant.¹⁸ It is impossible, however, to shake these old associations entirely, for they have been in circulation in various forms for centuries, and persevere in spite of Bergamascos' economic gains. Consequently, a Bergamasco accent can also symbolize the disjuncture between who Bergamascos think they used to be, and who they think they are – and want to be – now. No matter how educated or economically successful Bergamascos become, Bergamasco long vowels and short consonants still sound hardworking (like the old man in the cell phone ad), ignorant (like the overenthusiastic *muratori* building useless structures) and provincial (as in the Dracula sketch). And while Bergamascos usually found the portrayals of the hardworking though perhaps naïve Bergamasco amusing, their sentiments about the everyday use of Bergamasco accent were often conflicted, for beneath the noble, hardworking laborer lies an uneducated, lower-working class oaf. For instance, at the opening ceremony of a Bergamasco ethnographic museum, the man who had funded the museum – a hugely successful Bergamasco businessman – gave a speech in a *stretto* (strong or strict) Bergamasco accent. A Bergamasco man in his early seventies leaned over during his speech and directed me to pay attention to the speaker's strong accent, noting that no matter how rich he got or how many museums he opened up, he still sounded like a Bergamasco *muratore*.

5.3. “It lacks elegance”: Bergamasco accents sound male

Given the concern Martina showed about her accent, the censure that “Big Brother” Cristina received for hers, and the preponderance of male Bergamasco characters portrayed on television, it should come as no surprise that a Bergamasco accent is closely associated with maleness, which forms the third cluster of associations. In

¹⁷ Indeed, Bourdieu suggests that accents might be ideally suited for analyzing class, noting that, “we know that properties such as voice setting... and pronunciation... offer better indices than syntax for identifying a speaker's social class” (1977, p. 653).

¹⁸ Although historically Bergamascos have been both peasants and industrial workers, the image of the ideal hard worker seems most attached to someone who works with his hands and the strength of his back, but retains a certain amount of personal independence, just as Arlecchino may work hard for various bosses, while constantly asserting his independence from one particular master.

the national mass media, it is rare to hear women in the mass media speaking with a Bergamasco accent. Indeed, the only Bergamasco woman I was aware of on television – the newswoman mentioned above – was seen as hiding and covering up her accent. This was not the case on the local Bergamasco television station, where there were numerous women, including female newscasters as well as a popular female daytime talk show host, who spoke with Bergamasco accents. These women's accents elicited few comments in my experience, however, nor do the accents of the majority of Bergamasco women who speak with a Bergamasco accent in the course of everyday life in Bergamo. However, when these accents become the subject of explicit discussion, they may be criticized as too 'rough' or 'not sexy.'

The specific terms of these criticisms are informative in several ways, for they provide a starting point for avoiding the overly simplistic association of linguistic variables with a binary opposition of sexes, and instead offer a way to investigate how language use is associated with gendered positions in Bergamasco society (see Eckert, 1996). Specifically, the preponderance of images of Bergamasco males and paucity of females in the national mass media make evident that the prototypical Bergamasco sociogeographical characterological figure in circulation is male. Further, the qualities embodied in this figure index maleness through their association with particular personal attributes, an indexical relationship that remains consistent in some cases in local contexts as well. In other words, the qualisigns of a Bergamasco accent – shortened consonant sounds and lengthened vowels, substituting /h/ for /s/, the deletion of word final vowels and intervocalic /v/ – index a male voice, and are bundled together with this gendered position. This bundling “inescapably” includes qualities associated with working class laborers and the peasants of the (not so distant) past such that the Bergamasco sociogeographical characterological figure is a working man.

Not surprisingly, this set of associations has various consequences for diverse Bergamasco speakers across different contexts. Young Bergamasco women, especially if they are educated, are open to the highest level of social censure for speaking Bergamasco dialect and having a Bergamasco accent. As one young educated Bergamasco male in his late teens told me during a group interview:

Una ragazza che parla bergamasco non è che... sia sexy... Perchè manca di eleganza.

A girl who speaks Bergamasco it's not that... it would be sexy... Because it lacks elegance.

Bergamascos (as well as other Italians) frequently describe the Bergamasco accent as rough and unrefined, features they do not associate with femininity, which is portrayed as cultured and refined (and, not coincidentally, is how Standard Italian is described). Moreover, a Bergamasco accent involves an articulatory set and intonations that are more closely associated with male voices, such as low-pitched tones.¹⁹ Indeed, a common critique of my own Bergamasco pronunciation was that

¹⁹ Analysts have noted that accents tend to involve a particular articulatory setting, which gives their speakers distinctive voice qualities (Honey, 1997).

