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Linguistic Othering and Cultural Stereotypes: The Reception of the Italian Language in France from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment

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Abstract This study explores the role of linguistic othering in shaping French cultural identity through a diachronic comparison with the Italian language. By analyzing key texts by French grammarians and scholars from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, the research reveals how linguistic representations and stereotypes served to sustain cultural narratives and define symbolic boundaries. Initially regarded as a prestigious reference and later as a rival, Italian played a crucial role in articulating the distinctiveness of French linguistic identity. While efforts to affirm the uniqueness of French often led grammarians to overstate differences with Italian – at times obscuring their shared origins – the development of both languages was marked by continuous exchange and reciprocal influence. The study's originality lies in showing how linguistic and ideological frameworks evolved in tandem, tracing the progressive articulation of othering within the cultural landscape of early modern Europe.

Keywords Language and culture. Linguistic othering. Cultural stereotypes. Cultural identity. Historical linguistics.

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1 Introduction. Language and Otherness

The construction of identity, understood as the definition of the self, is intrinsically tied to the process of defining otherness. The dialectic of recognition, as outlined by Hegel in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) (Hegel [1807] 1970, 145), describes identity as a dynamic process shaped in relation to the other. This mechanism reveals how individuals and communities define themselves not only by what they are, but, more significantly, by contrasting themselves with what they are *not* – that is, the otherness they encounter (Bucholtz, Hall 2020, 231-48).

The process of 'othering' or the construction of the 'Other', goes beyond mere distinction, functioning as a complex system of symbolic differentiation. In the social sphere, otherness can serve as a productive force: encountering the Other allows for a redefinition of the Self (Remotti 2011). In other cases, however, the Other is represented as radically different, challenging the possibility of full understanding or assimilation, as notably theorized by Levinas (1961). Often portrayed as exotic or threatening, this representation of the Other reinforces group unity and a shared sense of identity, while also supporting symbolic hierarchies and mechanisms of cultural exclusion (Staszak 2008).

On a linguistic level, the concept of othering has gained increasing relevance in recent decades, particularly in the fields of language sociology, postcolonial studies, and language education. Scholars like Sonesson (2000), Joseph (2004), and Khrebtan-Hörhager (2023), working at the intersection of sociolinguistics and intercultural studies, have highlighted how language serves as a fundamental means for asserting identity, functioning as 'symbolic capital' that is politically and socially leveraged to reinforce power and community cohesion. Language not only reflects cultural identity, but also actively shapes and constructs it (Patten 2006).

The relationship between language and identity becomes particularly significant when language is used to construct the idea of collective belonging, including that of the nation. As Anderson observed, nations can be understood as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991): shaped through complex processes of collective self-definition which, alongside the affirmation of shared values, traditions, and languages, also require a clear distinction from other identities. In this context, language serves a dual purpose: it functions as a symbol of cohesion and belonging, while simultaneously acting as a mechanism for delineating cultural boundaries and reinforcing the sense of otherness.

The case of linguistic othering I examine in this study is particularly emblematic because, among European cultural contexts, few have attributed as much symbolic significance to language as France

(Hagège 2012). At the dawn of the modern era, the French language acquired unprecedented conceptual and philosophical prominence, becoming a key vehicle for cultural and national identity. In this scenario, the comparison with Italian – at the time a language of great prestige – played a central role in articulating French specificity, both linguistically and culturally.

This analysis focuses on a corpus of texts by grammarians, language theorists, and thinkers, spanning a crucial historical period in the formation of French cultural identity – from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. The texts examined contain systematic reflections and illustrative episodes that underscore the persistence of linguistic stereotypes, used to reinforce national narratives and draw the boundaries between 'us', and 'them'.

While the aspiration to define a uniquely French linguistic tradition led grammarians to exaggerate the differences between Italian and French, even to the point of obscuring their common origins, the evolution of the two languages was marked by a series of reciprocal exchanges and influences. The persistent need for French scholars to engage in comparison with Italian reveals the lasting importance of Italian culture in France: an influence that remained strong even in the eighteenth century, when the balance of power between the two languages shifted.

Primary sources for this research are housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), with many early editions available via the Gallica digital platform. The choice to adopt a broad chronological arc enables the identification of discursive structures that persist and evolve over time, revealing how language functions as a vehicle of ideological continuity.

2 The Fortune and Spread of the Italian Language in Sixteenth-Century France

To understand the emergence of othering in the Franco-Italian linguistic context, it is essential to examine how Italian gained a prestigious position and became a key reference for French grammarians and theorists (Brunot 1905).

Since the tenth century, the importance of Italian in maritime and commercial sectors had facilitated the introduction of numerous Italianisms into other languages, especially throughout the Mediterranean basin and the Balkans. However, the spread of the Italian language prior to the sixteenth century can be considered "a marginal fact" compared to the "enormous linguistic impact that Renaissance Italy had on European culture" (Serianni 2002, 439), particularly in intellectual and artistic fields. This diffusion seems all the more remarkable when we consider that Italian, unlike other

major Romance languages, did not rely on political or institutional centralization, but gained prominence through literary and cultural prestige.

In France, the prominence of the Italian language became firmly established from the fifteenth century onward, driven by the rise of Italian art and literature. Traveling to Italy became an essential formative experience for French humanists, and many prominent writers and intellectuals became well-versed in Italian.[1] The presence of Italians in France, along with the extensive commercial exchanges between the two countries, further facilitated this process of cultural assimilation. In a study on Italian immigration to sixteenth-century France, Marco Penzi (2009) limits this presence to a relatively small number of individuals who nonetheless held important positions not only at court but also within ecclesiastical and military hierarchies. From the late fifteenth century onwards, Italian merchants, artists, and craftsmen settled in the Kingdom of France, especially in the southern regions, to the extent that the city of Lyon became one of the leading centers of the French Renaissance. The presence of French soldiers in Italy during the Italian Wars (1494-1559) further encouraged linguistic interaction, explaining the significant number of Italianisms incorporated into French in military contexts.

