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Sociolinguistic Typology and Language Contact

Despite the fact that the linguistic outcomes of contact strongly depend on the structures of the languages involved, it is sociolinguistic factors that cause language contact to occur in the first place and to determinate its intensity and its direction. In particular, the sociolinguistic profile of the speech community in terms of linguistic repertoire, sociolinguistic norms and language use patterns play a significant role in shaping language contact. Most scholars in the field of contact linguistics have now proved that almost everything is possible in language contact and that constraints are easily violated by counterexamples. Yet, this does not mean that everything is equally likely to occur in any sociolinguistic setting.

Italian and German, or rather Italo-Romance and Upper German varieties spoken in Northern Italy, provide an excellent test bench to verify the impact of sociolinguistic factors in language contact. In fact, a large number of German varieties are spoken in Italy's alpine regions where they have been in contact with Standard Italian and/or Italo-Romance dialects for a long time (in some cases up to eight-nine centuries), differing from each other on many levels: status, official recognition, geographical continuity, access to Standard German, bi-/multilingualism. Such differences are singled out for both qualitative and quantitative variation in terms of observable language contact phenomena, despite the similarity of the languages/ language varieties involved.

Based on the outcomes of several research projects and on a large amount of conversational data documenting language use in a selection of German-speaking speech communities in Italy, the presentation will focus on borrowing strategies and code-mixing patterns to be related to a typology of speech communities/linguistic repertoires.