

# How is the Usage of the Swiss Variety of Italian Perceived in the Educational Context?

## First Outcomes of the Project *Repertorio lessicale dei regionalismi d'uso scolastico della Svizzera italiana*

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**Abstract** RepSi (acronym standing for *Repertorio lessicale dei regionalismi d'uso scolastico della Svizzera italiana*) is a project that aims at collecting and analysing up-to-date data about the perception and the usage of the Swiss variety of Italian (ISIt) in the educational context in the Italian-speaking Regions of Switzerland, namely Ticino and Graubünden. This contribution is divided in two main sections: the first one intends to explain how the project RepSi has been developed and which milestones have already been reached during the first year of work; the second one presents a selection of words (explained both in their meaning and in their use) and some further developments related to school teaching and perception of this regional variety of language.

**Keywords** Swiss variety of Italian. Italian language varieties. Educational context. Italian linguistics. Sociolinguistics.

**Summary** 1 The 'Repertorio dei regionalismi d'uso scolastico della Svizzera italiana' Project. – 2 Languages and Language Influence in Switzerland. – 2.1 The Regional Variety of Italian Spoken in Switzerland. – 2.2 Italian as a Pluricentric Language. – 3 ISIt-isms in the Educational Context: A Selection of Headwords. – 3.1 *Mappetta*. – 3.2 *Bocciare*. – 3.3 *Foglio a brutta*. – 3.4 Some Other Examples of ISIt-isms. – 4 Conclusions.

## 1 The ‘Repertorio dei regionalismi d’uso scolastico della Svizzera italiana’ Project

Covering a two-year period of research (September 2021-August 2023), the ‘Repertorio dei regionalismi d’uso scolastico della Svizzera italiana’ (RepSi) project aims at collecting and analysing up-to-date data about the perception and the usage of the Swiss variety of Italian (ISIt) in the educational context – mainly primary and secondary schools in the Italian-speaking Regions of Switzerland, namely Ticino and Graubünden. Given the geographical location of Southern Switzerland and its closeness to the Italian border (and therefore the influence both the Italian language and the Italian culture have on the Swiss territory), the study is most certainly relevant to the context it has been designed for.

Considering the multilingual dimension of Southern Switzerland and the absence of such studies in the educational context, it is interesting to see how the Italian language and culture influence the perception of the Swiss variety of Italian. In fact, the development of RepSi is based on an observable need for such studies involving language use and perception in the educational environment. Because of its multi-disciplinary application, two complementary institutions are involved in the project: the Osservatorio Linguistico della Svizzera Italiana (OLSI) and the Department of Education and Learning of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (DFA SUPSI). While the first focuses more on the description of the language variety on a sociolinguistic level, the latter reflects on the role of Swiss variety of Italian inside the classrooms and in general in the school environment.

To provide a reasoned description and a theoretical reflection on Helvetisms in the educational context, a glossary of lexical and syntactic items has been designed and is now being worked on. For each entry a certain number of features are described, such as the word’s historical background and origin, its equivalent in ‘Italiano d’Italia’ (‘Italian of Italy’ according to the definition of Moretti 2011), its spread within the Italian-speaking Regions of Switzerland, its variants, some fun facts (if present) and a few examples of use taken either from the educational context or from other real-life situations such as newspapers or Swiss-Italian literature (no example of use has been made up by the researchers).<sup>1</sup>

Among the objectives of the project there is also the analysis of the perception and the usage of ISIt in the educational context. To

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**1** The examples of student writing are taken from the DFA-Tiscrivo corpus, collected as part of Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) projects ‘TiScrivo’ and ‘TiScrivo 2.0’, which includes 1,735 texts (<https://dfa-blog.supsi.ch/tiscrivo/corpus/>).

do this it is important to collect and analyse up-to-date data and finally to create some non-prescriptive guidelines that can be used by schoolteachers for their in-class projects on the variety of Italian spoken in Switzerland or on language use in general.

## 2 Languages and Language Influence in Switzerland

Switzerland is divided into four language macro-areas: the largest is the German-speaking area, followed by the French-speaking area, the Italian-speaking area and the Romansh-speaking area. All four languages are recognised at a federal level as national languages, although only the first three are official languages in all domains. At a cantonal level, each of the 26 cantons establishes its own official language(s). Most cantons are monolingual: the official language of Ticino is Italian, the language of Geneva, Vaud, Neuchâtel and Jura is French, while all the other monolingual cantons have German as their official language. Three cantons are bilingual (German and French), namely Berne, Fribourg and Valais, while only one is trilingual (German, Italian and Romansh): Graubünden.

