Where linguistics meets historiography: The Great War and popular Italian in the works of Leo Spitzer

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**1. Introductory remarks**

We may justify a linguistic study of the Great War (hereinafter, GW) for various reasons, even though linguistic aspects are often those most neglected in the study of historical phenomena. The GW led to a revolution in the production of letters and diaries, so much so that the period has been seen as suffering from “writing bulimia” (Cafferana2005: 40).[[1]](#footnote-1) During the war years, four billion letters and postcards were written in Italy alone, as well as ten billion in France, and thirty billion in Germany. The figures are even more impressive if one considers that the illiteracy rate among Italian soldiers at the time was between 32% and 39%, with peaks of up to 53% in Calabria (Renzi 2016; Caffarena 2005: 42-43). The data provided by De Mauro (1963, chapter 3: with 40% of Italians still illiterate in 1911; see also below, footnote 5) are much more pessimistic.

These data clearly suggest fairly widespread phenomena of collective and “delegated” writing (Caffarena 2005: 60), in which a writer just slightly more educated than his peers would take on the task of reading and composing letters for a group of illiterate people. The vast majority of these letters, postcards, and diaries are still waiting to be studied. Given the widespread illiteracy in Italy in the early twentieth century, the language of these documents was obviously not standard Italian, but a different type of Italian, strongly influenced by dialect, later referred to as *unitary popular Italian*, that is, “a form of Italian imperfectly acquired by those who have a dialect as their mother tongue” (Cortelazzo 1972: 11; Lepschy 1990: 69).

In the following pages, we will examine the characteristics of popular Italian, as compared to other types of Italian, on the basis of a study by Spitzer (1921/2016) that revolutionized linguistics. For the first time, he shifted the interest of linguists from traditional writing to a type of writing strongly influenced by spoken language, which displayed features that were not dealt with in the grammars of the time. Spitzer leads us to reflect on a series of paradoxes regarding the GW and the very nature of language:

1. The catastrophe of the war has always been considered unspeakable and unrepresentable (Amato 2015; Amato *et al.* 2017), but to what extent is this due to the obvious restrictions imposed by writing, as well as by censorship, on those who were in a position to describe it?

2. How is it possible to transcribe, and thus analyse, this material (letters written by the working classes) without manipulating them, without radically transforming them into something else?

3. How should we assess deviations from the standard found in such letters, and how should we interpret the many similarities between popular Italian and Italian *Umgangssprache*?

As we shall see, the content of the letters confirms the inexpressibility of the War, since they rarely contain interesting historical information. Instead, their form, their signifier, tells us a great deal about the Italian population of the time and the differences between written and spoken language, between standard, substandard and neo-standard.

1. All quotations in this chapter have been taken from Italian editions of texts unavailable in English and translated by the author, with the exception of Lepschy, which was published in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)