The ‘dialect myth’ and socio-onomastics. The names of the castles of Bellinzona in an integrational perspective

Adrian Pablé

English Department, Faculty of Letters, University of Lausanne, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that name variation and change cannot be studied in a satisfactory way within a variationist sociolinguistic framework, as the latter cannot ultimately cope with the psychological complexity involved in human communication. The reason why variationism does not describe a social ‘reality’ has to do with its insistence that lexical variants have to be assignable to ‘fixed codes’ (‘dialects’, ‘sociolects’, ‘style lects’) and that two speakers using different codes will result in misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. The present contribution offers an alternative approach to synchronic name variation inspired by an integrational semiology, thus treating linguistic signs (in this case, toponyms) as context-sensitive and in need of instantaneous referencing. By not considering proper names as part of any fixed codes the integrational fieldworker is able to observe language use unbiased, prepared to accept that in principle any name may be used between any two speakers in any situation. The objects of study for this paper are the names of the three Medieval castles of Bellinzona (Italian-speaking Switzerland), which the present author already investigated in an orthodox sociolinguistic perspective in the 1990s.

Keywords: Integrational linguistics; Variationist sociolinguistics; Onomastics; Italian-speaking Switzerland

1. Introduction

The present contribution proposes a different approach to language use and variation from that commonly taken within a variationist sociolinguistic framework. The objects of study of this paper are the names of the three Medieval castles of Bellinzona, the capital of Italian-speaking Switzerland, which the present author collected through fieldwork and documentary research in 1997. From that enterprise two publications in the field of ‘socio-onomastics’ issued (Pablé, 1999, 2000), in which an attempt was made at (i) correlating ‘toponymic competence’ (i.e. the knowledge of certain names) and (ii) ‘actual’ usage of names with particular extralinguistic variables characterizing informants. In this contribution the author would like to take as its starting-point the postulates of integrational semiology (Harris, 1996, 1998a; Harris and Hutton, 2007) and propose an alternative account of how the castle names of Bellinzona are used in everyday communicational encounters. At
the same time the paper will question the usefulness of core sociolinguistic concepts based on the ‘fixed code’ myth to accomplish the above task. The integrational position will be tested on the basis of first-hand observations of how the castle names are ‘made sense of’ in spontaneous communicational situations, that is how ‘meaning’ and ‘reference’ are established during encounters. In this way, it is hoped that the tenets of integrational linguistics can be shown to be applicable to fieldwork-based studies of communication and that supra-individual categorizations commonly adopted within variationist sociolinguistics lead to a distorted view of synchronic lexical variation.

2. The integrationist vs. the sociolinguistic position

Integrational linguists reject the idea of ‘fixed codes’ (underlying abstract systems) to which any spoken or written realization (the surface linguistic forms) must be attributable. In this perspective, what is termed ‘a language’ or ‘a dialect’ does not constitute an objective reality but rather a folklinguistic (‘second-order’) construct which is the result of linguistic reflexivity (see, Love, 1998 [1990]). For the integrationist, in fact, the folk perception that in locality x and in locality y two different varieties (e.g. ‘dialects’) are spoken always presupposes historical, political and geographical factors antedating the use of the two names – if there are any – for variety x and variety y (see also Harris, 1998a, p. 55, 1998b [1990], p. 94). The sociolinguist, in turn, sets himself the goal of describing ‘language varieties’ (as ‘first-order’ phenomena); the assumption is that language variation (facts of parole) is not random but ‘orderly’, and ultimately conducive to understanding facts of langue, and that this structured heterogeneity only emerges after systematic inspection of the (tape-recorded) data by the professional linguist. The ‘order’, however, is only apparent once the data are made to correlate with the context (i.e. whether a situation requires formal or informal speech), the social variables (e.g. sex, ethnicity, socio-economic class, age) and the linguistic environment (e.g. phonetic, morphosyntactic). The codes thus identified by the sociolinguist either refer to speakers (‘sociolects’) or to situations (‘style lects’). Harris (1998b [1990], p. 93) termed the beliefs underlying a structurally-informed sociolinguistics the ‘dialect myth’ and the ‘style myth’, respectively; in his view, the two myths serve to ‘prove’ the determinacy of the verbal sign, which, in turn, allows a ‘scientific’ approach to language and society.

The integrationist’s grounds for rejecting a ‘fixed-code theory’ are manifold: for the purpose of this paper, let us concentrate on the ‘lexical unit’, in particular the processes of innovation and obsolescence. Harris (1998a, p. 79) notes:

> When we come across words we do not know, words which apparently did not exist a few years ago, it is difficult to resist two conclusions. One is that if there are verbal ‘codes’, they cannot be fixed: on the contrary, they must be changing all the time. The other conclusion is that if there are such codes, different people use different ones, and these too change. Until yesterday, mine did not include the word moshpit: today it does. But if the code has the kind of instability evidenced by the sudden emergence of new words and meanings, what guarantee of stability is there for ‘old’ words and meanings? The integrationist sees none. And if indeed there is none, then it is the viability of the concept of the code that is itself called in question. For it conspicuously fails to fulfill the theoretical function that is required of a code in semantics; namely, to provide a source for those publicly invariant meanings that supposedly underpin verbal communication in the community, and can consequently be both ‘encoded’ and ‘decoded’ by those who know the code.

