Comparing prosody of Italian varieties and dialects: data from Neapolitan

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Abstract

The paper provides a preliminary, qualitative examination of the prosody of Neapolitan dialect (ND) as it relates to Neapolitan Italian variety (NI). Taking NI as baseline for comparison, ND data seem characterized by several phonetic-phonological strategies to enhance prosodic prominence, suggesting that phonetic parameters have a larger and more dynamic range of variation in ND than in NI. The data also highlight the interlacement between rhythmic, metric, and intonational facts, and the importance of sociolinguistic factors in shaping prosody. In particular, the larger variability of phonetic parameters observed in ND is likely to index dialectal speech as socially marked. We identify several prosodic discrepancies between ND and NI involving gradient features and tonal organization that call for further investigation. Future studies need to examine such differences in relation to sociolinguistic factors and consider the range of prosodic variation between Italian varieties and dialects spontaneously used by less linguistically-informed speaker. To strongly support our proposal, a larger sample of speakers is required.

Index Terms: Neapolitan dialect, Neapolitan Italian, phonetic parameters, double pitch accent, stylized contour, prominence.

1. Introduction

Italian is characterized by a widespread and longstanding standard-dialect contact, involving Italian as the official common language and local dialects or vernaculars. Such dialects are linguistic systems different from Italian, with significant divergences concerning morpho-syntax, lexicon and phonology [1]. Contact has made the boundary of the involved linguistic systems less neat, especially in spoken language, in which dialectal phonological features are absorbed by the Italian language - for which no real spoken standard was offered - feeding the phonology of regional varieties [2,3]. Note though that experimental investigations on the prosodic contact between regional Italian varieties and the corresponding dialectal varieties are still needed. In the present article, we provide a first contribution in this direction focusing on the case of Naples, Campania. Specifically, we examine the intonational and metrical properties of the Neapolitan dialect (henceforth ND), as well as prosodic features related to the segmental properties of the dialect and the corresponding Italian variety, i.e. Neapolitan Italian (NI) as described in the literature [4,5,6]. Campania, in the South-West of Italy, is one of the regions where dialects show a strong vitality and are present in all situational contexts [7,8]. Even if dialects are and have been under linguistic and social pressure from Italian [3], Campania still presents a widespread Italian/dialect bilingualism [9], since more than 72% of the population actively speaks a dialect [9]. In Naples, within the family environment, 45% of the parents report to speak only in ND, or else using ND more often than NI; another 24% speak both [10]. Although in recent years a number of studies on the Campania dialects have been published [11], the area is still under-researched. On the basis of speech material in ND and descriptions of NI offered in the literature [4,5,6], the paper proposes the main factors to be considered in analyzing the complex interplay of segmental, prosodic and sociolinguistic aspects playing a role in the contact of dialectal and regional varieties. The article is structured as follows: in Section 2 we present the available research on the prosody of Italian varieties and dialects, including ND. Section 3 reviews several relevant features of ND. In Section 4 we present the methodology used for eliciting ND data employed for the analysis. Subsequently, in Section 5, we comment upon selected examples showing relevant intonational and metrical phenomena that are likely to differentiate ND and NI. We then discuss the implications of our study for future research (Section 6) and draw the conclusions (Section 7).

