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Elizabeth Horodowich
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Introduction

Discussions about language are always signs of other political and social changes. In his "Note for an Introduction to the Study of Grammar," Antonio Gramsci remarked:

> Every time that the language question appears, in one mode or another, it signifies that a series of other problems are beginning to impose themselves: the formation and enlargement of the ruling class, the need to stabilize the most intimate and secure links between that ruling group and the popular national masses, that is, to reorganize cultural hegemony.[1]

Gramsci suggested that concerns about the use of language betray deeper political motives and are always reflections of other cultural and social anxieties such as worries about class, gender, and power.

Gramsci penned these words in the early 1930s from his prison cell in Turi, a village outside of Bari, where Italian fascists had incarcerated him for his radical Marxist beliefs. Although Gramsci was not a historian, he was uniquely qualified to consider the relationship between language, politics, and history. He had studied the development of Italian as a national language as a student, and his education directly influenced his most fundamental contributions as a philosopher: his ideas about ideology, hegemony, and power. Gramsci argued that an ideology is not simply a system of beliefs, but is a shared group of ideas that ultimately justifies and benefits the interests of dominant groups. Ideologies work

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[1] Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, vol. 3 (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 2346. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

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More information

to legitimize the different types of power that different groups have or do not have. By hegemony, Gramsci meant the social infiltration of an entire system of values and attitudes that effectively supported the status quo in power relations. Hegemony occurs when the general population internalizes the culture and morality of the ruling elite to the degree that such values appear as the natural order of things. According to Gramsci, the growth of a unified, standard Italian language reflected the ideology and hegemony of the ruling classes of Italy. Constructing such a national language, he argued, was ultimately about something else: it directly represented the exercise of political power on the part of Italian elites.

In sixteenth-century Venice, a wide variety of individuals demonstrated an interest in or concerns about the words people spoke in public, ranging from official state magistrates to bread bakers and midwives. Such concerns manifested themselves in treatises, comedies, legal compendia, legislation, trials, proverbs, chronicles, and verbal exchanges on the street. The Venetian republic went so far as to create an official magistracy in 1537 – the *Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia* – for the specific purpose of monitoring and disciplining blasphemy in the lagoon city: an action that no other early modern state went so far as to take. The republic enacted numerous laws against verbal insults in the sixteenth century, hoping to prevent its inhabitants from insulting both each other and visitors to the city, including the Turks. Various state agencies demonstrated specific concerns about the public language of the underclasses and sought to prosecute the unruly tongues of servants in particular. Many expressed the idea that women talked too much, and Venetian writers furthermore paid a disproportionate amount of attention to the language of courtesans. Stepping back and observing this panoply of concerns about public talk raises the question: Why did Venetians pay so much attention to spoken language in the sixteenth century, and following Gramsci's musings, what deeper anxieties did these concerns betray?

Renaissance culture as a whole expressed a profound interest in language. To offer just a few examples, while classical and medieval writers had long weighed the sins and merits of the tongue, the Italian Renaissance witnessed an explosion of interest in this subject, producing a quantity and quality of discussion about social speech that had never been seen before. The Renaissance revival of classical antiquity focused obsessively on rhetoric, and the ideas of Aristotle, Quintillian,

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Excerpt
More information

and Cicero on oratory became central to the new canon of humanist learning. Based on these authors, Renaissance writers argued that the functioning of society, attributable to the art of language, relied on the power of the tongue to establish a common good. The smooth running of the household and city-state depended largely upon civil conversation, and the Renaissance educational curriculum trained generations of politicians and bureaucrats-to-be in the arts of rhetoric and oratory. Additional interest in language emerged in the debate that preoccupied many of Italy's foremost thinkers during the Cinquecento – the *questione della lingua*. By the sixteenth century, Italian had begun to surpass Latin as the language most frequently used in written expression. This, in turn, prompted heated discussion about the use of the vernacular and the forging of a shared language. What language should Italians speak and how they should speak it? What were the various merits of and differences between spoken and written forms of language? Such were the questions Pietro Bembo and others attempted to answer as they argued about the standard forms for vernacular Italian, similar to the process of developing a standard language that Gramsci later considered in the nineteenth century.[2]