Concerning the question of the invariance of meaning, the sociolinguist is wont to circumvent the objection by shifting the problem from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ level, thus bringing into play the ‘sub-codes’ available to different groups which constitute ‘the community’. The invariant meanings thus exist but are not necessarily shared by all the members of the community. Hence, if such a word as moshpit is attested by a speaker of language x, there must indeed be an identifiable group of speakers who would interpret that word in the same way – in other words, moshpit is part of a ‘sociolect’ or ‘register’ – while those who are unacquainted with it do simply not have that word in their ‘dialect’; however, the word may, in principle, become part of the language habits of other social groups until it is eventually shared by the whole community, be it local, regional, or national.
Concerning the compatibility between system (in a structuralist sense) and change, it should be kept in mind that sociolinguists have also pondered upon this issue; Larry Trask, for instance, devotes a sub-section of his course book *Historical Linguistics* (Trask, 1996, pp. 267–268) to what he terms the “Saussurean Paradox”, i.e. the puzzle of how systems are constantly disrupted by changes and still retain their structural properties.\(^1\) In his explanation, which is based on the groundbreaking paper by Weinreich et al. (1968), Trask (1996, pp. 282–284) has recourse to the idea of co-existing variants and thus of the *polystylistic speaker*: in fact, any new word enters the language as a minority variant, competing with an older variant; the variants possess overt or covert prestige, and are hence (dis)favoured in specific situational contexts requiring a rather formal or a rather informal variety, respectively. What may have started as a minority variant may in some cases become the majority variant, and possibly oust the older variant from the language. Also the social prestige inherent in a variant is subject to change.

From an integrationist perspective, these two sociolinguistic explanations require us to accept (i) the idea of ‘telementation’, i.e. that speaker \(A\) and hearer \(B\) will have the same mental image as far as, say, *moshpit* is concerned, and (ii) the notion of ‘synonymy’, namely that two variants (in this case lexical) are alternative ways of saying the ‘same thing’ (linguistically, though not socially).

For the integrationist, the linguistic sign is *indeterminate* in both form and meaning: nothing is given in advance, i.e. prior to the communicational act; misunderstandings and communicational breakdowns are thus not explained as the result of speakers not sharing the same ‘code’ (or ‘sub-code’), but have to do with how speaker \(A\) and hearer \(B\) each contextualise (i.e. temporally integrate) the verbal and non-verbal elements of the communicational encounter. From this it follows that signs, being highly context-sensitive, are newly created each time when speaker \(A\) and hearer \(B\) engage in communication and ‘make them mean’ something, whereby \(A\)’s and \(B\)’s thoughts will never be identical (and do not need to be in order for communication to be ‘successful’). Thus, Harris (1998a, p. 70) explains that, unlike what structuralists believe, coming across a word for the first time is not an exception:

“A [...] mistake would be supposing that coming across a word for the first time is a ‘special case’ and therefore unreliable as a guide to the ‘nature of meaning’. The integrationist, on the contrary, maintains that what happens in this ‘special case’ is what happens in *every* case, except that the similarity is disguised by our hubristic readiness to assume that our past linguistic experience provides all the information we need in order to assign semantic values in present and future cases.

Not knowing what a word ‘means’, therefore, is not knowing what to ‘do’ with it, i.e. “how to integrate the occurrence of the word into enough of our linguistic experience to satisfy the requirements of the [present] case” (Harris, 1998a, p. 69). If required by the situation (e.g. a person insisting on being given more information, coming across new contexts of occurrence), we may want to search for a different or more elaborate explanation of that same word (Harris, 1998a, p. 70).

The commonsensical notion that two persons both call *Fido* ‘a dog’ and *Tibbles* ‘a cat’ does not constitute proof that the words *dog* and *cat* have determinate meanings (Harris and Hutton, 2007, p. 202), already given before the communicational event, just as “a ‘unanimous decision’ taken at a meeting does not warrant supposing that all were of one mind: those present might have voted as they did for all kinds of disparate and incompatible motives” (Harris and Hutton, 2007, p. 203).

3. Socio-onomastics revisited

The notion of the *indeterminacy* of the linguistic sign also has implications on the level of the denotation (or ‘reference’), not only on that of the connotation (or ‘sense’): in fact, within an integrational semantics, the traditional separation between ‘common nouns’ and ‘proper names’ collapses. While traditionally the latter are perceived as mere labels allowing unequivocal identification with a referent (a two-way process that does not involve the *signifié*), in an integrational perspective the denotation of proper names is never simply guaranteed, the relationship between *signifiant* and the referent being context-dependent:

\(^1\) For an exposition of how Saussure conceived of the question whether systems are open to change, see Harris (1996, pp. 204–207).
This is very obvious in the case of non-verbal signs, such as pointing, but it is no less fundamental in the case of words. A proper name does not ‘refer’ to anything independently of the circumstances in which it is uttered or written; and the notion that it does, or could do, is generated by a metalinguistic abstraction. If $A$ succeeds on a number of occasions in using the name *Socrates* in such a way as to give $B$ to understand that he is talking about one particular Greek philosopher who was Plato’s master and condemned to death for impiety, that is not because of some permanent relation between Socrates and the name *Socrates*, but because on each and every occasion $A$ has deployed an appropriate technique of contextualization in those circumstances. It is easy, however, for $A$ to overlook his own role in the act of reference, and suppose (mistakenly) that reference is somehow assured by a prior bond tying the referent to the name. This belief is a survival from primitive word magic. $A$ is all the more likely to succumb to the mistake if he realizes that there is no such bond tying a deictic expression like *this philosopher* to Socrates, or to any other particular philosopher. $A$ supposes, therefore, that the essential difference between names like *Socrates* and referring expressions like *this philosopher* is, precisely that the name itself guarantees the reference, without any effort on his (or anybody else’s) part (Harris and Hutton, 2007, p. 208).

Harris and Hutton’s (2007) insistence on the here-and-now when it comes to establishing the reference of a proper name is incompatible with the traditional socio-onomastic view, according to which names have fixed referents (even though the same name may have a different referent, depending on the ‘sub-code’). Thus it becomes possible for the sociolinguist to make predictions about which specific name or names (applied to a specific referent) are likely to be used by a specific type of speaker when talking to a specific type of listener in a specific kind of situation. The present author’s socio-onomastic study of Bellinzona (Pable`, 1999, 2000) was produced in exactly this spirit. The integrational linguist, in turn, focuses on a less static model of communication, where *any* name (applied to *any* referent) can in principle occur in the presence of *any* two (or more) speakers, in *any* context of use. Unlike the sociolinguist, the integrationist thus has no wish to stress the *in-group* (or ‘sociolectal’) nature of names or to support the idea that a name may be associated with the ‘wrong’ referent because speakers do not share the same ‘sub-code’. In fact, if referents are not given antecedently, then whether a name is referenced ‘rightly’ or ‘wrongly’ cannot be decided by an ‘impartial’ third party, but will have to be negotiated between the speakers involved in the communicational act.

