COGNITIVE STUDIES | ÉTUDES COGNITIVES, 26
Warsaw 2026

Article No.: 3487
DOI: 10.11649/cs.3487

Citation: Brasca, L. (2026). Italian nationalist ideology and the inconsistent classification of Gallo-"Italic" contested languages. *Cognitive Studies | Études cognitives*, *2026*(26), Article 3487. https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.3487

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Italian Nationalist Ideology and the Inconsistent Classification of Gallo-"Italic" Contested Languages

Abstract

Genealogical, dialectometric, and intelligibility studies unanimously describe Gallo-"Italic" as closer to Gallo-Romance than to Italo-Romance. Nonetheless, a significant body of scholarship refers to Gallo-"Italic" as part of Italo-Romance (pro-Italo- tradition). Recent research has identified several formal inconsistencies in these pro-Italo- classifications, which suggest that the inclination for the pro-Italo- models among linguists could have extra-linguistic motivations.

This paper argues that referring to Gallo-"Italic" as part of Italo-Romance has the effect of representing Italy as an ethno-linguistic taxon – a concept historically perceived as essential to the Italian nation-building process. By adopting the hypothesis of ideological interference from a mono-ethnolinguistic framework, this study provides an economical explanation for various classificatory inconsistencies found in the literature. These include the incongruous use of nomenclature forms, the use of the questionable "bridge variety" category, and the arbitrarily decisive classificatory weight assigned to the loss of final *-s*.

The study suggests that the pro-Italo- terminological and classificatory choices may obscure the deep ethno-linguistic diversity of Italy, potentially preventing speakers from developing awareness that, rather than "Italian dialects" – as Italian academia and institutions call them – they speak distinct languages deserving, as such, of institutional recognition and support. Furthermore, it is proposed that the prevalence of these views is partly sustained by the structural position of linguistics within Italian university curricula, particularly within literature-based Bachelor of Arts programmes. The paper concludes by advocating for the development of alternative channels for disseminating knowledge of linguistic sciences other than the university courses in literature, to foster a more nuanced understanding of Italy's linguistic heritage.

Keywords: Gallo-Italic; language classification; Romance languages; contested languages; teaching of Italian literature; language ideologies; language policy; language dominance

1 Introduction

Scholars consider the Massa-Senigallia line[1] as an important bundle of isoglosses in the Romance domain. It runs along the Apennine mountains ridge in Italy[2], dividing Western from Eastern Romania (Bartoli, 1936; Lausberg, 1956/1965; Loporcaro, 2009; Pellegrini, 1973/1975, 1992; Trager, 1934; von Wartburg,

[1] While scholars agree on the geographical collocation of most of this bundle of isoglosses, there is hesitation/debate about its extremities: older literature proposes the "*La Spezia–Rimini* line" (e.g. von Wartburg, 1950/1967); some suggest the "*Carrara–Fano* line" (Pellegrini, 1992, p. 285); Hull (1982/2017, p. 9) proposes the "*Carrara–Pesaro* line". For the current aims, discussing these fine-grained geographical differences is not necessary.

[2] In the present study, 'Italy' is used with the currently common extra-linguistic meaning of the 'territory of the Italian Republic'.

1936, 1950/1967). Scholars also consider most Romance varieties historically spoken between the Massa–Senigallia line to the south and the Alps to the north, as a homogeneous group known as Gallo-"Italic"[3] (see Figure 1; for the internal articulation of Gallo-"Italic" see, e.g. Devoto & Giacomelli, 1972).

While scholars agree about the extent and the internal articulation of Gallo-"Italic", an issue emerges when dealing with its ascription to wider Romance sub-groups: some scholars classify Gallo-"Italic" as part of Gallo-Romance (henceforth pro-Gallo- scholars), others classify it as part of Italo-Romance (pro-Italo- scholars). The pro-Gallo- stance is held by Hull (1982/2017), Schmid (1956), and Bec (1970–1971). Hierarchical clusterings resulting from dialectometric studies corroborate this stance (Goebl, 2008; Tamburelli & Brasca, 2018). Some representative works of the pro-Italo- stance are von Wartburg (1950/1967), Lausberg (1956/1965), Hall (1974, 1976), Pellegrini (1973/1975, 1992), and Loporcaro (2009).

Brasca (2020, 2021, 2023) points out a discrepancy in the pro-Italo- works: despite *referring to* Gallo-"Italic" as Italo-Romance, they *describe* it as structurally Gallo-Romance. This is inconsistent, since 'Gallo-Romance' and 'Italo-Romance' are universally used as mutually exclusive labels within the same nomenclature. In particular, they are normally used in the family tree model to name two cousin taxa: Gallo-Romance is a Western Romance daughter, while Italo-Romance is an Eastern Romance daughter[4].

Brasca (2020, 2021, 2023) showed that such an inconsistency can be explained by the fact that pro-Italo- scholars mix the ontologically and conceptually distinct *Abstand* and *Ausbau* criteria (see Kloss, 1952, 1967) in a unidimensional "classification". In their studies (1) they describe, compare, and group the vast majority of the geolects that they consider based on *sharing isoglosses* (i.e. *Abstand*); (2) they describe Gallo-"Italic" as sharing all the isoglosses that they consider critical in distinguishing Western Romance (and, in particular, Gallo-Romance) from Italo-Romance (Hall, 1976; Lausberg, 1956/1965; Pellegrini, 1973/1975; von Wartburg, 1950/1967); but (3) some sociological (an aspect of *Ausbau*) or geopolitical arguments are eventually presented in these works, determining the ascription of Gallo-"Italic" to the Italo-Romance taxon (i.e. group) instead of to the expected Gallo-Romance taxon (see the "taxon problem" in Brasca, 2023). Such a "classification" has to be rejected since *Abstand* and *Ausbau* criteria ground two independent classifications: an *Abstand*-based one, grouping Gallo-"Italic" with Gallo-Romance based on shared isoglosses, and an *Ausbau*-based one, grouping Gallo-"Italic" with the varieties currently heteronomous towards Italian. These classifications can be combined in a bidimensional classification (Table 1) but not mixed into a unidimensional one (Table 2).

