Introduction

*Eva Del Soldato and Andrea Rizzi*

In the year 1484, humanist Pietro Capretto completed and dispatched to printer Geraert van der Leye his vernacular translation of the ‘Constitutions of the Friulan motherland’ (*Constitutioni della Patria del Friuli*). In the preface to his version of this text, Capretto explains his choice to use the Trevisan vernacular and ponders the diversity of Italian vernaculars as follows:

As I was preparing to translate this work, I considered the diversity of Italian towns and languages. I wished to use a language that would be appropriate for and suitable to not so much the material of this volume, but the readers who for any particular reason would find these constitutions useful. To this end, I did not deem the Tuscan language appropriate, since it is too obscure to the Friulan peoples. By the same token, the Friulan language is also not suitable, because it is not universally [used] throughout Friuli, and because it is impervious to write and, even worse, read and pronounce, especially by people who are not familiar with the Friulan accents and vocabulary. For these reasons, I decided that [the language of] my translation should be closer to the vernacular of Treviso than any other language, since it is smooth, clear, and intelligible for everyone.¹

Two years later, Capretto adopted a different approach to his translation of the Latin liturgy of the Assumption (*Ordo festi assumptionis*). In this preface, Capretto clarifies that since many did not understand spoken Latin, he had chosen to blend Tuscan and Lombard vernaculars, while giving the spoken Tuscan language preference, as it is ‘not obscure nor little used.’² These two examples clearly illustrate the complexity of considerations associated with language choice at the intersection between oral, manuscript, and printed cultures at the turn
of sixteenth century Italy. A common factor in Capretto’s decisions to use a Trevisan patois or a blend of Tuscan and Lombard spoken vernaculars was concern about reaching out to regional and supraregional readers. Capretto’s linguistic suppleness also reveals the multilingualism of a late Quattrocento scholar, priest, and member of the Confraternity of the Battuti: his ability to engage with Latin poetry, essay writing, and invectives was complemented by his translations into Tuscan, Lombard, and Trevisan.

The multilingualism of Capretto, who lived and worked in the Friuli area, exemplifies the multilingualism that existed throughout the Italian peninsula during the early modern era. Florence, Rome, and Venice are the key areas examined in this volume, with the aim of providing a novel insight into the interplay and dynamic exchange of Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and some of the local vernacular languages. In particular, this collection of essays examines the flexibility of the linguistic practices deployed both by the social and intellectual elite, and by the men and women in the street. Early modern urban culture and communication was played out in spaces that were shared by varied demographies such as canals in Venice, piazze of Florence, princely courts, and academies. In such spaces, language use by gondoliers, preachers, teachers, architects, physicians, diplomats, and scholars played an important role in the articulation of identity and production of cultural capital. When these people spoke or wrote they would inevitably choose one language over another (or produce polyglot or code-switching texts). In doing so, they were of necessity addressing social and cultural exigencies or expectations within a “dynamic world that is in perpetual motion”. Such a dynamism occurred in both oral and written communications. The chapters of this volume demonstrate that multilingualism in the early modern era was founded on discrete socio-cultural factors such as competition, inclusion (or exclusion), gender, and
education. The daily multilingual negotiations and interactions consolidated or affirmed the role played by speakers and writers in a given community.

The present collection of essays builds on recent explorations into scribal and print, oral and written cultures in medieval and early modern Italy. The point of departure for this project is the realisation that most of the early modern speakers and authors considered here were self-aware multilingual communicators. Language choice and use were consciously and carefully performed, and frequently justified, in order to overcome (or affirm) linguistic and social differences. Whether in a piazza, academy, or other social space in urban environments, people wanting to communicate shared similar concerns about the value, effectiveness, and impact of the language they chose.

Recent scholarship has examined different aspects of early modern connections between orality and textuality—which often involved a transition from public to private communication. This volume shifts away from the separation of oral and textual (or public and private): as the contributions in this book demonstrate, many early modern communicators—whether gondoliers, preachers, humanists, architects, doctors of medicine, translators, or teachers—made explicit and argued choices about their use of language. The textual and oral performance of languages—and self-aware discussions on languages—helped define or problematize the identity of early modern Italian multilingual communities.

Multilingualism is as much a fact of life today as it was in the past. Demographic statistics show there are more bilingual than monolingual speakers around the world today: data reveals that five to eight thousand different ethnic groups reside in approximately one hundred and sixty nation states. Within these nations, five thousand distinct languages are
What is evident from these figures is that few communities are either monolingual or mono-ethnic. Yet, twenty-first century language and education policies often fail to account for language mobility and multilingualism. The bias of monolingualism is still strong even in multilingual communities such as Australia, the United States, and France. This bias has a long history in Western Europe. In ancient Greek, the word barbaros initially denoted the foreigners whose language sounded like ‘ba-ba’. After the Persian Wars, barbaros began to acquire broader and more negative implications. When the rhetor Aeschines insinuated that his rival Demosthenes was the son of a Scythian woman, that is a barbarian, he wanted at the same time undermine his rival’s personal reputation both in terms of linguistic ability and morality (Against Ctesiphon, 172). In Aristotle’s Politics, the term ‘barbarian’ is taken in a purely derogative sense without linguistic connotations, but foreigners are excluded from the polis as they implicitly belong to a different homo-lingual community.

