

## Accents and Pronunciation

Attitudes of Italian University Students of Languages

edited by David Newbold and Peter Paschke

# Learner Profiles and Attitudes Towards Accent in the Foreign Language

## The Role of Language Backgrounds

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**Abstract** This paper is part of collaborative research investigating the attitudes of first-year university students in Italy towards foreign accents. It examines the first part of the survey which aims to define the students' identity and language profile. The analysis focuses on the characteristics of the group which are hypothesised to correlate with students' attitudes towards foreign accents examined in the other sections of the questionnaire. Factors that could have an impact are gender, motivation for studying languages, bi-/plurilingualism, the nature of the languages studied, the language repertoire and the background of its acquisition.

**Keywords** Second language acquisition. Language learner profiles. Foreign accent perception. University language learners. Language backgrounds.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Description of the Sample and Its Representativeness. – 2.1 Age. – 2.2 The Declared Gender. – 2.3 High School Education. – 2.4 Languages Studied at the University. – 2.5 Languages Studied at School. – 2.6 Final Comments on Section 2. – 3 Language Biography and Research Questions. – 3.1 The Impact of Gender. – 3.1.1 Literature Review. – 3.1.2 Analysis of Responses in Questionnaire (Question A1). – 3.2 The Impact of Motivation. – 3.2.1 Review of the Literature. – 3.2.2 Analysis of Responses. – 3.3 The Impact of Bilingualism. – 3.3.1 Review of the Literature. – 3.3.2 Responses Concerning Bilingualism. – 3.3.3 Discussion. – 3.3.4 Final Comments on Section 3.3. – 3.4 The Impact of the Languages Studied. – 4 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

This chapter is part of a collaborative research project linked to the ‘Project of Excellence’ of the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies of Ca’ Foscari University and specifically the branch of the project which deals with plurilingualism and socio-linguistics. Our specific research focuses on “Accents and Pronunciation. Attitudes of Italian University Students of Languages”. It is a cross-linguistic research project because it brings together researchers of German, English, Spanish, French and Russian who have in common a homogeneous population of native or acquired Italian speakers enrolled in an academic language course. The shared focus of interest was the nature and perception of the ‘foreign accent’. The originality of the project was to work on the perception that students who enter university to study languages have of foreign accents in general, both the accent of other people who speak their language - mainly Italian - or their own accent in the languages of their own repertoire in a process of self-evaluation. The researchers wanted to understand the importance given to pronunciation by learners, the possible existence of stereotypes, and the influence that the languages they are learning might have on representations of the accent. All responses were linked to the background of the respondents. The first task undertaken by the research team was to design a questionnaire that was submitted to two cohorts of students in 2019 and 2020. We refer to the article by Arroyo Hernández (2020) for a presentation and discussion of the questionnaire.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we analyse in more detail the nature of the survey sample based on the responses to the first part of the questionnaire (Section A). We check the representativeness of the sample in relation to the total number of students enrolled, we compile a picture of the linguistic biography of the students interviewed and we discuss the influence certain features of linguistic biography might have on the answers in other parts of the questionnaire: Section B about opinions on foreign language pronunciation and accent in general, Sections C and D about self-assessment and opinions about one’s own accent when speaking the languages studied at university and Section E on English as a lingua franca. The other chapters in this volume will focus on the analysis of these sections.

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I would like to thank other members of the research group *Accento straniero in studenti universitari di lingue straniere*, and in particular, Peter Paschke for his critical eye on my analysis and David Newbold for his patient linguistic proofreading.

**1** In the same issue of *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata* were presented the results of the first cohort of students: Newbold (2021) on English as a lingua franca, Dal Maso and Miotti (2021) on the problem of identity, Paschke (2021) on perception and evaluation of L2 accent.

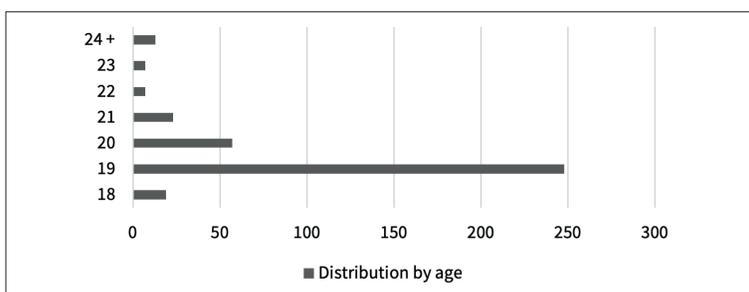
## 2 Description of the Sample and Its Representativeness

The homogeneity of the group lay in the fact that we addressed ourselves exclusively to students in the first year of the degree course in “Languages, Civilisations and the Science of Language” (Lingue, civiltà e scienze del linguaggio, LCSL) which has been taught for the past decade. We had no idea *a priori* how successful our undertaking would be. The two cohorts, in 2019 and 2020, had a total of 1,020 registered students, all of whom were potential informants. 437 students completed the questionnaire submitted in two consecutive years, 238 in 2019-20 and 199 in 2020-21. We retained only the 372 students actually enrolled in the first year of the LCSL course, excluding students who had access to the questionnaire although they were no longer in the first year (identifiable through question A03). This constitutes 36.5% of the total of 1,020 first-year students over the two cohorts. We now need to see whether this sample is representative. To do this, we examine the responses to Section A, regarding age, gender and languages studied, and compare them with data provided by the university for the cohorts as a whole.

### 2.1 Age

The question A02 was about age. As we restricted the group of respondents to first-year students (*matricole*), the age was quite homogeneous [chart 1]. We consider the difference between the year of birth and the year when they filled out the questionnaire to calculate the age, even though it is not perfect in terms of month of birth.

Chart 1 Distribution by age, 372 students in 2019 and 2020



Putting together the two cohorts, 81.9% of the participants were 19 or 20 years old, at the time of completing the questionnaire; 11.3% were either 18 or 21 years old – a small age difference. 6.7% were mature students, aged between 22 and 53 years old. The percentage of the main age classes (19-20 years old) is slightly lower in the entire group (80.8%). Also, the groups of 18- and 21-years-olds is some-

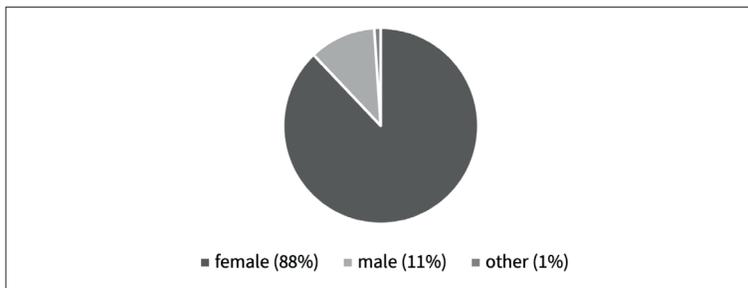
what less represented in the total population (9.9%), while the mature students make up a slightly larger proportion (9.3%). However, the (Pearson moment) correlation between sample and population across all age groups amounts to  $r=0.998$ , thus supporting the view that the sample can be considered representative.