Table 1. Bidimensional (partial) classification of Romance varieties.

	Gallo-Romance	Italo-Romance
heteronomous towards Italian	**Gallo-"Italic"**, Occitan of Piedmont, etc.	Neapolitan, Sicilian, etc.
heteronomous towards French	Occitan of France, etc.	Corsican

In Table 1, the independence of the two dimensions (horizontal/*Abstand* and vertical/*Ausbau*) is correctly respected and recognisable. On the contrary, the Table 2 matrix does not distinguish them. As a consequence, it cannot fulfil the main scientific function of classifications, which is *to inform* about the traits shown and shared exclusively by the grouped items (see Simpson, 1945; also Bailey, 1994; Devitt, 2008). To exemplify this, let us say that we come across the following (fictitious) statement about a Romance

[3] All Gallo-"Italic" languages – Emilian, Ligurian, Lombard, Piedmontese, Romagnol – are spoken in the north of the Italian state and listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (Moseley, 2010). I write Gallo-"Italic" with inverted commas because the Italic linguistic profile of this group is questioned in this contribution.

[4] In this contribution, I focus on the opposition 'pro-Italo- vs. pro-Gallo-', which is both 'classical' and still prevalent in academic debates. However, in Brasca (2023, section 6.2.1.2), one can find a concise reference to some anti-Italo- classifications proposed in the literature for Gallo-"Italic", which propose groupings and labels other than 'Gallo-Romance'.

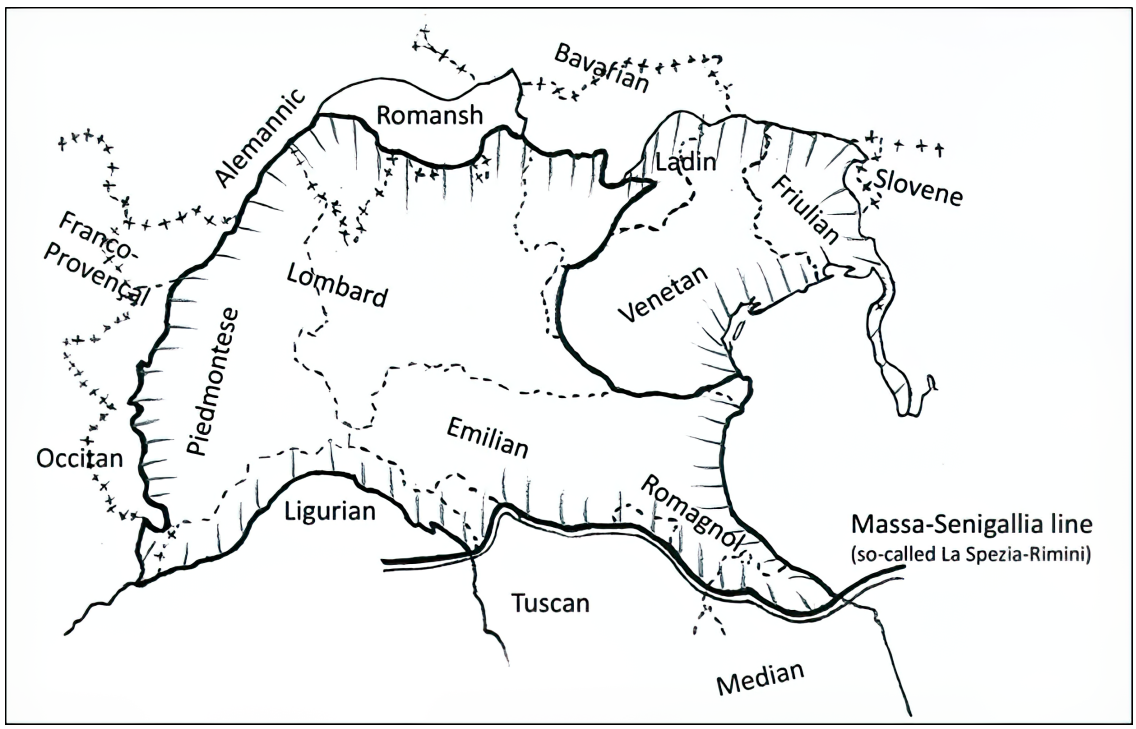


Figure 1. The Gallo-"Italic" languages are spoken within the thick line. The Cisalpine continuum (including Gallo-"Italic") is within the 'fringed' line. The Rhaeto-Cisalpine (or Padanian) continuum (Hull, 1982/2017) includes Cisalpine plus Romansh. Small crosses: state borders; dashed lines: regional administrative borders.

Note: The Töitschu, Mòcheno, Cimbrian, and Resian (endangered) languages are not represented in this map. Find them in Moseley (2010), also online: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026/PDF/187026eng.pdf.multi.

Table 2. Unidimensional (partial) classification of Romance varieties.

Gallo-Romance	Italo-Romance
Occitan of France and Piedmont, etc.	**Gallo-"Italic"**, Neapolitan, Sicilian, etc.

variety that we do not know: "the Xese geolect is Italo-Romance". From this statement, we *cannot derive* structural linguistic information about Xese if the author mixes *Abstand* and *Ausbau*. For instance, Xese could show either Eastern Romance linguistic traits (like Sicilian) or Western Romance ones (like Gallo-"Italic"). Similarly, from the statement "Yese is Gallo-Romance", we *cannot derive* either sociological or geopolitical information about Yese. In fact, Yese could be acknowledged as genealogically Gallo-Romance but heteronomous towards Italian (like Occitan of Piedmont).

