



DATI ALLA MANO

I Podcast

ITALIAN OR DIALECT?

In Italy, the percentage of people who speak exclusively or predominantly Italian in all relational contexts – that is, within the family, with friends, with strangers, and at work – is constantly increasing. But what about dialects? Are they still spoken?

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano, a podcast by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project.

In this episode, we will talk about the use of the Italian language and of dialects, and also about the knowledge of foreign languages by those living in our country.

How many people in Italy today speak only or predominantly in dialect? Less than 10% within the family and with friends, less than 3% with strangers and at work. And to think that at the end of the 1980s, the exclusive or at least predominant use of dialect within the family concerned about a third of the population and, in friendly contexts, more than a quarter. It is true that in interactions with strangers, the proportion dropped to just under 14%, but this is a significantly different value compared to what was recorded in 2024 by the survey 'Citizens and leisure time', which – we recall – is part of the system of social surveys we call Multipurpose. Since 2015, the use of dialect in work contexts has also been surveyed, and compared to nine years prior, that too is decreasing. But what do these numbers tell us? I asked my colleagues Marina Musci and Daniela Panaccione, who deal specifically with this topic.

Cristiana. Hello Marina, let's start with you. First of all, welcome.

Marina. Hello, thank you.

C. We have seen that over the years the percentage of people who use dialects, both within the family and outside the home, is decreasing... so are dialects disappearing?

M. No, I wouldn't say so, they survive. What has significantly decreased is their exclusive use in all contexts, which now only concerns 2.3% of the population. If we look at mixed use, both Italian and dialect, there has certainly been a decline in the last decade, but not compared to forty years ago, at the time of the first Istat survey.

C. So, no funeral.

M. No, no, the numbers tell us that dialects are still alive. Today, more than four out of ten people speak in dialect exclusively or in alternation with Italian in at least one relational context.

C. But the exclusive use of Italian is increasing.

M. Yes, that's the real change. Especially concerning very young people.

C. Interesting, tell me more.

M. Children and young people aged 6 to 14 are those who most frequently use Italian in all relational contexts.

C. Family, friends, strangers?

M. Yes, while the exclusive or prevalent use of dialect in that age group is decidedly residual: less than 2% in the family context and with friends, less than 1% with strangers.

C. Do we have data on the factors that influence these linguistic habits?

M. We can say that among younger generations, the use of dialect is strongly influenced by the family's linguistic habits. If Italian is predominantly spoken at home, 96% of children and young people between 6 and 24 years old use Italian.

C. And I imagine it's the opposite if dialect is predominantly spoken at home.

M. More or less, yes: 61% of young people exposed to dialect at home use dialect.

C. But in the case of dialect, the family's influence results in lower usage percentages... can we imagine the role of school as an important influencer – if you'll allow me the term?

M. Yes, I would say so. School has a historical role in the spread of Italian. And in any case, if we look at those aged 25 and over, the prevalent use of dialect is clearly linked to their educational attainment.

C. Meaning?

M. We are talking about those aged 25 or over. In a family context, 20% of those with at most a middle school diploma use dialect almost exclusively, compared to 2.7% of graduates. Then, in friendly relationships, the percentages decrease in both cases, but the gap between those with a middle school diploma and graduates remains.

C. To summarise: dialects are alive, but their exclusive or prevalent use is linked to age and education.

M. From a general perspective, we can say that. Then there are other variables.

C. For example?

M. For example, linguistic profiles vary according to geographical distribution.

C. Tell me more.

M. Let's take the North-West: just under seven out of ten residents speak almost exclusively Italian. In the Centre, the proportion is more than six out of ten residents. However, in the South and the Islands, the almost exclusive use of Italian applies to fewer than 4 people out of ten.

C. Indeed, the difference is significant. But since we are talking about territories, may I try to guess which region has the most widespread exclusive or prevalent use of Italian?

M. Well, it's easy....

C. True, it's easy. It's Toscana, which is the cradle of our language.

M. Exactly, but Liguria comes right after.

C. I didn't expect that. However, which regions have the highest prevalence of dialect?

M. As we were saying, they are found in the South, and in order they are Calabria, Sicilia, Campania. In all of them, the proportion of people who use dialect exclusively or alternately with Italian in the family exceeds 60%.

C. Thank you very much, Marina, for being with us. Now I have a battery of questions for Daniela. Hello Daniela, ready to answer?

Daniela. Certainly.

C. So, I was reflecting on the fact that in Italy there are also specific languages protected by law – there are several, but for example, Sardinian, Friulian, Slovenian, Croatian, Franco-Provençal, Ladin come to mind... but are they still widespread?

D. Yes, yes, these are realities strongly linked to specific territories; however, more than 3.7 million people aged at least 6 years old know one of these languages. That is to say, 6.6% of the resident population.

C. Do they know or speak them?

D. They certainly know them. Then, among those who know a protected language, almost one in two always or often use it within the family, 34% use it with friends, and just under 10% use it with strangers.

C. Listen, but how is the survey conducted? I mean, do people self-declare the use of dialect or a protected language?

D. Yes, thanks to a question that at the time – we're talking about almost forty years ago – was proposed by Tullio De Mauro.

C. A renowned linguist.

D. Yes, at the time De Mauro was part of the commission that designed the Multipurpose survey, which was then a single survey, whereas today it is a system of surveys.

C. A noble father, I'd say.

D. Yes, especially since the question has remained exactly as it was conceived. Over forty years, changes, reconsiderations, and updates usually occur, but that question, formulated in that way, still works today.

C. At this point, you must give me the full reading.

D. Certainly, here it is: Usually, in the following situations, do you predominantly use Italian, dialect, or some other language? This is the question, which is then followed by a table where it is possible to indicate the language spoken in different communicative situations, i.e., within the family, with friends, with strangers, at work.

C. Thank you, very interesting. But I wonder: how effective is a self-assessment of spoken language by those who answer the questionnaire?

D. Self-assessment has its limitations and its potential. It certainly encourages reflection on language, as one needs to differentiate the contexts in which it is practised. Then it is clear that we cannot know how pure or spurious the spoken dialect is, whether it's a regional Italian rather than a proper dialectal form...

C. Indeed, the language issue in Italy is complicated.

D. Yes, and there have been relatively recent periods when dialects gained popularity through literature and cinema.

C. Well, yes, just think of neorealist cinema. But speaking of historical periods, French used to be the foreign language studied par excellence, now it's obviously English, right?

D. Yes. More than half of residents know English, French is the second most widespread language, followed by Spanish and, at a considerable distance, German. Knowledge of other foreign languages is decidedly residual.

C. I imagine that the spread of knowledge of at least one foreign language is growing compared to past years.

D. Yes, definitely. Even if our level of knowledge places us among the last in Europe.

C. But how can that be? Foreign languages are studied at school!

D. Yes, Italians are the ones who study it for more school years compared to other European countries, yet the knowledge is predominantly at a poor or sufficient level... but there's good news.

C. Tell me, tell me.

D. Compared to 2006 and also 2015, the percentage of those who declare their level of foreign language knowledge as good or excellent is growing. In short, we are improving.

C. And we'll conclude our chat on this good news. Thank you for the information you have given us, and until next time.

D. Bye everyone.

So, we have seen that both dialects and protected languages survive in Italy. However, the prevalent use of Italian in all contexts is constantly growing. The knowledge of at least one foreign language is also increasing, and even if we don't perform very well in Europe in terms of proficiency, this aspect is also evolving.

I am Cristiana Conti, and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast from the Italian National Institute of Statistics.

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Are there any topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at datiallamano@istat.it

Marina Musci and Daniela Panaccione collaborated on this episode