## 2.2 The Declared Gender

The first question A01 was about gender. The predominance of females in this type of foreign language course emerges clearly if we look at the figures for the last ten years at Ca' Foscari: the average percentage of female students is 83.5%. This figure in Venice is in line with Italian universities generally, since the official 2017-18 ISTAT data available indicates that for Italy 81.7% of the more than 21,000 first-year students in language courses are females and 83.9% of language graduates are female.<sup>2</sup>

Thus an overwhelming majority of female students (327) responded to our questionnaire, together with 41 males and 4 'others' since provision had been made for this response in the questionnaire [chart 2].

Chart 2 Gender distribution (rounded percentages)



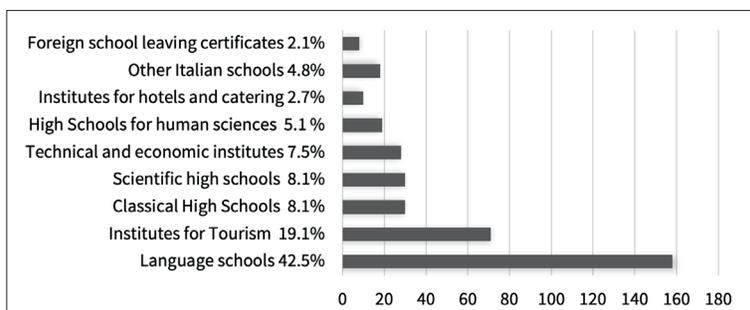
As we cannot draw conclusions from the small number of other gendered identities, we calculate the percentages here on the basis of the declared male/female opposition comparable with the data collected at the central level of university enrolment. Thus, 87.5% of females completed the questionnaire, slightly more than the 84.2% of all first-year students in the two years under review. Could it be that young females are slightly more diligent in responding to a request from their teachers for research purposes? However, the difference is small and so from this point of view our sample can be considered representative of the two cohorts together.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2019/12/C07.pdf>.

## 2.3 High School Education

Question A16 focused on the educational background of students. As expected, more than 60% of informants come from language high schools (*licei linguistici*, 42.5%) and tourism institutes (*istituti per il turismo*, 19.1%) where languages enjoy high priority [chart 3]. This percentage is higher compared to the same two schools in the whole group (35.2% and 16.5% respectively),<sup>3</sup> but the ranking of the different schools is the same: 1) language schools 2) institutes for tourism 3) classical high school 4) scientific high school 5) technical and economic schools. The Pearson moment correlation between the two distributions amounts to  $r=0.984$ . The questionnaire sample thus seems to be representative of the first-year students as a whole.

Chart 3 Distribution of high school educational backgrounds (question A16)



## 2.4 Languages Studied at the University

Four questions relate to this information: questions A21, A22, A23, A24. Students on the Venice undergraduate language course choose two languages which carry an equal number of credits (12 credits per year) and there is no academic difference between the two. Even though language A often seems to be considered the main one and will be the language chosen for the final dissertation and even though the declared level of proficiency is higher for language A than for language B (questions A22 and A24) we do not have any real evidence of significant differences. We can thus consider the two languages as equivalent. The five most popular Western languages in the two

<sup>3</sup> Of the 1,020 enrolled first-year students, 66 did not give any answer regarding their high school diploma. So the percentage is calculated on the basis of the 954 students who answered the question and those 20 informants who had attended a foreign high school, for a total of 974.

cohorts 2019-20 and 2020-21 cover 89.32% of all students enrolled in the course, as follows (cf. also **tab. 1**):

- English and Anglo-American: 37% as language A or B with a very clear predominance of language A;
- Spanish and Latin American Spanish: 18.9% as language A or B (predominantly language B);
- Russian: 11.56%, as language A or B (slight predominance of language B);
- French: 11.5% as language A or B (predominantly language B);
- German: 10.28% as language A or B (predominantly language B).

**Table 1** Distribution of languages reported in the year cohorts and among the students in our survey

	<b>2019 Languages A &amp; B</b>	<b>2020 Languages A &amp; B</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Our sample languages A &amp; B</b>	<b>%</b>
English + Anglo am.	380	377	757	37.07	273	32.1
Spanish +Latin American Spanish	212	174	386	18.90	110	14.78
Russian	130	106	236	11.56	89	11.96
French	125	110	235	11.51	104	13.9
German	106	104	210	10.28	101	13.57
Italian sign language	49	41	90	4.41	23	3.09
Portuguese	37	25	62	3.04	20	2.69
Swedish	24	20	44	2.15	16	2.15
Modern Greek	2	3	5	0.24	1	0.13
Polish	3	2	5	0.24	2	0.26
Serbo-Croatian	4	1	5	0.24	1	0.13
Catalan	2	2	4	0.19	2	0.26
Albanian	1	1	2	0.1	-	
Romanian	1	0	1	0.05	2	0.26
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,076</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>2,042</b>		<b>744</b>	

In the group participating in the survey, the five major languages are confirmed, with a slight variation in their order: 1) English + Anglo-American: 32.1%; 2) Spanish + Latin American Spanish: 14.78%; 3) French 13.9%; 4) German: 13.57%; 5) Russian 11.96%, amounting to a total of 86.31%.

It can be seen that the percentage of our sample for Russian is in line with the overall enrolment; the first two languages (English and Spanish) have a slightly lower participation rate but remain in positions 1 and 2, while students of French and German have slightly higher percentages than in the general cohorts, placing them before Russian in our sample. These slight variations may correspond to con-

tingencies in the data collection (for example, one might think of a greater or lesser insistence of the teachers who promoted the questionnaire; or a greater fear of talking about the accent for Russian). However, they do not invalidate the representativeness of the sample.

## 2.5 Languages Studied at School

Questions A08 to A15 aim to check how many students studied one specific language and for how long before enrolling at the university. We will then compare these data and the languages chosen for the academic programme. Obviously, we observe higher percentages in correspondence with the school cycles: after 3 years (middle school), after 5 years (high school), after 8 years (the entire cycle of secondary school) or after 13 years (the primary and secondary school). We group the results between less than 5 years (that is, false beginners with a high probability of a temporal gap between the period in which they studied the language and the university), 5 years up to 8 years, and 9 to 13 years, a period which includes primary school.

The 30 students who studied ancient Greek correspond to those who attended a classical high school, plus one student who had studied Greek for one year and another for 3 years. For Latin, 59% of the students had studied it for at least 1 year, mostly for 2 years, and the percentage of those who had studied Latin for 5 years corresponds to the sum of students of classical or scientific high schools.

29 students mentioned other languages such as Chinese (38%), Japanese (20%), Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Finnish, Portuguese, Modern Greek, Turkish, and Arabic.

For the 5 quantitatively more important languages taught at school and at the university, table 2 shows the number of students who had already studied the language, the number of students enrolled at university and the level declared at university.