A look at the pioneering essays interested in the sociolinguistic aspects of onomastics – mostly written by Eastern German scholars working within a framework of Marxist–Leninist linguistics – shows that the field of *socio-onomastics* (for which two terms have been used in German, i.e. ‘Sozio-Onomastik’ and ‘Namensoziologie’, depending on one’s orientation) was meant from the beginning to be modeled on a structuralist (presumably Labovian) sociolinguistics, a logical move if proper names are regarded as an integral part of linguistic systems (just like appellative lexemes):


Hence, the ‘fixed-code myth’ and the ‘dialect and style myths’ constituted the foundation stones for establishing this new discipline in the early 1970s, as outlined by one of the most prominent socio-onomacists, i.e. Walther (1989 [1974], p. 358):

---

2 On the distinction between ‘Sozioonomastik’ and ‘Namensoziologie’, Naumann (1989 [1984], p. 393) notes the following: “Analog zum Vorgehen der Soziolinguistik könnte davon ausgegangen werden, dass die Sozioonomastik die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Onyment als spezifischen sprachlichen Zeichen und Gesellschaft unter onomastischen, d.h. linguistischen Aspekten untersucht und die Namensoziologie – oder wie man diese Disziplin sonst nennen mag – von soziologischen Fragestellungen aus an die Analyse onymischen Materials herangeht”.

The same Walther, however, also admitted what most variationists would be reluctant to admit, namely that identifying each and every group of name-users within the so-called ‘speech community’ is an impossible task, if by ‘group’ is meant that its members use a specific toponymic variant uniformly. Walther therefore decides to postulate an infinite number of ‘sub-codes’ to be found within a confined territory (e.g. a ‘village’ or ‘town’): “Beim Namengebrauch ist die Gemeinschaft [...] in unendlich viele, bei jedem Namen verschiedenartige und verschieden grosse Namenbenutzergruppen aufgesplittert” (Walther, 1971, p. 54). In other words, Walther does not question the reality of the ‘code’, but what he insinuates is that ultimately the professional linguist (or onomastician) will not be in a position to describe all of the sub-codes available to the speakers of the speech community, as, in order to do so, each and every member of the community would have to be interviewed, and his/her onomasticon inventoried.3

4. The castle names of Bellinzona, Southern Switzerland

When back in 1997 the present author started to collect data on the micro-toponyms of Bellinzona with a focus on oral usage and its social stratification, there were very few comparable studies dealing with the sociolinguistics of name variation in a synchronic perspective (e.g. Vorob’eva, 1971; Kornaszewski, 1985; Weinacht, 1985; Petzold, 1988; Christoph, 1990), most of which focused on the ‘rural village’ rather than the ‘town’ or ‘city’. What made Bellinzona an ideal object of study for such an enterprise were (i) the historical character of its urban micro-toponyms (the castles, the squares and churches), which would allow one to investigate both synchronic variation and diachronic change (ii) the fact that Bellinzona’s Medieval castles are three – not only one – which required the presence of unambiguous names on both the ‘macro and ‘micro’ levels of society, and (iii) the fact that Bellinzona’s population consisted of both dialect speakers and non-dialect speakers, who would thus employ different names depending on the two language varieties.

For the present purpose it suffices to summarize the most pertinent findings of the study with respect to the castles (Pable´, 1999, 2000, pp. 61–81). As was to be expected, the research laid open a wealth of castle names that, according to informants, were being used or had been used in the past (by themselves, or by previous generations). The selection of the informants was made on the basis of three sociolinguistic variables, ‘age’, ‘dialectophony’, and ‘nativeness’, with the aim of obtaining a representative champion of informant ‘types’ belonging to the Bellinzona speech community. Whether somebody counted as a ‘dialect-speaker’ or a ‘native’ was decided by the fieldworker, based on the informants’ own declarations (in the case of ‘dialectophony’) and their autobiographical indications (in the case of ‘nativeness’). From an integrationist position, this classification is problematic for many reasons, but I shall comment on only two of them: even if somebody claims not to be a ‘dialect-speaker’ in a Swiss–Italian context, that person may still have a passive command of it, or/and speak an Italian interspersed with dialectal elements in specific situations (e.g. for jokes). Secondly, whether somebody is ‘indigenous’ (or ‘native’) to the place under investigation cannot be decided by an outsider; thus, the present author classified people born and raised in Bellinzona (what he called ‘true bellinzonesi’) as ‘indig-

3 This move stands in contrast with Labov’s claim that it suffices to select the most representative members of the community, those who most represent the ‘essence’ of the community; for Labov, it is not necessary to collect data from each and every member of a group (or sub-group) for the purpose of describing the group’s synchronic grammar (see also Figueroa, 1994, pp. 92–94).
enas', irrespective of whether they were living there at the time of the inquiry, while informants who were born and raised in another part of Italian-speaking Switzerland or in Northern Italy – some of whom, however, had been living in Bellinzona for several decades already – automatically counted as 'non-natives'.

