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The Classification of Sicilian Dialects: Language Change and Contact

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1. Introduction

The role of prescriptivism in inhibiting language change and in imposing a reduction in variation on the basis of linguistic norms has long been acknowledged. This emerges most clearly in the contemporary situation of standard languages, where variation across different dialects of the same language has been subject to a (relatively) successful prescriptive influence and to attempts by prescriptivists to preserve the standard language. The situation is somewhat different, however, for lower-prestige varieties and minority languages: the lack of a standard, and hence of prescriptive rules, coupled with the influence of the high-prestige language spoken in the same territory, provide favourable conditions and sometimes even triggers for language variation and change.

This paper is concerned with the contemporary situation of Sicilian, where the traditional classification of its dialects comes up against cross-dialectal variation and the pace of language change. Despite constituting a distinct language of Italy, Sicilian has no official status and consequently no standard grammar or orthography. A significant number of differences, especially at the phonological level, allow the identification of several Sicilian dialects within the island: indeed, these differences have been used as the major criteria for the classification of the Sicilian dialects. In addition to the lack of a standard grammar and of prescriptive norms, Sicilian is in constant contact with Italian in a situation of diglossia: the two languages are used in different contexts and under different conditions by the same community (see Berruto 1987, Grassi 1993, Loporcaro 2009). Most speakers are bilingual, although one language is often dominant over the other; other speakers have learnt the non-dominant language not as native but as a second language or have only developed a limited competence in it, with sociolinguistic variables also playing a role. For the younger generations, it is increasingly Sicilian that is the second language, and its status is not particularly highly regarded within the community (see, e.g., Ruffino 2006).

The effects of the absence of norms and the influence of the complex language-contact situation are rather difficult to evaluate, and are thus often overlooked. In addition, little attention has been paid to the direction of language change and its specific processes under these sociolinguistic conditions of contact with no exposure to normative influence. Are linguistic innovations possible in Sicily? How are they transmitted or spread across speakers and dialects? What can the observed variation tell us about the geolinguistic representation of the territory? In this paper, I will tackle these questions with respect to the traditional classification of Sicilian dialects, showing how the dialectal groups are built on criteria that abstract away from variation and that often conceal the actual situation behind a veil of apparent uniformity. Upon closer scrutiny, it turns out that certain alleged innovations are in fact the result of the persistence through time of archaic features that have mostly disappeared under the influence and pressure of Italian, and only survive in a limited number of contexts. The picture of uniformity associated with the traditional classification of Sicilian dialects has reduced these features marginal exceptions. Dialects should instead be described on the basis of individual features with an attempt to capture their precise distribution and development: this approach to geolinguistic investigation would provide a better picture of the complex linguistic situation in Sicily, avoiding the definition of artificial boundaries for groups and subgroups of dialects, and capitalizing on the importance of dialectal variation for comparative reconstruction.

In Section 2, I will present the phonological criteria on which the traditional classification of Sicilian dialects is based. In Section 3, the limits of this type of classification will be discussed, both in the light of the understudied dialectal variation and in reference to an alternative explanation of some apparent innovations. I will, in particular, discuss the role of

the [-ATR] feature in explaining orthographic and transcription irregularities with respect to the traditional Sicilian vowel system, and in understanding some alleged deviations or readjustments in the vowel system of central Sicilian dialects. In Section 4, I will make use of this evidence to draw some conclusions about the process of change that may operate in the linguistic situation of Sicilian. In addition to the [-ATR] feature, I will also discuss other patterns of variation, both phonological and morphosyntactic, that may be seen as the result of mechanisms of convergence towards standard Italian. The main points of the paper will be summarized in Section 5, together with some final closing remarks.

2. The classification of Sicilian dialects

The criteria adopted for the classification of Italian dialects have historically been largely phonological. In his *Italia Dialettale*, Bertoni (1916) proposes a division of southern Italian dialects into extreme southern dialects and upper southern dialects mostly on the basis of phonological features. In particular, the 'extreme' area is identified by its pentavocalic system and by the further reduction of the atonic vowels, which are characteristic of Sicily, southern Calabria and Salento (see, e.g., Fanciullo 1984, Ledgeway 2016). Bertoni discusses some internal variation with regard to consonantal features of Sicilian dialects, but presents a homogenous picture of the vowel system. The metaphonic diphthongization of Latin mid-vowels was observed at an early stage in the literature (De Gregorio 1890; see Matranga 2016a), but it is only with Piccitto (1951) that metaphony becomes the major criterion for the classification of Sicilian dialects. Piccitto divides Sicily into two areas depending on the presence or absence of the metaphonic diphthongization of mid-vowels. The non-metaphonic varieties are then further classified into dialects with no metaphony and dialects with unconditioned diphthongization. Pellegrini (1977) accepted and adopted these distinctions in his famous classification of Italian dialects.[1]

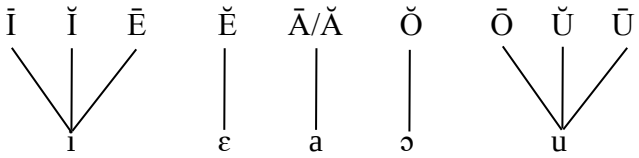
Different criteria or refinements of these criteria have subsequently been proposed. Varvaro (1979) adopts a historical and sociolinguistic perspective on the classification of the dialects, maintaining that the present linguistic situation in Sicily should be considered in the light of the diachronic processes of social and demographic change. Ruffino (1984, 1991, 2001) proposes a refinement of the linguistic map of Sicily that relies on a less rigid classificatory method, also taking morphological, syntactic and lexical criteria into account, and capitalizing on the distinction between conservative and innovative features and on different types of isoglosses. Despite these alternative proposals, Piccitto's classification remains popular, presumably due to its simplicity. Thus, while its unusual vowel system separates Sicilian from other southern Italian dialects, metaphony has been identified has a key property for the classification of its internal dialects.