2. Prosody of Italian and dialects

Prosodic research on the Italian dialects is still scattered. While scholars have investigated the rhythmic-temporal features of a several regional Italian varieties and dialects over the past twenty years [12,13], as well as the intonational properties of (mainly city-based) Italian varieties [14]), dialectal intonation has received much less scholarly attention up to now. Our present knowledge relies on a small number of studies conducted on a handful of dialects, adopting different theoretical frameworks [15,16]. Among them, [15] includes the dialect spoken in Ravello, which belongs to the Southern Neapolitan dialectal group. At present, to the best of our knowledge, the only available study on the intonation of ND is [17]. In contrast, NI intonation has been largely investigated [4,5,6,14]. An important research gap concerns the relationship between the prosodic systems of the dialects with those of the regional Italians. In fact, it is a widely held opinion that phonology, and particularly prosody, is the level at which a dialect exercises its most pervasive influence on Italian [2,3]. However, research on such influence is still scarce and we are far from having a complete picture of the prosodic features of dialect that are found in regional Italian. At present, there are only a few studies, e.g. [15,16], examining intonational contact between dialectal and regional Italian varieties and showing that Italian presents both patterns that are transferred from the dialectal level as well as innovations. Specifically, these studies indicate that regional Italian intonation cannot be simply reduced to transfer from the dialect. It also appears that the

effects of contact on intonation can indeed be pervasive, as shown by the contact between Italian and Spanish in Buenos Aires. In fact, the intonational system of Porteño Spanish underwent a profound reorganization due to long-lasting contact with some varieties of Italian (or more likely, dialects) spoken by immigrants [18], with effects lasting until today [19]. The present paper contributes to the strand of studies on the contact between Italian dialects and regional varieties of standard Italian, by zooming in on the case of Naples. Besides observing similarities, we focus on a range of prosodic and segmental-related phenomena which contribute to differentiate ND and the corresponding variety of Italian, NI.

3. Features of Neapolitan dialect

ND is characterized by several phonological and morphological features that are absent in Italian, such as, among many others, stressed enclitics (IT *dàmmelo* > ND *dammèllo* [damˈmellə] "give it to me"), unstressed vowel centralization and deletion (IT *avete (a)* > ND *avite>ata* [ˈata], [ˈatə] "you have to"), metaphonetic diphthongization (IT *ferro* > ND *fierro* [ˈfjerrə] "iron"), and widespread consonantal strengthening, often with a morphological function such as marking number ([aˈfatt͡ʃa] "the face" vs. [efˈfatt͡ʃə] "the faces") or gender ([oˈfjerrə] "the iron tool" vs. [ofˈfjerrə] "the iron") [10,11,20,21].

Such phenomena are likely to be relevant for the cross-linguistic comparison of rhythm and intonation, as they result in differences in syllable structures, stress position, syllable count and stress spacing in ND with respect to Italian. These phenomena are combined with another feature, i.e. the centralization of unstressed word-final vowels (>[ə]) [21,22]. Centralization becomes particularly relevant from a prosodic point of view in intonation phrase-final position [22], given that it is likely to affect intonational as well as rhythmic organization. The realization of the phrase-final unstressed syllable can vary within the same speaker, ranging from a non-weakened form (IT *casa*>ND *casa* [ˈkasa] "house"), to a form ending with a centralized vowel [ˈkasə], to the deletion of the final vowel [ˈkas] or syllable [ˈka] [21,22] which in both cases implies re-syllabification. In the dialects of Ischia, Capri and Pozzuoli (nearby Naples), such weakening is claimed to occur independently from the fact that the intonation phrase-final word is often the intonational nucleus [22], suggesting that it can affect nuclear as well as post-nuclear accents, besides boundary tones. This phenomenon has been related to rhythmic differences between Italian dialects and regional Italian [22]. Note also that intonation phrase-final weakening, when occurring, may induce a reorganization of the tune, given that phonetic realization of tonal targets (both in accents and phrase boundaries) is known to be affected by factors such as syllabic structure, position of the stress within the word and presence of stress clashes [23].

4. Methods

We ran a pilot experiment collecting a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) combined with a reading task, according to the methodology used for the Italian section of the Interactive Atlas of Romance Intonation [14] (N=260 utterances). The original Italian prompts were adapted to the cultural context [24], translated and presented in ND, in written form, as in (1):

(1) (Context) *Trase int'a 'nu verdummaro e cchiere si teneno 'e mmulignane*
"You enter a grocery store and ask if they have eggplants"

(Target sentence) *Tenite 'e mmulignane?*
"Do you have eggplants?"

