

# Possessive with kinship terms: micro-variation in Italian and Italian dialects

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## Introduction

This study investigates the acceptability of constructions containing third-person possessives combined with singular and plural kinship nouns in adult bilingual speakers of Italian and several Italo-Romance dialects spoken in different geographic areas in Italy. In Italian, with kinship terms possessives may occupy a prenominal or a postnominal position and may occur with the definite article depending on the number features (singular or plural) of the noun and the position of the possessive. The prenominal position is the unmarked one. In the dialects, much variation is observed. Based on AIS maps (Jaberg/Jud, 1928), Rohlfs (1968) and Cardinaletti/Giusti (2019) observed that singular and plural kinship nouns may behave alike in both co-occurring with the definite article or both showing no definite article. In Veneto, kinship nouns are preceded by possessives without definite articles. In Emilia-Romagna, with singular nouns, possessives occur in prenominal position and the article is omitted, as in Veneto, whereas in the plural, kinship nouns occur with both possessive and definite article. In Tuscany, kinship nouns are always preceded by both possessive and article. In Campania, two patterns are found. In some locations, the possessive occupies the postnominal position and the definite article precedes the noun. In some other locations, the possessive is omitted, and the noun is only combined with the article. This study investigates the influence of some variables (plural and singular features on nouns, and the dialect spoken by participants) on the acceptability of the determiner and the third-person possessive in different positions. In addition, we investigate whether their distribution differs from what was reported in the AIS maps and whether the regional varieties of Italian have been influenced by or have influenced the dialects spoken in the relevant areas. Finally, we analyze whether the speakers' language profile and education level modulate sentence acceptability.

## Methodology

We collected data from 174 adult participants, recruited in different areas of Italy. In northern Italy, we collected data from Conegliano (Veneto,  $N=52$ ;  $M_{AGE}=45.06$ ,  $SD_{AGE}=17.83$ ), in the area of Mestre-Venezia (Veneto,  $N=15$ ,  $M_{AGE}=33.73$ ,  $SD_{AGE}=19.12$ ), Ferrara (Emilia-Romagna,  $N=36$ ,  $M_{AGE}=45.92$ ,  $SD_{AGE}=15.89$ ), and Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna,  $N=15$ ,  $M_{AGE}=49.8$ ,  $SD_{AGE}=14.55$ ). In central Italy, we collected data from the area of Grosseto (Tuscany,  $N=17$ ,  $M_{AGE}=33.29$ ,  $SD_{AGE}=13.21$ ). In southern Italy, we collected data from the area of Naples (Campania,  $N=39$ ,  $M_{AGE}=37.72$ ,  $SD_{AGE}=15.6$ ).

An online questionnaire was used to investigate the use of possessive in Italian and in Italian dialects. It included 6 items containing kinship terms: *cugina* (cousin.FEM), *fratello* (brother), *sorella* (sister), *cugine* (cousins.FEM), *fratelli* (brothers), and *sorelle* (sisters). For each noun, the participants were presented with four different patterns:

- PREN-ART: the possessive is prenominal and is preceded by the article (*Questa è Giovanna. Conosci il suo fratello?* 'This is Joan. Do you know the her brother')
- PREN-ZERO: the possessive is prenominal but the article is absent (*Questa è Giovanna. Conosci suo fratello?* 'This is Joan. Do you know her brother')
- PSTN-ART: the possessive is postnominal and the noun is preceded by the article (*Questa è Giovanna. Conosci il fratello suo?* 'This is Joan. Do you know the brother her')

- ZERO-ART: the possessive is missing and the noun is preceded by the definite article (*Questa è Giovanna. Conosci il fratello?* ‘This is Joan. Do you know the brother)

Participants were also submitted a battery of questions concerning their language dominance (Italian vs. dialect), using the Dilalic Language Profile by Procentese et al (2022).

## Results

In Italian, the most accepted form in the plural is PREN-ART in all locations, although Piacenza, Grosseto, and especially Naples also shows a high percentage of ZERO-ART. In the other locations (Conegliano, Mestre-Venezia, and Ferrara), ZERO-ART is less frequent. ZERO-ART is also frequent in the singular in Naples, and a high rate of occurrence is also observed in Piacenza. With singular nouns, the prevailing form in all locations is PREN-ZERO. The second most frequent form is ZERO-ART. The form PSTN-ART is quite infrequent in Italian. In the dialects, much more variation is observed. The form PSTN-ART is common only in Naples in both the singular and the plural. In the other locations, this form is either absent or very rare. The form PREN-ART is the prevailing form in the plural in almost all locations, especially in Grosseto and Piacenza. In Piacenza, this strategy competes with ZERO-ART. The form PREN-ZERO is the prevailing form in the singular in Conegliano, Mestre-Venezia, Ferrara, and Piacenza, as in Italian. In the plural, this form occurs to a lesser extent; nevertheless, it is well-attested in all these locations.

As far as language dominance is concerned, our results suggest that this variable may have an impact on some judgments provided by Veneto speakers. Moreover, formal education was found to have an impact on the speakers from the Veneto region and from Grosseto.

## Discussion

Massive optionality in the presence or absence of third-person possessives in Italian was found across Italy. The frequent use of ZERO-ART, in both the singular and the plural, was described by Rohlfs (1968) as typical of the dialects spoken in the southern Italy and attested in the Italian varieties spoken throughout the country. Our data, and especially the frequent use of this form in the province of Piacenza, are coherent with this description, thus advocating for a convergence of the dialects towards Italian.

In the province of Grosseto, the fact that speakers also accepted the form PREN-ART, frequent in the dialect, with singular nouns can be seen as an instance of the influence of the dialect onto the Italian spoken in this location.

Moreover, the fact that the dialects spoken in Ferrara and Piacenza show a frequent usage of the PREN-ZERO form with plural nouns is at odds with what is attested in the AIS maps, thus suggesting for an expansion of some traits of the dialects of the Veneto area towards south. Crucially, the fact that the results for the dialects of Ferrara and Piacenza are different from those reported in the literature suggests that the dialects are dynamic and have evolved autonomously and independently from Italian.

Finally, we interpret the fact that in Naples the form PSTN-ART is frequent in the dialect while in Italian it is not attested as a sign of the fact that the dialect does not influence Italian.

## References

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