Such a mix of *Abstand* and *Ausbau* criteria also explains what Brasca (2023) calls the "category problem"[5], which entails the inconsistent classification of the contested[6] (not only) Gallo-"Italic" *languages* as "*dialects*". The category problem occurs when, in a formally unidimensional "classification", the *category name* 'language' refers to two different concepts – (1) '*Abstand* language' and (2) '*Ausbau* language' – and the classified varieties are alternately and impredictably grouped into 'languages' according to one or the other meaning of the term.

[5] The "taxon problem" and the "category problem" are the two forms of the "ontological problem" (Brasca, 2023).
[6] For the concept of 'contested language', see Tamburelli and Tosco (2021).

(1) According to the *Abstand* meaning of 'language', group X is a 'language' in virtue of the fact that its members are linguistically so similar that they are mutually intelligible to a large extent. Usually, such a similarity is mainly due to a shared genealogical profile;
(2) According to the *Ausbau* meaning of 'language', a set of varieties forms the group of 'Yese dialects' in virtue of the fact that, regardless of the level of linguistic similarity and consequent mutual intelligibility, they are heteronomous towards the same 'language y'. 'Language y' is the sociolinguistically dominant literary standard. Some add that such varieties must be part of the same "continuum" as y; some specify that the definition of *Ausbau* language includes the standard y plus the "non-standard […] heteronomous varieties" (e.g., Trudgill, 1992, p. 169).

Each of these two meanings of the term 'language' corresponds to a different meaning of the counterpart term 'dialects': 'highly intelligible geographical and social varieties' in (1); 'heteronomous varieties' in (2).

In pro-Italo- unidimensional "classifications", which inconsistently fail to distinguish between these two meanings of 'language', the following two irreconcilable assertions cohabit: (i) Italian and French are classified as distinct languages based on the *Abstand* meaning of 'language'; but (ii) both Tuscan geolects and Gallo-"Italic" geolects are classified as 'Italian dialects' based on the *Ausbau* meaning of (Italian) 'language' (see Brasca, 2023, for several examples in the literature).

In Brasca (2023, 2026), it was also shown that some pro-Italo- scholars claim that Gallo-"Italic" would have become more similar to its second-cousin Italo-Romance than to its sibling Gallo-Romance varieties through contact with the Tuscan/Italian literary language. However, Brasca (2023, 2026) argued that, even assuming this 'critical convergence' scenario[7] as a working hypothesis, these scholars propose a *synchronological*[8] classification which, as such, should be expressed by a nomenclature terminologically distinct from both the *genealogical* and the *Ausbau-based* ones. Therefore, they should avoid the labels "Italo-Romance" and "Italian". In fact, the same set of items can be classified according to different criteria (see Bailey, 1994, pp. 3–4; also Goebl, 1991, p. 342), and thus be sub-grouped differently in the resulting classifications. It seems, therefore, appropriate that each classification be *expressed by a distinct nomenclature* if we want the labels to be "distinctive" (see Simpson, 1945, pp. 24–26) and indicate what type of classification they concern. More importantly, although their 'critical convergence' claim[9] is quantitative in nature, these scholars do not provide quantitative evidence in favour of it. Because of these flaws, too, the pro-Italo- classification is formally inconsistent and has to be rejected (detail in Brasca, 2023).

However, Brasca (2021) also pointed out that it is unlikely that so many scholars were and are unable to make scientific classifications; instead, he proposed that pressure from Italian nationalist ideology is a more likely explanation for the abovementioned flaws. In fact, presenting all varieties of Italy – including Gallo-"Italic" – using the typically genealogical label 'Italo-Romance' aligns with the nationalist ideology and rhetoric that have persisted since the 19th and 20th centuries, which foster the representation of nation-states as ethno-linguistic taxa (i.e., taxonomic units[10]; "exhaustive and mutually exclusive classes", Bailey, 1994, p. 3). In what follows, I will expand the arguments introduced in Brasca (2021, section 4).

Presenting the Gallo-Romance *Abstand* nature of Gallo-"Italic" separately from its current heteronomy towards Italian within a bidimensional classification (i.e., one that consistently combines two independent classifications without mixing them; see Bailey, 1994) would collide with the chauvinistic assumption that national partnership is unidimensional, like biological brotherhood. Regarding biological kinship, one cannot state: 'I am John's brother and Alice's second cousin *in some respects*, but I am John's second cousin and Alice's brother *in others*'. Accordingly, a *unique* and *unidimensional* pro-Italo- classification of all the varieties of Italy aligns with the unidimensional way civil loyalty is conceived in (supposed) nation-states. Under this conception, each citizen has one king or president, not two; one national parliament, one national

[7] On the model of the physics (and other disciplines) concept of "critical mass" (see collinsdictionary.com), 'critical convergence' is intended here as the minimum amount required for a linguistic convergence to make Gallo-"Italic" more similar to Peninsular geolects than to its sibling Gallo-Romance geolects.
[8] That is, based on current linguistic similarity, see Brasca (2023).
[9] What in this contribution I call 'critical convergence claim' is called 'post-Wartburg hypothesis' in Brasca (2023).
[10] Each item of a taxon is closer to the other items of that taxon than to the items of other taxa.

government; and one supreme military commander, not two. Furthermore, on either side of a frontier, 'bi-dimensional' military uniforms or national flags are inconceivable. If chauvinists adopt this as a model for national ethno-linguistic identity ('one nation, one people, one language'), it is therefore undesirable for them that schools and the media prompt Gallo-"Italic" speakers to think: "we are closer to the Italians *in some respects* (i.e., according to the *Ausbau* classificatory criterion), but closer to the French and Swiss, etc., *in others*" (i.e., according to the *Abstand* classificatory criterion).