Both the Renaissance focus on rhetoric and debates surrounding the *questione della lingua* suggest that during the Cinquecento, language came to be seen as a social rather than simply intellectual phenomenon. Other developments reflect this shift as well. For instance, conduct books that considered the art of conversation and the most effective ways to speak in public became highly popular in the sixteenth century, instructing Italians and Europeans alike on the practices of eloquence and verbal self-presentation. In addition, Tridentine culture was also deeply concerned about language and verbal propriety as a part of its program for spiritual reform, encouraging a new Christian modesty that included directives about measured and controlled speech for churchmen and laypeople alike. The second session of the council in 1546, for instance, decreed that whether it be during the performance of sacred services or at the dinner table, there should be no "idle conversation."[3] Alongside the Council of Trent, the Holy Office in sixteenth-century Europe worked

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[2] See Bruno Migliorini, *Storia della lingua italiana* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), 321–42, and Maurizio Vitale, *La questione della lingua* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1978).

[3] Rev. H.J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (London: B. Herder, 1941), 13–14, 105–6, 142, 152.

Cambridge University Press
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Excerpt
More information

to stamp out heretical blasphemy and aimed to delineate clearly the boundaries between acceptable and heretical statements, both printed and spoken. Early modern Italy proved to be so fascinated with and concerned about the tongue that printmakers such as Cesare Vecellio and Nicoletto da Modena went so far as to depict this unruly organ in their prints and engravings. The Italian Renaissance interest in language can be explained at least in part, we shall see, as a result of Italians' sense of disenfranchisement in an age of foreign invasions and humiliation. As the Hapsburgs in particular placed much of Italy under their control in the course of the sixteenth century, Italian discussions about language were in part a manifestation of their sense of humiliation. Italian elites hoped to shore up their status by proving the nobility of their behavior and language in particular.

Some of this general background explains how and why Venetians paid so much attention to public speech. The *questione della lingua*, for instance, was deeply embedded in Venetian culture. The Venetian press was the largest in sixteenth-century Europe, publishing between 15,000 to 17,500 editions in the sixteenth century alone, which represented half or more of all the books printed in Cinquecento, Italy. Based on these figures, the literary scholar Carlo Dionisotti has argued that in this period, "Italian literature developed on a generally northern and specifically Venetian basis."[4] Many of these Venetian publications considered the specific questions of grammar, dialect, rhetoric, and pronunciation, and Venetian authors contributed significantly to this discussion; Giovan Francesco Fortunio, Iacomo Gabriele, Giulio Camillo, and Giangiorgio Trissino – among the first and most influential writers on Italian grammar – all lived and worked in Venice and the Veneto.[5] Furthermore, two texts fundamental to the history of Italian were first published in sixteenth-century Venice: the Aldine publication of the work of Petrarch in 1501, edited by Pietro Bembo; and the 1525 Aldine publication of Bembo's

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[4] Carlo Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), 170–71. See also Paul Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540–1605* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xvii, 6, and Migliorini, *Storia della lingua italiana*, 295.

[5] Migliorini, *Storia della lingua italiana*, 328–32. On the Venetian contribution to the *questione della lingua*, see the articles by Mazzacurati, Aquilecchia, Floriani, and Cortelazzo in *Storia della cultura veneta: Dal primo quattrocento al Concilio di Trento*, vol. 3:2, ed. Girolamo Arnaldi and Manlio Pastore Stocchi (Vicenza: Neri Pozzi, 1980).