In the questionnaire that served as a basis for the face-to-face interviews (Pableé, 2000, pp. 52–53) informants were asked to (i) list the names they knew for object \( x \) (e.g. the three castles) and (ii) which name(s) (for object \( x \)) they would use in a dialect conversation (in the case of dialectophone informants), and which one(s) they would use most spontaneously in Italian (in the case of non-dialectophone informants). The first question tested ‘knowledge’, i.e. an individual's (active) ‘toponymic repertory’, consisting of both official and unofficial names, not all of which (s)he would necessarily make use of spontaneously, while the second question focused on ‘actual usage’, and thus aimed at ascertaining which names occurred in informal exchanges between the various groups of people living and working in Bellinzona. The underlying assumption regarding the different treatment of Swiss–Italian dialect and Standard Regional Italian in the questionnaire was that speaking dialect automatically means ‘speaking informally’, while speaking Italian does not. Those names which were indicated by all speakers, leaving aside ‘minor’ differences in pronunciation (e.g. dialectal castèll da cima vs. Italian castello in cima), were classified by the fieldworker as making up the ‘minimal’ toponymic repertory, i.e. names suitable for communicational events involving members of any social group within the Bellinzona speech community. For the integrationist (as well as the sociolinguist), this way of eliciting data is problematic because decontextualised in the extreme; in fact, what informants state that they say or do not say (i.e. which names), and which names they claim never to have come across or not to understand when confronted with them, constitutes a folk discourse belonging, in integrationist terms, to ‘second-order’ phenomena; ultimately, data collected in this way tell us little about the names actually occurring in unobserved everyday communicational encounters (the ‘first-order’ phenomena).

The three castles of Bellinzona distinguish themselves visually in various points: (i) their topographical position: in fact, they are located on different levels; (ii) their dates of construction: 10th to 12th century (with many successive phases of amplification), late 13th century, and late 15th century; (iii) their sizes. The biggest and oldest one, Castelgrande, built upon a 40-m-high massive rock, is also the most central one, i.e. closest to the downtown area; the second biggest and second oldest, Castello di Montebello, was erected on a hill adjacent to the town-centre. The smallest and most recent one, Castello di Sasso Corbaro, is located further uphill, in fact the farthest from the centre. As can be imagined, this particular constellation found its reflex in the names given to the castles in the course of their history: the dialect names castèll da méz (‘castle belonging to the middle’) and castèll da cima (‘castle belonging to the top’) refer to the topographical position; the names castel grande and castel piccolo (the latter originally designating the castle in the middle) refer to their respective sizes (and for obvious reasons were coined prior to the construction of the third castle); castel vecchio (originally designating Castelgrande) and castel nuovo (for Montebello) refer to the dates of construction (again, these names must have been coined before the third castle was constructed).

A nowadays popular name triplet attested during the socio-onomastic study (Pablé, 1999, 2000), namely il primo castello, il secondo castello and il terzo castello (‘first’, ‘second’, and ‘third castle’) could be explained on the basis of any of the factors mentioned before (i.e. ‘first’ in proximity, size or age); at the same time, however, the names could also refer to how the community values the importance of the castles in the present day (e.g. in terms of their attractiveness, usefulness, or as a tourist destination). In this respect, it is certainly note-

---

4 This classification conforms to Labov’s criterion for membership in a particular ‘speech community’. The underlying idea is that there is a grammar acquired at a very early stage which stays with one during one’s lifetime (as opposed to a grammar which develops continuously, i.e. the one modeled on the linguistic output of peers and people influencing one’s life): for Labov, it is the first grammar which determines membership in a speech community (Figueroa, 1994, p. 89). Thus, somebody born in Bellinzona, from parents who were likewise born there, counts as a ‘native’, irrespective of whether (s)he stayed in Bellinzona a lifetime or moved away at the age of, say, 20, never to return again or only on rare occasions.

5 Compare Figueroa (1994, p. 99) as regards Labov’s objection to traditional dialectologists’ reliance on introspective intuition. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine how the use of onymic variants should be investigated via the sociolinguistic interview, which is interested in collecting information about the ‘vernacular’. In fact, it is highly unlikely that the researcher will be able to collect a high number of name variants without directing informants’ attention to the relevant topic.

6 Obviously, how ‘firstness’ is interpreted by the people using (or hearing) the names ‘first castle’, ‘second castle’ and ‘third castle’ will vary greatly, depending on speakers’ personal experiences with the castles.
worthy that the study revealed an analogous name triplet apparently in use, indicated exclusively by informants aged between 18 and ca. 25, who asserted that the local youth referred to the castles as il primo, il secondo, il terzo (thus omitting the generic element, ‘castello’). We shall come back to these clipped names shortly.

The motivations underlying other – formerly common – name triplets are (i) of a ‘historical-colonial’ nature, and (ii) political. Concerning the first set of names, it must not be forgotten that in the early 16th century the three Swiss–German cantons Uri, Schwyz (Scitto in Italian) and Unterwalden, also known as the three cantons of ‘primitive Switzerland’, took possession of Bellinzona (and thus also of the three castles consolidated by the city of Milan to protect the local population from the same Swiss–Germans). It is in relation to that era that the three castles were also referred to as castell da u¨ri, castell da svitt and castell da unterwalden, names which have survived to this day (also commonly pronounced as Italian forms), despite their negative historical load. In reaction to this period of colonialism, it was decided in 1818 that the official names of the castles should be hagionymic ones, namely Castello di San Michele, di San Martino, and di Santa Barbara. Unlike the names Uri, Scitto, Unterwalden, which are still known today (however, as the study of 1997 revealed, only among speakers born prior to ca. 1960), two of the saints’ names (San Martino, Santa Barbara) have clearly become obsolete, while awareness of the name San Michele is still relatively widespread, though not always attributed to the original referent, i.e. Castelgrande (Pablé, 2000, pp. 71–72).

The data gathered in the socio-onomastic study showed (with respect to the castles) that (i) some of the old (i.e. historical, dialectal) names had disappeared or were being used/interpreted in relation to a different castle; (ii) some names seemed to be known to all speakers (but not necessarily used by all of them); (iii) some names were in use among (or known to) only specific groups of speakers. The first category concerns semantically ambiguous names like castel vecchio (‘old castle’), castel nuovo (‘new castle’), castel piccolo (‘small castle’), all of them also used formerly as dialect variants (e.g. castell vecce). In the second category feature the official Italian names (Castelgrande, Montebello, Sasso Corbaro). In the third category fall the aforementioned clipped forms il primo, secondo, terzo, which were considered by the author – and understandably so, given his former theoretical allegiance – to be part of a ‘generational lect’, i.e. youth language.