2.1. Vowel system

The Sicilian vowel system exhibits three degrees of aperture and five phonemes in tonic positions, and two degrees of aperture and three phonemes in atonic positions. The evolution of the Sicilian vowel system from Latin is traditionally represented by the following schema (see Tagliavini 1962, Rohlfs 1966, Fanciullo 1984, Varvaro 1988, Loporcaro 2011, Ledgeway 2016):

[1] In this paper, I will not consider the non-Sicilian dialects spoken on the island such as Gallo-Italian dialects and Albanian dialects. For an overview of these dialects, see Trovato (2013).

(1)



In unstressed syllables a further neutralization occurs, which leads to the loss of the opposition between high and mid vowels in favour of the former. The only vowels found in atonic positions are therefore /i a u/. While what is referred to as literary Sicilian appears to consistently conform to this vowel system (but see §3.1 for apparent exceptions), several modern Sicilian dialects have undergone phonetic developments, resulting in vowels that seem to deviate from the traditional Sicilian vowel system. The close-mid vowels [e o] sometimes appear in published transcriptions of spontaneous speech or data elicited through questionnaires, although not in a systematic or consistent way. Rohlfs (1966: §29, §37) mentions some data from central Sicily, where the presence of close-mid vowels is conditioned by the final vowel: in stressed syllables [e o] are found when the word ends in a high vowel, but not if it ends in *a*:

(2)

a.	'neku ‘small.M.SG’	'krodu ‘raw.M.SG’	ka'rosu ‘kid.M.SG / boy’
b.	'nika ‘small.F.SG’	'kruda ‘raw.F.SG’	ka'rusa ‘kid.F.SG / girl’

Close-mid vowels are also found in contemporary writing, especially on social media and messaging platforms. In line with Rohlfs’ observation, native speakers of central Sicilian varieties would often write *nica* for the feminine singular and *necu* for the masculine singular, but also *neche* for the plural.[2] This shows that the vowel alternation obeys the context described by Rohlfs, i.e. that close-mid vowels are absent with word-final *a*, as well as demonstrating that close-mid vowels are also produced – or at least perceived as such – in unstressed positions. Interestingly, the context that determines this apparent irregularity in the Sicilian vowel system is the same as the context that triggers metaphony.

2.2. Metaphony

The characteristic pentavocalic system that distinguishes Sicilian from the other Romance varieties only remains intact in those areas of western Sicily characterized by the absence of metaphony (3a). In central and eastern dialects, metaphony yields the diphthongization of the low-mid stressed vowels /ɛ ɔ/ (from Latin Ĕ and Ŏ, respectively) under the influence of a high vowel in the following syllable, producing different outcomes in different dialects: a rising diphthong (3b), a falling diphthong (3c) or monophthongization to a high vowel (3d) (see Piccitto 1951, Piccillo 1969, Ruffino 2001, Cruschina 2006).

(3)

Ĕ-Ŏ >	a. 'bɛddu, 'bɔnu ‘beautiful’, ‘good’	b.	ié-uó (biéddu, buónu)
		c.	íe-úo / íə-úə (bíeddu/bíəddu, búonu/búənu)
		d.	í-ú (bíddu, búnu)

The Palermo area is characterized by unconditioned diphthongization of the stressed mid-vowels, which is therefore independent of the phonological context and the presence of following high vowels. This seems to be a recent innovation (Ruffino 1991).

[2] These examples were produced by speakers from Mussomeli. Speakers from different areas of the island commonly produce similar examples.

On the basis of metaphony, but with other phonological features also taken into account, the following dialectal groups have been identified (Piccitto 1951; see also Ruffino 2001 and Matranga & Sottile 2013):

Table 1: ***Piccitto's classification of Sicilian dialects***

no metaphony Western Sicilian		Palermitano Trapanese Central-western Agrigentino
with metaphony Central-eastern Sicilian	central	Madonie dialects Nisseno-Ennese Eastern Agrigentino
	eastern	South-eastern dialects North-eastern dialects Catanese-Siracusano Messinese

Two hypotheses have been formulated with regard to the chronological order of the metaphonic outcomes. Piccitto (1951) argues that the rising diphthong characteristic of the south-eastern dialects constitutes the oldest type, with the falling diphthong deriving from that through stress shift; the falling diphthong then reduced to a monophthong. This development is illustrated in (4):

(4) Ĕ > ié > íe (ía, íə) > í

Ŏ > uó > úo (úa, úə) > ú

By contrast, Palermo (1950, 1965, 1976) proposes that the most archaic metaphonic diphthong in Sicily is the falling diphthong of the central dialects (see also Rohlfs 1966), which later developed along two distinct paths: monophthongization in some central dialects, and stress shift on to the second element on the diphthong, thereby yielding the rising diphthong of the south-eastern dialects, as shown in (5):

(5)



Different outcomes are found in the areas of Catania and Siracusa, as well as part of the province of Messina, where the metaphonic diphthong is generally absent and, where present at all in a scattered distribution, it seems to depend on sociolinguistic variables. Piccitto (1951) postulates that metaphony originally occurred across the whole of central-eastern Sicily, and that in these areas it has undergone regression to the point of disappearing altogether in most dialects. The monophthongization that has affected some central dialects could also be seen as a kind of regression, which leads to the loss of the metaphonic diphthong, although in these dialects the metaphonic effects are still present (cf. *bedda* 'beautiful.F.SG' *vs biddu* 'beautiful.M.SG').

