Variation and sociolinguistic competence in children's talk at school

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Abstract

This study analyses how children switch between varieties of Italian during classroom interaction, based on video recordings from third-grade classes in four Lazio schools (Colleferro, Pomezia, Valmontone, Frosinone). It examines the role and communicative functions of these shifts in relation to children's sociolinguistic competence. By observing how students use different forms depending on context, interlocutor, and activity, the research explores intentional variation to achieve interactional goals. The theoretical framework combines sociolinguistic and conversational approaches, focusing on style-shifting within the broader concept of code choice and comparing it with code-switching. The second part presents the data by variation type and classroom setting, classified by activity, topic, interlocutor, direction and scope of style-shifting, and communicative intention.

Questo studio si sofferma sulle modalità con cui i bambini passano da una varietà all'altra di italiano durante l'interazione in classe, sulla base di video-registrazioni effettuate in classi terze di quattro scuole situate nella regione Lazio (Colleferro, Pomezia, Valmontone e Frosinone). L'obiettivo è indagare come i bambini utilizzino in modo intenzionale le risorse del proprio repertorio linguistico per partecipare all'interazione e raggiungere i propri obiettivi comunicativi, variando registro e stile a seconda di interlocutore, attività e contesto.
Il quadro teorico integra elementi della sociolinguistica e dell'analisi della conversazione, con particolare attenzione allo style-shifting e alle sue differenze rispetto al code-switching. I dati sono poi classificati secondo vari parametri (tipo di attività, direzione del cambiamento, posizione sequenziale, ecc.) e analizzati per setting (lezione plenaria vs. piccolo gruppo).

Keywords: classroom interaction; style-shifting; intra-individual variation; sociolinguistic competence; Italian repertoire

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[i] Elisa De Roberto is responsible for the conception, data analysis, and writing of Sections 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Sabrina Rizzello contributed to the transcription work and wrote Section 2.

1. Introduction

Contrary to the common belief that the classroom is the exclusive domain of standard and formal Italian, the reality is far more complex. While the school system aims to promote the acquisition of standard Italian, empirical data show that both students and teachers introduce a range of linguistic varieties into the classroom that extend beyond this norm. A first factor of differentiation lies in the fact that children and adults do not express themselves in the same way. Research conducted on language used by primary school children in teaching situations has led to the development of the concept of "puerile Italian", a variety of Italian that emerges from the interplay between the linguistic varieties present in children's community and individual repertoires, as well as from features linked to age-specific language development and educational activities (see Corno & Janner, 2009; De Roberto & Rizzello, 2025, about the linguistic features of history questioning). Another layer of complexity in classroom interaction stems from children's sociolinguistic competence, which enables them to shift between registers or varieties depending on the context and their interactional goals — often in ways that diverge from adult language behavior or from shared normative models.

In the following pages, we analyse how repertoire and register vary across different teaching situations. Following a brief presentation of the data (§2), the theoretical framework adopted in this study is outlined (§ 3), situating style-shifting within the broader domain of code choice and distinguishing it from code-switching. Key studies on style-shifting in children and classroom interaction are also reviewed (§ 3.2). After outlining the parameters and categories adopted for the analysis (§ 4), in §§ 5 and 6, we turn to the examination of the collected data, which will be organised according to type of variation and classroom setting, and classified on the basis of several parameters, including formal, sociolinguistic, and conversational aspects.

2. Data

This analysis utilizes data derived from video and audio recordings, obtained with the prior informed consent of parents and teachers. The collection took place between May 2024 and April 2025. The recordings were made in six third-grade classes within four primary schools in Colleferro, Valmontone, Pomezia (all little towns in the province of Rome), and Frosinone.

It is useful to provide some contextual information about the areas in which the participating schools are located. Colleferro and Valmontone, situated 35–50 km southeast of Rome, are medium-sized towns with populations of approximately 21,000 and 15,000–16,000, respectively. Pomezia, located 20–25 km south of Rome, represents a markedly different context: with nearly 65,000 inhabitants, it is one of the largest municipalities within the Metropolitan City of Rome. By contrast, Frosinone—around 90 km southeast of Rome and the capital of its province—has approximately 43,000 residents. It is characterized by an aging demographic structure and an ongoing process of population decline. The socio-economic profiles of these contexts range from lower-middle levels in Colleferro to upper-middle levels in Pomezia, with Valmontone and Frosinone occupying intermediate positions. Linguistically, varieties of central-northern Lazio dialects are still spoken (in particular Ciociaro in the province of Frosinone), although the influence of Romanesco is increasingly pervasive across the region (see below). Notably, the children involved in the project do not appear to use the local dialects in their everyday school interactions.

Class sizes range from 12 to 23 children. No class includes newly arrived children from abroad. The few children with both parents being non-native Italian speakers (mostly concentrated in the school of Colleferro) show good proficiency in Italian—as is also evident from the teachers' behavior, who effectively interacts with them as if they were native speakers.

In total, approximately 20 hours of classroom interactions were recorded for each class by means of four video cameras and four audio recorders. The excerpts discussed in the following pages are drawn from about 15h 25 min of transcribed material (08 h 45 min in whole-class settings, 06 h 40 min in small group interactions). Transcriptions were produced in accordance with Jefferson's (2004) conventions. It should be specified that, in order to represent regional pronunciations, an orthographic transcription was used, following the conventions used in Troncon and Canepari (1989). Furthermore, only clearly perceptible and unequivocally recognizable phenomena were noted: the analysis is not concerned with prosodic and phonological levels, but rather with the dimensions of lexicon, phraseology, morphology, and syntax.[1]

3. State of the art and theoretical framework

3.1. Types of code alternation face Italian (and Roman) sociolinguistic situation

Italy's current sociolinguistic situation is characterized by "dilalia": the Italian-speaking community uses Italian for both written and oral, formal and informal communication. In informal settings, Italian is used alongside dialects.[2] While the exclusive domains of dialect use have drastically shrunk over the last fifty years, dialects have simultaneously regained ground in expressive uses, to the extent that we can speak of their refunctionalization as register-specific forms (it is quite common for diatopic variation to shift into diaphasic variation as observed by Coseriu, 1955). Younger generations often have only a receptive competence in dialects, though their vitality varies significantly by region (e.g., Veneto, Sicily). Nevertheless, diatopic variation persists as a crucial factor in the differentiation of the Italian language. Berruto (1987/2012), in his analysis of the Italian linguistic repertoire, identifies the diatopic axis of variation as cutting across all other axes. These dynamics have particularly significant implications for the contact and the Italian-dialect continuum, especially concerning intermediate varieties such as regional Italian[3] and Italianized dialect, and their clear demarcation in linguistic usage. Regional Italian is the most prevalent and frequently employed spoken variety, extending beyond merely informal contexts. Within this broader category, it is also important to distinguish between educated regional Italian and popular regional Italian (D'Agostino, 2011): the latter includes more salient regional traits as well as forms typical of less monitored varieties.