Cambridge University Press
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Excerpt
More information

own *Prose della volgar lingua*, which became the standard manual for sixteenth-century vernacular forms. Language – both its production as well as debates about its spoken and written use – was clearly at the center of Venetian concerns and commercial life. These linguistic concerns in literary and print culture did not necessarily reflect the same anxieties that arose about oral language and public speech; nevertheless, the world of the Venetian presses turned up the volume of these debates and drew the attentions of the city to debates about language. In addition, Venetian and Italian debates about the *questione* illuminate connections between language and political control. As Antonio Gramsci explained, the *questione* "was a reaction by intellectuals against the breakup of the political unity that had existed in Italy under the name of the 'equilibrium of Italian states' . . . and represents the attempt, that we can say was largely successful, to preserve and strengthen a harmonious intellectual class."[6]

A fuller explanation of Venetian concerns about spoken language, however, demands a more careful exploration of political, cultural, and social life in lagoon city itself. Ultimately, Venetian concerns about speech in the sixteenth century were direct expressions of Venetian statecraft. Directives about public talk reflected the desire to articulate more clearly what the social, economic, and political boundaries of the state were and to patrol and strengthen those boundaries against the incursions of outsiders. That is to say, a crucial but largely unrecognized component of statebuilding, in Venice and perhaps in other states as well, was the management of public speech: controlling unruly verbal outbursts and teaching citizens the rules of proper verbal comportment.

Charles Tilly has defined states, the world's most powerful form of association for thousands of years, as "coercion-wielding organizations that are distinct from households and kinship groups and exercise clear priority in some respects over all other organizations within substantial territories."[7] Such a definition remains controversial in the way that it is limiting; states are both bigger and smaller, more and less, than this. There exist national states that are centralized and autonomous, but also supra-national states such as empires and city-states that are more

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[6] Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 2350.

[7] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 1.

Cambridge University Press
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Elizabeth Horodowich
Excerpt
More information

expansive and diverse. There are nation-states whose inhabitants claim to share strong linguistic, religious, and symbolic ties, or modern welfare states that work to re-distribute and equalize income in the hopes of bettering their societies. Some of the issues that have tended to dominate the study of states have, for instance, tried to explain the variety of states that have developed, or by contrast, their general convergence into the nation-state model in the West. They have developed and then destroyed assumptions that all developing states follow one main path towards a nation-state.[8] The interest of this study, by contrast, is more modest, or rather, more focused; it by no means proposes to give any kind of complete account of statebuilding or enter into these larger debates that surround it. It aims instead to focus on one of the building blocks or mechanisms by which states form and function: language.

Historians have typically described state formation as the cause and result of a number of standard institutional activities such as organizing taxation and military conscription more efficiently, developing a more elaborate bureaucracy and unified judiciary system, wielding greater control over both civic policing and the food supply, and perhaps most importantly, waging war. Amidst these factors reflecting and encouraging the development of the state, several studies have pointed to language as an additional ingredient, though few have actually investigated this concept of them with any depth. For instance, Jacob Burckhardt argued that because Italy in the early modern period did not have a king or a divinely appointed ruler, its states constructed their legitimacy by other means, such as through behavior or language. In his discussion of "The State as a Work of Art," Burckhardt claimed that because the foundation of the Italian states remained illegitimate, "the nobility, though by birth a caste, were forced in social intercourse to stand upon their personal qualifications alone."[9] For this reason, "the demeanour of individuals and all

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[8] In addition to Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N.L.B., 1974); Thomas Ertman, *The Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[9] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 70. See also Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1000–1600* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 202.

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Excerpt
More information

the higher forms of social intercourse became ends pursued with a deliberate and artistic purpose" (2:361). As a result, language in Italy became "the basis of social intercourse" and "an object of respect" because "people of every origin . . . spent their time in conversation and the polished interchange of jest and earnest" (2:371–76). In addition, scholars have demonstrated how the linguistic academies that first appeared in Northern Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, such as the *Accademia Fiorentina* or *Accademia della Crusca*, were both a cause and effect of the formation of early modern states.[10] Pierre Bourdieu also posited that an "official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. It is in the process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language."[11] As one further example, James Scott has argued that of the many tools that governments use to make a state "legible" – the use of standard weights and measures, population registers, the construction of a standard legal discourse, or the organization of transportation – the construction of a shared, normative language "may be the most powerful, and it is the precondition of many other simplifications" that allow a state to monitor its population and facilitate interventions for taxation, conscription, public health, and political surveillance more effectively.[12] All these ideas suggest, as Gramsci posited, that political domination is reproduced and reinforced by linguistic domination.

