

Variable Realization of /v/ as [v] or [w] in a Heritage Italian Variety

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The Ciociaro Heritage Italian Language of Sarnia (CHILS) corpus documents and archives the variety of Italian known colloquially as *Ciociaro*, which comes from the Frosinone province of central Italy. This variety is unintelligible to speakers of Standard Italian. Ciociaro is spoken by most of the Italian immigrants in Sarnia, Ontario (population: 72,000; StatsCan 2017). At the peak of immigration, Sarnia was home to 2,400 Italians: of which 1,300 were from Frosinone, and nearly 1,000 had emigrated from only 4 towns in that province (Di Cocco 1991).

In this paper I present a phonetic feature of Ciociaro: the variable realization of /v/ as [w] or [v].

<i>Standard Italian</i>	1) <i>vino</i>	2) <i>nove</i>	3) <i>vecchia</i>
[Ciociaro]	[wino]	[nowə]	[wɛkja]
‘translation’	‘wine’	‘nine’	‘old’

I have conducted 38 interviews as part of the CHILS corpus. Each interview begins with a wordlist of 30 English prompts to elicit Ciociaro translations. The target translation contains a /v/ either word-initially (e.g. ‘true’ *vero*) or word-medially (e.g. ‘egg’ *uovo*). After removing responses of unexpected synonyms, inaudible responses, and “I don’t know”s, the final dataset contains 957 tokens of the variable /v/. An open-ended conversation follows the wordlist. From these conversations, I extracted 2,239 tokens of [v] or [w]. The result is a total of 3,196 tokens across 38 interviews—an average of 78 tokens per participant.

The tokens were coded using ELAN (Sloetjes & Wittenburg 2008). The recordings were coded for eight social factors and ten linguistic factors.

The overall rate of /v/ being realized as [w] was 41.3%. Men produced [w] at a higher rate (46.3%) than women (38.4%). Further, /v/ was realized as [w] at a significantly higher rate during the open interview (44%) than the wordlist (29.3%).

These tokens were then analyzed using Rbrul (Johnson, 2009). I calibrated the factors to ensure the reliability of each individual factor’s results. I used the log-likelihood ratio test described in Geyer (2003) to ensure a faithful fit of the data.

Linguistic Factors	MoE	Social Factors	MoE
Segment immediately following /v/	58%	Speaker	84%
Grammatical category	32%	Conversation topic	30%
Segment immediately preceding /v/	31%	Time of occurrence	20%
Previous realization of /v/	22%		

Table showing the significant factors constraining variable /v/ realization as selected by Rbrul analysis (Note: MoE is the ‘Magnitude of Effect’; Ellis 2010).

Of the 18 factors coded, three social and four linguistic variables were selected by the step-up/step-down analysis. The most significant variable overall is the inter-speaker variation. The rate of [w] realization ranges from 88.3% to as low as 4.2%. This range appears to correlate with the speaker’s town of birth, parents’ occupation(s) in Italy, and other self-reported details.

The most significant linguistic factor is the phoneme that immediately follows /v/. For example, front vowels strongly prefer [v], and back vowels strongly favour [w].

Ciociaro has many more features to be explored. However, this first study of the dialect shows an interesting and unusual phonetic realization of /v/, and the factors that influence it. The CHILS Corpus continues to document the Ciociaro variety in Sarnia, and it serves as an important record of a variety that quite possibly no longer exists in Italy.

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