**Table 2** Number of students enrolled at the university compared to number of students who had studied these languages at school

<b>372 students</b>	<b>Tot. number</b>	<b>Less than 5 years</b>	<b>5-8 years</b>	<b>9-13 years</b>	<b>Chose this language A or B at the university</b>	<b>Beginners and declared level A1</b>	<b>Declared mother tongue</b>
English	372	1	39	332	273	1	-
French	209	84	124	1	104	32	1
German	240	47	181	12	101	3	3
Russian	74	31	43	3	89	50	2
Spanish	189	74 <sup>4</sup>	115	2	110	22	1
	1,084	237	502	350	677	108	6

We can see that a large number of students who had already studied a major language do not continue with this language at university. Since beginners never studied the language at school, we can subtract their number from the number of those who chose language X and conclude that most of the other students continued the same language from school. The only students who have chosen to study language A or B without being beginners are mother tongue speakers of that language. It is also possible that they could have studied their language at school too. But there are not many such students, so the general trend is not affected.

With Russian, for example, if we have 50 beginners, 39 out of 74 who studied Russian before, or who are mother tongue speakers, continued at the university. We find the same phenomenon for French: a third of all students who choose it are beginners. Of the others, some have studied only at middle school and can be considered as false beginners. The first-year French class is thus highly non-homogenous.

Will the previous study of foreign languages influence students' perceptions of accent? This question will be addressed in the following sections of this volume. However, we observe, on the basis of our teaching experience, that students who studied at school often have difficulties in pronunciation because they have not been corrected well. But they are not aware of this fact.

<sup>4</sup> Two students mentioned Spanish for 3 years as other languages. It might have been a third language. So we counted them with Spanish.

## 2.6 Final Comments on Section 2

The most common profile in our sample is female, 19-20 years old; students come from a linguistic or tourism high school, they are Italian, and mostly from the Veneto region. They have studied English from primary school. Nearly half of them chose other languages than those studied before taking advantage of the range of choice available. Our sample is coherent with the complete cohort of language students at Ca' Foscari by age, gender and choice of languages.

## 3 Language Biography and Research Questions

The questions in Section A are intended to compile a profile of the students who were asked to examine the influence this profile might have on reported attitudes towards foreign accents. For example, the impact of gender, the impact of the individual's bilingualism or plurilingualism, where this existed, the impact of students' language repertoires and process of acquisition, the impact of target language difficulty. We will examine these factors in the light of what the literature can tell us.

### 3.1 The Impact of Gender

#### 3.1.1 Literature Review

Does the gender variable have an impact on the responses regarding students' perceptions of foreign accents? There is little research on the correlation between sex/gender and L2 acquisition. Rod Ellis, in his review of the literature, mentions generically that "females outperform males" (1994, 25) and, basing his observations on Labov's findings that women use new forms more often than men, he hypothesises that:

women might be better at L2 learning than men as they are likely to be more open to new linguistic forms in the L2 input and they will be more likely to rid themselves of interlanguage forms that deviate from target-language norms. (Ellis 1994, 202)

In her 2008 article, Karen Feery provides an overview of research on gender in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) which was still comparatively rare, as there was still no real theoretical current on the subject. She mentions a publication by Kettemann (1998, cited in Feery 2008), in German, which summarises other research on gender-related performance in SLA. One study showed that girls perform better on tests in primary and secondary education in Europe, but in other activities this may depend on subjects which are more familiar either to girls or to boys; it may also depend on learning strate-

gies or attitudes towards language. While there is no consensus on a gender difference relating to learning strategies, in terms of attitudes, many studies converge in pointing out that they are more positive for females because there is a greater desire to learn other languages and to improve their knowledge. In particular, males would choose languages for practical reasons and females because of their intrinsic interest (research cited in Feery 2008, 38). A more recent study by Alonso-Herrero and Lasagabaster Herrarte (2019), on L2 English, cited by Arroyo Hernández (2020), confirms this same positive attitude of females, which would also be noted in the acquisition of the phonological component.

This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why females choose to study languages, as had already been pointed out in a 1989 study (Loulidi cited in Feery 2008, 41). This trend has continued ever since. Our observations of the Venice group point in the same direction, given the clear predominance of females in this field, even if other socioeconomic and social reproduction factors<sup>5</sup> may play a role in the choice of university studies. Thus, existing research on gender and SLA invites us to consider gender within a social context that involves a system of interacting factors. Piller and Pavlenko (in Pavlenko et al. 2001, 3) call for SLA research to become “more context-sensitive” and to treat gender as “a system of social relations and discursive practices whose meaning varies across speech communities” (cited in Feery 2008, 47).

### 3.1.2 Analysis of Responses in Questionnaire (Question A1)

For our study, given the differential between females and males who responded to the questionnaire, it will be difficult to establish correlations between gender – and the consequently different motivations towards language study (as shown before) – and opinions on foreign accents expressed in our questionnaire, unless the male responses all converge and are in some way kept distinct from the female responses. Questions to ask might be:

- if females have a greater desire to learn and do better in languages, will they be more demanding than males in seeking a pronunciation which is more native-like?
- If males are more inclined towards languages for practical reasons, will they favour communication over phonetic accuracy?

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**5** The socioeconomic factors which can explain the predominance of females in this kind of university course are the lesser paid jobs obtained at the end of their studies. The social reproduction factor, described by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in *La Reproduction* (1970) shows how education maintains models that favour dominant social classes. It can be extended to females because they tend to choose the same kind of studies or jobs, responding to implicit social pressure.

The analysis of motivations may help us to refine these research questions.

## 3.2 The Impact of Motivation

### 3.2.1 Review of the Literature

In any learning/acquisition process – and therefore in that of languages – motivation plays an essential role, as shown by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan who developed the Self-Determination Theory in the 1980s, opening the way to a humanist approach instead of the prevailing behaviourist approach. It is to Deci and Ryan that we owe the threefold distinction between *intrinsic motivation*, where the subject invests in the learning he chooses without any other reward than pleasure, *extrinsic motivation*, where the subject invests in learning for reasons external to him (duty, constraint, social pressure, identification of a future reward) and *a-motivation*, lack of motivation (Deci, Ryan 2002). At the same time, in Italy, since the 1960s, in the wake of Titone's (1966; 1977) holodynamic model, the Venice school of *glottodidattica* (language teaching) has been reflecting on these principles for language didactics and Freddi (1990; 1994) integrates the principle of motivation into his model of the teaching unit. Balboni (1994) synthesises three types of motivation: *duty*, *need*, and *pleasure*, and continues his reflection (2008) by showing that these three factors interact in a dynamic way: a duty or a need can evolve towards pleasure which is the major reason for success.

### 3.2.2 Analysis of Responses

One question in our survey (A19) allows us to reflect on the motivation for enrolling in a foreign language course. There were 13 options – presented at random – and several choices available, for which there were 1,634 responses, with some students limiting themselves to a single response and others choosing several (up to 9). Insofar as the students are at university and have freely chosen their language course, no *a-motivation* is possible and the probability of *extrinsic motivation* due to coercion by a third party or due to a system (e.g., a school imposes a language which is not the one desired), or due to some kind of duty, is almost nil, whereas it might be frequent in secondary education. In any case, the questionnaire did not consider this kind of extrinsic motivation among the 13 options offered and it did not appear in the open-ended comments (A20). Table 3 presents the results, which we will comment on.