The integrationist field study undertaken for the present paper focused on names from the first and the third categories, for the following reasons: (i) to demonstrate that the notion of obsolete names does not prevent speakers from interpreting these names (when confronted with them); (ii) to prove the previous investigation wrong, which – on the basis of scattered statements by older informants – concluded that il primo, secondo, terzo were not intelligible to elderly (and middle-aged) speakers. At the same time, this new study did not automatically exclude names belonging to the second category, as these were often mentioned spontaneously by the informants.

5. An applied integrational study

For the study discussed in this paper informants were selected randomly by a small team of fieldworkers as they were walking in the streets of Bellinzona between June 30 and July 2, 2008. The aim of the 60 interviews conducted was to engage speakers in a conversation about local places in need of identification. For this purpose, the fieldworkers needed to keep their academic interests secret and pretended to be looking for a person they were supposed to meet. Thus informants were told an invented story about a ‘friend’, a native of Bellinzona, who had left a message on the fieldworker’s voicemail saying that he should be ‘at point x at time y’; informants were also told that this friend could not be reached because he had switched off his mobile. To make the situation credible, the fieldworkers claimed not to be from Bellinzona (while clearly being identifiable as Swiss–Italian native speakers), and that their friend had somehow not taken this into account when leaving his cryptic message.

As far as methodology is concerned, there was obviously the problem of how to record the data; surreptitious recordings never were an option, which is why the fieldworkers decided to reconstruct the communicational encounter right after it had taken place, thus taking into account that the reconstruction would
necessarily amount to a rough approximation (with respect to a tape-recorded conversation). Apart from the unethical aspect involved in tape-recording surreptitiously, it must not be forgotten that the latter method may nurture the fieldworker’s hopes to be able to reconstruct ‘everything’ retrospectively, when listening to the recordings; as a consequence of that, the fieldworker might become less attentive to elements which are equally important in studying communication and interpreting the linguistic data within an integrationist framework, namely visual details (e.g. body language, eye gaze).

The way the field study was conceived fostered a random selection of informants, as someone searching for a place in a locality (s)he is unacquainted with will not necessarily address passers-by who are ‘natives’ of that locality. This, of course, is not to suggest that addressing an unknown person in the street to obtain a certain piece of information (e.g. the location of a place) is a communicative act devoid of strategic moves: for instance, some people may deliberately select young or middle-aged persons, and not elderly persons, because the latter are thought not to know where the fashionable places (e.g. cafés, restaurants) are. Others may look for a police officer or go to the tourist information office right away. Still others may refrain from stopping a person in the street because (s)he looks ‘foreign’ (or like a tourist); what is more, people may ask the person they seek help from whether (s)he is from here’ before explaining what their problem is. The locations where the interviews were conducted, in turn, were not chosen randomly, as the focus on contextualization made it preferable to engage informants in a conversation at points from where a specific castle was visible (and sometimes very close) or invisible, respectively.

5.1. Case studies

In the following section, I shall discuss some of the reconstructed conversations (given in an English version). They aim at conveying an idea about how the persons involved tried to accomplish the task asked of them, i.e. in what ways they ‘made’ an (often unknown) name mean something. Given that integrationists reject the notion of ‘codes’, it is clear that the examples shown below are not meant as illustrations of regular, categorizable linguistic behaviour: they cannot be because for the integrationist situations are non-repeatable and because no two individuals share the same range of previous (linguistic) experiences – a belief diametrically opposed to how Labovian sociolinguistics treats the individual, i.e. not in terms of his particularity but rather in terms of supra-individual categories (Figueroa, 1994, p. 89).

The two toponyms under discussion in this section are (i) the triplet il primo, secondo, terzo (both with and without the mention of ‘castello’), and (ii) the name Castel Vecchio. The reason why the study paid a great deal of attention to the former names has to do with their supposed ‘sociolectal’ nature (Pablé, 1999, pp. 100–101); in fact, the new set of interviews should either confirm or refute the author’s previous conclusion that saying something like ‘ci troviamo stasera al primo’ (‘see you tonight at the first’) is utterly unintelligible to elderly speakers from Bellinzona, while being a common expression among local youngsters. Discovering that today’s teenagers do not know what place il primo designates will not pose a problem to the sociolinguist, as he would argue that the triplet under scrutiny was not passed on, i.e. those who are adolescents or young adults today (who were thus not interviewed in 1997 because too young) never used these names in the first place, while the triplet may have survived as part of the sociolect of people now aged ca. 27–37 (who were ca. 15–25 at the time of the first study). What the sociolinguist may find harder to account for, however, would be the situation in which elderly informants, given a particular context (including the co-text), would be able to interpret il primo as referring to ‘il primo castello’ (thus unlike what elderly informants claimed in the mid-1990s); this, in fact, would question the notion that understanding il primo, il secondo, il terzo requires a specific ‘code’. Of course, it could be argued that the names have also become part of other ‘generational lects’ in the meantime. By

---

8 This was exactly what the fieldworkers did on many occasions, so that the situation would look ‘authentic’.
9 It is clear that many of the persons interviewed claimed not to know where the place was, in which case they often did not make an effort to be helpful. However, in these cases speakers ‘did’ something, too, e.g. when exhorting the interviewer(s) to ask somebody else.
10 Judging from the reactions of elderly and middle-aged informants in the former study, however, it seems highly unlikely that the older generations have started to use primo, secondo, terzo (without the mention of ‘castello’) along with (or instead of) the more traditional names. At the same time, however, the hypothesized finding above would suggest that the reactions against the said name triplet could only be regarded as reactions to decontextualized name lists (thus, confronting informants with these names in such a way may rouse their indignation as to how ‘lazy’ or ‘ignorant’ today’s youth have become).
shifting the methodology (i.e. from official face-to-face interviews with relatively fixed questions to natural conversations, whose real purposes remained unknown to the informants), the present author was finally able to observe the castle names *il primo*, *il secondo*, *il terzo* in real-life situations and to say something about their communicative (in)efficiency.