Italian bankers in major French cities also played a crucial role, as their influence extended beyond the economic sphere to the linguistic realm. The Tuscan Medici family, the main creditors of the French monarchy, introduced Italian to the highest echelons of political power (Picot 1918). Catherine de' Medici, who married Henry II in 1533, led the French kingdom for two decades (1560-80), during which the Parisian court was animated by a large group of Italian artists, diplomats, and intellectuals, leaving a lasting mark on the culture of the capital.[2] A few years later, in 1600, Maria de' Medici married Henry IV and exercised the regency until the coronation of Louis XIII, further consolidating the Italian presence at court. By the end of the sixteenth century, Italian cultural influence in Paris had reached its peak, to the point where the use of Italian became a widespread fashion, giving rise to the phenomenon of *italomanie* – the imitation of all Italian things – which became a defining trend among the French elite. This long period of Italian ascendancy culminated with Cardinal Mazarin (Giulio Mazzarini), who served as Prime Minister of France from 1642 to 1661, marking the end of nearly a century of Italian preeminence in French state affairs.

In this cultural climate, the prestige of Italian literary production played a decisive role in shaping the French perception of the Italian

1 For example, Rabelais, du Bellay, and Montaigne (see Walter 1997).

2 It was during these years that the Comédie italienne opened in Paris.

language. Alongside Dante and Boccaccio, as well as the flourishing of Italian Renaissance prose, comedy, and courtly dialogue, the influence of Petrarch was particularly significant. The Petrarchan model, widely imitated, established the image of Italian as a refined, musical, and affective language, ideally suited to express the subtleties of amorous feeling (Fumaroli 1980).

From a linguistic perspective, Italy's influence on sixteenth-century French culture is more clearly demonstrated by the substantial number of borrowings and calques from Italian that entered the French language (Hope 1971; Wind 1973). These Italianisms, harmoniously blending into the Latin-derived lexicon, are difficult to identify in contemporary French, yet they constitute a significant body of words. So much so that, until the end of World War II, Italian was the foreign language from which French had borrowed the most lexically.[3] In a 1991 study conducted on a corpus of approximately 60,000 contemporary French words, Walter (1991, 141) identified that, of the nearly 8,000 words of foreign origin (excluding Latinisms and Grecisms), about 1,000 were calques or borrowings from Italian, with a clear predominance of calques – a form of assimilation facilitated by the morphological proximity between the two languages. The same analysis, when focusing on the 35,000 words of the *Petit Larousse*, identified over 4,000 words of foreign origin, of which 700 are Italianisms.

It is difficult to provide an exhaustive list of sixteenth-century Italianisms, not least because only a portion of these words have survived in modern French. Tools such as the *Dizionario degli italianismi in francese, tedesco e spagnolo* (*Dictionary of Italianisms in French, German, and Spanish*), edited by Stammerjohann and Arcaini (2009), or the *Dictionnaire des mots d'origine étrangère* (*Dictionary of Words of Foreign Origin*), edited by Walter (1991) allow us to trace the primary areas of Italian influence.[4] The first domain is the artistic and literary fields, which contain a large number of borrowings and calques, including *appartement*, *artiste*, *balcon*, *cadre*, *campanile*, *caricature*, *colonnade*, *compositeur*, *concert*, *conservatoire*, *coupole*, *dessin*, *façade*, *fugue*, *galerie*, *intrigue*, *madrigal*, *manifeste*, *mosaïque*, *opéra*, *orchestre*, *parfait*, *piano*, *piédestal*, *profil*, and so on. Next in order of importance are the financial and commercial domains (*agence*, *banque*, *crédit*, *douane*, *faillite*, *médaille*, *numéro*, *réussir*, *risque*, *tarif*, etc.), the military domain (*alarme*, *arsenal*, *bastion*,

3 This calculation excludes the numerous learned borrowings from Greek and Latin, as well as those from Provençal.

4 Some Italianisms have complex histories: *azur* and *zéro*, for instance, have Arabic origins but entered French through Italian; others, like *moustache* and *céleri*, have remained in French while the original Italian terms fell into disuse. Still others, such as *sketch*, originated in Italian but entered French via other languages.

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bombe, *capitaine*, *piste*, *sentinelle*, *soldat*, etc.), and the maritime domain (*corsaire*, *frégate*, *gondole*, etc.). Finally, there is a rather heterogeneous set of words reflecting the success and spread of certain aspects of Italian life and culture in France: *biscotte*, *bouffon*, *brocoli*, *burlesque*, *cantine*, *caresse*, *carnaval*, *carrosse*, *casino*, *courtisan*, *douche*, *festin*, *magasin*, *important*, *pantalon*, *perruque*, *politesse*, *valise*, and so on.

The words listed here as examples survive in modern French, but the majority of sixteenth-century Italianisms disappeared in following centuries. This was not only due to the 'purist crusades' led by grammarians, but also because the use of foreign words often represented a concession to fashion and was, therefore, a passing trend. Words such as *burler*, *escarpe*, or *discoste*, typical of sixteenth-century *italomanie*, quickly fell into disuse.

3 Anti-Italianism and the Defense of the French Language

The cultural prestige of Italy in early sixteenth-century France provoked a complex response, combining admiration with unease. Although devoted to the study of the Greek and Latin classics, the French Renaissance was unsettled by its encounter with Italian, a language whose literary 'supremacy' initially had to be acknowledged. This confrontation, made unavoidable by the significant presence of Italians in the upper echelons of the French state, contributed to the rise of national pride, which often manifested in critical attitudes and, at times, hostility toward Italian culture.