**Table 3** Motivations for language study. Distribution of responses for the whole sample and for the sample of male respondents only. Percentage inserted to two decimal places

		All responses (1,634)	%	Rounded %	Male responses (193)	%	Rounded %
A. Intrinsic reasons: "Raisons du cœur"	I am curious to know other cultures	238	14.56	<b>46</b>	26	13.47	48
	Languages are my passion	231	14.13		24	12.43	
	I like literature	114	6.98		17	8.8	
	I would like to teach languages	92	5.63		13	6.73	
	I am interested in linguistics	77	4.71		12	6.21	
B.1 Extrinsic reasons: Positive past triggers	I was good at school	182	11.13	<b>21</b>	25	12.95	23
	I had a good language teacher at school	90	5.50		13	6.73	
	Following a stay in a different linguistic context	67	4.10		7	3.62	
B.2.1 Extrinsic reasons: Lack	By exclusion (e.g., of scientific subjects)	33	2.02	<b>33</b>	3	1.55	29
	I never studied languages well at school	25	1.53		2	1.03	
B.2.2 Extrinsic reasons: Future needs	Good job prospects in a globalised world.	234	14.32		24	12.43	
	Foreign Languages give me the possibility to transfer abroad.	211	12.91		24	12.43	
B.2.3 Extrinsic reason: Present need	This degree programme is present in Venice, i.e., close to my home	40	2.44		3	1.55	

The division of options between intrinsic and extrinsic according to Deci and Ryan's (2002) model is not easy, insofar as some motivations are nuanced or some questions have implicit interpretations that blur a binary categorisation. For example, the reason "I was good at school" could be interpreted as the extrinsic desire to get good marks but also as the result of a personal passion which is intrinsic. In the same way the reason "I had a good language teacher" seems to be extrinsic, but also intrinsic if it refers to personal emotions related to the person. These two motivations in the next chapters will be treated as ambiguous and neutral.

However, let us start our reflection with a binary classification. On the one hand, we have the first group A comprising the five emo-

tional reasons, as evidenced by the affective vocabulary used (“I am curious about other cultures; “Languages are my passion”; “I like literature”; “I am interested in linguistics”; “I would like to teach”) These motivations are clearly intrinsic and relate to the immediate pleasure of studying or the future gratification of fulfilling one’s professional dream. The second group B display extrinsic motivations.

For this first categorisation, the relative percentages are as follows:

- *Intrinsic motivations*: 46%, fuelled by curiosity about other cultures (≈15%) and passion for languages (≈14%).
- *Extrinsic motivations*: 54%, fuelled by the two motivations concerning the future – job prospects (≈14%) and the possibility of going abroad (≈13%) – followed by academic success in languages (≈11%).

We notice a small majority for extrinsic motivations, but, as we can see in table 4, the top four scores are balanced between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, the first one being intrinsic.

**Table 4** Ranking of the top five motivations

	All students	Male students
I am curious about other cultures.	1	1
Good job prospects in a globalised world.	2	4
Languages are my passion.	3	3
Foreign languages give me the possibility to transfer abroad.	4	5
I was good at school.	5	2

However, we can refine the motivations initially listed as extrinsic by sub-categorising:

- Group B.1. Motivations linked to a positive past personal experience.  
The trigger can be evaluated positively, i.e., “being good at languages”; “having had a good teacher”; “having made a trip abroad”.
- Group B.2. Motivations that point to an analysis of needs and shortcomings:
  - B.2.1. Shortcomings arising from past experience: the fact that one has “not studied languages well” implies that one must study them, and the fact that one has chosen languages to the “exclusion of other subjects” is a choice forced by necessity.
  - B.2.2. Projected future needs: “I will have good job prospects in a globalised world” or “be able to transfer abroad”;
  - B.2.3. Present need: proximity to the university.

If we classify these motivations differently by considering the ambiguous group B.1 on the side of intrinsic motivation, we have: A+B.1: 67% and B.2: 33%.

It appears that reasons linked to a positive dimension dominate over a pragmatic choice motivated by reason and even more in the male group.<sup>6</sup> The ranking of motivations is slightly different in the male group compared to the whole group: in position 2, we find the ambiguous reason “I was good at school” but separated by less than 1 point from the third motivation: “passion”. These results are not congruent with what the literature reports and seem to demonstrate that males who chose a university programme in languages are highly motivated. Maybe findings would be different in language courses for non-specialists. However, this conclusion should be investigated with a higher number of males in different study programmes, to increase the limited research on the links between gender and language learning as seen in 2.1.

If, following the analysis of motivations, female and male students enrolled at university in a language programme approach their courses with similar kinds of motivation, with even a slight advantage for males in terms of intrinsic motivation, is this also the case with regard to the responses on the perception of foreign accents? The results presented here suggest that the gender factor will not be a determining one.

But some other factors could be correlated with intrinsic motivation, in particular: the pleasure of having a native-like accent, positive emotions when speaking aloud, positive feedback in communicative interaction, the feeling of having a new identity, and less stress management. These factors are related to questions asked in Sections B, C and D.

### 3.3 The Impact of Bilingualism

#### 3.3.1 Review of the Literature

The definition of bi/plurilingualism is subject to variation. In common parlance, a bilingual is a person who has a perfect command of two or more languages, learned in childhood, to the point of always being identified as a member of each community. And it is the ability to express oneself orally, of which one of the signals is the accent,

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<sup>6</sup> We should have compared the male group to the female group. But the responses were open-ended and not easily accessible. The manual counting was easier for males, less numerous. But if the results show a better intrinsic motivation for the male students compared to the whole group of which they are part, *a fortiori* the gap with females is bigger.

that we spontaneously think of. Claude Hagège, a renowned polyglot, states that “to be truly bilingual implies that one can speak, understand, read and write two languages with equal ease” (1996, 218). He includes all the linguistic components of the language, from grammar to idiomatic structures, and makes the speed with which structures are accessed a discriminating factor. This idealistic view of bilingualism, seen as the sum of two monolinguals – themselves ideally interpreted – has been nuanced by numerous research studies in linguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. We will quote two works, one dating from 1981, the other from 2015, which, by taking stock of the research, offer some interesting concepts for the present research. Francescato (1981, 21) reviews international research since the 1930s and distinguishes between spontaneous bilingualism – acquired in childhood – and bilingualism resulting from conscious learning – our case study for the most part – and focuses on the first typology. He differentiates between the concept of diglossia, introduced by Ferguson (1959), where the separation of languages is achieved in terms of registers according to the conditions of use (field of use and role of the speakers) and the concept of ‘bilingualism’ proper, where “the speaker’s competence is such as to enable him to deal with any type of discourse, from the most informal to the most formal, regardless of the use of either code (L1, L2)” (Francescato 1981, 36; Author’s transl.). However, he already posits this definition – which is in line with Hagège’s later definition – as ideal and states that it is the exception, because the observation of practical cases shows bilinguals who will face certain situations with the L1 and others with the L2, and diglossia therefore falls within the definition of bilingualism. However, he does not go beyond a distinction of ‘domains’ interpreted in sociolinguistic terms as f (non-formal) and F (formal). More interesting is his conception of the “isolated bilingual” to which he devotes his book, i.e., individuals who share their L2 with the community in which they live while they are native speakers of an L1. The concept of mother tongue is also discussed, as a child raised in a multilingual family or growing up in a context where the L1 is in the family, and the L2 is readily available outside, may have an equivalent degree of proficiency, resulting from a unique cognitive development that integrates the two languages.