The relationship between Italy's dialects and its varieties of Italian (regional, standard, neo-standard) is particularly complex in Rome and Latium (De Roberto, 2024), where the boundary between Roman Italian and the Romanesco dialect is especially blurred. Historical factors—such as the early Tuscanization of Romanesco in the late 15th century and intense migratory flows to and from the capital—have progressively reduced the distinctiveness of the dialectal system. Whereas in the past a clear division existed between Romanesco and regional Italian, today even educated speakers do not avoid strongly marked regionalisms (D'Achille, 2011).[4]

These peculiarities impact the interpretation of the variation dynamics discussed later in this article, particularly in relation to their place within the broader framework of code choice and language contact. A key issue is to define the nature of the variation phenomena employed by the children in our corpus. As already observed by Berruto (1990, p. 108), what prevents the shifts between Standard Italian and Regional Italian from being classified as genuine code-switching is the fact that both varieties are manifestations of the same linguistic system. In the Italian sociolinguistic literature, the notion of code-switching concerns switching between Italian an Italo-Romance dialect or another language. As it is well-known, however, in other traditions (Hymes, 1974; Auer, 1984), code-switching can also involve varieties of the same system.

If we turn to consider our data — and their specific geo-linguistic context — we should therefore refer to code-switching only when dialectal forms and utterances are clearly present. However, as we have noted, it is not always easy to distinguish between Romanesco and popular or educated regional Italian. To frame the

phenomena of variation that emerged during classroom interaction, we will therefore rely on the notion of style-shifting (employed in Italian context by Giacalone Ramat, 1995, pp. 46–47 and Waumans & Marzo, 2019). This term[5] can refer to intra-speaker variation, which may involve deliberate or unconscious shifts "into and out of different language varieties, and shifts in usage levels for features associated with these varieties" (Shilling-Estes, 2013, p. 376), even though it originally derives from inter-speaker variation — that is, the variability distinguishing social groups (Hernández-Campoy & Cutillas-Espinosa, 2012).[6] Register, diatopic and genre dimension can be involved: style-shifting is an all-encompassing phenomenon.

Although the concept of style-shifting originated in variationist studies of the 1960s and 1970s, it has since converged with the interests of ethnography, sociology, and conversation analysis (Coupland, 2001; Shilling-Estes, 1999). Observing style-shifting allows for a better understanding of "how individuals internalize broad-based community language patterns and how these patterns are shaped and re-shaped by individuals in everyday conversational interaction" (Shilling-Estes, 2013). This broader perspective has expanded the phenomenon beyond Labov's Attention to Speech framework (1972) to include additional dimensions, following a trajectory similar to research on code-switching (Auer & Hinskens, 2005). In Communication Accommodation Theory, style-shifting is considered one of the primary manifestations of accommodation (cf. Giles, 1984, who supposes that speakers modify their communication to align with or diverge from their interlocutors). Convergence (i.e., the adjustment of one's speech to become more like that of an interlocutor) may display solidarity or social approval between interlocutors, while divergence may be employed to emphasize social distance, assert individuality, or group distinctiveness. As a component of Audience Design (Bell, 1984), style-shifting comprehends a reactive dimension but also a responsive one. Speaker design approaches further emphasize this factor (Coupland, 2001): style-shifting is viewed as a creative tool, that allows speakers to position themselves with respect to social structures, group, addressed recipients, further participants and talk itself. Variation can thus relate to different external or internal parameters: setting, topic, audience, speaker's purposes, key, frame (see § 3.2). From this perspective, style-shifting is part of sociolinguistic competence, reflecting both the ability to respond flexibly to shared and learned norms and the capacity to engage with processes that are constructed and redefined during interaction. It involves not only selecting variants according to context and interlocutor, but also mobilizing them to construct, perform, and renegotiate social and interpersonal identity (Hernández-Campoy & Cutillas-Espinosa, 2012).

3.2 Studies on style-shifting in children's language and sociolinguistic competence

The question of when children achieve sociolinguistic maturity (Kerswill, 1996) – that is, the ability to produce variation patterns similar to those of adults and make socially conditioned choices between or within languages – has primarily been addressed in studies on Anglophone[7] speakers, although research has so far tended to focus on adolescents rather than younger children (but see Fischer's, 1958 precursor study on *-ing/-in* alternation in a group of 24 children aged 3-6 and 7-10 years). While early studies suggested that children are essentially monostylistic (Labov, 1970; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974), more recent research indicates that the acquisition of adult-like variational patterns is completed before age 12, during the early school years, or even earlier (Labov, 1989; Auger, 1997; Chevrot & Foulkes, 2013; Katerbow, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). Generally, this type of studies examines the acquisition and use of marked variables (for example *–t/d* deletion or *–ing* production)[8] in relation to various parameters (child's age, gender,[9] input type, order of acquisition, sociolinguistic recognizability of the variable, etc.). So far, research conducted on benchmarks of first bidialectal acquisition has identified five main trends regarding what children are able to do with linguistic variation (Chevrot, 2025):[10]

- Social status-related differences are transmitted through adult–child interaction starting from the age of three.
- From the same age the diversity of interactions between children and adults leads to the apparition of early stages of speech styles.
- From six years onward children produce more standard variants.
- From five years children recognize standard vs non-standard variants.
- Only in preadolescent phase they can talk about sociolinguistic norm (metapragmatic competence).

More oriented to the study of conversational functions of style-shifting are Gleason (1973) and Sachs and Devin (1976), who consider features as syntactic complexity, attentional utterances, reformulation, repetition etc., observing that children can adjust their speech to the listener. These studies address broad discursive phenomena rather than specific diatopic, diaphasic, diastratic, or structural variables. However, adjusting one's speech to the interlocutor is not the same as using variation as a conscious communicative strategy, one that can engage all levels of language. As a matter of fact, according to Slosberg Andersen (1990), the communicative use of style-shifting is very limited before the age of 7.

This assumption appears to be supported by the study carried out for Francophone speakers by Buson and Billiez (2013), who investigated children's representations of stylistic variation among 9- to 11-year-olds in the Grenoble area, using recorded interviews. The data provide a rather nuanced picture of children's metapragmatic competence: while some do not perceive significant differences between utterances produced in varieties of French with varying degrees of formality, others express judgments of correctness or of social and interactional appropriateness depending on the variety used.[11]

In the Italian context, studies specifically dedicated to style-shifting in classroom interactions and in children's speech are still lacking. Research on Italian-dialect code-switching among pre-adolescents is also relatively scarce. This gap is partly due to the fact that, as noted by Ruffino (2006) and Cortelazzo (1995), young people tend to "discover" dialect during adolescence, often using it as an alternative or rebellious code in opposition to adult norms. In childhood and pre-adolescence, the use of dialect appears to be quite marginal. Similarly, Corno and Janner's (2009, p. 125) research into Novarese and Ticinese children's language noted only limited occurrences of vernacular words (*borlà* 'to fall', *pitigià* 'to fart'). Regional Italian features, such as phrasal verbs, were found to be more widespread. However, this study relies on experimental data from a specific task—oral continuation of a fairy tale—rather than a naturalistic approach.

4. Research approach

Our corpus of spontaneous classroom interactions offers a valuable basis for examining code choice and language variation. It allows us to identify and trace instances of child-initiated style-shifting across different situations.