3. The limits of the phonological classification

Piccitto's classification of the Sicilian dialects is somewhat limited in several respects. First of all, it relies exclusively on phonological criteria, among which the vowel system and the presence of metaphony play a predominant role. As pointed out by Ruffino (1997), Piccitto's classification constitutes a major contribution to Sicilian dialectology, but it largely neglects phonological features other than the properties of the vowel system and it entirely ignores morphology, syntax and lexicon. Ruffino additionally criticizes the traditional classificational method, arguing for a different approach:

> "a more fruitful and less rigid methodological approach should focus not on delimiting (internally fluid and ill-defined) subgroups of dialects, but on individual linguistic phenomena. We can always delimit dialect groupings by more or less reliable procedures, but then we are merely focusing on the latest stage of a historical development rooted in the very distant past. If we consider individual innovations, or the persistence through time of significant archaisms, we can discern by what channels innovatory currents have appeared, or where the major barriers to innovation have been. Thus we may bring to light both the historical operation of linguistic and cultural influences, and the ongoing linguistic dynamics internal to the relevant area." (Ruffino 1997: 367)

The focus of the geolinguistic investigation should thus be on the distribution and development of specific features, individually, rather than on the definition of artificial geographical boundaries that are based on the present-day distribution of a single property. A method of this sort is certainly a more suitable way of capturing the complex reality of the linguistic situation of Sicily, which has been characterized by both gradual and fast changes (see also Matranga & Sottile 2013). The simplicity (and simplification) of Piccitto's classification has contributed to its popularity over several decades, but to the detriment of aspects of variation that have been largely overlooked or relegated to a marginal position. The mere task of classifying different dialects or varieties of the same language almost inevitably leads to approximations and to a reduction of complexity. In the case of Sicilian dialects, however, the traditional classification has additionally contributed to the neglect of those deviating features that are the result of innovations or of persistence through time. As pointed out by Ruffino, it is precisely these features that may shed light on the dynamics of the current linguistic situation in Sicily and on the historical development of some apparently unexpected divergences.

Overlooking variation in individual features creates difficulties with respect to the apparent exceptions: Are they innovations or the results of archaic features? Indeed, dialectal variation can be used for comparative reconstruction, in the sense of Loporcaro (2015). In what follows, I show that the emergence of close-mid vowels in recent attestations is by no means a new phenomenon, but is in fact the result of the survival and adaptation of archaic features.

3.1. 'Indistinct' high vowels

Deviations from the Sicilian pentavocalic system were observed in the very earliest linguistic descriptions of Sicilian dialects. By the end of the nineteenth century, several scholars had already highlighted the particular – almost indistinct – pronunciation of the high vowels in unstressed positions (Böhmer 1878, Schneegans 1888, Meyer-Lübke 1890, De Gregorio 1890, Pirandello 1891). The cause of this phonetic feature must be very old, given that the same studies point out that some degree of instability between *e* and *i* and between *o* and *u*, both in tonic and in atonic positions, was already present in old Sicilian texts. The precise nature of these vowels has been defined in different ways by the scholars who first described the Sicilian vowel system. Meyer-Lübke (1890: §123) claims that the height of Sicilian *i* does not correspond to that of the corresponding Italian vowel, but is to be placed between *e* and *i*,

thus explaining the great variation found in the written texts. De Gregorio (1890: §26) states that the quality of Sicilian higher vowels *i* and *u* is not clearly defined, sharing features with close *e* and *o*, respectively. In his doctoral thesis on the dialects of Agrigento and its province, Pirandello (1891: §9) attempts to provide a description of the phonological context in which *i* and *u* are indistinct and open. These are found in both pretonic and posttonic positions, especially at the end of the word.

The indistinctness of the high vowels has thus been observed since the very first descriptions of Sicilian phonology and phonetics. Visible traces are also found in the AIS. Despite Pirandello's contribution, the exact syllabic – and also geographic – distribution of this phenomenon has yet to be fully investigated. Drawing on data from central Sicilian varieties, in Cruschina (2006) I maintain that indistinctness of the high vowels must be phonetically interpreted as the [-ATR] realization of these vowels [ɪ, ʊ]: this realization matches their description as open high vowels or as different from Italian close high vowels [i, u].[3] In Mussomeli, Villalba, and surrounding villages in central Sicily, [+ATR] tense close high vowels alternate with [-ATR] lax open high vowels. Indeed, [+high, -ATR] vowels and [-high, +ATR] vowels (i.e. the close-mid vowels *e* and *o*) are acoustically very similar (see Calabrese 2005 and references therein). It is therefore not surprising that they are sometimes mixed up when described or transcribed, especially by speakers of a language that lacks a phonological opposition.[4]

[-ATR] high vowels seem to have played an important role in the transition from Latin to Romance, where the vocalic quantity distinction typical of Classical Latin is replaced by a qualitative opposition between open and close vowels (see Elcock 1960: 55-56, Tagliavini 1962: 189-195, Loporcaro 2011). Calabrese (2003) analyses the qualitative opposition on the basis of the feature [±ATR], which was absent in Classical Latin but then developed in Late Latin and in Romance. Romance varieties lack this qualitative distinction with respect to high vowels at the phonological level, but the feature [ATR] has been invoked to describe some phonetic alternations (Hualde 1989, 1992, Calabrese 1998, 2000, 2003). Loporcaro (1991), more specifically, discusses the robust presence of [-ATR] high vowels in southern Italian dialects.[5]