Almost 35 years later, Swiss psycholinguist François Grosjean takes stock of the situation in his book *Parler plusieurs langues* (Grosjean 2015). Deploring the fact that prejudices die hard, and that a strict definition of bilingualism excludes the vast majority of people who have several languages in their repertoire to varying degrees and who are not “monolinguals in one person”, he starts from the simplest and broadest possible definition: “bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages or dialects in everyday life” (Grosjean 2015, 16). This definition is in line with Francescato’s ob-

servation of a distribution of languages/dialects within the individual, but it broadens as it encompasses more differentiated domains of use (close or distant family, work, study, home, shopping, leisure, administration, holidays, clothes, sports etc.), the existence of different communicative goals, the diversity of the channel (for example, oral skills in L1 and written skills in L2, or only oral skills in L1 and L2, e.g., among some migrants etc.). In addition, it includes the type of activities performed: counting, calculating, singing, praying, taking notes etc. In order to trace the linguistic profile of the individual, Grosjean formalises the “principle of complementarity” of situations, previously observed empirically by some researchers: he proposes a visual representation where each facet of life is indicated with its reference language and placed on the two axes of *knowledge* and *use*. He notes the interaction between the principle of complementarity and the knowledge/performance of languages at a given time, as a lesser-used language might also be less developed. Furthermore, he affirms the dynamic aspect of this principle, which evolves and adapts according to the circumstances of life, so that a language may be dominant for a time, then regress and be reactivated later. Finally, he rehabilitates *language transfer* in bilingual speech with code switching between subjects who share the same bilingualism, situating the competence of the bilingual speaker on a continuum between monolingualism (facing a monolingual interlocutor) and bilingual speech. He is therefore a proponent of a holistic view of the bilingual speaker.

As far as accent is concerned, Grosjean rejects the idea that a bilingual speaker necessarily has no accent. He dissociates knowledge of a language from the accent and mentions not only personalities who had a strong accent, starting with Napoleon or Marie Curie, but also people who have no accent because they learned the language in childhood, but no longer practice it, and are no longer fluent speakers: “It is time to do away with the ‘accent’ criterion of bilingualism” (Grosjean 2015, 39). It goes without saying that the people who speak with an accent had no problems of intelligibility and comprehension with the French-speaking world in which they lived. So the question of accent is part of a continuum and implies a threshold of social acceptability. Today’s language teaching specialists, when assessing learners’ performance, are moving towards “comfortable intelligibility” (Arroyo Hernández 2020) instead of imitation of a “native accent”. Arroyo Hernández points out that recent research shows that learners’ expectations are that they will progress towards a native-like accent. How, then, should this ‘native-like accent’ be defined? A student from an Italian region with Italian-German bilingual status raises the issue in her free comments in the questionnaire:

A language can vary from one place to another, so how can you achieve ‘native speaker-like pronunciation’? This is not a criticism of the (very good) questions, but a reflection on myself. I am a native speaker of German like most South Tyroleans, but our German is far (in pronunciation) from that of an Austrian or German. Can I therefore call myself a ‘native speaker’ even if my pronunciation is very different? (Stud0052; Author’s transl. from Italian)

A native accent will be that of one of the sub-communities in which the mother-tongue child will grow up. The generic linguistic set – to which the name of the language is given – is subject to diatopic and diastratic variations which do not hinder intercomprehension between the speakers of the set. Therefore, our student from South Tyrol is a native speaker of German. But in the institutional teaching framework that is ours, the ‘native accent’ in the learners’ representations will be the standard, neutral accent, that of the dominant media, selected for teaching/learning contexts because that is how it is taught. If French is taught in a non-French-speaking country of Europe, the model offered by the teaching materials for production tasks will be the standard accent of France (and not of Switzerland or Belgium). Similarly in Europe, the implicit model of textbooks for English remains standard British English, for Spanish the standard variant of the Iberian Peninsula, and for German the standard German of the German (not Austrian) media, while variation can be introduced in comprehensive tasks. Nevertheless, for French, things are different in Québec, the teaching materials and course books present the Québécois accent to English speakers studying French in schools or to newcomers. And in Europe, openness to variation is gaining ground, particularly with the development of the concept of Francophonie and the special case of English as a lingua franca. In relation to this phenomenon, the foreign accent will be the one which presents phonetic features which are not congruent with the set of features defining a variant. Sometimes it takes just a few words to be identified as ‘foreign’ by a member of the reference language community.

How will our learners fare? Will being Italian monolinguals influence their perception of foreign accents in their own language or in the languages they are learning? Will the bilingual individuals in the group have a different attitude?

### 3.3.2 Responses Concerning Bilingualism

Several items in the questionnaire aimed at defining the contours of a monolingual or bi/plurilingual student, by cross-referencing data of different types. We also tried to identify the associated degree of pluriculturalism which might change the perception of accent. In fact, a

bilingual dialect/Italian speaker has no significant different cultural background. We use the term ‘mother tongue’ in our questionnaire and not L1, because this is immediately comprehensible to students.

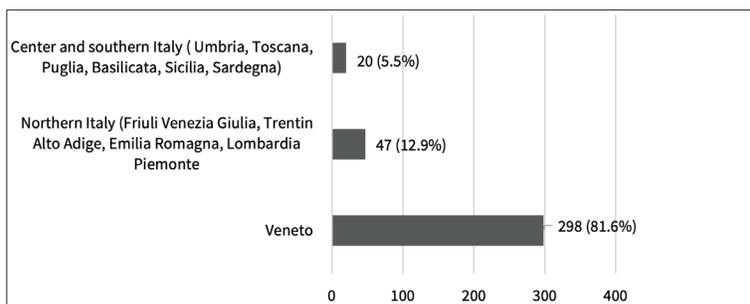
Questions A04 and A05 deal with schooling in Italy or abroad; question A06 investigates the acquisition of Italian (family or school influence); question A07 deals with exposure to the foreign language during childhood; question A17 explores the use made of foreign languages in everyday life, and question A18 includes in the panorama of bilingualism the use of dialects which are still very much alive in Italy. All of the questions, which can be cross-referenced, show the proportion of bilinguals or biculturals in our sample according to the different definitions mentioned above. We will present here the results for each question before the discussion.

### 3.3.2.1 School Attendance

Question A4. If you attended school in Italy (for at least 1 year), please indicate the prevailing region here.

Seven students did not give a response. All the other students had studied in Italy for at least one year. So the percentages in chart 4 are calculated on the basis of 365 students who had studied in Italy.

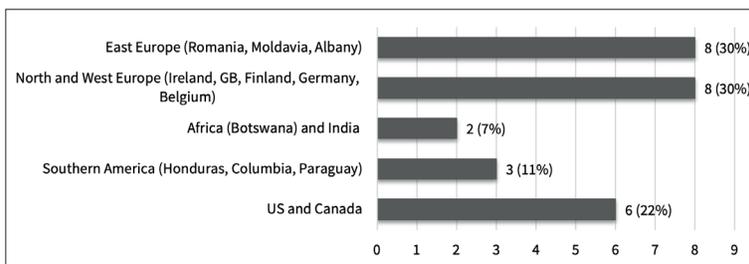
Chart 4 School attendance in Italy



Question A5. If you have attended school outside Italy (for at least 1 year), indicate the prevailing country.

