

SOME NOTES ON VOWELS AND GEMINATED CONSONANTS IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN

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Before trying to point out some characteristic features of the Italian phonological system as regards vowels and geminated consonants, I should like to say that the type of pronunciation referred to is the norm described by a number of Italian linguists (for instance, A. Camilli) and recently adopted in the *Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana* (published in Milan in 1965). This sort of "received pronunciation" is also the basis for the majority of phonetic (or phonematic) transcriptions, for example by Piero Fiorelli, whose texts alternate with those of Marguerite Chapallaz in the journal *Le maître phonétique*. The lack of consistency that we sometimes find in such transcriptions is not present in Fiorelli's orthoepic spelling (used in his book *Corso di pronunzia italiana*, Padova 1965), which is an interesting compromise between phonetic transcription and normal spelling.

It is known that most Italian words are stressed on the last syllable but one. If we take this type of word as a model for the contact between vowel and consonant, we can see that the possible phonological realization is determined by certain relationships between the sounds. Our selection could contain words with intensified consonants, which are really a characteristic feature of Italian pronunciation, for example: *tappo, fatto, tacco; tufo, passa, fascia, pazza, faccia, mamma, panna, bagna; palla, paglia, narra*. The geminated consonant here reaches the highest degree of intensity, whereas the duration of the vowel is at the lowest point. Starting from this extreme case, we arrive through various consonant groups to the opposite combination, where the stressed vowel is lengthened and the consonant is unintensified: *tipo, fato, fico; tufo, naso, tace, lame, mano, palo, caro*.

Of course, there are other factors to help distinguish between words: the voiced or voiceless quality of consonants, and the closed or open quality of vowels. That means that intensified voiceless consonants, except *ss* and *sc(i)*, are also voiced, and the vowels E, O can have a closed sound or an open sound: *ebbe, cadde, leggo; bève; mèzzè, lògge*.

The value of distinctive features changes according to the requirements of the meaning and according to the character of the sounds themselves and their position. For example, the consonants *sc(i)*, *z*, *z*, *gn*, *gl(i)* in the words *fascia, pazza, gazza, bagna, paglia* are intensified (*z* and *z* are doubled in spelling) and the preceding vowels are more or less short. The spelling and unintensified pronunciation of the voiceless

z in words like *Venezia*, *vizio* (Fiorelli admits this pronunciation) shows the possibility of differentiating between *vizi* and *vizzi*, *tizi* and *tizzi*, *spazi* and *spazzi*, but the majority of Italian linguists (among them Camilli, Fiorelli, Migliorini) usually make no difference between the pronunciation of z and zz. I think that a lengthened vowel before one z can be heard quite clearly if we compare the word *avvezzo* with the words *spazi*, *grazie*, *orifizio*, *Fabrizio*. And spelling does not avoid the doubling of z, common in other consonants; I am referring to pairs like *battere*—*abbattere*, to which we may add the pairs *zitto*—*azzittiere*, *zòppo*—*azzoppare*, *zèro*—*azzerare*.

As far as vowels are concerned, the scale of quality goes from open A to open or closed E and O and finishes with closed I and U; the pronunciation of the last two sounds can also be semiconsonantal: *pali*, *èri*, *pìle*, *ìeri*, *òro*, *óre*, *pure*, *nuòre*.

Now let us look at the contact between vowels. In the so-called rising diphthongs (*ìeri*, *nuòra*) the semiconsonantal element is relatively stable, but the other order (vowel—semiconsonant), which occurs in the so-called falling diphthongs, is on the other hand characterized by the possibility of forming hiatus. Words like *mai*, *poi*, *sei* sometimes have (especially in singing) a bisyllabic pronunciation because the semiconsonant becomes a vowel here. When we add that neither the combination *i* or *u* plus a stressed vowel assures the realization of a diphthong (*viòla*, *continüare*), it can be seen that unlike other languages (for example, Czech, where the glottal stop or a transitional sound may be used) Italian forms hiatus very frequently; it appears not only in the middle of a word but also between words in a sentence. And we may note that such contacts lead quite often to the formation of new diphthongs or to the omission of the final consonant. Fiorelli illustrates this with the following examples: *parrà oscuro* (hiatus or diphthong), *pare ovvio* (diphthong or hiatus), *pare oscuro* (diphthong), *quell'affare* (elision), *par oscuro* (troncamento).

We have mentioned the word *mai* and its possible bisyllabic pronunciation with two real vowels. I should say that we are not very far from groups in which a stressed (and, consequently, lengthened) vowel is followed by another, unstressed vowel, both being pronounced; with "one impulse of the breath" (I. C. Ward). Let us remember for a moment the English diphthongs and try to find some Italian words that might serve as counterparts. For example: try [*trai*]—*tràe*, now [*nau*]—*ciàco*, dare [*dæə*]—*dèa*. Considering the quality of the Italian final vowels and the character of the English mixed vowel, the comparison seems to be useful. Other examples may tell us something, too: mere [*miə*]—*mìa*, tour [*tuə*]—*tù* etc. The difference between *ma-i* and *mi-a* lies in the direction from one element of the group to the other. So one impulse is able to form a diphthong both in the word *mai* and in the word *mia*. Some Italian phoneticians are aware of this possibility and draw attention to it in their transcriptions (for instance, P. Fiorelli in *Le maître phonétique*) by indicating clearly the semivowels (*maï*, *miä*); the first element in such vowel groups is naturally more prominent than the other, so they might be interpreted as falling diphthongs.

When we were talking about the contact between vowel and consonant, we referred to the lengthening of the stressed vowel. Its duration, however, has nothing to do

with the so-called quantity which exists in other languages (in Czech or in Finnish, for example) and is independent of stress. While Czech, a language with the stress always on the first syllable, makes use of short and long vowels without regard to accentuation, the length of Italian vowels is only potential and is determined by their stress and position in the word. The "quantity" functions here as a prosodic feature.

DISCUSSION

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L'idée de M. l'abbé Falchun, prononcée tout à l'heure, pourrait être très utile pour l'étude de l'évolution des diphtongues dans les langues *romanes*, par ex. (Mentionnons, parmi autres, l'espagnol avec son influence des palatales sur l'évolution de la voyelle diphtonguée précédente). Nous croyons que cette idée pourrait servir de base pour un système entier de recherches concernant le développement des langues nommées.