As regards the second name under scrutiny, i.e. *Castel Vecchio*, the choice was determined by the fact that this name type (cf. also *castel nuovo*, *castel piccolo*) is no longer recurrent nowadays (except, of course, for *Castelgrande*) while still being semantically transparent (though usually not associated with the original referent). Chances that informants simply say that they do not know which castle a particular name designates are much smaller when it comes to names such as *Castel Vecchio* than names for which there is no logical motivation available to the layperson (e.g. *Castello di Santa Barbara*).

5.1.1. *Il primo/secondo/terzo* (castello)

What struck the present author in particular was the number of people ‘from Bellinzona’ or ‘from a neighbouring locality’ and of all age classes who did not consider *il primo* as a clipped variant of ‘il primo castello’, and hence did not automatically associate ‘firstness’ with ‘secondness’ (and ‘thirdness’), in spite of the fact that informants were literally surrounded by the three castles at the time of the interviews. A possible reason why it did not cross informants’ minds that *il primo* might mean ‘il primo castello’ may have to do with the fact that a castle is not a typical meeting-point between friends (one of whom, moreover, is not a native and therefore does not know which castle is called by which names). In turn, a considerable number of informants suggested a restaurant called *Prisma*, thereby implying that either that ‘friend’ had mistaken *Primo* for *Prisma* or, more likely, that the fieldworkers had got it wrong. Others, among whom the lady working at the tourist information office, thought of a supermarket chain called *Primo*, which, however, is not present in Bellinzona but only in a neighbouring town. To be absolutely sure, she checked the name in the computer without finding anything. It was noticed, moreover, that many of the people who were stopped in the street automatically looked around to see whether they could spot the place called ‘primo’, i.e. the conclusion on their part was that because they were being asked about the place in that particular spot, the place in question had to be in the vicinity (while the fieldworkers never claimed that ‘il primo’ had to be somewhere close). Equally noteworthy is the fact that several young informants (aged about 16–22), on being asked by the fieldworkers whether *il primo* could possibly mean ‘il primo castello’ locally, denied that, adding that one would say ‘il primo castello’. On several occasions informants not aware of a place called *primo* (or *secondo*, *terzo*, respectively) in Bellinzona they would know it, be it because they ‘go out a lot’ or because they had lived in Bellinzona for a long time.

Let us now consider some of the conversations involving informants who established a connection between ‘il primo/secondo/terzo’ and ‘castle’:

**Case study 1**

**Informant**: elderly lady (presumably of Italian descent).

**Place**: *Via Orico* (little street leading up to the ‘first castle’, i.e. *Castelgrande*; woman is walking down that street).

**Fieldworker**: A friend of mine told me to meet him ‘al primo’. Do you know where that place might be?

**Woman**: ‘Il primo’? Today is the ‘first’ – he meant the first of July! But *what place* are you supposed to meet your friend?

**Fieldworker**: No, I don’t think he meant the day. I thought that there was a place called ‘il primo’ in Bellinzona.

---

11 In fact, some informants asked the fieldworkers what the purpose of that meeting was.
12 A typical case of this type of behaviour manifested itself when a local policeman, who, when asked about ‘il primo’ on *Piazza del Sole* – a populous square over which looms *Castelgrande* on its massive rock, suggested that the fieldworkers should go down to the first floor of the underground parking built under that square.
Woman: No, there isn’t. And I’ve been living here for 50 years! (Spontaneously) Maybe he means the ‘first castle’ (and points up towards Castelgrande).
Fieldworker: I also thought of that castle. Do you call it like that around here?
Woman: No, we say ‘il primo castello’.
Fieldworker: But there is no doubt that the ‘first castle’ is really this one?
Woman: (decisely) It’s that one. ‘First’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ castle (points them out one by one. She then indicates to the fieldworker how to get to the castle).

While in a sociolinguist’s perspective the informant’s unexpected ‘name competence’ (because she is ‘elderly’ and ’non-native’) would have to be accounted for by claiming that a new local ‘sub-code’ containing the names ‘primo/secondo/terzo’ has been discovered, the integrationist would stress the context-sensitivity inherent in communicational encounters: hence, as the question happens to be posed to the informant on a street leading up to the ‘first castle’ (which may also be her permanent address), it eventually occurs to her that the meeting-point in question could be the castle ‘right up there’. Whether her answer would have been the same if she had been asked the same question in a totally different location, e.g. far from downtown, cannot be known, but there is no guarantee that it would have.13 At the same time, ‘first castle’ is only her second guess, which indicates that ‘il primo’ is not an expression she has come across often (or ever); in fact, as the conversation took place on July 1, she believes at first that the fieldworker’s friend must have meant ‘il primo (di luglio)’, which in dialect is ‘al primm da luì’ (while in Italian ‘al primo’ is not possible for dates).

Case study 2

Informants: two elderly ladies (presumably from southern Italy).
Place: Viale Stefano Franscini (street leading to the old walls descending from the ‘first castle’).
Fieldworker: A friend of mine told me to meet him ‘al secondo’.
Woman 1: The second what?? (Neither of them seems to have a clue).
Fieldworker: He also said something about ‘concerts of classical music’.
Woman 1: Ah, the second castle. It’s the ‘castle in the middle’.
Fieldworker: They call it like that in Bellinzona?
Woman 1: Yes. First, second and third castle. (They then go on to describe how to reach Montebello Castle by car).

Again, given the social variables of ‘old age’ and ‘non-nativeness’, the informants are not supposed to understand what ‘il secondo’ refers to, and indeed they do not; however, the mention that classical music concerts are performed there makes it all clear to one informant. In fact, during the summer months open-air classical concerts take place at Montebello Castle. Perhaps the fact that the conversation was held in early July also helped the informant (notice that the fieldworker did not mention ‘open air’ or ‘summer’); if a similar conversation had taken place in the winter time, the same informant might not have guessed that it was the castle (or it might have taken her longer).14

5.1.2. Castel Vecchio

As was to be expected, most people confronted with the toponym Castel Vecchio were puzzled by it, and asserted that none of the castles in Bellinzona bore that name. Often this statement was accompanied by a list

13 It could, for instance, be assumed that the same elderly lady would have interpreted ‘il primo’ as ‘il primo castello’ as well in a different situation, but depending on where she was asked, she might have hesitated between Castelgrande and Castello di Sasso Corbaro, the latter possibly being the more likely choice if she was asked in the vicinity of the ‘castle of the top’. There were indeed cases in which informants argued that ‘primo castello’ could be either the one ‘on the top’ or the one ‘on the bottom’, depending on where one stands to count. Although the studies conducted in Bellinzona indicate that the majority of bellinzonesi seem to agree that ‘il primo castello’ is the one downtown (Castelgrande), the people themselves are aware that reference is context-dependent: somebody living close to the ‘castle of the top’, for instance, may regard that particular castle as the ‘first’ one.