In order to reveal the dynamic interplay between linguistic forms and social interaction that emerges from collected data, the identified occurrences of style-shifting will be presented and discussed according to the following categories of analysis:

- shifting direction: the selection of a variable or variety can move away from or closer to the standard, allowing for a distinction between downwarding (§ 5) and upwarding style-shifting (§ 6);
- setting (plenary lesson or small group);

- extent of shifting, that can involve a single word, a word sequence, a whole turn or more turns (intra-turn or inter-turn style-shifting);
- teaching activity (dialogue lesson, task execution, circle time, spontaneous and free insertion);
- interlocutor type (teacher, peers, whole class) and their reaction (where detectable);
- key: this notion, developed by Hymes (1974) and Goffman (1974), refers to the possibility that speakers, within a given activity, introduce expressive modes or communicative frames typical of other contexts. This process, known as keying, plays a crucial role in signaling shifts in footing, interactional stance, or communicative intention. Instances of keying are frequently observed in humorous and ironic discourse (Tannen, 1984/2005), where the speaker reinterprets the frame of interaction to create distance or to subvert expectation, or in quoting;
- pragmatic function: style-shifting may function pragmatically to enhance or attenuate the force of actions such as requests, reproaches, apologies, evaluations, and other interactional moves;
- sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions: topic shift, situation shift, accommodation, identity expression, group membership mark, distance indication, etc.

5. Inserts of popular regional Italian and downward register shift

5.1 Whole class interaction

In the examined data, during plenary lesson children attempt to express themselves in what we could define as an educated regional Italian, marked especially at the phonological and prosodic levels. Inadvertently, regional pronunciations are produced, such as the assibilation of the liquid before a sibilant (*borza* for *borsa* 'bag', *inzieme* for *insieme* 'together'), undue consonantal gemination (as in *abbile* for *abile* 'skilled'), the lenition of intervocalic voiceless consonants (*sbagliado* for *sbagliato* 'wrong', even after a nasal consonant:[12] *attenda* for *attenta* 'careful', *non doccarlo* 'don't touch it'). However, traits like progressive assimilation (*monno* for *mondo* 'world') or the degemination of the dental vibrant (*tera* for *terra* 'earth') are not produced,[13] as these are indeed perceived as more marked in diatopic and diastratic terms. In the Frosinone data, furthermore, one observes a greater use of the particle *ci* (loc. and 4p. clitic) instead of the 3p. oblique clitic *gli* (*dicono che ci abbiamo copiato l'idea* 'they say we copied their idea').

Despite this fundamental homogeneity, it is easy to identify cases in which children, during whole classroom interaction, employ forms or expressions that are more diatopically marked, inserting elements of popular regional Italian, which is well-characterized, especially at the morphosyntactic level. Rather frequent regional variables are the shortened form *maé* for *maestra* ('teacher') and *ragà / regà* for *ragazzi* ('guys'): this usage appears across the entire corpus and does not seem to be governed by any specific conditions. Besides, even proper nouns are often truncated (e.g., *Luì* for *Luigi*, *Maurì* for *Maurizio*).

A greater diatopic characterization and the realization of traits typical of Roman popular regional Italian occur in exchanges that do not concern didactic content but rather practical matters (e.g., requests for permission to leave one's seat or go to the restroom or unexpected events: *maé, posso andà a buttà la carta?* 'teacher, can I go throw away this paper?', *mo casco m'ammazzo* 'I'm gonna fall and kill myself!') but also in more informal teaching situations. For example, when children are invited by the teacher to talk about daily events close to their experience, they may realize apocopated infinitives and recur to clitic pronouns as *me*, *te*, *ce*, *ve* instead of *mi*, *ti*, etc. Phonological features normally avoided become more frequent. This is what happens in the following excerpt, taken from an Italian lesson: the children had to take turns describing a classmate, first physically

and then by their character. At a certain point, a brief digression opens up: a child, Giusy (GIU), states that she often gets angry with herself, and the teacher asks her to explain herself better:[14]

Extract 1 [FB_05_24_pl_stud_1_3 - 00:12:30-00:16:23]

```
01        T1:    cioè   non me sembra        che tu sei una che proprio(h) (0.4)
                 I mean it doesn't seem to me that you're someone who really

02               alza la voce diciamo(h) non è proprio la bam[bina,
                 raises her voice I mean she's not really the girl

03    →   GIU:                                              [vabbè se: .hse m-
                                                             ok   if    if

04    →          se: .hmi arrabbio con me stessa perché:.hh perché
                 if   I get angry  with myself   because    because

05    →          (0.2) 'na volta al: al campo scuola in camera .hmi è caduta >una
                       once      at at school camp   in the room  I dropped

06    →          cosa che mo non me ricordo,<     e me sò arrabbiata con me stessa
                 something that now I don't remember and I got angry with myself

07    →          e me so' arrabbiata con me stessa però- però poi: cioè (.) però poi
                 I got angry     with myself but but then I mean but then

08    →          me sò calmata subbito.
                 I calmed down right away

09               (00:02:40) ((T1 talks about angry and self-consciousness))

10        T2:    tu ricevi più complimenti oppure rimproveri >perché magari ti
                 do you get more compliments or scoldings like, maybe

11               succede qualcosa.<
                 something happens to you

12               (1.0)

13        ISA:   °mh°
                  mh

14        GIU:   >allora< c'ho:: (.) c'ho una mia- una mia amica che non viene
                 so      I've      I've got a friend of mine   who doesn't go here

15               qua a scuola però: (0.9) c-   c'ho::(0.8)
                 to school here though     I've

16               su WhatsApp °sul° telefono.
                 on WhatsApp on the phone

17               (0.4)

18        T1:    di mamma,=
                 your mom's?

19        GIU:   =no. (0.4) °mio.°
                 not        mine

20        T2:    ah (ecco)
                 ah right

21        T1:    °okey°
                  okey
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22  →    GIU:   che:: che lei se arabbia su- sempre con me perché (.h) .hperché
                'cause 'cause she always gets mad    at me because      because

23  →           de:e volte me g- me dimentico le cose a casa sua. (0.4) e q- e
                sometimes       I forget     things at her house       and

24  →           quindi lei se arabbia subbito scioè me manda t- tutte le
                so      she gets mad   right away I mean she sends me a bunch of

25              faccine arrabbiate. (0.7) sempre.
                angry emoji               always

26              (1.5)

27      T1:     [[che cosa dimentichi?]
                  what do you forget?

28      ISA:    [[^e allora non è  un'] amica,
                  then       she's not  a friend
                 ^((S2 knits her brows))

29  →    GIU:   .hcioè (0.2) mi- cioè a volte mi dimentico,
                I mean       I    I mean sometimes I forget

                (1.4)

30  →           >una volta me so' dimenticato il telefono una volta me so'
                 one time I forgot            my phone    one time  I

31  →           dimenticato lo zaino una volta me so' dimenticato l'astuccio<
                forgot      my backpack one time   I forgot      my pencil case
32              ((the class laughs))
```

As can be observed, the teacher's turn (ll. 01-02) already appears more informal (*non me sembri*, a regionally marked pronunciation of *non mi sembri*). The child also selects a more informal register, producing a greater number of accelerations and allegro phenomena as well (see ll. 30-32). Among the diatopically marked phenomena, we observe the gemination of /b/ in *subbito* (l. 24), the degemination of /r/ in *arabbiata* (l. 06), in *arabbia* (l. 22, 24), the apheresis in the indefinite article (*'na* instead of *una*, l. 05), the use of *me* as the clitic pronoun (alternating with the standard form *mi*), *mo* instead of *ora* ('now', l. 06), and *so'* for *sono* (1st person singular present of *essere*, 'to be', ll. 06, 07, 08, 31, 32).