The controversial events of Catherine de' Medici's reign, particularly the bloody St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (1572), attributed to the Machiavellianism of the queen and her Italian advisors, sparked widespread outrage, especially among Protestant intellectuals (Mormile 1986). As Marco Penzi (2008, 81) notes, by the late sixteenth century, the idea that the Italian presence at court was responsible for the decline of French noble values, as well as for the introduction of corrupt and depraved customs in Paris, had gained significant traction. Italians were increasingly perceived as cunning, voluptuous, and cruel individuals.

This anti-Italian sentiment reflected not only political and religious tensions but also took on a linguistic dimension. In sixteenth-century France, the debate over language acquired a political significance, closely linked to the construction of national identity and the expansionist ambitions of French monarchy. It is unsurprising, then, that the leading French grammarians of the time regarded Italian with apprehension, particularly as they sought to establish French as a language of culture and literature. They were inclined to define

the distinctive traits of their language in opposition to what was, at the time, the most influential linguistic model.

The efforts of the Pléiade authors, dedicated to demonstrating the equal dignity of the vernacular language compared to Latin, nonetheless found both a model and an ally in Italian, to the point that the defense of French was initially modeled on the defense of Italian. Joachim du Bellay's *Deffense et Illustration de la langue françoise* (*Defense and Illustration of the French Language*) (1549) – a text that plays a fundamental role in the codification of literary French and stands as one of the most important manifestos of the Pléiade movement – is, to a large extent, a plagiarism of Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo delle lingue* (*Dialogue on Languages*) (1542).[5]

In the initial phase, the Other can be perceived as 'superior', and proximity to it is emphasized by seeking out similarities, reflecting a psychological mechanism studied by Tajfel and Turner (1979) in social identity theory. According to this theory, social groups tend to seek points of contact with those perceived as superior in order to strengthen collective self-esteem. However, as these similarities begin to pose a threat to the group's identity, the need for distancing emerges, signaling the shift to the next phase, characterized by the marginalization of the Other (Bhabha 2012).

It is within this complex context of confrontation and identity-seeking that Jean Lemaire de Belges composed the treatise *La Concorde des deux langages* (*The Concord of the Two Languages*) (1511), though it was not published until much later, in 1549. The work's aim is to demonstrate the 'concord' between Italian and French, two languages considered to have descended "d'un mesme tronc et racine" (from the same trunk and root) (98). At this stage, the association with Italian granted French not only an equal dignity to Latin, but also a framework for cultural legitimation. Lemaire de Belges' philological treatise, which alternates between Dantean tercets and French alexandrines, has been the subject of various interpretations: some scholars have highlighted its attempt to reconcile the cultural tensions between Italy and France in the early sixteenth century, while others have emphasized how the discourse – only seemingly conciliatory – is in fact shaped by a clear intention of national and linguistic affirmation (Pénot 2018).

From a linguistic perspective, the text is particularly interesting because it introduces certain typological dichotomies that would shape the debate for centuries to come. The text anticipates the Enlightenment concept of the 'genius of language', which posits that linguistic structures shape the thoughts and behaviors of speakers,

5 All translations from French texts, both ancient and modern, are by the Author. Literary quotations follow the historical spelling, according to the referenced edition.

thus foreshadowing a broader understanding of the relationship between language and national identity. Lemaire argues that French shares, at least in part, the 'feminine' virtues of harmony and sweetness that characterize Italian, but is further enriched by 'masculine' qualities of firmness and rigor. In his allegory, French – embodied by Mars – becomes the ideal medium for recounting military exploits and heroic deeds, while Italian excels in the art of seduction and the expression of sensual passions (Balsamo 1992, 41). In this symbolic configuration, Italian is implicitly associated with Venus: a language of beauty, desire, and rhetorical allure, but lacking the martial vigor and moral discipline.

Here, Lemaire de Belges develops one of the key tropes of French anti-Italianism: the 'femininity' of the Italian language. This gendered characterization underscores the continued influence of Italian literary models in France, particularly Petrarch and the tradition of Petrarchan love poetry. As early as 1533, Pasquier had described Italian as "un vulgaire tout effeminé et molasse" (an effeminate and weak vernacular), due to its musical sounds and vowel endings (Stammerjohann 1990, 15). This quasi-Manichean distinction between the two languages further fueled the othering process. Italian was associated with moral decadence, epitomized by the figure of the aesthete – the sensual and seductive courtier – in sharp contrast to the French 'warrior', who embodied moral integrity and the traditional nobility's *mos maiorum*.

Lemaire de Belges thus solidifies a stereotype that would persist for centuries: Italian is portrayed as a language that is aesthetically refined but 'morally weak', suited to seduction and pleasure, while French is portrayed as a 'virile' language, capable of representing the strength and honor of the nation. This framework reflects a dynamic in which linguistic otherness is shaped through rhetorical oppositions that rely on gendered imagery to define and contrast cultural identities. In reality, the consolidation of this stereotype reveals one of the main concerns that tormented French intellectuals of the time: the issue of France's political role in Europe. The depiction of a decadent Italy and a weakened people resonated with the political ambitions of the French monarchy – a theme particularly relevant during the restoration program promoted by Henry IV.

From these political premises, nourished by an italophobia widespread in Protestant circles, emerged the work of philologist and hellenist Henri Estienne, who made the comparison with Italian a recurring, almost obsessive theme in his theoretical reflections. With Estienne's publications, we clearly enter the second phase of the othering process, in which the mechanism of externalization evolves into a fully developed hierarchy (Lippi-Green 1997), with Italian relegated to an inferior rank, serving to affirm the primacy of French.

In *Conformité du langage françois avec le grec* (*Conformity of the French Language with Greek*) (1565), Estienne (1852) starts from a reactionary stance, defending classical culture over the modern. Dismissing French's origins from Latin – the language of Rome and, by extension, the papacy – Estienne sought to bestow French with a mythical dignity by claiming it derived directly from Greek. Estienne's argument is based on a historically inaccurate premise: French is the modern language closest to Greek "non seulement en un grand nombre de mots, mais aussi en plusieurs belles manières de parler" (not only in a great number of words, but also in many beautiful ways of speaking) (18). And since Greek is the "roine des langues" (queen of languages), whose perfection "se doibt chercher en aucune" (should not be sought in any other), Estienne concludes that French is, by extension, superior to Italian.