According to statistical surveys, about 8.5% of the Swiss population declare Italian as their main language (more than one answer is possible). This percentage roughly corresponds to 590,000 speakers, who are, surprisingly, spread over the whole of Switzerland, with more than half of them residing outside the so-called 'Italian-speaking Switzerland' (Janner, Casoni, Bruno 2019).

The territory referred to as 'Italian-speaking Switzerland' does not coincide with a political-administrative area: it includes the whole of Canton Ticino and four valleys in Canton Graubünden. The physical peculiarity of this 'Italian-speaking territory' also lies in its fragmentation: while two of the Italian-speaking valleys of Graubünden are contiguous to the territory of Ticino (Mesolcina and Calanca), the other two (Valposchiavo and Bregaglia) are geographically separated from the other Italian-speaking area as well as from each other [fig. 1]. This results in three non-adjacent zones of Italophony in Switzerland.

This traditionally Italian-speaking territory has belonged to Switzerland, with different statuses, for about 500 years as far as Ticino is concerned and for about 200 years as far as Graubünden is concerned; from the beginning of the nineteenth century, both Ticino and Graubünden became cantons of the Swiss Confederation. In those areas, a Lombard variety of Italian is spoken, presenting regional linguistic, similarly to the many other regional varieties found throughout Italy, which derive from the meeting of the standard language with the dialect substratum that characterised and linguistically dominated the whole Italian area until the beginning of the twentieth century.



Figure 1 - Geographical distribution of the languages of Switzerland (2000); Swiss Federal Statistical Office, www.bfs.admin.ch

In addition to these features, which typify this variety as one of the regional varieties of Italian in use, there are, however, several characteristics that distinguish Italian of Italian-speaking Switzerland ('italiano della Svizzera italiana', henceforth ISIt) from other diatopic varieties of Italian. These are, especially, the consequences of the constant contact with the other two predominant national languages, German and French, as well as of the need to designate different political, social and administrative realities which do not always overlap with those of Italy. Alongside these factors of variation, one can also mention the tendency of Italian-speaking Switzerland, as a peripheral and politically detached Italian-speaking region, to retain archaic linguistic traits for a longer time.

Due to the heterogeneity of their origins, the various characteristic features are not uniformly perceived by the speech community. When the variation is due to the contact between Italian and the pre-existing dialectal substratum, for example, the differences are to be considered not only as geographically, but also, for the most part, diaphasically marked. This entails the tendency of these features to disappear in more controlled and formal discourse, similarly to the more markedly regional features of all varieties of Italian.

## 2.1 The Regional Variety of Italian Spoken in Switzerland

Alongside these diaphasically marked traits of ISIt, we can also observe, however, an important band of variation which, although diatopically marked, presents no diaphasic connotation. This second type of linguistic features appears in all kinds of production, in speech and writing, in formal as well as in informal texts, in the media, in political discourse and in administrative texts. This set of geographic variants is not always perceived as such by speakers, precisely because of their widespread presence in contexts that indirectly endorse their belonging to the linguistic norm. As opposed to the variants based on the dialectal substratum, the variants of this second type are often borrowings or calques from other national languages or terms and expressions linked to legal, regulatory, administrative or commercial language and archaisms. The link between the nature of their origin and their being less marked than terms of dialectal origin, is thus easily understandable.

In particular, as far as phonological features are concerned, generally Northern features (Baranzini, Casoni 2020) are the alternation between [s] and [z], which systematically includes the voiced variant in all intervocalic contexts, the affricate realisation ([ts]) of the voiceless [s] in some words or, on the contrary, the voiced realisation of the voiceless affricate (cf. Moretti 2011), the tendency to consonant degemination, the degree of openness of the vowels *e* and *o*, and the important presence of free allophones of /r/ other than the standard realisation.

More characteristic of ISIt are the unvoicing of some final consonants, the greater phonetic adherence to the original form of foreign words, the palatal pronunciation of [n]+[j] and [l]+[j], the reduction of intervocalic [v] and the tendency to spell an acronym according to the German alphabet (Baranzini, Casoni 2020).

Morphosyntactic peculiarities mostly concern differences in government, a few cases of different word order, particularly with regard to the position of some adverbs, the systematic presence of the article with personal proper nouns and kinship terms, some alternations in the grammatical gender of nouns and the tendency to form nouns through abbreviations and generalisations of brand names.

Socio-pragmatic features are also limited, mainly involving the T-V distinction in public communication and the prevalence in ISIt of feminine forms of function and profession terms.