Only 27 students responded, that is 7.3% of the entire sample, and of these only one never studied in Italy. One did not respond (Stud0086) but we could assume she studied abroad. The question does not make it possible to distinguish students who went abroad (with parents or with school programmes) from students from immigrant families or who came to Italy to study.

**Chart 5** School outside Italy (rounded percentages)

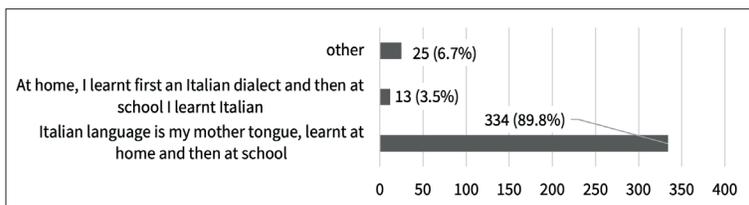


### 3.3.2.2 Italian Language

Question A06. Where did you learn Italian?

This question seeks to identify L1, Italian or dialect and foreign language. In chart 6 we can see that the vast majority have Italian as their mother tongue. Those who mentioned dialects only or dialect with Italian are counted with dialect native speakers. Among “others” we find: Romanian (6), Albanian (4), Russian (from Moldova) (5), Arabic (3), German (2), French (1), Spanish (1), Chinese (1), Slovak (1), plus one student from Trentino-Alto Adige who says she had also learnt a Germanic dialect.<sup>7</sup>

**Chart 6** Acquisition of Italian language



<sup>7</sup> Of the six students coming from Trentino-Alto Adige where four languages may be available (Ladin and Italian in the Romance family; Tyrolean dialect and German), four claim that Italian is their mother tongue, one that this is Ladin (counted as an Italian dialect) and one both Ladin and Tyrolean dialect, both of which she speaks. This student is classified as “other”. Of these 25 students, three declared that they were not bilingual.

### 3.3.2.3 Bilingualism

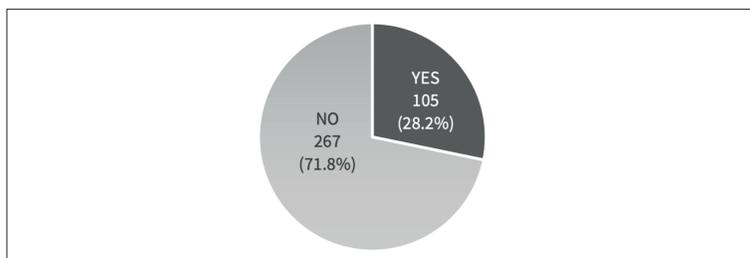
Question A07. As a child or teenager, did you learn another language, other than Italian, that you master (or mastered) at the level of your mother tongue or in any case with great spontaneity? If so, choose “other” and specify the language(s) and if you still use it.

The question attempted to identify those students who had another language in the first part of their life until 18 years old, from childhood to the end of adolescence. This choice is justified in order to be more inclusive. It includes students who spent time abroad during high school, or who learnt another language during infancy together with the children of immigrant families or bilingual families.

The title which appears in the questionnaire *Bilingualism* refers implicitly to students’ self-perception at the moment in which they filled out the questionnaire, since bilingualism may be acquired from birth or later.

Of the 372 respondents, 105 replied ‘yes’ [chart 7].

Chart 7 Bilingualism in childhood and adolescence



If, however, we cross-check with other responses, we should add three cases cross-referencing with the answer “other” to question A6 about Italian as mother tongue and with questions A22 and A24 about the proficiency level in the two languages of study. Three students answered “no” in A07 and they can be added to the list of those who had another language in childhood:

- Stud0086: native speaker of Russian, which is also her first language of study;
- Stud0146: born in Moldova, arrived in Italy at the age of 8, mentioned Russian as a language spoken every day;
- Stud1189: born in Moldova, arrived for high school in Italy.

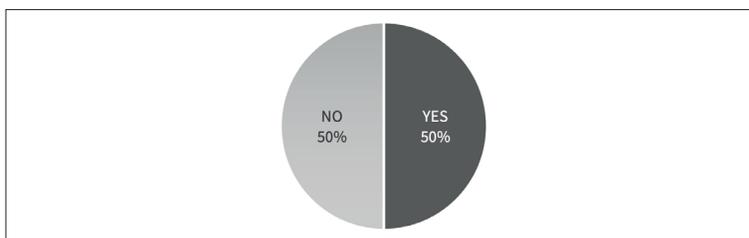
So we could count 108 bilinguals out of 372 students. But, as we will see in the discussion, the interpretation of ‘bilingualism’ is very different among the students and ranges from heritage language to family language to early learning language at school.

### 3.3.2.4 Use of Foreign Language in Everyday Life

Question A17. Excluding foreign language lessons, in everyday life, do you usually speak (or did you speak) a language other than Italian (e.g. at work, on social networks, during a school year abroad etc.)? If so, select “other” and specify the language(s) and usage situations.

The survey did not identify many bilinguals from childhood, while half of the sample say they use foreign languages every day, which seems to indicate a form of acquired bilingualism [chart 8].

Chart 8 Use of foreign languages in everyday life

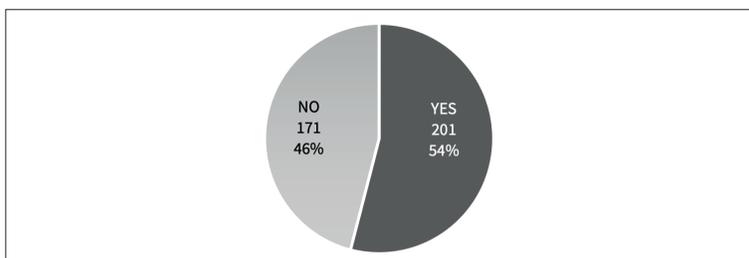


### 3.3.2.5 Use of Italian Dialects

Question A18. If you use (or used) an Italian dialect, indicate which one and in which situations.

The question aims to see how many students are already bilingual, not with a foreign language but with Italian dialects, in contexts in which we assumed there are not distinct cultures associated with the different languages. However, this variable means that the individual has a larger phonetic repertoire. A majority of students use a dialect in everyday life, essentially in informal situations in family or with friends [chart 9]. How significant will this turn out to be for our research?

Chart 9 Use of Italian dialects



### 3.3.3 Discussion

#### 3.3.3.1 Italian Mother Tongue

Let's begin the discussion with the information given in the responses to question A06: "Where did you learn Italian?", to give an initial picture of the group. Nearly 90% of the respondents stated that they had learnt Italian at home and then at school and therefore consider Italian to be their mother tongue. We have a consistent and homogeneous group which will be easy to correlate with answers about foreign accent.

Only 6.5% of the students say they learnt a foreign language before Italian. Most of them are young people with an immigrant background (from Romania, Moldova, Albania, China, Slovakia, Colombia) having grown up in Italy or having arrived there as children. Few of them have also spent time at school in their country of origin. The only French speaker comes from Belgium, where she also studied, but has an Italian father. Among the two German speakers, one is from Trentino-Alto Adige, where the two official languages are Italian and German, and one moved from Germany to Italy to study Italian at the university.