14 An analogous situation developed once with respect to ‘il primo’, where open-air movies are shown during the summer months. Again, two elderly ladies only suggested ‘primo castello’ after the fieldworker mentioned that his friend had said something about ‘open-air cinema’.
of ‘correct’ names for the three castles. Some of the informants nevertheless tried to make sense of the name and took it upon themselves to direct the fieldworkers to a specific castle. The following are some noteworthy examples.

Case study 3

Informant: postman.
Place and Time: Via Canonico Ghiringhelli (both Castelgrande and Sasso Corbaro on top are visible, not the ‘castle in the middle’, though. The time is 11.30 am).
Fieldworker: I am supposed to meet a friend of mine at Castel Vecchio.
Postman: Castel Vecchio? None of the three castles has this name. My guess is that it is either ‘Castelgrande’ (points at the ‘first castle’) or ‘Sasso Corbaro’ (points towards the castle at the top). They both have a restaurant. I think it is more likely that your friend meant ‘Castelgrande’.

What is striking about this communicational encounter is the fact that the informant discards the castle in the middle from the beginning, presumably because there is no restaurant in it. As the conversation happened shortly before lunch time, the informant automatically opted for the two castles mentioned above, as he assumed that the meeting was to be held over lunch (although, interestingly, the fieldworker did not specify the time of the meeting). In the end, the postman decided that Castelgrande was the more likely option, possibly because it is located in the town-centre, and therefore more easily accessible than Sasso Corbaro (which is usually reached by car), and not because he thought that Castelgrande was ‘older’ (which is true historically speaking, but not evident at all for laypeople).

Case study 4

Informant: elderly man (most probably resident in the area where the conversation took place).
Place: Via Sasso Corbaro (the steep road leading up to the castle at the top; far away from the town-centre).
Fieldworker: Excuse me, sir, can you tell me which one of the castles is ‘Castel Vecchio’?
Man: That one (indicates in the direction of Sasso Corbaro).
Fieldworker: Is that its name?
Man: Yes. ‘Sasso Corbaro’. It’s the smallest and the most rustic one. (then goes on to explain how to get to it).

Again, the context in which the communicational encounter is happening determines the informant’s choice. The latter assumes that if a person is driving up the road to the castle, it must be that one (s)he is searching for. Little does it matter whether the name indicated by the fieldworker matches the names the informant is acquainted with for that particular fortress. It may well be that the informant never heard ‘Castel Vecchio’ for the castle at the top, but the fact that he is being asked about an ‘old castle’ right underneath one makes matters clear to him; as already noted, Sasso Corbaro could give the impression of being the oldest of the three castles, while in fact it is the most recent one. When the fieldworker asked again whether that castle was really called ‘Castel Vecchio’, the informant mentioned the official name, but then added that it was the most ‘rustic’ (rustico) one of the three castles.

Case study 5

Informants: two middle-aged female employees (both claim to be ‘from Bellinzona’).
Place: medium-sized grocery store and newspaper stand located within the train station.
Fieldworker: I’m supposed to see a friend at Castel Vecchio.
Woman 1: ‘Castel Vecchio’? I don’t know. Let me ask my colleague (calls her colleague).
Woman 2: (she doesn’t know, either). There’s Castelgrande, Montebello and... (doesn’t remember the third one). However, none of them is called Castel Vecchio. In my opinion, it must be Castelgrande, as the
other two castles are not ‘old’ (goes and takes a city map from the shelves. Looks up the castle names in the index. Only the three official names figure). It must be Castelgrande because it’s central. People have appointments there. There’s an elevator that takes you up to the castle.

This example nicely illustrates an altogether sensible ‘glossing practice’ when it comes to toponyms (given the context in which the conversation occurs), equivalent to the recourse to the dictionary (for appellatives): checking a city map for the unknown designation. For this person, Sasso Corbaro is not obviously ‘old’ (possibly because she knows the chronological facts). As seen in a previous example, the fact that someone is having a meeting at one of the castles leaves no doubt that it must be the most central and most easily accessible one of the three, i.e. Castelgrande.

Case study 6

Informants: three women (woman 1 works at a laundry, women 2 and 3 are in a café next door).
Place and time: Via Canonico Ghiringhelli. It is 11.20 am.
Fieldworker: Excuse me, I’m supposed to meet someone at ‘Castel Vecchio’.
Woman 1: ‘Castel Vecchio’? It is a café. But let’s go and ask somebody else.
Woman 2: It’s the café at ‘the Portone’ (close to Castelgrande).
Woman 3: No, that one is called ‘Castelgrande’. ‘Castel Vecchio’ is a café in Giubiasco (town nearby).
Fieldworker: My friend didn’t say it was in Giubiasco, though. It must be in Bellinzona. I rather think it is one of the castles...
Woman 2: No, none of the castles has that name. There is Uri, Stitto and... (doesn’t remember the third).
Woman 1: (continues) ...Castelgrande, Montebello and ‘il Sasso’, but I don’t think your friend means that one [i.e. Sasso Corbaro] (she hesitates).
(Woman 3 finally decides to send the fieldworker to the café ‘Castelgrande’).