Here are a few examples of the anti-unidimensional logical consequences of classifying Gallo-"Italic" as structurally Gallo-Romance and as a group of languages distinct from Italian. These correspond to changes in certain disciplinary contents and notions currently taught in schools and universities. First, Italian students should be consistently taught that the Italo-Romance *Testimonianza Capuana* (960 AD; see Varvaro, 2001) can be considered the first written attestation of (the ancestor of) their state language (Italian) – currently cited as an emblematic date for Italians' linguistic identity – and of the Peninsular regional languages, but not of the Gallo-"Italic" (or other Cisalpine, see Figure 1) regional languages. For the latter, the Gallo-Romance *Oaths of Strasbourg* (842 AD) should be indicated. Second, Gallo-Romance-focused publications/sections (e.g., Barra-Jover et al., 2012) should regularly cover structural analyses of Gallo-"Italic". Third, medieval Occitan and Franco-Lombard[11] literature should be taught substantially as part of Cisalpine speakers' *own* heritage culture. This is due to the rooting of these languages in Cisalpine-produced culture (e.g., Benincà et al., 2016) as varieties closely related to Cisalpine and – concerning Franco-Lombard – partly constituted of it. Fourth, the expressions "forma sett." (northern form) and "vc. dial. lombarda" (vernacular Lombard term)[12], etc., currently used in the etymological information of Italian dictionaries (e.g., Zingarelli, 2026[13]), should be replaced respectively by "cisalpino" (Cisalpine) and "lomb." (Lombard). These expressions would be in line with how loans into Italian from other languages are currently reported. For instance, for "merluzzo" (cod fish) and "guardia" (guard), Zingarelli (2026) Digitale reports respectively "Provençal *merlus* [...]" and "Gothic *wardja* [...] from the Germanic verb **wardōn* [...]" (my translations from Italian)[14]. All these practices would exhibit the rich ethno-linguistic diversity of Italy, and likely inspire commitment in safeguarding its cultural and moral value (see Brasca, 2021).

2 Previous Literature Reporting or Suggesting that the Pro-Italo- Stance Is Driven by Ideology

Previous literature has already remarked on the interference of Italian nationalist ideology in linguistic classification. For instance[15], Hull (1990) states:

> The unscientific tendency to classify *a priori* all Latin-based dialects spoken on Italian soil as 'Italian' or 'Italo-Romance', and the practice of denying out of hand the antiquity (and therefore the indigenousness) of the non-Romance settlements, began to assert themselves in the last decades of the nineteenth century, seriously hampering the progress of philological research, especially among Italian scholars who felt duty-bound to adduce evidence in support of the party line. (pp. 166–167)

[11] "In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a literary current connected to the popularization of the French romances in northern Italy used a language (in fact a set of linguistic varieties *closely linked to each other and to French*) called 'franco-italiano', 'franco-*veneto*', or 'franco-*lombardo*' […] The basis for the evolution towards a sort of unity was the grammatical and lexical features that the languages of the area had in common. Moreover, the diachronic phonological rules that characterised the sub-areas were part of a unitary system of rules which bound these dialects, including French varieties. […] In situations like these […] the development of a koiné is unavoidable, the necessary product of […] contacts of people speaking very similar languages." (Benincà et al., 2016, p. 187 [emphasis added]).

[12] In Zingarelli (2026), see "*rugiàda* [forma sett. *rosada*...]" and "*cadrèga* [vc. dial. *lombarda*...]". See also "ràva [vc. dial. sett., 'rapa'...]" (square brackets original).

[13] For all the cases cited in this paragraph, identical expressions are used in the paper version 2021 (Zingarelli, 2021).

[14] "merlùzzo [provenz. *merlus*...]" and "guàrdia [got. *wardja* 'sentinella', dal v. germ. **wardōn* 'prestare attenzione'...]" (square brackets original).

[15] In Borghi (2011, p. 272), see also the reference to the effects of Italian "nationalistic intoxications / ubriacature nazionalistiche" on etymological studies.

Posner (1996) states:

> Although the new King of Italy, and his court, were, as northerners, more at home in French, Italian was adopted as the 'national language' to mould the very diverse regions of Italy into one cohesive polity. The *doctrine* adopted was that dialects of Italy *must be* 'Italian dialects' […] 'We have made Italy', said one statesman, 'now we must make Italians'. *Objective criteria for the affiliation of dialects were ignored* […]. (pp. 212–213 [emphasis added])

In the following, I will present a number of similar statements concerning the interference of nationalist ideology in the classification of varieties of France and non-Gallo-"Italic" varieties of Italy. I will also show how these statements indirectly support the plausibility that the pro-Italo- stance is driven by ideology. Goebl (1995) shows how "clearly recognisable are […] the geopolitical implications of […] typological [classificatory] debates" (p. 106), with reference to the position of Franco-Provençal and Occitan within Gallo-Romance. Goebl presents what he defines as the "typofobia" of Gaston Paris, Paul Meyer, and Jules Gilléron; namely, their rejection – as irreconcilable with the myth of the ancestral cultural unity and indivisibility of France – of the Ascolian "geotypological" approach that identifies, within Gallo-Romance, some "geotypes" (French, Occitan, and Franco-Provençal) on the basis of "the simultaneous presence or [of] the particular combination of [linguistic] traits (Ascoli, 1876, [p.] 387)" (as cited in Goebl, 1995, p. 105):

> While [Gaston] Paris and Meyer or Gilléron represent the centralising French ideology centred on [the town of] Paris and the myth of the unconditional indivisibility of the state, their opponents militate, with typophile geolinguistic arguments, for a certain ideal or symbolic autonomy of their provinces […]. (Goebl, 1995, p. 106 [here and below, my translation from Italian])

After quoting Gaston Paris, Goebl continues:

> Today, the chauvinistic standpoint of this [i.e. Gaston Paris's] typophobic assertion is universally recognised by the French linguistic historiography; see Daniel Baggioni (1985) and Guylaine Brun-Trigaud (1990). (Goebl, 1995, p. 106)

A section devoted to an Italian case follows, showing the same "typophobic" attitude in Carlo Battisti, who rejects Ascoli's view of Ladin – including, according to Ascoli, Dolomitic Ladin and Friulian (as far as the political Italian area is concerned) – as a linguistic "geotype" separated from "Italian" (see Battisti, 1906/1907, 1937, respectively quoted and cited in Goebl, 1995, p. 107).