For the comparison between ND and NI, we rely on DCT data previously collected for the IARI [14]. These include DCTs produced by three male and three female speakers, aged between 20 and 30 years, with university-level education, with Italian as L1. However, for this paper, we recorded new data from one male (FO) and one female (MU) speaker, both aged 45 years and born in Naples, and bilingual speakers of NI and ND, with university-level education. Due to the Covid-19 pandemics, the recordings were performed remotely using Zencastr (.wav, 44100 Hz).

5. Results

Based on a qualitative exploration of the pilot data, in this section we discuss several rhythm and intonation-related features of ND and NI, thereby providing a starting point for further research on the phonology of the two varieties and their prosodic contact.

5.1 Question and statement tunes

Given the long-standing contact between Standard Italian and dialects, it is likely that intonational patterns of ND are transferred to NI, parallel to what has been observed in other varieties [15], besides possible levelling effects which are known to affect dialects in the direction of standard languages [25,26]. A relevant case in this sense is provided by information-seeking yes-no questions in ND, whose tune seems to display the same rise-fall L*+H HL-L% pattern observed in NI [4,5,6], in which L*+H and HL- mark the beginning and the end of the focus constituent – Figures 1-2.
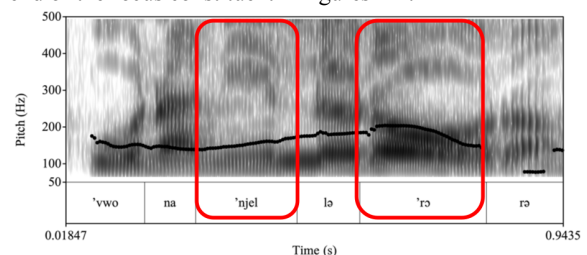

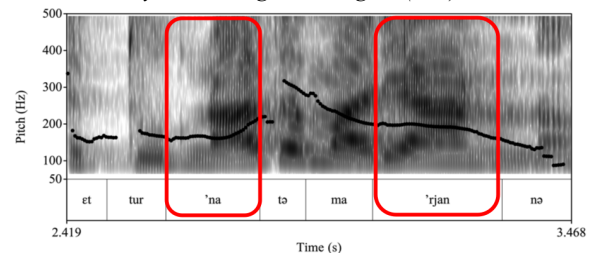Figure 1: *Information-seeking yes-no question Vuò 'n'aNIEllo D'Oro?, "Do you want a golden ring?". (MU)*

Figure 2: *Narrow focus information-seeking yes-no question: È turNAta MaRIAnna? "Is Marianna back?". (MU)*

Differences emerge, however, when comparing NI and the dialect considering the match between tonal events, patterns and their functions. In broad focus statements, NI presents the common Italian (H*) H+L* L-L% pattern which seems however less typical in the ND. In fact, in many ND productions, speakers use a pitch accent peaking at the onset of the nuclear vowel, which shows similarities with the nuclear pitch accent expressing contrastive-corrective focus in NI and

Salerno Italian, possibly analyzed as L+H* or H*+L [14, p. 160, fn. 12] and sounds as a falling accent. Figure 3 shows an instance of this accent, which occurs both in read and in spontaneous renditions of broad focus statements, suggesting that it might be the typical nuclear accent in ND. However, although such nuclear fall seems typical of ND, instances of nuclear H+L* can also be found, suggesting that Italian-style broad focus statements are indeed possible also in the dialect.
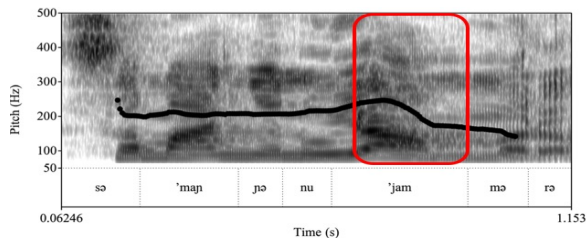