Unlike the cases presented above, in which the name Castel Vecchio, though unheard of, was automatically applied by the informants to one (or two) of the castles, these informants insist that the name refers to a café. In a display of ‘native identity’, they exclude the possibility that there is a castle called ‘Castel Vecchio’ in Bellinzona; from what is said, it apparently does not occur to any of them that ‘Castel Vecchio’ could in principle be an in-group variant locally in use for one of the castles, which they just happen not to know. One of the informants rather thinks it likely that ‘Castel Vecchio’ is a café in nearby Giubiasco, which the fieldworker would have had to reach by car. Their insistence that it must be a café has to do with the fact that indeed there is one called ‘Castello’ – not Castelgrande – at the ‘Portone’ in downtown Bellinzona (as the informants know), but probably also with the fact that a castle is not a place where one would meet around lunch time. When the fieldworker suggests that it might be one of the castles, the informants begin with the listing of names: the only potential candidate seems to be Sasso Corbaro, perhaps because it looks ‘old’ or because the likelihood that Sasso Corbaro may possess names not in common usage is highest. However, the fact that the ‘castle of the top’ is not where one would usually send a non-native to a meeting gets the informant to discard this option right away.

6. Concluding summary

Variational sociolinguistics, with its claim that linguistic behaviour can be predicted in terms of probabilities (provided that an individual’s social coordinates are known), relies on the ‘fixed code’ myth, i.e. a search for invariant signs and their assignment to social codes. From an integralational point of view, it is not predictable how a speaker behaves linguistically (in this case with respect to name usage) because no two individuals have been confronted with the same linguistic (or rather, communicational) ‘reality’ at any point in time: even if two informants belong to the same sex, have the same age, attained a similar educational level, and lived in the same neighbourhood all their lives, it is sensible to assume that during their lifetime they have come (and will come) across a different number of names, applied to a different number of objects; this is why classifying these two informants as speakers of the same ‘sociolect’, based on the fact that during the interview they independently show awareness of a particular name (or cluster of names) commonly unmentioned by informants
belonging to a different social profile, hardly does justice to the psychological complexity involved in human interactions. In discussing case study 6, this becomes clear when two of the women engaged in the problem-solving, who in a variationist sociolinguistic study would probably count as individuals with very similar social backgrounds, spontaneously indicate different name triplets for the castles, the first one listing two of the unofficial, more ‘popular’ variants (Uri, Svitto), whereas the second informant, instead of completing the triplet by supplying the name her friend did not remember (i.e. Unterwalden), decides to start afresh and indicates the three ‘correct’ (i.e. official) names (Castelgrande, Montebello, Sasso Corbaro), possibly because the latter variants are regarded by her to be more appropriate in the given situation, i.e. in the presence of a ‘non-native’.

Unlike what a structurally-oriented sociolinguistic study on names in communication tends to foreground, an integrational approach suggests that the referencing of names is highly context-sensitive, and not simply a matter of ‘name competence’, which is what the examples discussed here confirm. Thus, some elderly informants interpreted ‘primo’ as ‘primo castello’ under certain circumstances (e.g. when provided with particular pieces of information, when asked in particular locations at a particular time), whereas many of the young informants interrogated, who were not given the same side-information, did not establish such a denotation (but a different one, e.g. the restaurant called ‘Prisma’); this is in stark contrast with the author’s previous study (Pablé, 1999, 2000), where the latter group of informants was claimed to be the one using il primo for ‘il primo castello’, and at the same time the one able to interpret the clipped form as such, regardless – it was presumed – of the context in which the name occurred.

Moreover, the task set by a structurally-oriented socio-onomastics, namely to describe the co-existing name repertoires in use within a community with as much accuracy as possible, i.e. the ‘minimal repertory’, shared community-wide, the various ‘sociolectal repertoires’ as well as the ‘situational repertoires’, requires that social situations are assumed to be already given in advance, with speakers having to find the appropriate ‘code’ that fits a particular context. An integrational approach, in turn, assumes that nothing is given in advance, and thus that speakers constantly have to create ‘meaning’, irrespective of whether a name is already known or encountered for the first time.

This is not to suggest that sociolinguistic questionnaires such as the one conceived for the study criticized here (Pablé, 1999, 2000) are useless; in fact, it is probably only through a guided interview that the present author learnt about name variants which otherwise would have remained unmentioned in the scholarly literature (e.g. the clipped forms ‘primo/secondo/terzo’). On the other hand, the technique employed for the present study allowed the researcher to dispense with the somewhat artificial distinction between ‘name knowledge’ and ‘actual use’, for the names known by the informants were automatically also the names used by them. The working methodology adopted for this integrationist study could be criticized on the grounds that the starting-point of the conversations did not necessarily encourage informants to display the whole range of castle names they have a command of; while this is true, a future survey could involve encounters in which informants are invited to do exactly this, e.g. in a situation in which the interviewer (who, again, declares himself to be a non-native of Bellinzona) stops people in the street, claiming to have an appointment at one of the castles. In this story, the person he has a meeting with mentioned the name of the castle in a telephone message he left a few days ago, which he mistakenly erased after listening to it. Now he cannot remember the name, nor can he reach this friend. In this way, it is hoped, informants may make a special effort to elicit all the castle names they remember and the castles they supposedly refer to. The name lists, however, are embedded in a very specific (and realistic) context, i.e. that of helping a foreigner find the right castle. It is likely that many of the informants would want to direct the fieldworker to the ‘first castle’, but would be forced to mention names for the other two castles, if the fieldworker claims that the name he is searching for is neither Castelgrande nor Castello di Uri. This exercise would not be as artificial as when informants are interviewed ‘officially’ by a linguist, and asked to list all the names they know for each castle and relate them to their own (and other people’s) linguistic habits.

The present study, it is hoped, has shown that integrational linguistics is not just a philosophy of language, deprived of applied studies in the domain of social phenomena. It is rather a viable alternative to orthodox sociolinguistics. It must be conceded, however, that the data collected for this paper was subject to interpretation by a third party, inevitably so. It is fully realized that this goes against one of the fundamental beliefs of integrationism, i.e. that the linguist has no access to what is going on in his subjects’ minds.
References