#### 3.3.3.2 Italian Dialects

Regarding dialect as L1, less than 4% claim to have a dialect as their mother tongue (one from Sicily, one Ladin, other dialects from Veneto region). A student comment, however, highlights a problem. She wrote that she had learnt "both Italian and dialect" from the beginning. This situation is probably the case for many students, but the alternative "both Italian and dialect" was not anticipated in the questionnaire. If we look at the answers to question A18: 54% of the respondents claim to use a dialect, with family, with friends, in the place they live. They demonstrate knowledge of the dialect learned through contact in childhood. And it is of course the dialects of the Veneto that dominate, since the majority of the students had grown up in Veneto (≈85%), as the responses to A04 question show. This dissymmetry between A6 and A18 simply points to the phenomenon of diglossia, where the dialect is no longer considered as a mother tongue, but as a secondary language. So in question A6 most students chose Italian as mother tongue even though they learnt a dialect at the same time.

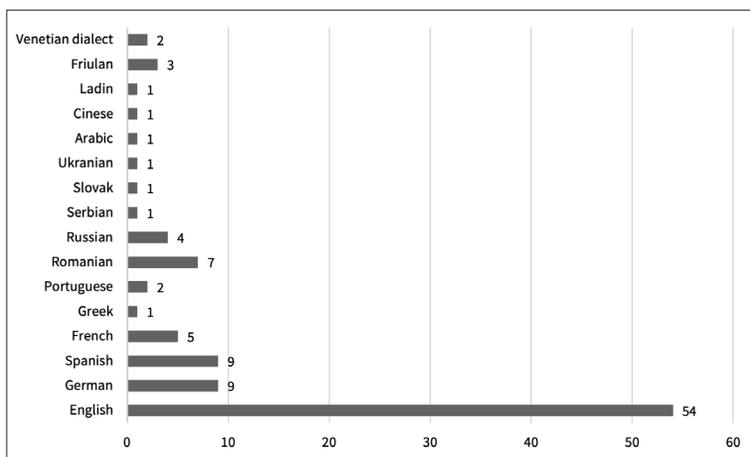
### 3.3.3.3 A Foreign Language in the Repertoire from Childhood to Adolescence

Another entry point for verifying bi/plurilingualism may be exposure to a foreign language during childhood, since studies have shown that a language learned during the period of brain plasticity is generally spoken without an accent, although it is wrong to think that there is no possibility of development after this critical period and in particular during adolescence.<sup>8</sup>

A larger number of students (108) declared they had another L1, even if only 7.3% said they had attended school outside Italy. Here we can find students from bilingual families (mother and father from different languages), students educated in another language from birth (those who attended an English school for example in Italy) or born in Italy to foreign families.

The 108 respondents who replied that they were fluent in a language other than Italian in childhood or adolescence are distributed as shown in chart 10 (some give more than one language, such as Romanian and Russian for a student from Moldova):

Chart 10 Other languages spoken fluently



Of these 108 people who claim to be bilingual, 40 have a heritage language (11%), six are from Alto Adige, and the others have a language learnt at school. 84 say they have Italian or a dialect as a mother tongue. Among them, we can distinguish different categories:

<sup>8</sup> See Titone 1996 for a survey of the very many studies on this subject.

- a. Six bilinguals with dialects. Only six persons consider the dialect as a “language” though many informants use dialect.
- b. 20 bilinguals from family history. Clearly the heritage language is seen as secondary.
- c. 58 bilinguals in the target language after learning it at school or during a period abroad, only for English, French, Spanish, or German.

However, the number of English speakers is surprising. Are there so many bilingual or English-speaking families living in Veneto?

#### 3.3.3.4 The Perception of School Education in Language Teaching

Questions A04 and A05 on schooling, primary and secondary, in Italy or abroad, can help to provide an answer. The presupposition is that attendance at a school abroad is a factor in measuring either early learning or immersion learning of a foreign language. In both cases, the temporal indication “for at least one year” was added, in order to exclude short holiday or study abroad stays.

Almost all respondents had attended school in Italy, including 80% in the Veneto region, while only 27 had attended school in 15 different countries, as follows: USA (5), Moldova (4), Germany (4), Romania (2), Albania (2), Belgium (1), Botswana (1), Canada (1), Colombia (1), Finland (1), UK (1), Honduras (1), Ireland (1), India (1), Paraguay (1).

The reasons behind long stays outside Italy can vary considerably, e.g. country of origin before emigration, country of temporary stay for the family, country where the student had been on a school exchange. Actual cases in our study include:

- young people with an immigrant background from Romania and Moldova (the other Romanians and Moldovans who said they had another language in their repertoire had probably been born in Italy and therefore had not attended school in their parents’ country of origin); a girl from Colombia;
- young people who had spent a year in Germany, Canada, Finland, Honduras, Paraguay and the USA. For the latter country these are all students whose L1 is Italian;
- young people who may have lived abroad probably with their families for a period of time: Belgium (French mother tongue), Botswana, United Kingdom (but there is no evidence of this other than the claim to be bilingual in English);
- a student from Germany (Stud1011) who had chosen to come to Italy to study.

Cross-checking with the other data, it can be seen that:

- a. many young people who speak immigrant languages have not lived in their countries of origin (Arab countries, Albania, Romania, Moldova etc.);
- b. in relation to English, if there was a high level of immigration from English-speaking countries, there would be more responses about attending school abroad.

The fact that almost all respondents attended school in Italy invites us to look at the data from questions A08 to A15. It can be seen that 280 students indicated 13 years of study of English, i.e., all the way from primary school (5 years), middle school (3 years) and high school (5 years), while 40 indicated between 10 and 12 years, reaching a total of 86% of all students.

Similarly for French, three of the informants were not native speakers, but felt that their 8 years of French medium education had given them bilingual competence. For German, on the other hand, three had been educated in Trentino-Alto Adige and two were mother tongue speakers.

This observation raises the question: if 86% of respondents had studied English since childhood in a school context,<sup>9</sup> why did only 54 students indicate English as a language they had mastered in question A07? In fact, it seems to depend on the students' self-assessment of their 'spontaneous fluency' in the language they have learned and their underlying conception of bilingualism. Some may have been induced not to come forward because of the term 'mother tongue'. This data could be cross-referenced with the levels achieved in the B2 English university entrance test, to test whether early institutional language teaching followed by an academic course of study would suggest a more cautious self-assessment when answering question A07.

Finally, question A17 considers bilingualism in relation to the regular use of a foreign language in everyday life (which is Grosjean's definition), outside the classroom. We find exactly 50% chose "yes", and 50% "no". Of the 50% who use other languages, isolated bilinguals (immigrant families) are included. English largely dominates and social networks are regularly mentioned. This is an interesting result which shows that young people are less linguistically isolated than they used to be in a homogeneous classroom learning situation in a country in which the languages being learned are not normally spoken.

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<sup>9</sup> A foreign language at primary school in Italy was introduced in 1990. Since 2003 (Moratti Law), English has been obligatory.