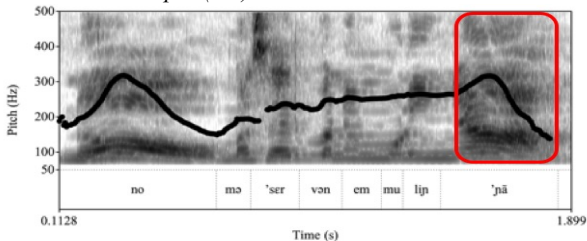Figure 3: *Broad focus statement: Se MAgna 'nu JAMmero, "She eats a shrimp". (FO)*

Figure 4: *Corrective focus statement: No, me SERven'e mmuliGNA(ne), "No, I want eggplants". (MU)*

Parallel to NI, in which a nuclear H+L* can appear both in broad and contrastive-corrective focus utterances [14], also in ND the nuclear fall described above can be used both context; Figure 4 shows a case of corrective focus.

A different match between pitch accents and functions has not only been observed in statements, but also in other sentence types. For instance, a nuclear rising-falling accent may be found in ND wh- questions different from the typical nuclear falling H+L* accent of NI [14]. Moreover, the fall, which typically occurs on the verbal predicate of many Italian varieties, (including NI) can be replaced by a pitch accent with a different shape. Both wh- questions features in ND are exemplified in Fig. 5. Note that, also in the case of wh- info-seeking questions, ND may show pitch accents different from NI (as in Fig.5) or it can show realizations more directly comparable to NI.
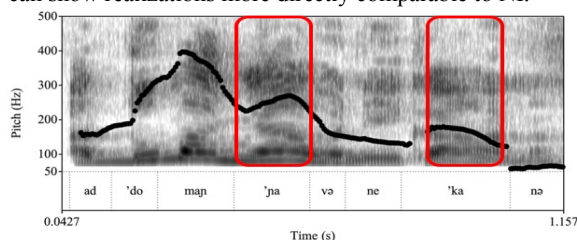

Figure 5: *Wh- question: AddÒ maGNAvene 'e CAne? "Where did the dogs eat?". (FO)*

Note that the picture sketched up to this point raises questions concerning the distribution of the different nuclear and pre-nuclear accents in broad and contrastive-corrective focus and in wh- questions in NI vs. ND and, more generally, on the match between tonal events/patterns and functions in these varieties. Since the two systems co-exist in a situation of prolonged and close contact, such questions about distribution of tonal events and patterns cannot be properly addressed without also taking sociolinguistic factors into account. Data on yes-no and wh-questions suggest that speakers of ND and NI possess a range of choices in the realization of yes-no and wh- questions, and can possibly orientate their production in the direction of Italian or that of the dialect.

Distributional facts and speaker choices can be expected to be deeply intertwined with social and stylistic variation, especially in a context such as the Neapolitan one, where dialect enjoys less overt prestige and is put under pressure from the local variety of the national language [27]. Prosodic contact is likely to have different outcomes when considering speakers with different age and education profiles, or different speaking styles. In this sense, a deeper understanding of the relationship between the prosodic systems of ND and NI cannot prescind from placing phonological and phonetics facts in a wider sociolinguistic picture.