In the second part of the treatise, the author attempts to demonstrate, through convoluted and unconvincing arguments, that French, both in its vocabulary and expressions, does not derive from Latin but rather from classical Greek. Estienne firmly condemns the use of words and expressions of Italian origin, such as *à l'improviste*, *manquer*, and *baster*, which he considers corruptions compared to their more 'authentic' French counterparts: *au dépourvu*, *défaillir*, and *suffire* (22). Even more intolerable, in his view, are military loanwords, because

> d'ici à peu d'ans, qui sera celuy qui ne pensera que la France ait appris l'art de la guerre en l'eschole de l'Italie, quand il verra qu'elle usera des termes italiens? (24)
>
> in a few years, who will not think that France learned the art of war in the school of Italy, when they see it using Italian terms?

Rather than adopting such Italianisms, the author advocates a return to older French words and even to dialect terms, in which he perceives – through an absurd reasoning – a direct kinship with classical Greek (18).

In *Dialogues du nouveau langage françois italianizé et autrement desguizé* (*Dialogues on the New French Language Italianized and Otherwise Disguised*) (1578), Estienne adopts the persona of Celthophile, a staunch defender of the purity of the French language against the encroachment of the new courtly jargon, contaminated by Italianisms. The author provides caricatured and likely exaggerated examples of a heavily Italianized French, almost unrecognizable:

> J'ay bonnes jambes (dequoy Dieu soit ringratié) mais j'ay batu la strade désjà tout ce matin, et n'estoit cela il me basteret l'anime d'accompagner vostre seigneurie partout où elle voudret. (50)

> I have good legs (for which may God be thanked), but I've already walked the street all this morning, and if it weren't for that, my soul would suffice to accompany your lordship wherever she would wish.

The satire is made even more cutting through footnotes, where Estienne compares the original Italian term with the French translation, emphasizing how incomprehensible these expressions are. For example, for *domestichesse*, he notes: "Dometichezza: familiarité" (5).

Estienne's argument, which develops throughout the dialogue, is that Italianisms are not adopted out of necessity but because of the frivolity of young people and the ostentation of the court, which is largely responsible for this 'ridiculous' trend of imitating everything that comes from Italy. Words that are now common in French, such as *risque*, *réussir*, *caprice*, or *parapet*, were at the time perceived as intolerable Italianisms.

The deeper reasons, as well as the contradictions of Estienne's linguistic theory, emerge fully in his most ambitious work: *Precellence du langage François* (*Preeminence of the French Language*) (1579). Dedicated to Henry III, the treatise links the magnificence of the French language to France's political and military supremacy. Although a subtle anti-Hispanism is present, the primary polemical target is Italian, whose 'superiority' over Spanish in the literary realm is taken for granted. While du Bellay had held Italian as the new classical language, Estienne attacks the authors of the Pléiade, accusing them of imitating the indeterminacy and "mollesse" (softness) of the Petrarchan poets. Long considered the archetypal language of love poetry, Italian – which some dare to rank

> non seulement au nostre, et à tous les autres vulgaires qui sont ajourd'huy, mais aussi au Grec et au Latin (Préface)

> not only above our [language], and above all the other vernaculars that exist today, but even above Greek and Latin

– is, according to Estienne, not even musical, but rather monotonous, given that all its words end in vowels (41).[6] In contrast, French is portrayed as a grave and solemn language, capable of conveying the king's authority and command through dense and incisive formulas.

6 Estienne's polemic against the arrogance of Italian scholars reflects a common stereotype in sixteenth-century France, where the authority of Italian humanism was often perceived as overbearing. This cultural perception is exemplified – not by Estienne himself, but in the broader intellectual climate – by Petrarch's well-known dictum: "Nec oratores nec poetas extra Italiam quaeramus" (Let us not seek orators or poets outside of Italy) (Petrarca 1948, 158).

Estienne also draws attention to the phonetic traits that, in his view, distinguish French from Italian and support the former's supposed rhetorical gravity. French, he argues, relies on distinctions in vowel length that allow for metrically structured verse, whereas Italian tends to favor proparoxytone forms and frequently drops final vowels, a phenomenon he associates with softness and phonetic instability. He further claims that French articulation is 'stronger' due to a higher proportion of plosive consonants, which he implicitly links to a sense of virility. To reinforce this opposition, Estienne invokes an ancient proverb: "Balant Itali, gemunt Hispani, ululant Germani, cantant Galli" (14) (The Italians bleat, the Spaniards groan, the Germans howl, and the French sing) – a saying traditionally attributed to Latin sources but in fact originating in the medieval *Poetria Nova* by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and later quoted by the Portuguese historian João de Barros (Stammerjohann 1990, 17).

In the final part of the treatise, Estienne expands his argument from the linguistic to the ethical level, following a familiar pattern: compared to French, which embodies the values of classical civilization (in this case the Greek one), Italian is presented as a degenerate and corrupt language, an expression of a divided and morally decadent people. The author thus distorts the relationship between the two languages, claiming that Italian is a late idiom, a form of "depravation" (44) of French. In contradiction to what he had stated in previous works, Estienne argues that certain Italianisms now common in France, such as *merveille* or *jambe*, are not Italian calques but rather ancient French terms that Italian had originally assimilated. In support of this claim, Estienne goes so far as to suggest that Italian owes much of its lexical and phrasal richness to French. He unreservedly presents words such as *rimembrare*, *riparare*, *orgoglio*, *solazzo*, as well as *bianco*, *testa*, and *bisogno* as borrowings from French – despite the fact that these terms, like their French equivalents, are Romance continuations of Latin roots shared by both languages (Swiggers 2009, 71).