Various recent studies have explored distribution of the [-ATR] high vowels in central Sicily (Cruschina 2006, Savoia 2016, Savoia & Baldi 2016). In these dialects, the alternation between [+ATR] and [-ATR] high vowels is regulated by a process of vowel harmony which is triggered by a high vowel in word-final position and which spreads the feature [-ATR] to all [+high] vowels in the word domain with the exception of *a* (but see Savoia 2016, and Savoia & Baldi 2016 for a different account). Given that final *a* does not trigger [-ATR] spreading, the contrast is evident in the singular *vs* plural oppositions, as shown in (6) from the dialect of Mussomeli:[6]

(6)		SINGULAR	PLURAL
	thread	'fɪlʊ	'fila
	cloth	'tila	'tɪlɪ

[3] The feature [±ATR] (*Advanced Tongue Root*) is determined by the state of the root of tongue during the articulation of vowels. The tongue root can be advanced [+ATR], so as to expand the pharyngeal cavity, or retracted [-ATR]. See Ladefoged & Maddieson (1996).

[4] A phonological opposition between the [+high, -ATR] vowels /ɪ ʊ/ and the [-high, +ATR] vowels /e o/ is missing both in Sicilian and in the regional Italian spoken in Sicily.

[5] In Loporcaro (2011) the [+high, -ATR] vowels are treated as the underlying phonemic forms of the Sicilian vowel system. This system is thus different from that in (1), inasmuch as it presupposes that all Sicilian varieties have a pentavocalic tonic phonemic system (/ɪ ɛ a ɔ ʊ/) with [+high, -ATR] vowels which reduces to a trivocalic system (/ɪ a ʊ/) in atonic positions (see also Loporcaro et al. 2010: 80 on the dialect of Pantelleria).

[6] On the plurals in *-a*, see Rohlfs (1968) and Sornicola (2010).

wall	'mʊrʊ	'mura
female	'fimmina	'fɪmmɪnɪ
male	'maskʊlʊ	'maskʊlɪ

In these examples we can see that high vowels are realized as [-ATR] both in tonic and atonic syllables (cf. ['fɪlʊ], ['tɪlɪ], ['mascʊlʊ], ['fɪmmɪnɪ]), always at the end of the word (cf. ['fɪlʊ], ['tɪlɪ], ['mʊrʊ], ['fɪmmɪnɪ], ['mascʊlʊ], ['mascʊlɪ]), and never when the word ends in *a* (cf. ['fila], ['tila], ['mura], ['fimmina]). This is the situation for central Sicily, but very little is known about the presence and the distribution of [-ATR] high vowels in other Sicilian dialects.

3.2. Close-mid vowels and speakers' perception

The Sicilian pentavocalic system is characterized by the absence of the phonological opposition between open- and close-mid vowels, which is present in standard Italian – but not in the regional Italian spoken in Sicily – as well as in other Italo-Romance varieties (see (1) above). From a phonetic viewpoint, Sicilian mid vowels are generally described as open. In unstressed positions, the vowel system only comprises two degrees of aperture (low and high) and the three phonemes /a i u/: no mid vowels are expected. However, close-mid vowels have been attested in western and in central Sicily, both in tonic and in atonic positions.

Matranga (2007: 29–32, 2013) points out that variation was already present in the AIS maps with regard to the western dialects, where stressed mid vowels are almost systematically close. On the basis of data from specific western dialects, he tries to outline the contexts in which the close-mid vowels [e o] are found (see also Matranga 2016b, and Loporcaro et al. 2010: 80 on the dialect of Pantelleria).

Rohlfs (1966: §29, §37) reports the lowering of the high vowels [ī ū] to [e o] across a vast area of central Sicily where metaphony is present (including the dialects of Caltanissetta, Calascibetta, Villalba, Barrafranca and San Cataldo. The environment where this change occurs is the same as metaphony, that is, the presence of *i* or *u* in word-final position. For this reason, Rohlfs arrives at the conclusion that the phenomenon is to be attributed to metaphony. As Loporcaro (1991: 464) points out, however, the AIS charts show some inconsistency, in that as Rohlfs' transcriptions of these vowels for the localities 844 and 845 oscillate between [i], [ɪ] and [e] for the front vowels, and between [u], [ʊ] and [o] for the back vowels.

For the dialect of Villalba (AIS 844), Palermo (1950, 1976) describes this phenomenon as the opening of high vowels leading to the opposition between close [i u] and open [ɪ ʊ] high vowels, an opposition that he defines as similar to that found in English but that does not exist in Italian (see also Fodale 1964). Because of the context determining the alternation, Palermo (1976: 594) concludes that this distinction should be assumed to be connected to a metaphonic mechanism. Piccitto (1959) and Mocciaro (1980), by contrast, consider the monophthongization of the metaphonic diphthong as the preliminary process that then yields the lowering of the high vowels (see also Assenza & De Angelis 2013).