5.2 Re-syllabification and double pitch accents

A known pronunciation feature of ND is the syllabification as hiatus of diphthongs such as /je/ and /wo/ realized as [i.e] and [u.o] [27], as in the word *scuola* 'school' /ˈskwo.la/ realized as [ˈsku.o.la]. Since this phenomenon affects the syllable count and can be accompanied by stress retraction (ex. /ˈwo/ > [ˈu.o], as in [ˈsku.o.la]), it can result in metrical rearrangements possibly impacting the intonational organization. In the dialectal example shown in Fig. 6, corresponding to a vocative initial call, stress (and accent) shift may be observed. The shift is realized thanks to a re-syllabification in hiatus of /ja/ > [i.a]; additionally, a stress retraction takes place, which makes the syllable [ri] a tone bearing unit available for nuclear pitch accent association.
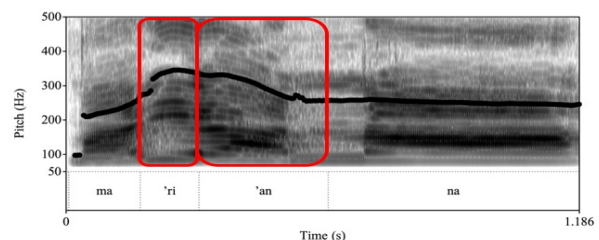

Figure 6: *Vocative "MaRIANna!". Double pitch accent. (MU)*

Note also that, double pitch accents have been found in vocatives, both in insistent calls and in first calls. In the cases at stake (cf. Fig. 6), the hiatus creates the conditions to restore the lexical stresses of the two nouns composing the name *Marianna*. As shown in Fig. 6, the syllables [ri] and [an] carry two pitch accents which are then followed by a downstepped high edge tone that is typical of vocatives. It is worth noticing that the restoration of the lexical stress of *Maria* > [ma.ˈri.a] creates a stress clash, which is not solved, but rather enhanced, by the double pitch accenting. As in the cases illustrated in Section 5.1, also here the single, later pitch accent observed in NI [14], which it is likely to be less socially/diatopically marked, can be found in dialectal speech too. Notice that double pitch accents have been attested also in other varieties of Italian (e.g. Lecce Italian [28]), while the re-syllabification in hiatus and the stress shift seem to be the more typical trait of ND.

5.3 Gradient features

As pointed out in Section 3, intonation phrase-final unstressed syllable in ND is frequently weakened to a different extent and

can even be deleted [21,22]. The deletion of the last syllable affects the tune organization, since in such conditions also the boundary tones are not realized (e.g. /muliɲˈɲanə/ > [muliɲˈɲna] in Fig.4). Note that both the stress shift in cases of diphthong re-syllabification (cf. Sect. 5.2) and the final syllable deletion are reported by [27] as socially low-marked features. This observation suggests that, also in these cases, a deeper understanding of such metrical and tonal reorganization phenomena cannot be achieved without looking at them through the sociolinguistic lens.

In other cases, dialectal productions can also present a strongly increased duration of the nuclear vowel (Figure 7), and possibly also a global increase of f_0 range or register. Such an extensive lengthening of the stressed vowel is not present in NI in comparable contexts, where instead the final unstressed vowel seems lengthened [29]. While in ND the duration of the nuclear syllable is visible in both read and spontaneous renditions, a difference in range can be detected between the two speaking styles, pointing to a possible gradient manipulations of pitch range to enhance the utterance's assertion.
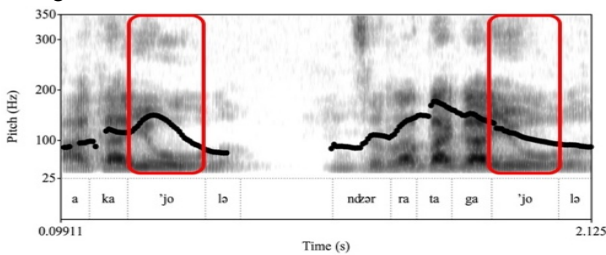

Figure 7: *Request/order: A caJOla! NzerRAt'a caJOla, "The cage, close the cage".*

5.4 Stylized contour

Both speakers MU and FO spontaneously produced stylized contours, also indicated as stepped or stereotyped intonation in the literature [30], in corrective focus contexts.
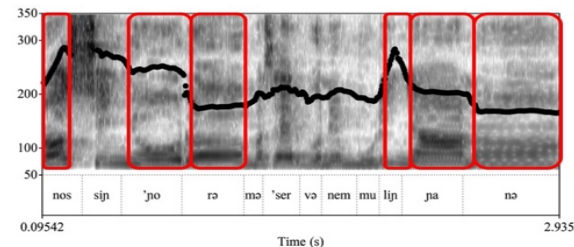