Estienne's criticisms were met with a swift response from Italy. The Florentine philologist Jacopo Corbinelli, who had been called to Paris by Catherine de' Medici to tutor her son, Henry III, was among the first to highlight the contradictions in the French grammarian's reasoning. Corbinelli, a prominent figure in the diffusion of Italian literary culture in late sixteenth-century France, is noted for his critical edition of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*. His scholarly work and translations, including those of Boccaccio and Guicciardini, contributed to reinforcing the cultural standing of the Italian language in French intellectual environments (Benzoni 1983).

4 The Normalization of the French and Its Distancing from Italian

Tracing the history of the French language between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reveals the concerted efforts of grammarians and writers to forge a coherent language, inspired by the values of rationality, order, and elegance that had previously been attributed to Latin. The exaltation of French coincided with the apotheosis of the nation and royal authority, to the point that its prestige justified, for various authors, France's expansionist ambitions in Europe. Grammarians thus sought to identify in the structure of French the embodiment of that utopia of order and stability characteristic of monarchical absolutism, envisioning an ideal language, immune to variation, modeled on courtly speech.

The affirmation of French was accompanied by a gradual emancipation from Italian influence, even though admiration for both ancient and modern Italian works remained very much alive (Serianni 2002, 440), as evidenced by the continued presence of artists and musicians of Italian origin, such as Giovanni Battista Lulli, at the French court. Moreover, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the immigration of Italian comic actors and opera singers to France became widespread, further solidifying the stereotype of Italian as naturally theatrical and musical.

The process of normalizing the French language is marked by two emblematic events that highlight the persistence of Italian cultural models: the founding of the Académie française in 1635, initiated by Richelieu following the example of the Accademia della Crusca in Florence, and the publication of the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* in 1694, inspired by the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (1612).

However, the similarities between the two institutions should not obscure the profound differences between the cultures and contexts they represent. In Italy, a common language was established following Bembo's solution to the *Questione della lingua*, which was inspired by literary models – primarily the great Tuscan authors of the fourteenth century – rather than by a living, spoken language (Marazzini 2000; Serianni 2002). Italy lacked, in fact, a central authority and a political hub capable of amplifying the prestige of its literature. By contrast, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, published after sixty years of work thanks to the direct intervention of Louis XIV, reveals the distinctly political dimension of the linguistic debate in France. In their dedication to the king, the academicians define French as "la langue dominante de la plus belle partie du monde" (the dominant language of the most beautiful part of the world) (Académie française 1694, "Préface").

It was precisely one of the first members of the Académie and a promoter of the *Dictionnaire*, Baron Claude Favre de Vaugelas, who theorized the connection between language and monarchical authority, making explicit a theme that had run through the French linguistic debate for centuries. In the preface to his *Remarques sur la langue française* (*Remarks on the French Language*) (1647), Vaugelas, introducing the concept of 'usage' as a criterion for linguistic choice, asserts that correct French – *le bon usage* – is the language spoken by the court and the king, whom he describes as the "maître de la langue" (master of the language). Thus, it is institutions and a few enlightened scholars close to power who determine the appropriate forms of the French language. Vaugelas's ideal of 'pure French', which involves purging foreign influences, particularly Italian ones, takes on an explicitly sexual connotation. He extols the 'chastity' of French, a language that

> rejette non seulement toutes les expressions qui blessent la pudeur & qui salissent tant soit peu l'imagination mais encore celles qui peuvent être mal interprétées. (13)
>
> rejects not only all expressions that offend modesty and tarnish the imagination even slightly, but also those that might be misinterpreted.

This metaphor of chastity implicitly positions French in opposition to Italian, which, by contrast, is often portrayed as sensuous, indulgent, and rhetorically excessive – a language less guarded, more prone to allure than to restraint.

The comparison with Italian was revived at the end of the seventeenth century by the Jesuit Dominique Bouhours, a follower of Vaugelas and an authoritative grammarian. In *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (*Dialogues of Ariste and Eugène*) (1671), Bouhours devoted an entire dialogue – the second, titled *La langue françoise* (*The French Language*) – to linguistic matters. In this work, French is elevated to the status of a universal language, while Spanish and Italian are accused, respectively, of rhetorical grandiosity and poetic sentimentality.

Italian is here placed alongside another sister language, Spanish, which had gained increasing importance in the political and cultural landscape of Europe during that century. So much so that the protagonist of the dialogue, Ariste, acknowledges that even Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, did not consider French superior to Spanish:

> Luy qui disoit, qui s'il vouloit parler aux Dames, il parleroit Italien; que s'il vouloit parler aux hommes, il parleroit François; que s'il vouloit parler à son cheval, il parleroit Allemand; mais que s'il vouloit parler à Dieu, il parleroit Espagnol. (64)

> He who said that if he wanted to speak to ladies, he would speak Italian; if he wanted to speak to men, he would speak French; if he wanted to speak to his horse, he would speak German; but if he wanted to speak to God, he would speak Spanish.

Several of Bouhours' statements clearly show that the supposed 'supremacy' of one language over another is linked to political-military motives. According to him, the spread of the French language beyond national borders was linked to France's growing political influence, reflecting the idea that linguistic dissemination often parallels the reputation and success of the monarchy (40).

Bouhours consequently believes that only French, the expression of a society and a state (that of the Sun King), could aspire to the role of universal language. Among modern languages, it would be the one most similar to Latin, while Italian by contrast, is seen as its corrupt and degenerate offspring.

To illustrate his theory and demonstrate the radical difference between modern languages – particularly in identifying, within the material essence of a language, a reflection of the people's mentality – Bouhours puts a series of anecdotes into the mouths of the dialogue's characters. One of the most famous is told by Eugène, who recounts how a learned Spanish knight, upon reaching the Garden of Eden, reports that the serpent spoke English, the woman spoke Italian, the man spoke French, and God spoke Spanish (59).