More data are needed to understand and explain the presence of close-mid vowels in western dialects. For central dialects, however, we can conclude that the orthographic inconsistencies found in the Sicilian texts and the different observations found in the specialist literature can be attributed to the same phenomenon, namely, the [-ATR] realization of high vowels. The presence of [-ATR] high vowels may indeed explain why some Sicilian speakers use the graphemes *e* and *o* in the current written rendition of the spoken language. In the absence of close-mid vowels in the phonological system, high vowels in the Sicilian dialects under examination might come to be pronounced as allophonic variants that exploit the available phonetic space. Under the influence of Italian, [+high, -ATR] vowels (i.e. [ɪ ʊ]) may

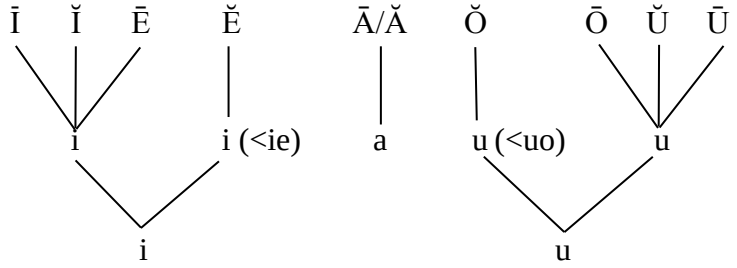
be perceived as more similar to [-high, -ATR] (i.e. the close-mid vowels [e o]) than to [+high, +ATR] (i.e. [i u]), and the lack of a standard orthography may well favour this perception. Interestingly, native speakers do not seem to be aware of the fact that the alternation only occurs with word-final high vowels, and use the graphemes *i* and *u* when transcribing Sicilian high vowels within words ending in *a* (cf. (2) above). For many Sicilian speakers, Italian orthography constitutes the sole writing system at their disposal. It is thus natural that they should adopt the graphemes *e* and *o* for sounds that are more similar to their Italian counterparts.

The inaccuracy of the transcriptions and the inconsistent descriptions of the data in the relevant literature has thus somewhat concealed the importance of [-ATR] high vowels. The role played by these vowels may in fact help to achieve a better understanding of certain synchronic and diachronic aspects of the vowel systems of the dialects concerned. Mocciaro (1980) states that the lowering of [i u] to [e o] in central Sicilian dialects (cf. Map 1 below) derives from a phonological readjustment that was necessary to distinguish between identical outcomes brought about by two distinct processes: /i/ and /u/ from Latin Ī Ĭ Ē Ō Ŭ Ū and /i/ and /u/ from the monophthongization of the metaphonic diphthong (cf. §2.2).

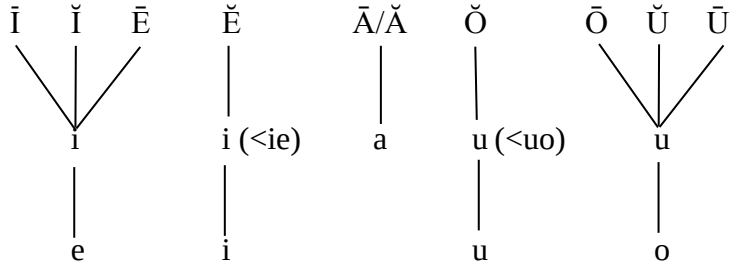
(7) a. (*muru* >) *moru* ‘wall’ *vs* (*muóru* > *múoru* >) muru ‘I die’
b. (*finu* >) *fenu* ‘thin, fine’ *vs* (*fiénu* > *fíenu* >) finu ‘hay’
(adapted from Mocciario 1980: 305)

Matranga & Sottile (2013: 223–224) represent the vocalic merger as illustrated in (8), which clearly yields a three-vowel system. They provide a similar account of the lowering of [i u] to [e o], arguing that this readjustment allowed the pentavocalic system to be restored, as shown in (9):

(8)



(9)



In fact, I believe that the opposition described by Mocciaro and Matranga & Sottile does not require a special explanation, let alone in terms of phonological readjustment, but is instead simply the result of the distribution of [+high, -ATR] vowels in central Sicily. First of all, as Mocciaro also accepts, the readjustment process does not take place with word-final *a* – she speaks of metaphonic conditions, but the environment should be in fact be described as the context that triggers the [-ATR] relaxation of high vowels according to the process outlined in Section 3.1. Secondly, it must be observed that in central dialects, vowel harmony is blocked

by the second element of the falling diphthong (Cruschina 2006).[7] As a consequence, the [-ATR] never spread to the high vowel of the metaphonic diphthong (examples from Mussomeli):

(10) 'muərʊ ‘die.1SG’
'fiənʊ ‘hay.M.SG’
'liəntɪ ‘slow.PL’

In the dialectal area described by Mocciaro, therefore, it could well be that in some or most dialects the tonic vowels (e.g. in *moru* ‘wall’ and *fenu* ‘thin, fine’ in (7)) are in fact not close-mid vowels ([e o]), but [-ATR] high vowels ([ɪ ʊ]), while the high vowel of the metaphonic diphthong remains [+ATR] after monophthongization.[8] It then seems perfectly possible that in a smaller group of dialects, in tonic position, the [-ATR] high vowels ([ɪ ʊ]) have been reanalysed as close-mid vowels ([e o]) as a perceptual effect. In this respect, it would certainly be interesting to verify more carefully, with the aid of an accurate acoustic and articulatory analysis, whether the [+high, -ATR] vowels are now realized as [-high, -ATR] (i.e. [e o]), as Mocciaro suggests, and indeed, how, more precisely, they are articulated. Even so, these vowels would still be a case of a phonologically-conditioned allophony: the allophonic realizations ([ɪ e], [u ʊ]) only occur in combination with a high vowel in the word-final position.[9]