In the last fifteen years, studies have variously explored the multilingualism of early modern and modern Europe. As a result, a number of multilingual contact zones (urban environments such as London, Paris, Lyon among others) and texts (multilingual poems, translations, or sermons) have been examined. These investigations have shed light on the use of linguae francae such as Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and European vernacular languages (French, Spanish, and English among others). In the present volume the relationship between these language is understood to be dynamic and complex as opposed to static and unidirectional, marking a radical departure from the long-accepted binary scheme of a premodern intellectual elite concerned with neo-Latin culture in contrast to popular, useful but inelegant vernacular cultures. Tom Deneire and Demmy Verbeke have described the interplay between Latin and vernaculars in Renaissance Europe as a “constantly changing
cultural matrix.” Interactions took place between early modern speakers and texts, as in the case of sermons and polyglot publications. These complex and constantly shifting forms of cultural and linguistic exchanges occurred between different languages and communities, depending on the nature and purpose of exchange, in a seemingly ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation of registers and literacies that echoes communication practices in medieval Europe.

This process of renegotiation characterizes also the perceived roles and use of languages in early modern Italian culture. For example, the ongoing tension in fifteenth-century Florence between Latin and the Italian vernaculars indicates that the relationship between languages was never seen as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, Latin and vernacular were used synchronously across a wide range of oral and written texts—sermons, administrative documents, medical texts, and literary essays and invectives. Beyond Latin, scholars working in early modern Italy also engaged with learning and translating Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew in a process that required continual recalibration of the perceived roles played by these languages in the understanding and dissemination of knowledge (medicine, philosophy, architecture, literature, and theology among others).

One of the key elements of the multilingual communication and learning discussed in this volume is eloquence—in the form of persuasive speech or writing. In early modern Italy, eloquence was an essential attribute for the pursuit of both personal and cultural excellence, and was accorded the power to influence contemporaries and future generations. Eloquence was initially associated with mastery of Latin. Many rulers, merchants, and patrons were not, however, masters of classical Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, or ancient Greek. For this reason

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1 A similar point and discussion on eloquence is in Andrea Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators in Quattrocento Italy: Scribal Culture, Authority, and Agency* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).
humanists dedicated their vernacular versions to leaders, men of business, and elite women and men who had limited access to Latin education. Translation from these languages into the Italian vernaculars therefore became the most effective means of making eloquence and erudition available to the broadest possible audience, without compromising the literary ambitions and reputations of the translators themselves. With the early flourishing of Quattrocento culture, learned men—*hominès docti* as humanists described themselves—understood the need to earn their keep and feed their intellectual passions. The same appreciation also spurred a strong multilingual culture, in which Arabic, Greek, Latin, and vernacular languages were considered crucial media, each with its discrete realm.

At the same time, several translators chose to engage in translating Latin eloquence into vernacular so that “not only the Latinate and learned but also unlettered and common people [could] appreciate the excellence and splendour [of eloquence]” (“non solo li huomini litterati et dotti ma ancho li indotti et semplici possino il suo splendore et excellenzia cognoscere”). In doing so, these translators expressed their desire to make accessible Greek and Latin eloquence and knowledge to a rapidly expanding readership, an audience without adequate command of Latin or Greek, but who longed to share in the most recent cultural and linguistic achievements of Quattrocento scholars. The reaffirmation of ancient Latin eloquence by Petrarca, Salutati, and Bruni, among others, motivated the philological restoration and renovation of ancient texts, and stimulated the translation of Greek and Hebrew texts into classical Latin and the translation of Latin eloquence into the vernacular for the purposes of both the literate and illiterate.

Translations from one language to another generated new meanings and implications. And the study of prefaces accompanying the different versions of the same text illuminates their
Contrary to what Petrarch claimed in his quarrel over the Boccaccio’s Griselda, a vernacular text did not necessarily imply a simplification of the translated material. The choice of writing or speaking in a particular vernacular could carry significant social, cultural, political or philosophical meanings, otherwise absent in Latin texts. Similarly, the choice to study, translate or use languages such as Arabic, Greek, or Hebrew in early modern Italy brought about deeper appreciation of the cultural, political, and religious value of these languages.