I had a hard time making my (female) voice sound “*basso*” (low, bass) and “*gutturale*” (guttural) enough to sound right, both characteristics that Bergamascos associated with male voices. There is thus a strongly gendered component of what speaking in a Bergamasco way signifies, especially for the younger generation of speakers, as the speech of older women is less frequently subject to these types of negative evaluations for sounding Bergamasco. Older Bergamascos of both genders were expected to – and indeed, often did – speak the dialect and speak Italian with a relatively strong accent.

An interesting and revealing exception to this rule can be found with Ella, one of the four transcription consultants with whom I worked, who was working full-time to put herself through college. During transcription sessions of one set of recordings, Ella tended to zero in on the speech of one older woman, which exhibited all of the dialectal features of a ‘*stretto*’ Bergamasco accent. Ella herself had a relatively strong Bergamasco accent but she did not have the substitution of /h/ for /s/ feature, which the older woman did. A talented mimic, Ella frequently repeated the utterances where this feature appeared, overplaying it in a fashion that reminded me of the ‘Dracula in Transylvania’ comedy sketch. Instead of just comic reversal, however, I read her actions as strategic distancing as well, as if to say, “I am like this speaker in some ways, but not in others.”

Ella and her accent – and her reaction to this other woman’s accent – demonstrate that accents are not just social practices reducible to any particular sociocultural identity. Indeed, treating them as such would miss much of what accents are and how they work. As [Hastings and Manning](#) have argued, a focus on ‘acts of identity’ – whether in terms of expression or performance – elides several important issues and “reductively aligns speech, speakers and selves” (2004, p. 292). Ella is Bergamasco yet female, hardworking yet seeking education, locally oriented but intent on expanding her horizons. Through comparing her accent to another’s, Ella looks into the mirror of the Bergamasco sociogeographical characterological figure, and sees herself only in part, as some but not all of the array of qualigns that compose it.

6. Conclusion

Accents are practices. In some cases, unreflective practices. However, there are also moments when they become objects of scrutiny, social judgment, and discussion. They become, in other words, objects in their own right and their place in the material world is shaped by local and national ideologies about how people should and do sound to one another and to themselves. One can easily imagine a world in which the short consonant sounds of Bergamasco and other northern Italian accents resonate with emotional precision rather than social reserve. Or one in which the cadences of Bergamasco might suggest the rolling waves of the sea instead of the peaks and valleys of the mountains. However, the clusters of social meanings that accents signal to their speakers and consumers seem to have everything to do with the sounds themselves, even as they reflect the contours of the sociogeographical landscape of contemporary Italy. As [Feld et al.](#) have recently

reminded us, “it is always the body social that is enunciated in and through the voice” (2004, p. 341).

A Bergamasco accent in particular proves an interesting case in point, as its role as an object of scrutiny and discussion reveals the inter-indexicality of national mass media contexts and local contexts of use. The Bergamasco sociogeographical characterological figure is that of a hard-working man, although different features of this figure come to the fore in different contexts. On television, a Bergamasco accent most often indexes hardworking, closed-minded, simple, provincial, Northern League-ist, and generally sounds ‘inherently’ male and humorous. Locally, Bergamasco accents draw on a more nuanced constellation of bundled associations, helping speakers to indicate – and patrol – boundaries between in-group and out-group, as well as symbolizing the characteristics that Bergamascos both value (hard work and down-to-earth honesty) and hope to overcome (backwardness, ignorance). The material forms of this accent seem to convey these meanings nakedly, as in the short consonants of straightforwardness, and slightly aspirated ‘s’s of the roughness more properly embodied by male speakers. A Bergamasco accents matters, in other words, both in terms of what it symbolizes, but also in terms of how it sounds.

The semiotic ideologies in play that give Bergamasco accents their meaning are local in origin, but have become commodified and have long circulated on a national level. These ideologies have an historical depth that belies their dismissal as simply elements in the ‘indispensable game of the dialects.’ Such consequences can include young Bergamasca women feeling they must choose between sounding feminine and sounding local, risking in the process being accused of having ‘embroidered’ their speech. Or they can result in older speakers sounding provincial and ignorant or speakers of any age being accused of sounding narrow-minded and prejudiced against southerners. Such insights make it clear that particular speech sounds can do more than just indicate a speaker’s provenance or membership in a particular group – their ‘identity’, as it were. As essential components of sociogeographical characterological figures, accents semiotically resonate, placing speakers according to how they sound, not just what they speak.

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