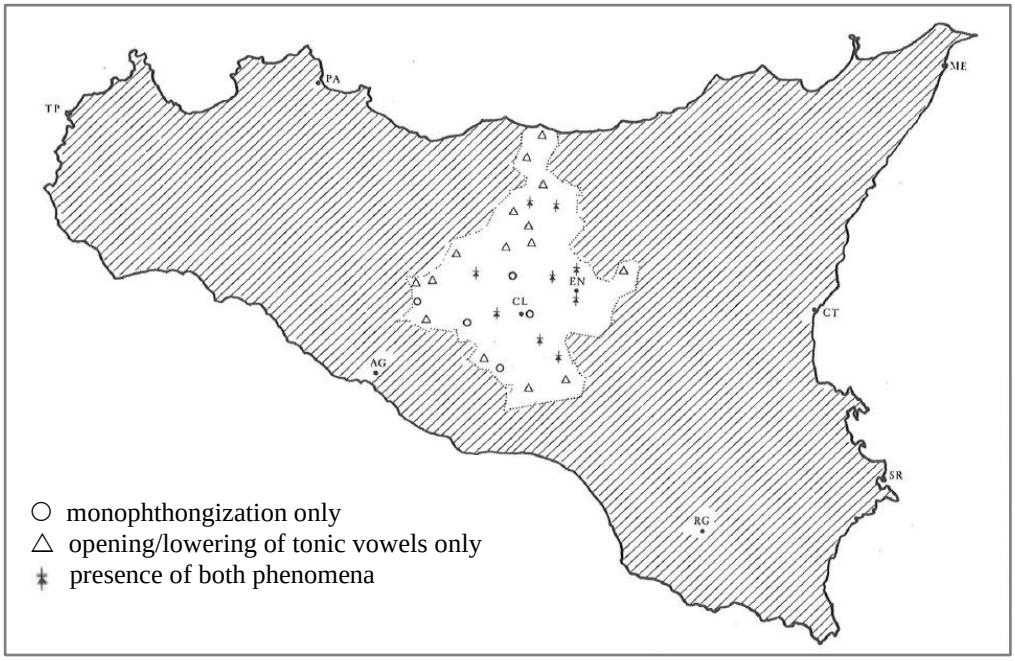
The present account is also able to explain the lack of full geographical overlapping between the dialects with the so-called lowering and dialects that exhibit monophthongization, as already observed by Ruffino (1984: 164, 2018: 11–12), and evident from Map 1:[10]

[7] In Cruschina (2006) and in this paper, I transcribe the second element of the falling diphthong as a schwa. It must however be noted that this sound is very often perceived, and hence transcribed, by native speaker as an [a] (see Piccillo 1969).

[8] It should also be noted that [+high, -ATR] vowels are found not only in tonic, but also in atonic positions. This has been described for the dialects of Villalba (Palermo 1950, Fodale 1964), Mussomeli (Cruschina 2006), Milena and Sutera (Savoia & Baldi 2016), and Pantelleria (Loporcaro et al. 2010: 80). The transcription problem discussed above (cf. §3.1) is independent of the position of the vowel within the word.

[9] Interestingly, in his study of the Sicilian dialects in songs, Sottile (2018: 111–113) shows that singers from the central area (Alessandra Ristuccia, Fratelli Mancuso, Pupi di Surfaru, and partially Mario Incudine) do not produce the metaphonic diphthong in their singing performances; they keep the open high vowels ([+high, -ATR]) in their pronunciation. This contrast could be due to a different level of self-awareness of the two features.

[10] According to this map, monophthongization is found in 5 localities (Santa Caterina Villarmosa, Campofranco, Serradifalco, Caltanissetta and Sommatino, all in the province of Caltanissetta), while *i* and *u* are pronounced as as [e o] – or most probably as [-ATR]) in our account – in 15 localities (Pollina, Castelbuono, Geraci Siculo, Castellana Sicula, Bompietro and Alimena in the province of Palermo; Resuttano, Villalba, Mussomeli, Acquaviva Platani, Milena, Delia, Riesi and Mazzarino in the province of Caltanissetta; Assoro in the province of Enna), independently of monophthongization. Only in 9 localities are both phenomena present (Petralia Soprana and Ganci in the province of Palermo; Marianopoli and San Cataldo in the province of Caltanissetta; Villarosa, Calascibetta, Enna, Pietraperzia and Barrafranca in the province of Enna). See Ruffino (2018: 11–12).



Map 1: The distribution of monophthongization and the opening/lowering of high tonic vowels in central Sicily (Ruffino 2018: 11)

The variable realization of [ɪ ʊ] as [e o] has more recently been reported for the dialect of Pantelleria in Loporcaro et al. (2010: 80), both in tonic (especially at the end of a word) and atonic positions (e.g. [ʊ/o vɪ'dɛːmʊ/-o] it/him.ACC see.PRS.1PL > 'We see it/him', [e/ɪ 'ntɪːsɪ/-e] them.ACC hear.PST.1SG > 'I heard them'). Since Sicilian lacks close-mid vowels, this lowering does not cause a collision. Note that the dialect of Pantelleria has no metaphony, so the realization of [ɪ ʊ] as [e o] cannot be attributed or related to a metaphonic mechanism.

Summing up, it seems that the confusion concerning the realization of high vowels in Sicilian is connected to the [-ATR] articulation of those same vowels – in a specific phonological context – and to the lack of phonological opposition between open- and close-mid vowels. This has led to differing perceptions of these vowels on the part of speakers who are dealing with Italian orthography and the Italian phonological system: they are perceived either as normal [+high, +ATR] vowels (i.e. [ɪ ʊ]) or as [-high, -ATR] (i.e. the close-mid vowels [e o]). This confusion has long been reflected in the transcription of these sounds. In some dialects (i.e. in the western dialects, and in the central dialects described by Mocciaro), perceptual reanalysis also seems to have yielded a further allophonic realization of the high vowels in the relevant context as [e o], more prominently so in tonic positions.