These considerations concerning Occitan/Franco-Provençal and Ladin can have some utility when applied to the Gallo-"Italic" case. First, in the Occitan/Franco-Provençal case, a chauvinistic attitude would have rejected representing the state territory (i.e., France) as divided into sub-groups (French, Occitan, Franco-Provençal) that scholars universally consider members of the same taxon, namely Gallo-Romance. This suggests that a similar chauvinistic attitude among Italian scholars is likely to reject, with even more vigour, the ascription of Gallo-"Italic" to a taxon (Gallo-Romance) from which the rest of the state territory is excluded. Second, if chauvinism urges and/or urged some scholars to reject classifying *Ladin* (i.e., Dolomitic Ladin and Friulian) as non-Italo-Romance, it seems reasonable to investigate whether, with all the more reason, it would urge the same scholars – and possibly further ones – to reject classifying *Gallo-"Italic"* as non-Italo-Romance. Indeed, while Ladin is spoken in geographically peripheral, poorly industrialised areas of the Italian state and consisting of around 1 million inhabitants, Gallo-"Italic" is spoken in Italy's most industrialised regions, consisting of around 20 million inhabitants, representing 30% of the state population.

3 More Inconsistencies Potentially Explainable by the 'Must-be-Italian' Dogma

We have seen that previous literature argues that nationalist ideology has polluted the debate on the classification of geolects (not only in Italy). Now, adopting this standpoint as a working hypothesis, I will show how the single premise of the censorial intervention of the 'must-be-Italian' dogma (see Posner's, 1996 example above) can economically explain numerous and diverse inconsistencies found in the literature. The following examples are intended to stimulate further investigation.

a. The 'respectful' wish not to violate a political *taboo* in 'another's home' – i.e., in a foreign country – potentially explains some classificatory inconsistencies shown by non-Italian scholars.

Von Wartburg (1950/1967) states that, over the centuries, [Gallo-"Italic"] would have become more similar to Italo-Romance than to its sibling Gallo-Romance varieties through contact with Tuscan/Italian (see Brasca, 2023, 2026). Even assuming, as a working hypothesis, that such a 'critical' linguistic convergence on Italian really occurred[16], one would expect him to label the geolects spoken in "Northern Italy" *before* that convergence as 'Western Romance' and 'Gallo-Romance', based on his own *Abstand* descriptions (see Brasca, 2023, pp. 91–96). Instead, von Wartburg refers to even those varieties as if they were neither Gallo-Romance nor Western Romance (see Brasca, 2023, pp. 96–102), making it unclear what the labels 'Western Romance' and 'Gallo-Romance' (and the rest of the nomenclature) signify in his study. This inconsistency is potentially explainable as the unavoidable effect of von Wartburg's attempt to avoid explicitly stating the Gallo-Romance genealogical nature of Gallo-"Italic". In fact, we can assume his awareness of the importance of the equation 'one nation, *one ethnos*, one language' for nationalist ideology. Therefore, a 'respectful' attitude on the part of a 'foreign' scholar – provided such a category exists in academia – would be imaginable, albeit scientifically unjustifiable, in a period (just before and after the Second World War) when national boundaries had just been dramatically contested and re-established at a high price.

b. A second case is found again in von Wartburg (1950/1967). Among the "Western" and "Gallo-Romance" traits listed by the author[17], final *-s* is the only one that (most of) Gallo-"Italic" has lost. Accordingly, von Wartburg only mentions the loss of *-s* as the trait that justifies grouping modern Gallo-"Italic" with "Italian" rather than with Gallo-Romance. However, it is not explained why the other Western and Gallo-Romance traits still present in Gallo-"Italic" do not influence its classification (see Brasca, 2023, pp. 114–118).

Iannàccaro and Dell'Aquila (1999) also illustrate the arbitrariness of the '*-s* loss' and similar criteria used by some scholars to *define*[18] the "Italian dialects" group. They point out how, "even in historical linguistics", it is [inconsistent but] "far from uncommon" practice to define languages within a continuum "on the basis of social, literary, historical, [and] political criteria", and then choose the demarcating isoglosses a posteriori with respect to those criteria. This is done to ensure that such isoglosses match the borders of the [ideologically] defined "language". These authors continue as follows:

> By choosing other parameters, such as the voicing of the voiceless intervocalic [consonants] (a parameter which moreover serves to distinguish between Western and Eastern Romance languages […]) or the reflexes of the late-Latin palatals, the boundaries between Italian and "other" would have been different. (Iannàccaro & Dell'Aquila, 1999, p. 10 [my translation from Italian])

c. A third case involves Lausberg's (1956/1965) inconsistent use of the same *geopolitical* element, "Italy", in the supposedly *linguistic* labels "Northern Italy" and "Central and Southern Italy"; these actually refer to two subgroups of Western Romance and Eastern Romance, respectively (see Brasca, 2023, p. 67). As with von Wartburg's case above, Lausberg's inconsistency is potentially explainable as the effect of a dogmatic (or 'respectful') refusal to use distinct labels for the various ancestors of Italy's linguistic groups.

d. Political *taboo* may also explain the use of the '-Italic' element in the label 'Gallo-Italic' itself, which is inconsistent with the rest of the nomenclature in which it is traditionally included. Indeed, in 'Italo-Romance', the element 'Italo-' is supposed to consistently refer to the substrate (as in 'Gallo-Romance' and 'Ibero-Romance'), i.e., the ancient Italic languages spoken in the Peninsular area (see Regis, 2020). Given that, in keeping with this pattern, the first element of 'Gallo-Italic' refers to its Celtic substrate, it is unclear in what sense the second one ('-Italic') could refer to the ancient Italic languages. Possibly, the

[16] Von Wartburg did not provide quantitative evidence in favour of this 'critical convergence' scenario, which was instead falsified in Brasca (2023, 2026).