The ideas of Bourdieu, Scott, or Gramsci may at first appear problematic when applied to the early modern period, but this is not irreparably the case. Their arguments primarily concern the form of language – grammar, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary – more than its content. However, this study will demonstrate that a normative language, especially as it was conceived of by early modern thinkers, is also content based, comprised of ideas about manners and propriety as much as grammar or pronunciation. Considering the construction of a normative

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[10] See Eric Cochrane, "The Renaissance Academies in their Italian and European Setting," in *The Fairest Flower: The Emergence of Linguistic National Consciousness in Renaissance Europe* (Florence: Presso l'accademia [della Crusca], 1985), 23.

[11] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 45.

[12] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale Unviersity Press, 1998), 1–8, 72–3.

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Elizabeth Horodowich
Excerpt
More information

language more broadly in this way, such theories have much to say about Renaissance Venice. It remains difficult to prove any clear or specific connections between the disciplining of language and, for instance, the improvement of taxation or conscription in early modern Venice, as Scott would argue there should be. However, the Venetian republic on several occasions passed laws to discourage unruly language from disrupting trade, and the promotion of a language of civility worked to reduce a chaotic, disorderly society to something more closely resembling administrative order. Enforcing linguistic civility was crucial to the maintenance of civic peace and the prevention of rebellions – significant in that one of the most unique aspects of Venice's history was its notable lack of organized, civic violence. If Venice was peaceful and therefore a good place to do business, perhaps this had something to do with its maintenance of verbal order.

How do Italy and Venice fit into traditional narratives about the development of European states? Many of the factors leading to stronger states – the growth of bureaucracies and military conscription, for instance – began to occur simultaneously in many European states in the early modern world, which is why many historians point to the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries as crucial in European state formation. Specifically, in this period, absolutism emerged to become the first international state system in the modern world.[13] During this time, the centralized monarchies of France, England, and Spain ruptured the pyramid style sovereignty of medieval social formation by centralizing and militarizing their power. Italy, by contrast, did not develop an absolutist state and was characterized more by localized urban and courtly cultures, as Burckhardt first pointed out.[14] Historians have traditionally tended to concur that Italian states developed some, but not most or all, of the institutions necessary to the absolutist state. For instance, Florence developed an institutionalized bureaucracy but not a standing army. Venetians managed to dominate their own hinterland and

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[13] Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 11, 48; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, 81.

[14] Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, vol. 2, 334–37. On state development in Italy, see Giorgio Chittolini and Anthony Molho, *Origini dello stato: Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo e età moderna* (Bologna: Mulino, 1994), and Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

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Excerpt
More information

occupy an international maritime market, providing the capital necessary for statebuilding, and the early modern city similarly witnessed the creation and growth of numerous bureaucratic institutions to confront the burdens and responsibilities of the growing state.[15] However, Venice never adopted absolutist politics; until Napoleon invaded the city in 1797, the Venetian state represented a peculiar mix of republicanism and aristocracy in its politics. It was a republic in name, in that political decisions were made by voting in its Great Council, but the Great Council and other governing bodies such as the senate were all controlled by a hereditary caste of some 2,500 nobles whose membership had been officially closed in 1297.[16] Historians such as Anthony Molho have often insisted on seeing Italian city-states, including Venice, as "anti-modernist" or personalistic, built on patron-client tires rather than on a "rational" bureaucracy of impersonal citizens.[17]

Furthermore, the Venetian state ultimately failed to become a fully "modernized" state because of its relatively small size. Capitalism stagnated in Venice and Italy in general became overwhelmed by more enterprising Atlantic societies. Venice and other Italian states could not compete with the armies or commercial capital accumulated by their larger European neighbors. According to this narrative, Venice and Italy at large