4. Processes of change

In the previous section, I showed that some of the phonetic properties of Sicilian vowels that have often been treated as exceptions or isolated innovations may in fact result from the persistence of an archaic trait, namely, the feature [-ATR]. Taking this case study as an example, let us now turn to some general considerations about language change in the special linguistic environment of language contact found in Sicily.

In discussing the role of the feature [-ATR] in Sicilian dialects, my main purpose has been to show, firstly, that the often far too uniform picture of dialectal classification is not reliable and, secondly, that variation may be the result of processes other than those traditionally described in dialectological studies. Apparent innovations or recent deviations from the established patterns may turn out to be the outcome of adaptation or survival

strategies of archaic features. Today, the [+high, -ATR] vowels ([ɪ ʊ]) are found in different parts of the island that do not seem to form a territorial continuum. From the evidence and the data available, one could envisage a situation in which this feature was more extensive and pervasive in older stages of the language and has gradually regressed under the pressure and influence of Italian on Sicilian. Indeed, as mentioned previously (cf. §2.1), the qualitative opposition between open and close vowels seem to have played a crucial role in the transition from the Latin vowel system to the Romance one (see Elcock 1960: 55-56, Tagliavini 1962: 189-195, Calabrese 2003). The feature only survives in those dialects in which it has been associated with and supported by a process of vowel harmony (cf. §3.1) or it creates a new phonological opposition (cf. §3.2).

Due to the gradual disappearance of these archaic features, the surviving remnants are scattered across different areas of the island, making it difficult to identify the geographical contiguity that is typical of processes of change such as levelling or territorial diffusion of innovations (see, e.g., Trudgill 1986). On the surface, thus, geolinguistic processes of innovation and spreading might account for dialectal variation within a variety, but in some cases underlying patterns might indeed be the driving force for the variation. Thus, a detailed analysis of a change and its distribution is necessary in order to identify and explain linguistic patterns.

4.1. Phonological convergence

The gradual loss of the [+high, -ATR] vowels could have been driven by the absence of these sounds in Italian: this would constitute a case of language convergence leading to the reduction or elimination of marked differences not between dialects of the same language (i.e. Sicilian dialects), but between languages in contact (i.e. Sicilian and Italian). Phonologically, this convergence process involves a [+ATR] articulation of the high vowels in all contexts, that is, the generalization of the only high vowels (i.e. [i u]) that exist in Italian.

In Italian dialectology, this type of convergence towards Italian is known as *italianizzazione dei dialetti* ‘dialect Italianization’ (see Berruto 1984, 1997, Sobrero 1997, Ricca 2006, Scivoletto 2014, among others; see Cerruti 2016 for an overview). For Sicilian, most studies have concentrated on lexical convergence (see, e.g., Tropea 1991 and Mocciaro 2011), but it has been shown that convergence in Italian dialects can affect all levels of the grammar (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon/semantics), although it is certainly true that lexical Italianization is stronger and faster (Cerruti 2016: 67). In Section 3.2., we saw that in some dialects, the convergence is not realized through the [+ATR] articulation of the high vowels, but rather through an allophonic replacement of the [-ATR] high vowels with close-mid vowels [e o]. This change also qualifies as a case of convergence, insofar as it is triggered by the speakers’ perception of these sounds, under the influence of Italian (cf. §3.2).

Language convergence cannot, of course, account for all the patterns of variation that characterize the linguistic situation of Sicily, but could be an important factor in determining the linguistic changes by which Sicilian moves closer to Italian as a result of prolonged language contact and the continual interference. If this hypothesis is on the right track, the source of the change in question is external, while the mechanisms of resistance that lead to different outcomes in different dialects are solely internal.

Other phonological features that present a fragmented and scattered distribution include the current outcomes of Latin FL and LL, which in many dialects tend to move away from the supposedly original realization towards sounds that are also available in Italian. Different sounds are found as the result of the development of the Latin consonantal cluster FL into Sicilian: [ç] [tʃ] [ʃ] and [j] (e.g. FLUMEN > çumi, tʃumi, ʃumi, jumi). Both Rohlfs (1966: §183) and Ruffino (184: 170) hypothesize that the most widespread sound was originally the palatal fricative [ç] and that different pronunciations have gradually replaced this sound in several

dialects. The variant [ç], thus, survives in a variety of locations across the island, but with a scattered distribution (although it is possible to identify some more compact areas, see Ruffino 184: 170). Crucially, the consonant [ç] is the only one of the Sicilian outcomes of Latin FL that is absent in Italian, making the other realizations potential cases of phonological convergence.

Most Western Romance languages changed Latin LL to palatal [ʎ]. In Sicilian, as well as in Sardinian, Salentino and Calabrian dialects, the general outcome is the geminate voiced retroflex stop [ɖː], which exhibits different variants in different areas (see Tropea 1963, Rohlfs 1966: §234, Celata 2006). In the Agrigento area and in other dialects, however, the retroflex stop is losing ground in the pronunciation of younger speakers to a more convergent realization of the sound as the geminate alveolar dental [dː], namely, to an existing sound in Italian.[11]

4.2. Morphosyntactic convergence

The examples discussed in the previous sections show that some cases of variation in Sicilian could be seen as the result of mechanisms of phonological convergence towards Italian. In this section, I explore the possibility that morphosyntax could also be subject to the same type of convergence. More specifically, I briefly discuss two phenomena: past tenses and proclisis on infinitives.