Figure 8: *Two instances of stylized contour in corrective focus statement: NossiGNOre! Me SERven'e mmuliGNAne! "No, I need eggplants".*

Such stylized contours consist of a three-step sequence on the nuclear word. This involves a pitch rise on the syllable preceding the stressed syllable, followed by a first low plateau on the stressed syllable and by another, lower plateau, on the final unstressed syllable (Fig.8). The realization of such stepped contour also involves durational features. In particular, both plateaus show a markedly increased vocalic duration, with the second which tends to be longer than the first. In the context of corrective focus, the choice of this stepped contour may be interpreted as a strategy to underline the speaker's expectation or her/his impatience. A similar stylized contour is also available in NI, but the range of situational contexts in which it is appropriated is likely to be more restricted. This discrepancy suggests that the stepped contour might be acceptable in a wider range of socio-situational contexts in ND compared to NI.

Cross-linguistic evidence shows that intonational choices may reflect the social distance between speakers [31], and that low social distance can favor more peremptory and less polite intonational patterns [32, 28]. Along this line, we can speculate that the assumed social distance between the speakers is lower when the language used is a dialect rather than a (regional) standard.

6. Discussion

In this paper we proposed a first, qualitative examination of a number of prosodic features of the Neapolitan dialect as well as a comparison with features observed in Neapolitan Italian. If we take Neapolitan Italian as baseline for comparison, dialectal data seem characterized by more spanned pitch accents (e.g. in broad focus statements and wh- questions), double pitch accents triggered by re-syllabification due to hiatus (as in the vocatives, cf. Fig.6), weakening/deletion of the phrase-final segment(s) affecting the tune reorganization or the pre-boundary lengthening, larger pitch excursion, marked durational increases of the nuclear vowel and a wider use of stylized patterns. Further investigation of the dialectal prosody will possibly unveil other dialectal traits, and are necessary to confirm the preliminary observations presented here. At this stage of the research, however, such features seem to share a common quality; they can be seen as facets of a phonetic-phonological strategy to enhance prominence. This can be supported by our findings, showing a boosting the phonetic correlates of accents and boundaries, as in the case of the increase in duration and pitch excursion, or by inserting additional prominences, as in the case of double pitch accents. Our data suggest that phonetic parameters such as f_0 and duration may have a larger and more dynamic range of variation in the dialect than in Italian. In turn, such features of phonetic variability are likely to index dialectal speech as socially marked. Note that both the relevance and frequency of dialectal features, even in the variety of Italian, might depend on the interplay of various factors, such as the level of instruction, the (perception of the) social distance or even the speaker's age. Our data also highlight the interlacement between rhythmic, metric, and intonational facts, pointing to a relationship between rhythmic/metric and intonational structure more complex than a simple one-way influence of rhythm on intonation [33]. Finally, the data discussed here also point to the need of taking carefully into account sociolinguistic factors and collecting (spontaneous) speech material that is representative of sociolinguistic variation.

7. Conclusions

In the present study we examined data produced by two cultivated, Neapolitan Italian bilingual speakers, who are well aware of the linguistic distance between the systems of dialect and Italian, and who were required to use the dialect in a relatively controlled setting. Such methodological choice was justified by the aim of the study, consisting in identifying potential features distinguishing the two prosodic systems. However, to gain a better understanding of the socially related variation of dialectal and Italian prosody, future studies need to leave the safe harbor of highly educated speakers and hence explore the intermediate varieties between dialect and Italian spontaneously used by less linguistically-informed and less linguistically-aware speakers. Of course, given the preliminary nature of the study, any generalization of the ideas discussed in this paper require data from a higher number of informants.

8. References

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