On the lexical level, as mentioned, the differences are particularly numerous. There are variants due to the different factors of influence mentioned above, i.e. the contact with the local dialects, the contact with French and German, the development of a specific lexicon for the Swiss social and administrative reality and the maintenance of some archaisms. These variants can be categorised

as follows (Petralli 1990): ‘absolute ISItisms’ are those expressions that do not find a correspondence in ‘Italiano d’Italia’ either at the level of signifier or signified (e.g. *modina*, *stake*, Pandolfi 2010); ‘Semantic ISItisms’ are terms used in Switzerland with an additional meaning or used in Switzerland while in Italy they are replaced by another term to express the same meaning (*azione*, *special offer* – in Italian of Italy *offerta speciale*); The third category is that of ‘lexical ISItisms’, namely expressions that differ in signifier but are associated with the same meaning (*zwieback* or *zibac*, *rusk* – in Italian of Italy *fetta biscottata*).

The differences at lexical level affect, predictably, mainly lexical words. There are, however, also some cases of variation of functional words, such as the prepositional phrase *a dipendenza di* (‘depending on’ – in Italian of Italy *a seconda di*), which is particularly widespread.

## 2.2 Italian as a Pluricentric Language

The idea that the Italian of Italian-speaking Switzerland should be considered as a separate standard variety of Italian was first introduced in Pandolfi (2010) and was later addressed in Berruto (2011), Hajek (2012), Pandolfi (2017), Moretti, Pandolfi (2019) and Baranzini, Janner (2020). Nowadays, the scientific literature fully considers Italian as a pluricentric language. Michael Clyne’s criteria for defining a pluricentric language (Clyne 1992) are indeed applicable to the case of Italian-speaking Switzerland: a national border separates the two Italian-speaking areas in Europe, i.e. Italy and neighbouring Switzerland, and Italian is an official language in Switzerland. Moreover, the Swiss variety can be associated with the identity of the language community concerned (see among others Bianconi 2016). These observations obviously presuppose a significant (internal) difference between the two varieties, which we tried to briefly illustrate above, on which the very recognition of the Swiss variety as such depends.

Clyne (1992) already observed how the relationship between the different national varieties is often asymmetrical, resulting in the dominance of one or the other variety. Based on his criteria and on Muhr (2012)’s later discussion, the descriptions by authors like Berruto (2011), Hajek (2012) and Pandolfi (2017) characterise the Italian of the Italian part of Switzerland (ISIt) as a clearly non-dominant variety. First of all, the asymmetry between the number of speakers and the territory of diffusion of the two varieties is particularly noticeable (a brief comparison between the population living in Italian-speaking Switzerland and that living in Italy shows a ratio of 1:164, cf. Baranzini, Ricci 2023), and the political power linked to the language community is also limited. The Italian-speaking part of Switzerland

is thus, in Ammon (1989)'s terms, a 'semi-centre' - or even a 'rudimentary centre', cf. Pandolfi (2016) - having no influence on the Italian norm, and often identifying its own linguistic traits as 'deviant' or 'dialectal'. Furthermore, we can observe an almost total absence of linguistic institutions, academies, and reference works - such as dictionaries or manuals - explicitly codifying the norm.

Nonetheless, the widespread presence of the variety features in all contexts of even controlled language production, by speakers of all diastatic provenances, unequivocally demonstrates an indirect standard-setting power.

### 3 ISIt-isms in the Educational Context: A Selection of Headwords

In the next sections of the paper, we present a representative selection of ISIt-isms regarding school terminology collected during the project, each item being accompanied of actual uses attested in the Swiss-Italian context. With reference to the studies on and repertoires of the variety of Italian in Italian Switzerland (Bianconi 1980, Pandolfi 2016, Petralli 1990, Savoia, Vitale 2008), all the data was collected considering the following criteria: the semantic areas of the entries, the uses attested in the largest corpus of school Italian in Italian Switzerland (DFA-TIscrivo corpus) and the opinions of a selected group of teachers interviewed during the project. Each word is analysed according to the following criteria: its meaning - mainly regarding the differences between ISIt and 'Italiano d'Italia' -; its spread and usage in the Italian-speaking Region of Switzerland; its origins and the possible influence of the other national languages.