[17] Retention of [or adoption of literary] final Latin *-S* (see Brasca, 2023); voicing of Latin intervocalic voiceless plosives; diphthongization of [ɛ] and [ɔ] before palatal consonants; *-CT-* > *-χt-*; and *Ū* > [y].

[18] I would not say 'identified' here: see "identification" in Bailey (1994, p. 9) and Brasca (2023, section 1.7).

need to promote an 'Ital(ian) image' of Gallo-"Italic" could urge nationalist scholars to artificially include the '-Ital-' root in the label at any cost, i.e., at the expense of creating a label that is formally inconsistent with the rest of the nomenclature.

e. The literature often refers to Gallo-"Italic" as a "bridge" between Gallo-Romance and Italo-Romance (Bossong, 2016, pp. 67–18; Regis, 2020, p. 33; Tagliavini, 1969, p. 356). A first exploratory analysis suggests that such a definition (applied to other varieties as well[19]) is inherent to the inconsistent practice of mixing *Abstand* and *Ausbau* criteria and could, therefore, be intended as a rhetorical device to avoid full and direct acknowledgment that Gallo-"Italic" is not Italo-Romance. First, from a genealogical/cladistic standpoint, there can be no such thing as an intermediate bridge-category between kinship categories such as 'sisters' or 'cousins'. Second, from a synchronological standpoint, *any* geolect or group – not only Gallo-"Italic" – within a continuum (in this case, the Romance continuum) can, by definition, be described as a "bridge" between the two groups between which it is geographically located. Of particular relevance is that the very concept of a 'linguistic group', and the recognition of the existence of distinct 'linguistic groups', necessitates that any alleged "bridge variety" be preferably grouped – even if only for a tiny percentage of affinity – with one of the two geographically bordering groups. This would only differ if that variety constituted a third group in its own right at the same categorial level. However, as far as this latter possibility is considered, traditional literature using these labels holds that between Gallo-Romance and Italo-Romance *tertium non datur* from both geographical and linguistic standpoints (see Brasca, 2023, 2026). Therefore, Gallo-"Italic" must be grouped with either the Transalpine Gaul or the Peninsular geolects. Third, in studies where it is mentioned in these terms, rather than as a "bridge" between two *Abstand* groups, Gallo-"Italic" is treated as an ontologically impossible bridge between two unrelated dimensions. It is presented as something 'staying in the middle' between the *Abstand*-identified Gallo-Romance group and the (supposedly) *Ausbau*-identified Italo-Romance group. Alternatively, it would possess a sort of double *Abstand* identity: it would be ascribable to the *Abstand*-identified Gallo-Romance group based on its *Abstand* features, but also to the equally *Abstand*-identified Italo-Romance group by virtue of being part of the *Ausbau*-identified "Italian linguistic system" (see the quote below – or similar expressions, i.e., the set of varieties heteronomous towards Italian). Both these ontologically inconsistent interpretations[20] are possible for the following (intriguingly ambiguous) passage:

> Between Italo-Romance and Gallo-Romance there is the group of Gallo-Italic dialects, which, although belonging to the Italian linguistic system, if only for their centuries-old historical-cultural acclimatisation, form a bridge between Italo-Romance and Gallo-Romance, and indeed, due to certain notable characteristics, perhaps agree more with the latter. (Tagliavini, 1969, p. 356, as cited in Regis, 2020, p. 12; my translation from Italian)

An analogy can be drawn from plant classifications to illustrate what I have defined as an 'ontologically impossible bridge'. This comparison reveals a conceptual similarity between the non-scientific "classification" of 'pseudocereals' and the pro-Italo- "classification" of Gallo-"Italic". The labels 'Poaceae' and 'cereals' are normally used, respectively, in the botanical and commercial/gastronomic fields, and the two terms are not considered interchangeable within either classification. In particular, the label 'cereal' is not used in scientific botany. Interestingly, in non-scientific contexts where the two labels are often casually confused, a third (non-scientific) group appears: the so-called 'pseudocereals'. 'Pseudocereals' would group non-Poaceae (a scientific botanical definition) that are used in gastronomy in much the same way as the so-called 'true cereals' (another non-scientific definition) – i.e., cereals that are botanically Poaceae, which constitute the vast majority of cereals (see "Pseudocereal", n.d.). My point is that the non-scientific group label '*pseudocereals*', which expresses the ambiguous trans-ontological taxonomic status of these plants within a unidimensional "classification" that inconsistently mixes botany and gastronomy, presumes the existence of an alleged category that could be termed a 'bridge plant category'. Such a category performs the same conceptual function as the alleged '*bridge variety* category', whose name in turn expresses the

[19] E.g., Catalan; see Bossong (2016).

[20] E.g., see how Regis (2020, p. 12, footnote 11) supports the first of these two possible interpretations of Tagliavini (1969, p. 356).

trans-ontological status assigned to such linguistic varieties. This function is the attribution of a seeming taxonomic location to groups assigned such ambiguous trans-ontological status, such as Gallo-"Italic", within a unidimensional "classification" that inconsistently mixes *Abstand* and *Ausbau* criteria.

f. The ambiguous trans-ontological taxonomic status of Gallo-"Italic" is *de facto* expressed by the label *Gallo-Italic* itself (see, above, another possible interpretation of the inconsistent co-presence of the two elements). In this label, the element *Gallo-* factually expresses the *Abstand* nature of this group, while *-Italic* could be intended to express – albeit in a formally incongruous way (see 3: d.) – its current heteronomy towards Italian (*Ausbau*) (see, for example, Tagliavini, 1969, p. 356, quoted above).