This type of style-shifting can occur in the same utterance and can meet a need for personalization of speech and achieve greater expressiveness (the child knows she's telling something funny and is also being self-mocking).

Shifts toward lower registers are also common in the moments leading up to or following the actual instructional activity. We report just one example, a particularly telling one due to the teacher's reaction.

Extract 2 [FB_05_29_gr_stud_1-01:40:00-01:40:26]

```
01      ISA:    vai Frà
                your turn Frà

02  →    FRA:   ^non se stanno zitti,
                 they just wouldn't shut up
                ^((he extends his hand to the right))

03      T:      EH:: (1.4) allora questo tuo modo di dire le cose non va più bene.
                        look the way you say things doesn't work anymore
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04              (2.0) basta dire (.) se fanno >un attimo di silenzio iniziamo
                just say if they're quiet for a moment we'll begin

                a parlare< no non se stanno zitti.
05              to speak not they just wouldn't shut up
```

Children have finished writing a text and are now expected to read it aloud to the class. Isabella (ISA) gives the floor to FRA (Francesco), who notices that the others are not quiet and points this out (l. 02) using a rather impolite expression — *stare zitto* ('to shup up') — made more marked by the addition of the regional clitic pronoun *se* (stand. It. *si*). The child likely expresses both frustration and resignation. What stands out, however, is the teacher's reaction. In most recordings from the corpus, teachers do not correct colloquial or regional expressions; sometimes they may offer a standard alternative. In this case, though, the teacher appears annoyed and asks the child to rephrase more politely, using the colloquial mitigation marker *un attimo*. What is being sanctioned here is the excessive directness and rudeness of the expression used by FRA.

Remarkably, in our corpus, even more structured situations, such as dialogic explanation, are characterized by style-shift involving popular regional Italian. As we were able to observe in the data, even within activities primarily conducted in standard Italian or educated regional Italian, children might interject with turns that lower the register, as documented by the following extract. This is taken from a dialogue lesson in Italian grammar: children listen to a rhyming narrative (Italian version of *The Gruffalo*) and together try to define its meaning and moral, before moving on to the study of adjectives. The teacher points out how the protagonist of the tale managed to defeat a bigger and stronger monster using his wits. At this point a child, Laura (LAU), raises her hand asking for the floor:

Extract 3 [OR_d_02_06_pl_stud_3_5-00:12:50-00:13:30]

```
01          T:      dimmi
                    tell me

02          LAU:    maestra infatti: quando (2.0) una persona fa     box     no,
                    teacher indeed   when           one              boxes

03          T:      mm:
                    mm

04   →      LAU:    tipo il (box) no? quello del ring no? (.) le persone
                    like the boxe        that of the ring     people

05   →              che lo allenano glie dicono non serve. tipo quello disce
                    that train him   say him  don't need    like  he    says

06   →              ma questo è alto più de- du' metri più de me no?
                    but he is higher than of   two meters than me no?

07   →              e quello glie di- e quello glie pò dì (.) glie disce
                    and the other says and that can say       he   says

08   →              non serve essere grandi o forti serve essere-
                    there is no need to be strong there is need to be

09   →              (che tu sai a usare) il cervello.
                    that you are able to use your brain

10                  (1.0)
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11        T:      sicu[ramente il cervello (1.0) serve sempre] non serve-
                  for sure the brain is        always needed   there is no need

12                non serve
                  there is no need

13        LAU:      [perché più piccolo sei (gli passi tutto davanti)]
                     the smaller you are the more you pass him all by

14        T:      e:m: non serve      solo essere più prepotenti più forti
                  e:m there is no need only to be more overbearing stronger

15                più grossi degli altri
                  bigger than the others
```

After obtaining permission to speak (l. 01), LAU proceeds to compare the fable-like tale she heard with the world of boxing, staging an imaginary dialogue between a boxer and his trainers, which at first proves to be pertinent (later in the sequence, not reported here, LAU goes further by starting to talk about how to sidestep a taller opponent). The style-shifting occurs in the middle part of the sequence (ll. 05-09) and seems to be provoked mainly by a change of discursive key. LAU introduces into the lesson a more concrete discursive object (boxing) into the lesson (which is perhaps even more personal, if we consider that it could be a sport that the girl practices or follows). She does not develop analogy in argumentative and informative terms but introduces a narrative sequence and a direct reported dialogue. This insert – which exhibits polyphony – is partially realised in popular regional Italian, as shown by the pronominal form *glie* for *gli* (3rd person oblique clitic), the verbal forms such as *pò* (l. 07) for *può* 'can' (3rd person pres. *potere* 'can'), *dì* (l. 07) for *dire* 'to say' and the "straggling" pronunciation (spirantization) of the prepalatal deaf affricate (*disce* for *dice* 'he says', l. 05), *de* (l. 06) for *di* 'of', *du'* (l. 06) for *due* 'two'. At l. 08 (corresponding to the words attributed to the coach), LAU once again shifts register and tone of voice: the wise words of the boxing coach are reported in a more careful variety, despite the syntactic project shift in l. 09. The self-repairs that the child produces along the entire sequence and the change in syntactic plan (also in ll. 04 and 05) show her difficulty in explicating the analogy she has in mind: however, recourse to a concrete factual story takes the form of a communicative strategy aimed at explaining an abstract concept.

As observable in our data, style-shifting can also be triggered by referents connected to regional or local realia. The following sequence occurs during a correction activity focused on the categorization of hyponyms under appropriate hypernyms. The teacher pronounces the word *pancetta* (a type of cured pork belly commonly used in Roman cuisine). While his classmates propose the solution (*salumi* 'cured meats'), Fabio (FAB) offers a positive evaluative comment about the referent *pancetta*, using Roman regional Italian (l. 01).

Extract 4 [ORc_02_19_pl_stud_3_intero-01:16:52-01:17:10]

```
01   →    FAB:  [troppo bona aò-] (.) troppo bona a: pan[cetta]
                too      good oh(REG INT) oh too good the (REG) bacon

02        T:                                          [sh:: ]
                                                       sh

03              (1.1)

04        MIR:  è buona solo per il (fritto)=
                it's good only for the fried

05   →    AND:  =mh:: buonissima immagina la carbonara
                 mh:: very good      think to the carbonara
                ((shaking and twisting his hand))
```

FAB's turn (l. 01) presents many regional features: the monophthong in *bona* (it. *buona* 'good') and the lex Porena in the determinative article realization (i.e. the dilution of the intervocalic /l/ and the lengthening of the vowel in phonotaxis: *a:* for *la* 'the').[15] The allocutive interjection *aò* is also typical of Romanesco and Roman regional Italian and is normally used to draw attention to someone or something. Although the teacher sanctions the intervention with an invitation to be quiet (l. 02), the other children pick up on FAB's contribution: in particular, Andrea (AND) continues his appreciation (l. 05), mentioning *carbonara* (a typical Roman dish).