Through these anecdotes, Bouhours reinforces cultural stereotypes associated with each language, delving into them in greater detail. If the Spanish language is characterized by "vaine grandeur" and resonates as solemn and proud as its nation, the Italian language is described as "molle & effeminée, selon le temperament & les moeurs de leur païs" (weak and effeminate, according to the temperament and customs of their country) (62). Rich in allusions and wordplay that French, a more rational language, rejects, Italian

> tombe dans le ridicule. Car enfin elle n'a presque rien de serieux: cét enjouëment qui luy semble si naturel, approche de la badinerie. (43)

> falls into the ridiculous. For in the end, it has almost nothing serious: this playfulness, which seems so natural to it, borders on frivolity.

The overuse of diminutives and the 'perpetual rhyme' of Italian prose, due to its vocalic endings, result in

> la pluspart de ses mots & de ses phrases sentent vn peu le burlesque. (43)

> most of its words and phrases have a touch of the burlesque.

Using a striking analogy from the visual arts, Bouhours finally claims that Italian aspires to create "plus des belles peintures que des beaux portaits" (more beautiful paintings than beautiful portraits) (49), and is therefore incapable of accurately imitating and representing the nature of things. The contrast between *peinture* and *portrait* is not merely aesthetic: it opposes artifice to truth, flamboyance to precision. This rhetorical antithesis reinforces the French classicist ideal of mimesis, where beauty is inseparable from fidelity to nature. Like a painter guided solely by his imagination in pursuit of an abstract beauty disconnected from reality, the Italian speaker tends to adorn his speech with brilliant and artificial expressions. Language, in this view, ceases to be a vehicle of truth and becomes instead a performance – a dazzling surface lacking substance. This idea is echoed in his comparison of Italian to a woman's made-up face: alluring but fundamentally deceptive. Here, the linguistic other is not only different, but dangerous because seductive.

This pictorial comparison seems to allude to the rather derogatory meaning that the term *italianisme* had assumed in the visual arts before it was used in the linguistic domain. As Balsamo noted, in the history of French art, starting in the sixteenth century, the word *italianisme* did not refer to the mere interest and curiosity that bound France to Renaissance Italy, nor to the imitation of Italian forms, but rather to

> l'inflessione di una tradizione nazionale verso una direzione italiana o supposta tale. Abdicazione del gusto francese, dimenticanza delle origini della nazione, corruzione dei costumi e del linguaggio. (Balsamo 1992, 10)
>
> the inflection of a national tradition toward an Italian or supposedly Italian direction. Abdication of French taste, forgetting the nation's origins, corruption of customs and language.

The word *italianisme* was used to denote a tendency toward rhetoric and excess, a disorderly and degenerate style, contrasted with the French tradition, the quintessence of classicism and elegance.

Drawing on this common idea, Bouhours introduces a key concept that would shape much of the eighteenth-century linguistic debate: the notion of the "ordre naturel" (natural order) (87) of sentence elements, exemplified by the typical French structure Subject-Verb-Object. While the nobility of Spanish and Italian lies in their use of inversions – "dans cét arragement bizarre; ou plûtost, dans ce desordre" (in this bizarre arrangement; or rather, in this disorder) (58) – French follows the 'natural order' and is thus the heir to the rationality and elegance of classical languages. The so-called *querelles des langues* – lively debates on the relative merits of modern European tongues – formed part of a broader eighteenth-century reflection on cultural identity and literature.

The idea that the French language contains a principle of intrinsic clarity and rationality had already emerged among sixteenth-century grammarians, particularly Louis Meigret (1542), and reached its peak during the Enlightenment. However, the exclusive connection Bouhours draws between French and the classical languages rests on a false assumption. Not only because Latin, unlike French, favors constructions with the verb at the end of the sentence and does not require the explicit mention of the subject pronoun, but also because Italian, due to its morphological characteristics, generally appears more conservative than French.

Bouhours' text thus demonstrates the persistence of the anti-Italian stereotypes already outlined by Estienne, though in the seventeenth century they acquired a different nuance, reflecting the changing role of Italians in France. While in the sixteenth century the quintessential Italian was a courtier or a cunning banker, in the following century he was more often cast as a performer or a buffoon. This transformation is staged with clarity in the *Ballet des nations*, which concludes Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (*The Bourgeois Gentleman*) (1670), where Italians sing love lyrics, while characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte* engage in buffoonery and acrobatics.

5 The Debate on the Genius of Language in the Age of Enlightenment

Throughout the eighteenth century, during which French spread across Europe as a language of culture, Italian underwent progressive marginalization in France. No longer used as a vehicular language in commerce and finance, Italian remained mostly confined to aristocratic salons, where it continued to be appreciated primarily by enthusiasts of art and melodrama. During this period, the stereotype of Italian as a musical and vague language, ideal for love poetry, was reinforced by the emerging belief that each language embodied a distinctive character that shaped both expression and thought.

This idea – later formalized as the notion of the 'genius of a language' – began to take shape within the intellectual milieu of the Académie française, particularly through the writings of members such as Claude Favre de Vaugelas and Bernard Lamy. Bouhours, although not a member of the Académie, further articulated this idea when he asserted:

> Le langage suit d'ordinaire la disposition des esprits; et chaque nation a toujours parlé selon son génie. (Bouhours 1671, 92)
>
> Language generally follows the disposition of minds, and each nation has always spoken according to its genius.

However, some theorists of that period tended to emphasize a sense of continuity, especially on the literary level, between the classical heritage of Italy and the emerging French tradition. In *Réflexions sur la poétique* (*Reflections on Poetics*) (1684), René Rapin frames France as the cultural heir of Italy, within a broader theory of *translatio studii*. While he upholds the superiority of French poetic order and clarity, he acknowledges the foundational role of the Italian Renaissance. This vision reinforces the classicist narrative of literary succession, positioning France not in radical opposition to Italy, but as the culmination of a shared tradition reinterpreted under the sign of clarity, decorum, and rationality.