g. The studies of Eugenio Coseriu and Žarko Muljačić are often cited in classification-focused literature on varieties of Italy. A first exploratory analysis suggests that recourse to their concepts and terminology in Italian dialectology factually works as a means of dissembling the inconsistent practice of mixing *Abstand* and *Ausbau* criteria when defining what a *language* and a *dialect* are (see "category problem" above and in Brasca, 2023). The use of such terminology may intend to reconcile (albeit only seemingly) the undeniable non-Italo-Romance *Abstand* nature of Gallo-"Italic" with its definition as a group of "Italian dialects" or as "Northern Italo-Romance dialects". In some studies, applying Coseriu's distinction between "primary vs. secondary dialects" (Coseriu, 1981/1988) to the varieties of Italy factually works as a lexical device that allows the distinction between:

i. (*Ausbau*-identified) *heteronomous varieties* of Italy ("primary dialects of Italian"), and
ii. (*Abstand*-identified) local *geolects* of the Italian *Abstand* language ("secondary dialects of Italian")

to be presented without having to renounce attributing to all of them the seemingly unidimensional definition of "*dialects*" as opposed to "Italian *language*". Importantly, these scholars do not specify which *Abstand* languages the "primary dialects of Italian" would be local geolects of (e.g., Berruto, 1995, p. 188; Loporcaro, 2009, p. 5; see also Grassi et al., 1997, pp. 7–9).

Similar considerations apply to Muljačić's (1990) use of "*dialetti*" (in inverted commas) and *dialetti* (without), referring respectively to the *Ausbau*-based concept of "dialects for subordination" and the *Abstand*-based concept of "historico-structural dialects"[21]. For instance, this terminology allows Muljačić to state that "Catalan […] is both Catalan language and a "dialect" […] of the Spanish *Ausbau* language" (Muljačić, 1990, p. 189).

4 The Fascination with the Myth of the Superiority of Italian as a Condition for Encountering Linguistics in Italian University

In the previous sections, I have shown that the "centralizing ideology" (see Goebl's, 1995 example above)[22] can economically explain various inconsistencies found in the classificatory literature. However, a disproportion strikes and calls for further explanation. Indeed, not just *some* or *many* Italian linguists (henceforth, 'working in Italian academia' will be understood), but even *the vast majority of them* – to my knowledge – refer to Gallo-"Italic" as Italo-Romance and as a group of "Italian dialects" (see Coluzzi et al., 2018). Accordingly, these scholars show themselves uninterested or overtly hostile to recognizing the status of independent languages to the Gallo-"Italic" languages, and to initiatives aiming at their institutional recognition as *languages* and public support[23]. This suggests that, surprisingly, *almost all* Italian linguists (1) share the centralizing ideology and (2) are keen on contributing to its inconsistent classificatory consequences. In respect of (1), the linguistic milieu seems to differ from other Italian academic milieus, where

[21] On these concepts, see references to Montes Giraldo (1984 and 1986) in Muljačić (1990).
[22] See also "macro-nationalism" in Coluzzi (2006), and Screti (2024).
[23] This also applies to other endangered languages of Italy not recognized by the Italian state. Find them in Moseley (2010).

an 'anti-centralizing' regionalist or federalist attitude is historically present to some extent (see examples in Galli, 2024). Here, I propose that how the teaching of linguistics is historically embedded in the Italian school system can be one of the factors[24] potentially explaining such disproportion.

An exploratory investigation into the subjects that form and formed Italian university courses suggests to me that Italian linguists came across linguistics almost exclusively (until the early 2000s) and predominantly (afterwards) during BAs in Classical [Latin, Greek, Italian] *Literature*, Modern [Italian, Latin] *Literature*, and Foreign *Literature*[25]. This lines up with non-systematic information that I obtained from some Italian colleagues (academic researchers in linguistics) about their school/university background. The consulted foreign colleagues, by contrast, reported a decidedly more diverse background.

Importantly, while linguistics is not taught in any type of Italian compulsory or secondary school, literature is always (often strongly) present. Unlike linguistics (e.g. Grillo, 1989), Italian literature teaching and its popularisation in the media encourage the evaluation and hierarchisation of *linguistic* forms[26] (see also Brasca et al., 2024). Here are some examples. Italian language models are cited as the "golden and silver Florentine", the "three crowns", the "primacy of Florentine", and the "illustrious vulgar tongue (of Italy)"[27]. All these expressions presuppose 'lower-quality' counterparts. Moreover, they present the 'only winner' of the comparison not just as better than the other varieties, but as *sublime*. All Italians learn at school that Alessandro Manzoni defined his operation of eliminating Gallo-"Italic" regionalisms from his literary works in Italian as "rinsing the [presumably *dirty*] clothes in the Arno"[28]. The success of Italian as the language of opera prompts even influential artistic and cultural institutions[29] to spread the conviction of an "alleged superiority of Italian as a language of music" (Rossi, 2022, p. 3).

A publishing/commercial factor is bound to circularly strengthen this bias. In fact, (professional) authors, who typically desire the widest circulation for their literary works (see Anderson, 1996), are unavoidably pushed to write more often in the majority language or, at the very least, in a recognised regional language than in a "dialect" that is invisible to the media and schools. Therefore, the lack of recognition exacerbates the advantage of the Italian percentage of 'great literature' over the regional language percentage. In turn, this further prompts one to associate the intellectual value of essays and the beauty of poetic and literary expressions mainly with the Italian language.

Furthermore, Italian is narrated as a means to modernise, to improve interregional communication and exchanges; as a tool for unifying Italians and Italy, transforming many small, weak nineteenth-century states into a stronger country (see Screti, 2024). One should note that this narrative can encourage the devaluation of "dialects" (read regional contested languages) and the acceptance of their shift only if one arbitrarily assumes a mono-ethnolinguistic, 'only-one-winner' conception of *language of the Italians* combining the assumptions proper to two mediatically influential forces: the nationalist ideology (one nation, one language) and Italian literature studies ('language' equates to 'literary language'), both of which assumptions are foreign to scientific linguistics. Such a conception would unjustifiably exclude the fact that, in each region of the state, the *state language* can co-exist with an institutionally recognised and supported *re-*

[24] During my presentation at CLOW4, Mattia Zeba proposed that the [possibly?] predominant urban and middle/high-class socio-geographical background of Italian linguists could be investigated as an additional potential factor.