Style-shifting may also occur in side sequences, when children comment on classroom events, temporarily suspending the main talk to highlight salient topics. For instance, during an Italian class exercise, while the teacher was explaining to a child how to better formulate his own text, one child drew the teacher's attention to a classmate who was laughing and remarked: *maè Vito ci ha la faccia rossa per quanto sta a ride* 'teacher Vito's got a red face from laughing so hard'. In addition to colloquial forms like the *ci attualizzante*, the child uses the Roman dialect progressive periphrasis (*stare a* + infinitive; Arcangeli, 1999, pp. 252–253, D'Achille and Giovanardi, 2001, pp. 46–54)[16] and apocopated infinitives. Phonologically, the word *quanto* exhibits a marked lenition.

A completely different case is reported in the following extract. During the teacher's explanation a child, Luigi (LUI), self-selects (a rather recurrent phenomenon during the dialogued explanations of our corpus), making a contribution that rephrases and complements that of the teacher but in a lower and more colloquial register, in that he combines the term *anfibi* 'amphibians' with the colloquial and somewhat rude expression *non gli frega niente* 'he does not give a damn':[17]

Extract 5 [SAd_12_06_pl_doc_2_1 - 00:15:50-00:16:07]

```
01          T:      ecco allora °perché hanno potuto sopravvivere° perché
                    here so      because (they) could survive       because

02                  anche se c'è stato uno tsunami provocato dal meteo[rite=
                    even if there was   a tsunami caused by the meteorite

03    →     LUI:                                              [eh: allora
                                                              eh so

04                  non gli frega niente]
                    they don't give a hoot

05          T:      =loro sapevano    ] vivere anche (.) nell'acqua.
                    they were able       to live in     the water too

06    →     LUI:    non gli frega niente perché (.)  so'   anfibi
                    they don't give a hoot because they're amphibious
```

Here, a deliberate lowering of register occurs compared to the variety used by the teacher and children in the dialogic lesson. Unlike previous cases, the phenomenon cannot be attributed to the type of topic or its proximity to the child's daily experience. LUI with his side comment (l. 03), repeated a second time in l. 06, makes an inference explicit by resorting to the scientific term amphibians (in the sense of 'being that can inhabit land and waters'). At the same time, by employing colloquial and substandard forms, he frames the information as something entirely self-evident. This instance of style-shifting may be interpreted as a rhetorical strategy of false understatement, but the effect of lowering the register and the use of the verb *fregare* 'be interested' (litt. 'to rub') is to make the subject matter more vivid. In this sense, style-shifting seems related to a change in discursive key. The child opts for a formulation that personifies the amphibians that survived the meteorite, as if

to introduce their perspective. The downward shift in register appears functional to this "dramatization" of educational content.

Stylistic variation can occur in connection with self- or other-repairs. In (6), a child initiates an other-repair to address a lexical trouble source produced by her peer:

Extract 6 [ORd_02_06_pl_stud_3_5 - 00:10:35-00:10:53]

```
01          LAU:      secondo me ins:egna che ah che non devi mai: farti s- mm
                      in my opinion it teaches that you should never let yourself

02                    come si disce?
                      how do you say it?

03          T2:       vuole dire-
                      she means
                      ((addressing to T1))

04          CAT:      ingannare?
                      to deceive?
                      ((turned toward LAU))

05          LAU:      no!
                      no!

06    →     CAT:      fregare?
                      to fool? (SUBST)

07          LAU:      (xxx) se uno è piccolo può essere cool.
                          even if someone is small, they can be cool.
                      ((addressed to CAT))
```

In the first turn, LAU offers her interpretation of the fairy tale the teacher read to the class, but she struggles to find the appropriate verb (likely *intimidire* 'to intimidate' or *spaventare* 'to scare'). Catia (CAT) suggests a form from standard Italian, which LAU does not adopt. CAT then proposes a lower, more colloquial alternative (*fregare*). At that point, LAU reformulates her contribution using a concessive conditional (*se uno è piccolo*) and the anglicism *cool*. Notably, CAT does not offer her classmate a verb with a different meaning, but rather assumes that LAU is searching for a synonym, and provides a stylistically different and more expressive variant.

5.2 Smallgroup interaction

One might assume that in small group activities, the very nature of the addressee—a peer—would predispose children to use a more informal register. However, the corpus data do not show an overextended use of popular regional Italian. Clear instances of register lowering (i.e., markedly regional or substandard formulations) occur in specific circumstances, for instance when supporting actions marked by a negative stance, such as complaints or reproaches. The following extract, which illustrates this phenomenon, is taken from a small group (four pupils) activity focused on the oral co-construction of a fairy tale, during which a verbal dispute arises between two children, Francesco (FRA) and Desirée (DES):

Extract 7 [FB_27_05_gr_stu_3_1 - 00:11:02-00:12:00]

```
01          FRA:    ^un giorno,=
                     once
                    ^((FRA opens his hand to the right))

02          DES:    =^aspetta=
                      wait
                     ^((DES touches FRA on his hand)

03          FRA:    =°il tizio (xxx)°
                        this guy

04                  (0.7)

05    →     DES:    >però Francé devi fà er serio eh<
                    but  Francé you have to get (REG) serious

06          FRA:    HO CAPI:TO
                    (DISCOURSE MARKER)

07                  (0.5)

08    →     DES:    non stai a fà er serio.=
                    you're not getting serious (REG)

09          FRA:     =sì che lo sto facendo
                       I am doing it actually

10    →     SAB:    eh: se: (.) [un giorno un tizio]
                    eh  yes (REG) a day    a guy

11    →     FRA:          MA SE[ STO A SCHERZÀ (DIC-)]
                          but if I'm joking (REG)

12                  = non so il nome
                       I don't know his name
```

FRA is supposed to narrate his part of the story, but he does not seem to take the task very seriously. In fact, he begins with an expression indicating vague time (*un giorno*) followed by *il tizio* ('this guy'), a colloquial and somewhat impolite way of referring to a person. DES does not appreciate FRA's careless tone (l. 05) and tells him to take the task seriously, using the expression *fà il serio* ('to act seriously') within a deontic periphrastic construction with *dovere* ('must'). DES's injunction is delivered in a fast and abrupt manner, prompting FRA to respond with a surprised *ho capito*, which in this context does not express understanding, but rather represents a phraseological expression that signals disagreement with the interlocutor.[18] In the following turn, DES once again highlights FRA's inappropriate behavior through an assertive utterance built using the central variant of the progressive periphrasis: *non stai a fà er serio* ('you're not acting serious'). FRA replies by echoing and inverting his classmate's assertion, using the construction *sì che* + progressive periphrasis, though he opts for the standard form (*stare* + gerund: l. 09). Another child, Sabrina (SAB), joins the exchange in support of DES, discrediting the truthfulness of FRA's claim with the interjection *se:*—a regional variant of *sì*—used here (l. 10) to express sarcastic agreement. At this point (l. 11), FRA reacts by characterizing his behavior as good-naturedly joking: the child resorts to the regional form of the progressive periphrasis, which may reflect an unconscious linguistic convergence with the two interlocutors, aligning his speech with theirs.