Starting with the Enlightenment, the concept of the 'genius of a language' evolved into a key tenet of French – and more broadly European – linguistic nationalism.[7] The term *génie d'une langue* appeared for the first time in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* in the 1762 edition: "On appelle le génie d'une langue, le caractère propre et distinctif d'une langue" (The genius of a language refers to its unique and distinctive character) (Siouffi 1995, 37). This perspective tended to view languages as stable and self-contained systems, each expressing the distinctive character of a people. This perspective reinforced the cultural tendency, common in early modern Europe, to associate language with collective identity and national character. Over time, this view fostered the development of symbolic hierarchies, in which phonetic or syntactic features were interpreted as reflections of cultural or even moral values – a core principle of what has been called linguistic essentialism.

Despite the great prestige that French achieved in the eighteenth century, it is interesting to observe how comparison and differentiation from Italian and other major European languages remained essential points of discussion – almost a necessity – in French linguistic thought. For example, in his *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* (*Letter on the Deaf and Mutes*) (1751), Diderot states:

> Le français est fait pour instruire, éclairer et convaincre; le grec, le latin, l'italien, l'anglais, pour persuader, émouvoir et tromper; parlez grec, latin, italien au peuple; mais parlez français au sage. (128)
>
> French is made to instruct, enlighten, and convince; Greek, Latin, Italian, and English to persuade, move, and deceive; speak Greek, Latin, and Italian to the people; but speak French to the wise man.

7 Johann Gottfried Herder was the first to argue, in an essay from 1771, that each language conveys a worldview (Herder 2001).

In this perspective, French is associated with clarity and the ability to construct rational arguments, while Italian and other languages are portrayed as instruments of emotional persuasion, thereby suggesting a different hierarchy of linguistic functions. This contributed to the emergence of the idea that French possessed an 'intrinsic grammaticality', recognized as the philosophical language par excellence. Diderot's classification of languages according to their rhetorical function enacts a subtle hierarchy of cognitive value.

For eighteenth-century French grammarians, the genius of the Italian language lay in its fluidity and musicality. For instance, François Raguenet (1765, 123) argues that Italian is better suited to singing than French because all its vowels have distinct sounds, while half of the vowels in French are mute, barely producing any sound at all. In the *Encyclopédie* (1751-72), a statement by Voltaire is reported describing the genius of French:

> Le génie de cette langue est la clarté et l'ordre: car chaque langue a son génie, et ce génie consiste dans la facilité que donne le langage de s'exprimer plus ou moins heureusement. (Diderot, d'Alembert 1751-72, s.v. "Français")
>
> The genius of this language is clarity and order: for every language has its own genius, and this genius lies in the ease with which the language allows one to express oneself more or less felicitously.

Voltaire contrasts this essence of French with that of Italian, to which he attributes different qualities. In his *Lettre à Deodati de' Tovazzi* (*Letter to Deodati de' Tovazzi*) (1761), he acknowledges specific morphological properties of Italian, such as syntactic inversions, which grant the language greater flexibility compared to French, which Voltaire himself perceived as overly rigid due to excessive formalism. He also highlights the grace and lightness of Italian, which he refers to as the "firstborn of Latin", in contrast to the supposed harshness and "barbarism" of English.[8] Italian is thus appreciated, though confined to an artistic and aesthetic dimension, distant from the seriousness and rigor of scientific and philosophical discourse that characterize French.

Some grammarians, however, adopt more critical positions. Nicolas Beauzée observes that while Italian is more melodic than French due to the variety and strength of its tonic accents, it has morphological features that, in his view, reflect Italians' tendency to be "sujets à se passionner davantage" (more inclined to be passionate) (Beauzée 1765). Beauzée, echoing the familiar trope of anti-Italianism, draws

8 See also on this topic Folena 1983, 419.

a connection between language and the 'moral decline' of the Italian population:

> La langue italienne, dont la plûpart des mots viennent par corruption du latin, en a amolli la pronunciation en vieillissant, dans le même proportion que le peuple qui la parle a perdu de la vigueur des anciens Romains. (Beauzée 1765)

> The Italian language, whose majority of words come from the corruption of Latin, has softened in pronunciation with age, in the same proportion as the people who speak it have lost the vigor of the ancient Romans.

Such statements exemplify the shift from linguistic description to moral evaluation – a typical feature of essentialist thought.

Rivarol, in his *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* (*Discourse on the Universality of the French Language*) (1783), an emblematic text reflecting the self-perception of French as a universal language, devotes significant attention to comparing French with Italian. As the author of a notable translation of Dante's *Commedia*, Rivarol initially acknowledges the literary refinement of Italian, particularly in poetry, suggesting that imitating its formal qualities could help French attain a similar level of 'flexibility' and 'abundance' in poetic expression.

However, despite this tribute – or rather, a nod to the recurring stereotype of Italian as a poetic language – Rivarol identifies several limitations that, in his opinion, make Italian less suitable than French for becoming a universal language. First, he highlights the excessive gap between prose and poetry, attributing this divide to the fact that Italian emerged primarily as a literary language, more closely linked to written rather than spoken traditions. According to Rivarol, this impairs Italian's ability to achieve the communicative pragmatism that characterizes French. Secondly, he criticizes the lesser 'gravity' of Italian, which, while remaining in poetry "la plus mélodieuse des langues" (the most melodious of languages) (Rivarol 1783, 109), lacks in prose the sharpness and strength needed to convey powerful ideas. These observations reinforce the semantic axis of 'seduction–decadence–weakness' that links Estienne, Bouhours, and Rivarol within a coherent ideological tradition. In all three cases, the rhetorical 'feminization' of Italian serves to justify the superiority of French, which is consistently framed as a language of logic, discipline, and masculine rigor.