[25] In Italian: Lettere Classiche, Lettere Moderne, Lingue e Letterature Straniere. In the late 1990s/early 2000s, the BAs Lingue e Scienze del Linguaggio (LSL, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, later Lingue, Civiltà e Scienze del Linguaggio, LCSL) and Mediazione Linguistica (e Culturale) (MLC) were instituted. Besides exams in two/three foreign languages (language skills), LSL included exclusively mandatory linguistics subjects (Theoretical, Structural, Historical, Computational, Acquisition, Glottodidactics, Socio-, Neuro-linguistics, and Philology, depending on curricula), and just one mandatory Literature exam (Italian, 5 credits). MLC included Italian Linguistics (5 credits) and General Linguistics (5 credits) as mandatory subjects. Students of Literature BAs seem to be much more numerous than those in L(C)SL and MLC.

[26] For the current purposes, it is sufficient to acknowledge and describe this fact. In turn, this fact should be studied in future research in order to address its possible ideological underpinnings.

[27] Whatever variety of Italy Dante Alighieri referred to, this expression presupposes an evaluative hierarchy between the "vulgar tongues" of Italy.

[28] The Arno is the main river in Florence, the homeland of the Italian language.

[29] E.g., *Why Italian is the language of music and opera* (n.d.).

gional language, as if – against what linguistic theory and historical experience show – speaking a regional *language* in schools, the media, and regional/local institutions would impede speaking the state *language*.

Recalling a truism is useful now: students who enrol in Literature BAs (as is the case for students of any BA) do so because they feel particularly fascinated *with what they have previously known* about literature and literary languages, basically through school and the media.

Since linguistics could be encountered almost exclusively (until the early 2000s) and can predominantly be encountered (afterwards) in *Literature* BAs, it turns out that almost only those who, during secondary school, were particularly fascinated with the narrative of the alleged aesthetic, moral, and civic *superiority* of Italian have so far had the opportunity to encounter linguistics. This because they *had* to pass a few *mandatory* introductory exams of linguistics in a Literature BA. Hence, only these individuals could become passionate about linguistics and become Italian linguists. This being the case, it does not seem surprising that almost all Italian linguists – I am obviously excluding the CLOW[30] contributors and a very few others to my knowledge – tend to conceive and feel contested languages according to the only attitudinal spectrum (see Brasca et al., 2024) that is allowed and induced by the 'only-one-winner' conception of *language*. In this sense, any academic interest towards increasing the value of "dialects" on the Status attitudinal dimension[31] by increasing their socio-political status is excluded, despite its paramount importance for language maintenance (Brasca et al., 2024; Edwards, 2011). Conversely, "dialects" can enjoy some academic sympathy just on the Solidarity attitudinal dimension and become the object of a historico-demophile feeling – if such an expression existed – and dialectological or folklore research interest, unavoidably coming down to describing how "dialects" – read contested languages – die. Indeed, even if such a possible academic 'compassionate sympathy' were conveyed to some students/speakers, the point still stands that positive attitudes on the Solidarity dimension alone are not sufficient to maintain the transmission of regional/minority languages found in situations of vertical bilingualism[32], like the Gallo-"Italic" ones (Brasca et al., 2024; Tamburelli, 2012).

Freeing further access to linguistics from the filter of Italian literature, while informing speakers about the unscientific influence of ideology on current academic attitudes, seems therefore crucial for awakening linguistic awareness and encouraging contested languages activism. Indeed, the established confidence in academia that common sense suggests unavoidably pushes laypersons – including politicians – to assume that the *almost unanimous* opinion of *Italian* academic linguists about '*Italy's* linguistic issues', however unpleasant and incomprehensible, is so scientifically authoritative that it is not worth trying to – at least seriously – challenge it.

Future research could investigate whether, among the new generations of Italian linguists (and other types of intellectuals), some have or will come across linguistics through the web, or through L(C)SL and MLC BAs, rather than through Literature BAs. It should then be investigated whether this corresponds to a stronger intellectual autonomy with respect to the 'only-one-winner' narrative, and to a stronger sensitivity towards the rights of contested languages. An affirmative response would (further) encourage the spreading of web linguistics courses in Italian and in the contested languages, presenting contested languages and Italian in a scientifically grounded, egalitarian way. In this way, scientific-minded adolescents could 'discover' linguistics regardless of their possible fascination with the alleged 'primacy' of Italian literature and language.

For the same reason, including some linguistics-related subjects in (social) science-focused secondary schools could also be encouraged, as well as increasing their compulsory presence in BAs, e.g. in Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Law, Economics, (Agricultural and) Environmental (and Natural) Sciences, Computer Science and Engineering, etc.

[30] The content of the current contribution was first presented at the CLOW 4: Contested Languages in the Old World 4 Conference and workshop. Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, 25th May 2024.

[31] For an overview of the Status and Solidarity dimensions of attitudes towards speakers, see Giles and Billings (2004); Brasca et al. (2024), and other references there.

[32] In vertical bilingualism, most young speakers speak the majority language as the language of primary socialization, and the regional/minority language does not enjoy any institutional recognition (see Brasca et al., 2024; Tamburelli, 2012).

Future research could also investigate the university background of Italian journalists, especially those who have written or write about 'Italian and "dialects"', whose importance in spreading linguistic ideologies is recognised in the literature. Besides their understandable propensity to trust Italian academia (see Screti, 2024) – which is actually present in most people, not only in journalists – their possible background in Literature would further explicate their (to my knowledge) almost total propensity for vehiculating the 'only-one-winner' linguistic ideology.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the audience of CLOW4 in Warsaw as well as the anonymous reviewers, whose feedback I found both encouraging and helpful.

The publication was financed at the author's expense.

This publication was reviewed using the CLARIN-PL research infrastructure (http://clarin-pl.eu).

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

Publishing history: Received 2025-02-14; Accepted 2025-07-26; Published 2026-08-10.