Unlike many other Romance varieties, Sicilian more generally employs the simple past form to express past tense (11), regardless of the time or the relevance of the past event being described. The compound past (12) is instead used not to "express recent past or current relevance, but rather durative or iterative situations encompassing the Speech Time" (Squartini 1998: 188, citing Skubic 1973, 1975; see also Mocciaro 1978, Harris 1982, Alfonzetti 1998):

(11) *Aju manciatu* tanti voti u piscispata, e m' *ha fattu* sempri beni.
'I *have eaten* sword fish many times, and it *has* always *done* me good.'

(12) M'u *manciài* oj e mi *fici* mali.
'I *ate* it today and it *made* me sick.'

Despite this general tendency, which has been attributed to the Greek substratum (Rohlfs 1969: §672) and which seems to have been a robust feature of the language since old Sicilian (Ambrosini 1969), the compound past is today widely used in eastern Sicily, with functions similar to Italian.[12]

The second phenomenon has been almost completely overlooked in descriptions of Sicilian grammar, with the exception of Ruffino (1984) and Manzini & Savoia (2005) (some fragmentary data are also presented in Leone 1995: 58). It concerns the position of weak pronouns that are proclitic with respect to the infinitive. Ruffino (1984: 173) exemplifies this construction with the infinitives following the final complementizer *per* 'for/to' (13a,b) and the preposition *senza* 'without' (13c) in its negative imperative function (see Leone 1995: 64).

(13) a. pi si lavari
for REFL.3 wash.INF
'to wash himself/herself/themselves'

[11] It is also true that the retroflex pronunciation of other consonant or consonantal clusters is instead being transferred from Sicilian to the regional Italian spoken in Sicily.

[12] I am not aware of any systematic study of this phenomenon. The evidence for my observations is admittedly rather incomplete and mostly based on personally collected data and judgements.

b. pi si maritari
for REFL.3 marry.INF
'to get married'
c. senza t' arriminari
without REFL.2SG move
'don't move'

In the dialect of Mussomeli, proclisis on infinitives is more generalized and includes indirect wh-questions (14a), and argument and adverbial clauses introduced by a preposition such as *pi* 'for/to', as in Ruffino's examples, but also *di* 'of/to' (14b).[13]

(14) a. Un sacciu cúəmu t'u diri.
not know.1SG how you.DAT-it.ACC say.INF
'I don't know how to tell you.'
b. Mi scurdavu di *ci* *u* diri.
REFL.1SG forget.PST.1SG to 3.DAT it.ACC say.INF
'I forgot to tell him/her/them.'

As Ruffino observes, this construction was present in old Italian and is still very much alive in other southern Italian dialects. Its distribution is however not entirely homogenous: it is present in the Agrigento area and, partially, in the province of Caltanissetta, but then displays an irregular territorial distribution in the provinces of Enna (Barrafranca), Catania (Biancavilla) and Messina (Capo D'Orlando, Ucria, Santa Domenica Vittoria) (see Ruffino 1997: 372).

While the functional extension of the compound past in eastern Sicily could be considered an innovation leading towards convergence with Italian, the proclisis on infinitives displays the typically scattered distribution of conservative features that survive under the pressure of standard Italian. As with the phonological features discussed above (§4.1), convergence could also be seen in this case as the driving force causing the disappearance of proclisis with infinitives (see also Cerruti 2016: 71). Interestingly, Manzini & Savoia (2005: §7.1) describe generalized and systematic proclisis with infinitivals for some varieties spoken in southern Italy, Sardinia, the Alps, and the canton of Grisons (see also Jones 1993 on Sardinian). However, for Sicilian dialects (Belmonte Mezzagno, Camporeale, Modica, Alimena, Leonforte, Calascibetta, Villadoro, as well as the Gallo-Italian dialect of Aidone), they provide data in which proclisis on the infinitive is limited – often optionally – to contexts with negation or with a wh-element in indirect questions, alternating with enclisis in other contexts (Manzini & Savoia 2005: 362–363). In these dialects, thus, the phenomenon of proclisis on infinitives only survives in the special contexts associated with a negative and/or an interrogative operator.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to outline the possible advantages of a different method of geolinguistic analysis other than the traditional classification. By carefully examining individual features in individual dialects, from both a historical and geographical perspective, it is possible to arrive at a more adequate and accurate account of apparently puzzling phenomena. The same data can also be used to better understand some of the processes of language change that take place in complex situations of language contact and lack of normative influence. We have seen that some variation patterns in Sicilian can be attributed to

[13] At any rate, enclisis is often an accepted alternative (i.e. *diritìllu* in (14a) and *diriccìllu* in (14b)). See also Leone 1995: 58) for a similar observation with respect to other dialects.

the adaptation of archaic features (e.g. the [-ATR] feature, and possibly also proclisis with infinitives) or to more or less recent innovations (e.g. the different realizations of the geminate voiced retroflex stop [ɖː], evolution of the palatal [ç], functional extension of the compound past in eastern Sicily). In both cases, the driving force seems to be a mechanism of convergence to Italian features (a.k.a. *Italianization*), rather than a process of spreading or diffusion from one dialect to another. This explains the irregular geographical distribution of some features, which survive in certain (conservative) areas that do not necessarily show a territorial contiguity.

The empirical difficulties encountered in the analyses and in the hypotheses relating to the phenomena discussed in this paper emphasize the need to collect new, more systematic data on Sicilian dialects, including from a diachronic perspective where possible. These data could be very important in allowing more thorough consideration of the historical developments and, ultimately, in understanding the conditions under which innovations or adaptation strategies can be admitted into linguistic systems as linguistic changes. Questioning the mechanisms behind changes, moreover, forces us to view them within the wider context of language contact, and in relation to processes such as convergence and dialect levelling.

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