### 3.3.4 Final Comments on Section 3.3

What can we conclude about bilingualism in our sample?

The respondents formed a rather homogeneous group in terms of their origin, all of whom had completed their secondary education in Italy and almost 93% of whom had Italian as L1 or a dialect or regional language of the Peninsula with Italian acquired at school.

'Isolated' bilinguals (whose L1 is not spoken in the territory in which they live) were few in number. Those who indicated "other" for question A06 (6.5%) are part of the 11% who have a heritage language in their repertoire in question A07). Six students came from a bilingual territory (Trentino-Alto Adige).

On the other hand, it was noted that a number of respondents declared that they were bilingual because they considered that they had acquired the language at school – particularly English, Spanish, German and French – or because they had spent time abroad in countries where the language was spoken. But they are not as numerous as we could imagine. It is possible that others who had followed a similar curriculum at school may have had hesitations about claiming to be bilingual, because they had reservations about the meaning of the term 'mother tongue'. On the other hand, if we apply Grosjean's broad definition, all of our students who claim to use more than one language in their daily lives could be considered bilingual, insofar as they have studied foreign languages during their primary or secondary education and are all language students.

Can we then define correlations with the perception and preconceptions of foreign accent?

As with gender, the number of bilinguals by origin is rather small in relation to the entire group. However, it will be interesting to examine possible variations in accent perception. Not all bilinguals have chosen their own L2 as their language of study at Ca' Foscari and therefore they find themselves in a similar position with their peers.

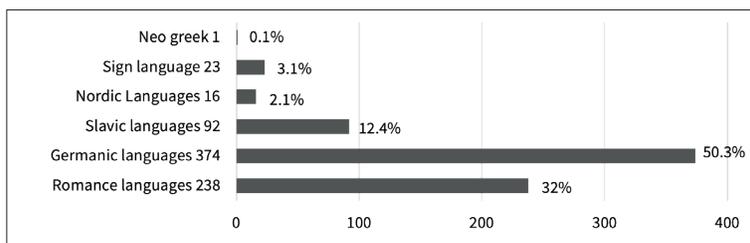
In any case, it might be expected that bilinguals are more tolerant of linguistic variation, used to handling several codes.

## 3.4 The Impact of the Languages Studied

The final factor which we looked at, and which could influence the perception of foreign accent is the difficulty of the language being learned. The difficulty of the foreign language may depend on its proximity to/distance from Italian. The notion of related languages could be an interesting way to investigate the perception of accent; chart 11 calculates the languages studied at the university gathered by language families. It could be an indicator. But we also know that

inside a family of related languages, such as Romance languages, French for example can be perceived as more difficult than Spanish for the higher number of vocal phonemes such as nasal vowels.

**Chart 11** Languages studied at the university by language family



The following research questions arise:

- a. if the languages being learned are close to Italian, and perceived as easier, such as Romance languages, will the attitude to accents be more relaxed, or will the opposite approach hold? Will there be a gradual scale of related languages (French perceived as more difficult than Spanish in the self-evaluation of the students in Sections C and D for example)?
- b. does the difficulty of the languages being learned (Slavic, Nordic or Greek languages) imply a greater tolerance of a foreign accent because they belong to other language families?
- c. does the fact that many students have studied English since childhood have an impact on the perception of English as a lingua franca, and therefore, greater tolerance of variety?

## 4 Conclusion

At the end of this analysis of the answers to Section A of the questionnaire, we wanted not only to describe the sample - which may appear useful to build up a picture of a university language programme - but also to highlight how the answers could possibly be correlated with the results of the studies in the following chapters. Section B concerns opinions and attitudes towards foreign accents and the importance of good pronunciation, Sections C and D more specifically the accent issues in the student's first and second language studied.

Our sample of first-year students is quite homogeneous: a very large majority (88%) are females; almost 90% are of Italian mother tongue; those who first learned an Italian dialect have nevertheless heard Italian since birth. Those who first learned a foreign language are very few in number, and mainly come from first or especially second-generation immigration. So two characteristics might not be statistically significant,

the number of males and the number of students with a foreign connection. However, the calculated percentages may provide interesting information, although they need to be confirmed by more targeted studies.

Colleagues who worked on the other sections of our questionnaire, Dal Maso and Duryagin (ch. 2 of this volume) for Section B; Arroyo Hernández and Paschke (ch. 3 of this volume) for Sections C and D, provide some answers.

The first answer is that for the vast majority of our sample, the preferred model remains that of native speaker pronunciation.

Regarding the impact of gender, starting from the presupposition in the literature of a greater motivation towards languages among girls, we had two questions: a) if females are more attached to a native-like pronunciation, and b) whether males, more inclined towards languages for practical reasons, put communication in the foreground to the detriment of the quality of the accent. We nuanced our research questions by observing motivation, because the males in our sample demonstrate a very high degree of intrinsic motivation and therefore apparently in contradiction with the more pragmatic motivations that have appeared in the literature among male language students in general (not necessarily in language courses). The gender impact could thus have been nil. Yet Dal Maso and Duryagin (ch. 2) find in their analysis of Section B that the male students in our sample give less importance to pronunciation accuracy and more to communication, and less importance to pronunciation when compared to the lexicon and to grammar.

As for the impact of the nature of the motivation on the attitudes towards the accent in the language studied, one's own or that of others, we wondered if an intrinsic motivation would imply attitudes where pleasure is an important variable, including pleasure of success (having a good accent, or communicating better), emotional and playful pleasure (having fun pronouncing aloud, feeling like someone else) and absence of stress. The results reported by Arroyo Hernández and Paschke (ch. 3) confirm this.

Plurilingualism - in all its forms - could also be considered as an important variable, and in particular we wondered if the fact of being bilingual would imply greater attention to perfection or, on the contrary, greater tolerance, given that plurilingual speakers are accustomed to using several codes. Dal Maso and Duryagin (ch. 2) show that the daily use of several languages - whether inherited languages in the family (foreign or dialectal), or languages learned later but often used - is associated with greater pleasure and greater self-confidence in the quality of pronunciation, which one might expect. Italian dialect speakers also value the importance of pronunciation over other language components to be learned such as grammar or lexicon, but at the same time show greater tolerance for variation. Similarly, Arroyo Hernández and Paschke (ch. 3) confirm that those

students who claim to be plurilingual evaluate themselves more positively in terms of accent (even in languages which are not their own and which they have been learning since childhood, such as English) and therefore demonstrate greater self-confidence.

Finally, the impact of the nature of the target language, and its proximity to the Italian language has been shown, since students of languages that are more difficult for Italians, because they are more distant, such as German, Swedish, and Russian evaluate themselves less well, and sometimes experience less pleasure (especially with German) (cf. Arroyo Hernández, Paschke, ch. 3 of this volume).

Our study can thus provide valuable indications which can inform teaching choices. For example: a) not only by teaching phonetics, but making students aware of all the implicit attitudes towards the accent both in terms of communication and pleasure; b) by underlining the value of dialect coexisting with a standard form of the language, for studying a foreign language, and c) by working on the affective attitudes for languages which are perceived as more difficult, in order to improve self-assessment and therefore the extrinsic motivation generated by confidence in success.

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