In the following case, the reproach does not concern the attitude of the classmate but their writing competence:

Extract 8 [FB_29_95_gr_stud_2_2 - 00:13:53-00:14:05]

```
01          ISA:    e vide (.) e- se e ^vede,
                    and he saw and yes (REG) and he sees
                                    ^((suddenly places her hands on the desk,
                                    brings one hand on her forehead and
                                    slumps slightly to the side then returns
                                    to looking at the paper her classmate is
                                    writing))

02          TOM:    oh (.) io la parola-=
                    oh   I the word

03    →     ISA:    =>COME LA STAI A FÀ 'STA VI ^VOGLIO SAPÉ IO<=
                    how are you doing (REG) this v? I myself want to know
                                        ^((turns the paper over, erases
                                        something and writes instead of
                                        ARI))

04          TOM:    =ma perché [non scrive I**?     ]
                    so why isn't I** writing?

05          ARI:              [°(io) non so scrive] la v°
                            I    can't write    the v
```

From a silent book the four children involved in this activity (Arianna, Isabella, Giusy, Tommaso) have to elaborate and put a story in writing. ISA is dictating the text, while Arianna (ARI) has the writing task. ARI has previously shown some difficulties (especially spelling). After dictating the wrong word and correcting herself, ISA looks at the paper on which ARI is writing and notes that the letter *v* is not written well with a non-canonical question (l. 03), which could be considered a surprise-disapproval question (Trotzke, 2024; Ferin, 2022), that focuses on manner (*come* 'how'). At the same moment ISA turns the paper towards herself, erases the letter and rewrites it. It is important to highlight the presence of the sequence *voglio sapé io* ('I myself want to know'), that seems to reinforce the illocutionary force of the question, even if no answer is requested. TOM seems aligned with ISA's consideration, by asking why it is not ISA who is writing (l. 04). ARI responds to the rebuke – by admitting the poor writing skills of *v*: this admission is pronounced with a significant lowering of tone. As in extract (7), the central variant of the progressive periphrasis recurs in this extract, which shows more diverse pragmatic uses than its standard counterpart. It is worth noting that the progressive periphrasis is not required here by the temporal-aspectual dynamics of the event (ARI has already drawn the *v*, otherwise ISA would not be able to see it). It is likely that its durative value is being exploited here for emphasis and intensification.

Such shifts toward sub-standard varieties frequently serve to mark stance in turns that convey disalignment or negative assessment. The following extract is from a collaborative storytelling activity in which the children narrate a fairy tale together. Sara (SAR) proposes to set the fairy tale in a school, but her proposal is rather bluntly rejected by Francesco (FRA), who uses the dysphemism[19] *cagata* ('bullshit'). Notably, the word features intervocalic voicing of the velar consonant:

Extract 9 [FB_05_27_gr_stud_3_1 - 00:03:07-00:03:18]

```
01          SAR:   sempre- uh >possiamo fare< la scuola no?
                   always uh     we can do    school   no

02     →    FRA:   MA NO: °°che  [cagata°°.
                   no way that's bullshit

03          LUC:                 [scusa vai::=
                                  sorry go

04          FRA:   =E CHE posso di[re?
                   and what I can say?

05          ELI:                   [OH: facciamo così [c'era una volta in una scuola.    ]
                                    oh let's do it like this once upon a time in a school

06          LUC:                                      [>non avete manco fantasia eh< ]=
                                                       you've got no imagination at all
```

As we can see at line 2, FRA expresses his dissent both through negation and by qualifying the proposal with a dysphemic exclamatory expression. FRA's contribution has no real effect: it does not lead to any negotiation of the proposal, which is in fact accepted by the group, even though Luca (LUC) points out the lack of originality in the choice (l. 7). None of the children comment on or react to the dysphemism.

This is not the only occurrence of a swear word in our dataset; another case appears in a different small group tasks. In our corpus we found one occurrence each of *sti cazzi* (compound by reduced demonstrative form + plural noun of male genital organ) and its euphemistic version *sti cavoli*, both expressions used to convey indifference or irritation toward a piece of information. In both occurrences, the swear word is not sanctioned by children: they simply continue their activities.

In small group settings (not supervised by the teacher) the use of swear words often goes unnoticed and does not provoke reactions. In other contexts, episodes of tattling can be observed: a child may whisper a swear word, and a classmate may notice it and judge it inappropriate. Sometimes, this dynamic involves words that are not actually swear words, but paronymic expressions or words that accidentally contain syllables that sound like bad words. Such cases are particularly revealing, as they highlight how children apply a double standard in evaluating the use of swear words: they show awareness and normative behavior during an explicit reflection on language, while being more tolerant or indifferent in peer interactions, as shown in the following two extracts (10a and 10b). Here children are individually doing a word-formation exercise from a worksheet, which includes the noun *maleducazione* ('rudeness'), to be converted into an adjective.

Extract 10a [SA_d_12_11_pl_stud_4_10 - 00:13:54-00:15:27]

```
01          LOR:   Clà, lo sai che questa parola è una parolaccia?
                   Clà, did you know that this word is a bad word?
                   ((points to a word with his pencil while bringing the worksheet
                   closer to his classmate))

02          CLA:   no.
                   no

03          LOR:   perché c'è ca(xxx)
                   because there is ca(VULG)

04          CLA:   maleducazione non è una parolaccia
                   miseducation is'nt a bad word
```

```
05    →        LOR:   però c'è caz(zo in mezzo)
                      but there is caz(VULG) in the middle

06             CLA:   eh. ma maleducazione non è una parolaccia
                      eh but miseducation isn't a bad word
                      ((shaking his head))

07             SAR:   cosa?
                      what?
                      ((turning to her classmates))

08             CLA:   maleducazione
                      miseducation

09                    (0.14)((LOR's pencil falls and lands near SAR, LOR gets up to
                      pick it up; meanwhile, SAR picks up the pencil and waves it in
                      front of LOR, T calls SAR, who gives the pencil to LOR, then
                      LOR returns to their seats))
```

In *maleducazione* Lorenzo (LOR) identifies the sequence *caz-*, which reminds him of the vulgar word *cazzo*. At lines 01 and 023 he shares this observation with Claudio (CLA), who replies that *maleducazione* is not a bad word. It is noteworthy that LOR independently produces a metalinguistic reflection that leads him to search for swear words hidden within "innocent" words. At this point (l. 07), another child, Sara (SAR), joins the conversation and CLA, pronouncing only the first syllable of the word, comments that *cazzo* is indeed a bad word (l. 08). After a brief moment when things seem to calm down, as can be seen in (10b), another child, Vincenzo (VIN), brings the topic back up and accuses CLA of having said a swear word:

Extract 10b

```
10             CLA:   quello è un CA. (.) quello sì che è una parolaccia
                      that's a (VULG.TERM) that really is a bad word
                      ((looking at LOR))

11             LOR:   lo sai che ha detto una parolaccia ieri Z**?
                      did you know that he said a bad word yesterday (CLA's SURNAME)?
                      ((looking to SAR and point at CLA with pencil))

12                    (0.6) ((CLA stands up to show the paper to the T, then he
                      returns to his desk))

13             VIN:   Clà hai detto di nuovo un'altra parolaccia adesso ti
                      Clà you said    again    a bad word         now I you
                      ((turned to look at CLA))

14             CLA:   no: maleducazione non è una parolaccia,
                      no miseducation isn't a bad word

15             LOR:   allora scusa (.) quando tu le disci,
                      so sorry         when you say it

16             VIN:   no non [[le ho
                      no I dont'

17             SAR:        [[IERI HAI [FATTO PURE IL DITO MEDIO]
                      yesterday you even gave the middle finger

18             CLA:              [busciardo (.) busciardo]
                      liar             liar
```

```
19        SAR:    <QUINDI FINISCILA>
                  so cut it out
                   ((turns towards VIN))

20        VIN:    no no le ho [mai dette                      ]
                  no I didn't never said it

21        CLA:               [°°(xxx) nello spogliatoio (xxx)°°]
                                 in the changing room
                           ((whispering into MAR's ear))

22        LOR:    eh non le hai mai dette Vincè, ma se io te conosco da quando
                  did you never said it   Vincè   but if I've known you since

23                stamo all'infanzia
                  we were in preschool

24        VIN:    eh vabbè
                  (DISC. MARK.)

25        CLA:    Vincè Vincè (.) dentro allo spogliatoio le disci eh
                  Vincè Vincè      in the changing room you say it

26                (1.1)

27                io invesce solo allo stadio. e a Lorenzo.
                  as for me, only at the stadium and to Lorenzo

27        CLA:    vabbè           <sempre parolacce so'>.
                  (DISC. MARK.) they're still swear words

28        LUD:    MAESTRA il nome astratto di bello,
                  teacher abstract noun of beautiful
```

VIN begins to formulate a threat (*adesso ti*, l. 13), while, once again, CLA denies that *maleducazione* is a bad word. Starting from l. 15 the discussion shifts its focus to VIN's verbal behavior. LOR reminds VIN that he often says a lot of bad words (l. 15); SAR adds that the day before VIN also made a vulgar gesture (l. 17). VIN denies using swear words, but CLA accuses him of lying (l. 24: *busciardo* is pronounced with a palatal sibilant, a regional form). LOR adds further input: he has known VIN since kindergarten and knows very well that VIN uses bad language (ll. 22-23). LOR and CLA, who had previously taken opposing sides in the discussion, now become allies. CLA then speaks up again, this time repeating aloud what he had previously whispered to LOR: VIN swears in the changing room. CLA, however, admits that he himself is used to saying bad words — but only at the stadium or to his classmate LOR. The sequence and the topic gradually come to an end, also because a classmate, Ludovica (LUD), asks the teacher a question related to the Italian grammar activity. Undoubtedly, the discussion diverts the children's attention from the main grammar task and turns into a playful moment. However, it also shows that children are aware of the rude or inappropriate dimension of language, both on a verbal and non-verbal level. This metalinguistic and metapragmatic competence can also be employed in an interpersonal context to reproach the interlocutor — even if just playfully.

Finally, the use of words and expressions from youth languages, as well as those widespread in web language, can also be regarded as instances of style-shifting. As observed throughout our corpus, especially in small group interactions, children tend to use trendy words—mostly Anglicisms—primarily with a playful function. Our data allow to distinguish three cases:

- Pragmatic English formulas, such as greetings and address forms: *bye bye, what?, yes, bro* (from *brother*);
- Anglicisms popularized through media, memes and social media: *occhiali swag, cool*;

– Anglicisms (included marchionyms) from advertising contexts: *Lelly Kelly*, *glitter*.

6. Upward register shifts

More rarely, children may also shift upward in register, using more formal words or expressions, or those typical of specialized domains. The phenomenon we are interested in—one that can be classified as style-shifting—involves cases where the choice of a more prestigious variety is not prompted by the topic or the instructional setting. We will therefore not take into account speech during oral assessments or instances in which children produce more controlled utterances, including technical terms that align with the subject being studied. Our focus is on those instances in which children spontaneously resort to a more formal register or variant, even though the interactional context at the time would have allowed for more neutral or informal formulations: within the examined corpus, merely two cases were found to fulfill these criteria.

In the following excerpt, a child rephrases the teacher's reproach to a classmate (cf. Margutti, 2011) – characterized by regional features – using Standard Italian, notably including an imperfect subjunctive and a hypothetical comparative of analogy.

Extract 11 [SAd_12_11_pl_stud_3_2 - 01:47:38-01:47:56]

```
01          T:    DOPO CI ARRIVIAMO ho detto Vincenzo (.) SE TU ADESSO
                  we'll get to it later I said! Vincenzo if you now

02                MO STIAMO A CORREGGE UNA COSA (.) E TE NE STAI A FÀ
                  now we're correcting something and you're doing

03                'N'ALTRA (0.3) LA CORREZIONE PER TE NON VALE
                  something else the correction doesn't count for you

04          STE:  e: già
                  that's right

05    →     LUI:  è vero: (0.9) è come se lui non stesse ascoltando niente
                  it's true it's like he's not listening to anything at all

06    →           (0.2) e stesse pensando solo al suo lavoro
                  it's like he's only thinking about his own work
```

The teacher scolds a student who, instead of listening to the correction of the assignment, is working on a different exercise. The teacher's turn displays several regional features at the phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical levels, and is also delivered in a raised tone of voice. One of the classmates (STE) expresses agreement with a confirmation marker (l. 04: *eh già*), while LUI intervenes with a thoughtful explanation—delivered in highly accurate standard Italian (also in the use of progressive periphrasis) and marked by noticeable pauses—of why VIN behavior deserves to be sanctioned (l. 05-06). At the lexical level, it appears to reproduce a usage that is typical of teachers' speech: namely, the lexeme *lavoro* ('work'), which children do not normally use to describe classroom activities. We cannot determine the child's exact intentions (the teacher ignores the two children's contributions and continues with the correction activity), but the choice of a linguistic variety different from that used by the teacher suggests that LUI is not simply reinforcing or aligning with the reproach. Rather, he appears to take on the role of a mediator, who—by adopting a more neutral and controlled mode

of expression—explains the reason behind the reprimand. It is as if the child were positioning himself as both a mediator and an expert, temporarily adopting a stance of competence and detachment.

The second case of upward style-shifting takes place in the small-group setting and concerns a word-search episode:

Extract 12 [FB_05_27_gr_1 - 00:09:26-00:09:55]

```
01        ISA:    aspetta aspetta (0.5) puoi dire no? (.) eh: poi un albero,
                  wait wait you can say not?              then a tree

02                (0.5) poi un al- un albe- (.) un albero parlante gli diede
                        a   a   tree            a talking tree  give him

03                una corda e Francesco legò l'orco che
                  a rope  and  Francesco tied up the ogre who

04                non si risvegliò mai più. perché quella corda (.)
                  never awake   again    because   that rope

05                era [ma:gica]
                  was magical

06        ARI:        [magica ]
                        magical

07   →    MAR:    no so:n[ni-
                  no hypno-

08        ISA:          [e tutti insieme [diciamo  ]
                         and all together we say

09   →    MAR:                              [sonnifera]
                                            hypnotic

10        ISA:    no magica. era magica che: non lo fece risvegliare più
                  no magical it was magical that made him never wake up again

11                e poi Greta e Francesco scapparono via fine
                  and and then Greta and Francesco ran away end

12        LEO:    fine della sto:ria
                  end of the story
```