Rivarol's critique, however, also extends into the aesthetic and artistic domain. Italian prose, he argues,

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> se traine avec trop de lenteur; son éclat est monotone; l'oreille se lasse de sa douceur et la langue de sa mollesse; ce qui peut venir de ce que, chaque mot étant harmonieux en particulier, l'harmonie du tout ne vaut rien. (111)
>
> drags along too slowly. Its brilliance is monotonous; the ear tires of its sweetness, and the tongue of its softness; this may come from the fact that, though each word is harmonious on its own, the overall harmony is worth nothing.

Finally, Rivarol reiterates a familiar sexist trope:

> La pensée la plus vigoureuse se détrempe dans la prose italienne. Elle est souvent ridicule et presque insupportable dans une bouche virile, parce qu'elle ôte à l'homme cette teinte d'austérité qui doit en être inséparable. (111)
>
> The most vigorous thought dissolves in Italian prose. It is often ridiculous and almost unbearable in a man's mouth because it robs him of the tone of austerity that should be inseparable from him.

Rivarol's remark relies on a metaphor of dilution and softness that is both stylistic and gendered. The verb *se détremper* implies not only weakening, but also a loss of substance, as if Italian prose were a medium unable to support intellectual density. This metaphor reflects the ideological construction of a linguistic hierarchy between the languages, suggesting that its euphony comes at the cost of conceptual rigor. By contrast, French is characterized as a language of clarity and rationality, leading Rivarol to make the sweeping claim:

> Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français; ce qui n'est pas clair est encore anglais, italien, grec ou latin. (112)
>
> What is not clear is not French; what is not clear is still English, Italian, Greek, or Latin.

6 Identity Construction and Linguistic Othering: Final Reflections

A key mechanism of linguistic othering is to attribute absolute value to the signifier, detaching it from its historical context and transforming it into an expression of identity-based ideology. French grammarians, in comparing their language to Italian, often adopted a deductive approach: starting from the desire to assert a difference from Italian, they used the linguistic signifier to legitimize their

theses. The differences between the two languages were not seen as the result of historical evolution and contingent choices, but rather essentialized and presented as immutable and distinctive traits. This process helped consolidate the symbolic role of French, while framing Italian in terms of cultural and linguistic otherness.

The contrastive analysis of morphological structures between French and Italian sheds light on how these differences may have fueled the stereotypes present in the texts examined. One of the most significant comparative studies is that of Scavée and Intravaia (1979), based on an extensive corpus of texts, primarily journalistic. At first glance, their study seems to confirm some of the differences that underlie the stereotypes. By comparing various expressive modes, syntactic structures, and idiomatic expressions, the scholars highlight how Italian is marked by greater syntactic freedom and flexibility, often employing juxtapositions, inversions, and neologisms formed through prefixes and suffixes. French, by contrast, appears more regulated, requiring a precise word order and the explicit articulation of relationships between clauses. While French adheres to a sequential and rational logic, Italian follows a "sensory and symbolic" order, with a fluidity of phrase movement that encourages stylistic experimentation. This tendency, described as the "fundamental vocation" of Italian, is accompanied by a propensity for aesthetic exploration, philosophical conceptualism, and "baroque" constructions (Scavée, Intravaia 1979, 151). Thus, the differences between the two languages reflect divergent communicative attitudes: Italian leans toward a "subjective realism", more psychological than logical, while French favors "objective" constructions, maintaining a rational and structured discursive order.

Despite these differences, French and Italian share several innovations compared to Latin, such as the creation of analytical verb tenses (the *passé composé* and conditional) and the disappearance of the infinitive's declension. While maintaining a complex verbal system with many irregularities, Italian has preserved nominal and verbal inflection through the alternation of suffixes, whereas the more analytical French requires the explicit expression of the subject pronoun. Additionally, Italian presents unique features, such as the use of diminutives, the gerund, the substantivized infinitive, and phrasal verbs – elements that are rare or absent in French and other Romance languages.

These topics have been widely discussed by scholars, many of whom identify in Italian a 'continuity with the ancient', linked to the persistence of syntactic and morphological structures inherited from Latin. For centuries a predominantly written and literary language, Italian did not benefit from the "spinta evolutiva del parlato" (evolutionary impulse of spoken language) (Simone 1990, 49). This predisposition, along with the flexibility of expression and a tendency

toward stylistic experimentation, reflects a historical continuity with medieval Latin, of which Italian represents a direct and natural continuation. While French was established through the recovery, by the "daughter language", of the values that governed the "mother language", Italian appears as the spontaneous continuation of Latin, the result of an uninterrupted evolution (Scavée, Intravaia 1979, 153).

However, the texts examined suggest that while certain morphological features of Italian – such as lexical abundance or syntactic flexibility – may have contributed to shaping its reputation, the most persistent stereotypes reflect cultural and literary traditions more than objective linguistic properties. These traits were selectively emphasized and codified over time, transforming contingent characteristics into essentialized signs of otherness.

Thus, the stereotype of Italian as a musical and romantic language, and that of French as a clear and rational one – linked to the fame of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* – are in fact historical and cultural constructions. These perceptions stem not from linguistic qualities but from cultural processes that linked languages to aesthetic and intellectual values. As evidence of this, during the Symbolist movement, French was reinterpreted as a literary language capable of expressing vague and indefinite concepts, moving away from the ideal of rigor and clarity previously attributed to it. Moreover, these differences reflect the role of institutions in shaping a language: while in France, centralized authority fostered the codification of a unified model, in Italy the absence of political unification allowed for more fluid linguistic evolution.

In conclusion, the analysis of the process of linguistic othering demonstrates how language, in specific historical contexts, can shape cultural narratives and symbolic distinctions. Identity configurations based on linguistic differences are not just the result of structural divergences, but reflect processes of differentiation. The historical phases analyzed in this study reveal mechanisms that, while evolving in form over time, still play a central role in contemporary cultural dynamics.

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