#### 3.1 *Mappetta*

The ISIt-ism *mappetta*, 'plastic folder', can be translated as *cartellina trasparente*, 'transparent folder' (usually made of plastic), or just *cartellina*, 'folder' (usually indicating folders made of cardboard with two elastic bands around the corners), in 'Italiano d'Italia'. The word is very common in the Swiss-Italian educational context as it designates an object that pupils use almost every day at school. In 'Italiano d'Italia', however, 'mappetta' does not constitute an independent lexical entry - it only corresponds to the diminutive of *mappa*, 'map'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Even though in some Italian regions the diminutives of 'mappa' are very well known and used (cf. Civitillo 2019), none of these meanings come close to those of 'mappetta'

Most likely the Swiss Italian word *mappetta* originates from the German entry *die Mappe*, ‘folder’ or ‘binder’, or from its diminutive form *das Mäppchen*, ‘little folder’ or ‘case’. According to the classification of Moretti (2011), *mappetta* must be considered a lexical ISIt-ism, a lexeme for which in ‘Italiano d’Italia’ it is possible to find a signified but not the same signifier as in ISIt – other examples of lexical ISIt-isms include *trattanda*, ‘bullet point to be talked about during a meeting’, and *ramina*, ‘iron fence used to separate borders’, specifically used to define the border between Switzerland and Italy:

- (1) Un giorno quando mi sono svegliata, sono andata a fare la colazione. Dopo aver preparato la mappetta con i compiti sono partita da casa per andare a scuola (3rd grade).<sup>3</sup>  
One day I woke up and had breakfast. After preparing my homework folder, I left home to go to school.
- (2) L’ufficio di Zali è un semplice tavolo, una comune sedia, il computer e qualche mappetta di fogli essenziali per l’attività di quel giorno (*Corriere del Ticino*, 25 giugno 2018).  
Zali’s office is a simple table, a common chair, a computer and a few folders which are essential for that day’s activity.

Both examples are original written occurrences of the word *mappetta*: (1) is extracted from a corpus of texts collected in the educational environment (cf. Cignetti, Demartini, Fornara 2016), while (2) is taken from a local newspaper (*Corriere del Ticino*).

### 3.2 *Bocciare*

The ISIt-ism *bocciare*, ‘to fail’ (‘to reject’ or ‘to be rejected’), can be considered among one of the most interesting examples on the morphosyntactic level. In ‘Italiano d’Italia’ the term can be used in the transitive form, such as in (3), or in the passive form, such as in (4):

- (3) La maestra ha bocciato Mario.  
The teacher failed Mario (in his exam).
- (4) Mario è stato bocciato dalla maestra.  
Lit. \*Mario was failed by the teacher.

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attested in ISIt.

**3** <https://dfa-blog.supsi.ch/tiscrivo/corpus/>.



However, in ISIt *bocciare* can also mean ‘to fail’ in a construction where the referent of the subject is rejected and not the referent of the object. The term can be used both transitively, as shown in (6) (but with a different argument structure from ‘Italiano d’Italia’), and intransitively, as shown in (5):

- (5) “Perché ha bocciato l’esame?”  
“Perché non ha studiato abbastanza.” (www.cptbellinzona.ti.ch).  
“Why did he fail his exam?”  
“Because he did not study enough.”
- (6) Lo sport che pratico è ginnastica ritmica: consiste nell’imparare dei test e poi esibirsi davanti alle giurate, le quali, alla fine della giornata, ti dicono se lo si ha superato oppure bocciato (4th grade).<sup>4</sup>  
My sport is rhythmic gymnastics: we must learn some exercises for each test and then perform them in front of a panel of judges who, at the end of the day, tell us if we have passed or failed.
- (7) Esami di guida: uno su due boccia. Dai dati 2015 della Sezione della circolazione emerge che quasi un allievo su due ha bocciato gli esami di guida pratici (www.ticinonews.ch).

Driving tests: one out of two fails. From the data of the Traffic Section from 2015 it emerges that almost one in two students failed the practical driving exam.

This morphosyntactic feature of ISIt is very common both in the spoken and in the written variety and the awareness of its usage seems to be very low; this is demonstrated by the occurrence of both forms in (7), where the first one is in the intransitive form (ISIt), whereas the second one shows the same structure of (6), which is not acceptable in ‘Italiano d’Italia’.

### 3.3 *Foglio a brutta*

*Foglio a brutta*, ‘first draft paper’, is a typical example of a polyrhetic construction (idiom) that can be found in ISIt. The idiom is used in ISIt both in the spoken and in the written variety to indicate the first draft of a school text – used mainly in a test or in an exam. On the opposite, *foglio a bella* means the final draft. The corresponding expressions in ‘Italiano d’Italia’ are *foglio di brutta* and *foglio di bella*.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://dfa-blog.supsi.ch/tiscrivo/corpus/>; <https://dfa-blog.supsi.ch/tiscrivo/corpus/>

- (8) A gruppi leggete attentamente il Patto federale. Create una mappa mentale con le informazioni più importanti. Scrivete su un foglio a brutta un riassunto del patto (materiale didattico).  
In groups read the Federal Charter carefully. Create a mind map with the most important information. Write a first draft of a summary of the Charter.
- (9) Riportate dalla carta velina sul foglio a bella copia la forma dell'insetto (materiale didattico).  
Copy the shape of the insect from the tissue paper onto the fair copy.