During the collective oral elaboration of a fairy tale, ISA introduces the referent magic rope, an element that enables the defeat of the antagonist and the conclusion of the story. ARI confirms ISA's proposal with an echo turn (l. 06), while MAR intervenes with a reformulation: initially interrupted (l. 07), then completed in full (l. 09). MAR's contribution consists in introducing the adjective *sonnifero* 'hypnothic', a compound formed from classical affixoids, which in Italian is more commonly used as a noun to refer to sleeping pills. ISA does not accept the proposal and, on the contrary, reiterates her own formulation: *no magica era magica*, thus reaffirming her own version and bringing the story to an end — an ending further confirmed in LEO's turn (l. 12). Without delving into the reasons why ISA does not take MAR's proposal into consideration —

which may relate to stylistic preferences or attachment to her own version of the story — it is nonetheless important to focus on MAR's suggestion. His contribution appears to consist in offering a more specific word, one that aims to indicate the function of the rope. The hesitation in l. 07 and the self-repair in l. 09 highlight how the child is engaged in a word search that is not merely tied to a referential content, but rather to a specific lexical item (a type of focus on form prominent during oral questioning in classroom: cf. De Roberto & Rizzello, 2025). However, the solution is not entirely appropriate (in adjectival function *soporifero* would be a better choice, but also this expression is not fully idiomatic).

7. Conclusion

If we set aside phonological and prosodic features—for which regionally marked phenomena are commonly found even in the neo-standard—in our corpus children's speech, especially during plenary interactions, tends to align with a middle variety that is not strongly marked from a diatopic point of view. This pattern does not change significantly when we look at peer-to-peer educational interactions in small groups. The picture that emerges from our data is consistent with findings from studies conducted in other languages and cultural contexts, which show that primary school children tend to move closer to the standard variety (that is also the learning target variety). However, it was possible to identify several instances of style-shifting, both in plenary contexts and in small group settings. Most of the occurrences involve a lowering of formality and the use of variants that are more marked either diatopically or diastratically. Yet the opposite phenomenon — an upward shift in register — can also be observed.

We analyzed cases where functional style-shifting is triggered by the discussion of a particular topic or by the appearance of realia having a regional relevance: when talking about their daily experiences, children insert more colloquial and diaphasically marked elements (see extract 1), even though the setting is educational (extracts 3 and 4). Children often use style-shifting to highlight an event or to introduce a playful or humorous topic. Finally, especially in peer interactions, style-shifting is often associated with intensification and emphasis phenomena (sometimes including dysphemisms), which function to reinforce reproaches or negative evaluations and express disagreement or conflict (extracts 8 and 9).

In some cases, the proactive and self-constructive function achieved through style-shifting is very evident. We specifically refer to those sequences in which the child, instead of accommodating to the teacher's speech, distances themselves by selecting a more informal or more formal variety (extracts 5 and 11). In small-group interactions, shifts toward more formal variants are relatively rare (also due to the limited data available for this setting), but they are not absent. The case discussed in extract 12 particularly highlights an attempt at lexical reformulation through which the child seems to be aiming to demonstrate their competence.

Understanding the level of sociolinguistic competence attained by 8-year-old children is no easy task, and a more satisfactory answer to this question can only come from the analysis of a broader range of interactional settings (peer conversations in recreational contexts, interactions with familiar and unfamiliar adults, etc.) and from comparison with more diverse regional realities. However, with regard to classroom interaction and the urban context of the Lazio region, the data discussed allow us to identify a conscious and intentional use of register variation.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Multimodal phenomena are presented as transcriber's comments in italicized parentheses.
2. Here and throughout, we use the term dialect as it is understood in the Italian (and Romance) context, referring to the traditional regional Romance languages rather than to varieties of Standard Italian. As observed by Berruto (1983) and Cerruti and Regis (2005), in Italy's "language with dialects" context, dialects and Italian should be viewed as distinct systems due to their historical independence and structural differences. Despite contact-induced overlaps and similar forms, many dialects remain as distant from Italian as other Romance languages in terms of lexicon, phonetics, and morphology.
3. For a definition of regional Italian and a review of studies on the topic, see D'Achille (2022, pp. 189–240).
4. The scholar refers to a "risalita di tratti dialettali nella varietà locale di italiano, che è stata icasticamente definita come 'italiano *de* Roma'".
5. A few scholars draw a distinction between style-shifting and style-switching, the latter being used to refer specifically to shifts between national standards (e.g., African American English vs. American English) motivated by identity performance. However, in the context of our data, this distinction — which remains rather peripheral (and ambiguous, given that in literary analysis *style-switching* often refers to instances of code-switching used with stylistic or rhetorical intent) — is not applicable.
6. Cf. Gumperz (1967) and Romaine (1989), which include style-shifting in the broad category of code-choice, due the processes governing style-shifting aren't much different from those governing code-switching between different languages.
7. A greater number of studies have focused on style-shifting between African American English and Euro American English (Craig et al., 2014; Cassell et al., 2009).
8. See Nardy et al. (2013) for a review of thirty-nine phonological variables in 2-11 years children.
9. As for the correlation between gender and the development of sociolinguistic variation, see Chevrot (2025).
10. As regards specifically code-switching, an increasing number of studies have focused on code-switching in children: Fantini (1985), Halmari and Smith (1994), McClure (1981), Zentella (1982, 1997), and Reyes (2004). Bilingual children seem to learn early how to switch codes depending on the situation, the interlocutor, and the topic of conversation. However, this practice appears to increase in frequency over time, contradicting the earlier hypothesis that code-switching is caused by a lack of competence in one of the two languages.
11. "Children perceive the characteristic features, assimilate them and are able to reproduce some of them, or even call upon representational schemata to produce others not heard on this occasion" (Buson Billiez, 2013, p. 348).
12. This feature is not common in urban varieties, but it recurs in several dialects spoken in the Lazio region (e.g., those of the Castelli Romani).
13. See De Vecchis (2002, pp. 72–74) for the distribution of features across the low, mid-, and high-register varieties of Romanesco.
14. An idiomatic English translation of the excerpts is provided. The following labels clarify the nature of certain phenomena: (REG) indicates regional forms and words, (SUBST) indicates substandard but pan-Italian forms and words, (REG-SUBST) indicates forms and words originally marked diatopically but now widespread across other varieties, (VULG) indicates rude words and dysphemism (DISCOURSE MARKER) indicates that the given expression functions as a discourse marker.
15. For more on the phenomenon, see De Vecchis (2022, pp. 143–144) and the references cited therein.

16. The periphrasis *"stare a* + infinitive" is not unknown in Italian; in fact, it has been attested since the earliest stages of the language, particularly in imperative constructions and with verbs of perception (e.g., *stammi a sentire*, *sto a guardare*, etc.). In Romanesco, however, this periphrasis has a broader range of use and effectively competes with the construction *"stare* + gerund" (see also extract 7). The distribution of these two forms in the variety of Italian spoken in Rome would nonetheless deserve further investigation.

17. *Fregare* may also refer to the sexual act, this acception is today pretty opacized.

18. The expression *ho capito* typically introduces a concessive move followed by a contrastive content: *Ma non hai lavato i piatti? — Ho capito [sì, è vero], ma li devo lavare sempre io?* 'didn't you wash the dishes?' — I got it [yes, that's true], but do I always have to be the one to wash them?'.

19. On swear words in the L2 classroom, see Pugliese et al. (2023).

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