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[15] Gaetano Cozzi, *Religione, moralità e giustizia a Venezia: Vicende della magistratura degli esecutori contro la bestemmia* (Padua: Cooperativa Libraria Editrice degli Studenti dell'Università di Padova, 1967–68), 1. Cozzi has similarly argued that the growth of the authority of the Venetian Council of Ten eclipsed the forces of more egallitarian law of the *Avogaria di Comun* in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reflecting the enhanced powers of a centralizing state. See Gaetano Cozzi, "Authority and Law in Renaissance Venice," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J.R. Hale (London: Kaber and Kaber, 1973), 293–345.

[16] On the Venetian constitution and government, see Gasparo Contarini, *De magistratibus et republica venetorum libri qinque* (Venice, 1551), 19–22, 63–65, and Andrea da Mosto, *L'Archivio di stato di Venezia: Indice generale, storico, descrittivo ed analitico*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1937–40), especially 21–38.

[17] See Anthony Molho, "Cosimo de Medici: *Pater Patriae or Padrino*?" *Stanford Italian Review* 1 (1979): 5–33, and "Patronage and the State in Early Modern Italy," in *Klientelsysteme im Europa der fruhen Neuzeit*, ed. Antoni Maczak (Munich: Verlag, 1988), 91–115. See also Gene Brucker, "Civic Traditions in Premodern Italy," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (1999): 357–77, and Philip Gavitt, "Charity and State Building in Cinquecento Florence: Vincenzo Borghini as Administrator of the Ospedale degli Innocenti," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 230–70. These are all Florentine examples that argue, for example, that Florence's charitable institutions and bureaucracy did not beocme "modernized" or "rationalized" but rather enmeshed in patron-client relations. Venice had a similar system of patron-client relations that, as the argument goes, made the state more personalistic and the bureaucracy less "rationalized" than other states.

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978-0-521-89496-8 - Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice
Elizabeth Horodowich
Excerpt
More information

failed to become England, and therefore became backwards and decadent. Such questions about modernization and the state have tended to die down, in part because historians have come to view them as too teleological and in part because more recent generations of historians do not find Italy in the early modern and modern world to be at all decadent. Nonetheless, this is the traditional portrait that historians have long painted of both Italy as a whole and the Venetian state more specifically.

Although this is useful background, these narratives have limited meaning, especially for this study. As Karl Appuhn has pointed out, such accounts "equate a particular set of institutions with efficiency, modernity, and power, thus excluding the possibility that other state and institutional organizations might also be effective and modern."[18] A close look at the relationship between speech and the state in Venice affirms Appuhn's point, because it demonstrates that language – a force not usually considered as contributing to state efficiency or power – played an important role in Venetian statecraft. What I argue, however, is essentially outside of the debates and narratives through which historians have traditionally described the state. How modern or anti-modern the Venetian state was, how like or unlike other states, is not in question here. Regardless of whether Venice successfully emulated the models of state formation offered by other absolutist states or resisted such modernizing processes in favor of its own anti-modern model, what I aim to demonstrate is that the construction of a normative language was a tool of statecraft – until now largely overlooked – that enabled the Venetian state to directly affect the behavior of its citizens. Pulling together a variety of government initiatives about language in Venice – usually treated as disparate but here treated as a consistent program – advances our understanding of the practices of Renaissance statecraft.

Language may play more of a role in the formation of some states than others: perhaps more in republics than absolute monarchies, or maybe the reverse. It may have played a greater role in the national states of the nineteenth century that Gramsci studied than in the pre-modern forms of states that preceded them. Although this study will draw comparisons

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[18] Karl Appuhn, "Inventing Nature: Forests, Forestry, and State Power in Renaissance Venice," *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 863. See also Julius Kirshner, ed., *The Origins of the State in Italy, 1300–1600* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).