This construction is more likely a case of 'prepositional exchange', which is a well-known phenomenon in ISIt.<sup>5</sup> As documented by Moretti (2011), cases of prepositional exchange between *di* and *a* ('of' and 'at') are already found in a certain number of idiomatic expressions in ISIt; examples of these idioms include: *obbligato di mantenere*, 'forced to keep' (which in 'Italiano d'Italia' is *obbligato a mantenere*); *preoccupato a fare*, 'worried to do' (*preoccupato di fare* in 'Italiano d'Italia'); *capace a fare*, 'able to do' (*capace di fare* in 'Italiano d'Italia'). Further examples, also mentioned in Bianconi (1980) and Berruto (1980) include the prepositional exchange between *in* and *su* ('in' and 'on') – which produces idioms such as *confidare sulla premura*, 'rely on' (*confidare nella premura* in 'Italiano d'Italia') –, the exchange of *in* and *sotto* ('in' and 'under') – *mettere sotto discussione*, 'to question' (*mettere in discussione* in 'Italiano d'Italia') –, and the exchange of *di* and *da* ('of' and 'from') – *pause da dieci minuti*, 'ten-minute breaks' (*pause di dieci minuti* in 'Italiano d'Italia').

### 3.4 Some Other Examples of ISIt-isms

As a brief illustration of the variety of uses of ISIt-isms, a list of entries belonging to broader contexts of everyday use is proposed below, accompanied by their translation into 'Italiano d'Italia'. Please note that not all these entries belong to the semantic area of school, but their presence in a glossary with didactical and educational purposes is relevant precisely because of their high use frequency. Being frequently used in many contexts and well known by both adults and young people, these words are consequently also present in the language spoken or written at school.

- *autocollante* (*adesivo* in 'It. d'It.') = sticker;
- *azione* (*offerta speciale* in 'It. d'It.') = special offer;

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<sup>5</sup> This prepositional exchange is not due to a calquing or a literal translation from any of the other Swiss national languages – the corresponding expressions are the German 'der Entwurf' and the French 'le brouillon' or 'l'ébauche'.

- *bilux* (*lampeggiante* in 'It. d'It.') = flashing light;
- *blitz* (*verifica a sorpresa* in 'It. d'It.') = pop quiz;
- *bucallettere* (*cassetta per la posta* in 'It. d'It.') = mailbox;
- *capanna* (*rifugio alpino* in 'It. d'It.') = mountain hut;
- *carta grigia* (*licenza di circolazione* in 'It. d'It.') = vehicle ID card;
- *classatore / classeur* (*raccoglitore/faldone* in 'It. d'It.') = binder / file;
- *cornetto* (*fagiolino* in 'It. d'It.') = green bean;
- *garage* (*concessionario* in 'It. d'It.') = car dealer;
- *gipfel* (*cornetto* in 'It. d'It.') = croissant;
- *licenza di condurre* (*patente di guida* in 'It. d'It.') = driver's license;
- *monitore* (*istruttore* in 'It. d'It.') = instructor;
- *natel* (*cellulare* in 'It. d'It.') = cell phone;
- *nota* (*voto (scolastico)* in 'It. d'It.') = grade;
- *plenum* (*assemblea dei docenti* in 'It. d'It.') = plenary session;
- *radar* (*autovelox* in 'It. d'It.') = speed camera;
- *rolladen* (*tapparelle* in 'It. d'It.') = roller shutters;
- *'sore / 'soressa* (*professore / professoressa* in 'It. d'It.') = school-teacher (male and female);
- *stabilo* (*evidenziatore* in 'It. d'It.') = highlighter;
- *tipp-ex* (*bianchetto* in 'It. d'It.') = white out;
- *trottinette* (*monopattino* in 'It. d'It.') = scooter;
- *vignetta* (*bollino autostradale* in 'It. d'It.') = highway sticker.

#### 4 Conclusions

Based on the collection of items such as those exemplified in this paper, the following phases of the project will be oriented towards developing a theoretical reflection on the use of regionalisms in the classroom and towards suggesting teaching activities involving meta-reflection. In a first step, guidelines will be developed for teachers in Italian-speaking Switzerland for a more targeted and conscious treatment of the regionalisms in use in the school context. This will later enable the development of teaching materials supporting metalinguistic reflection on the regional variety. A further aim is to construct language maps which are not restricted only to Italian language areas, but also extended to other Swiss national languages as well as other European languages, thus involving students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in reflections on language variation.

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