**Challenging Dichotomies**

This volume challenges a still widely accepted view of early modern Italy that privileges intellectual and literary achievements in Latin as well as Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic. It moves beyond the long established binary notions of relationships between authors and translators, written and aural production, and Latin and vernacular languages. To be sure, the dichotomisation of Latin and vernacular languages has been subject to criticism during the past decade. Historians of material culture, and musicologists in particular, have begun to critique the written–aural binary relationship by investigating synergies between textual and verbal performances in street culture, and in ephemeral texts such as songs, pamphlets, and gossip. The early modern literary culture examined in this volume defies sharp demarcation between Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and the Italian vernaculars, and invites reconsideration of the ways in which early modern speakers, writers, and readers engaged with ancient and traditional culture. All of the chapters in this collection examine the ways in which early modern speakers, authors, and translators crossed social, cultural, political, and linguistic boundaries.
The present collection of essays is grouped into three main areas of investigation. Part I is devoted to public speech in Florence and Venice. Here, the authors explore the social practice of oral communication. The actors at the center of these chapters are seemingly improbable partners: gondoliers (discussed by Rizzi and Horodowich), aggressively aware that their peculiarly privileged position and linguistic abilities could bring them social and financial gains; public preachers (analysed by Howard), at the crossroads of different audience and genres; and humanists (in Boschetto’s chapter), who were very well rooted in the mercantile and historical reality that surrounded them, and elaborate their linguistic agenda accordingly. In each of these different cases, the spoken word shaped a world of meaning and relations, in which the association of language with identity is firmly established. Part II focuses on the power relationship between Latin and vernacular in the written world of invectives, conduct literature, translation of scientific texts, contracts, registers, and treatises on architecture. The use of either Latin or vernacular language offered opportunities for professional recognition: it strengthened the self-identification of humanists, physicians, architects, artists, and builders as custodians of the ‘secrets’ of their profession, while also enhancing their public recognition. Appropriation of an ancient author’s style by humanists (as discussed by Baldassarri) went had in hand with the disruptive manipulation of ancient classical authorities by proto-feminist author Lucrezia Marinella. In the case of this early seventeenth-century author—discussed by Amy Sinclair in this volume—her appropriation of “male academic disputational modes” through the unconventional use of Latin subverted the role of the Latin literary tradition and redefined both the querelle de femmes and the role of women writers. Marinella’s case also shows how early modern languages and cultural ‘movements’ can hardly be separated.27 Conflict, competition, and jealousy often also drove language choice. For instance, Del Soldato’s examines the Florentine discussions about the subjects a physician could translate or write in the vernacular. These debates were embedded in long-
standing professional jealousy between high-level practitioners of medicine and low-level counterparts like apothecaries, and more in general between physicians and non-professional readers. Such discussions, nonetheless, bridged worlds usually set in opposition: the academies and the universities, and led to the early seventeenth century’s “Galilean turn”.

The process of vernacularisation of technical architectural terms, described by Anna Siekiera, aligned linguistic and professional traditions of earlier craftsmen or authors with the lexicon of newly rediscovered authors like Vitruvius, showing how fluid and multidirectional was the interaction between ‘low’ and ‘high’ technical languages. Part III crosses the geographical, ethnographic, and linguistic borders associated with the early modern Italian peninsula by exploring three case studies: the social and linguistic reality of the Greek émigrés in early modern Italy through the production and reception of Greek grammar books written in Latin (discussed by Ciccolella); Isaac Abravanel’s multilingualism and multilingual web of allies and political supporters in Spain, Portugal, and Italy as evidence of the interchangeable use of Latin, Portuguese, Castilian, Italian, Arabic, Aramaic, and medieval Hebrew as political tools of persuasion (analyzed by Cohen Skalli); and the promotion of ‘Arabic’ as a series of complex linguistic, cultural, and scientific dominions of learning by the Medici Press in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century. ‘Arabic’ was a label that encompassed extremely diverse communities, languages, and texts. Similarly, there was (and still is) no single ‘Arabic’ language. For this reason, in the final chapter of this volume, Casari offers an extensive and necessary assessment of the Arab linguistic landscape of early modern Europe and Italy, and an appraisal of early modern understandings of Arabic as a language for science, philosophy, religion, trade, and wisdom. Arabic was multilingual in itself, and the work of the Medici Press in Rome revolutionised the early modern understanding of the relationship between Arabic and the European and middle-eastern languages.
By moving beyond traditionally discrete assessments of the early modern court, street, university’s halls, and chancery, this volume affirms how closely connected the spaces of cultural and textual production could be: as Capretto’s example demonstrated, humanist scholarship, as well as the linguistic choices made by preachers, teachers, and professionals, was performed not only for peer Latin scholars, but reached out to less literate or illiterate audiences. Finding common ground was, for multilingual authors, speakers and readers, an opportunity to establish social and cultural connections or exclusions, while also securing financial, cultural, or spiritual profit.

1 Costituzioni della Patria del Friuli nel volgarizzamento di Pietro Capretto del 1484 e nell’edizione latina del 1565, ed. Anna Gobessi and Ermanno Orlando (Rome: Viella, 1998), 103: “Volendo adoncha dar principio a cotal opera e considerando la varietà de li paesi, sono varie anchora le lingue italiane, però, volendone io elezer una che fosse condecente et conforme non tanto a la materia del volume, quanto a le persone a chi per alguna casone tal constituzioni ponno esser necessarie, et non me parendo conveniente la elegantia de la toschana lengua, per esser troppo oscura a li populi furlani, né anchora la furlana, tra perché non è universale in tutto il Friule e tra perché mal se può scrivere e pezo, lezendo, pronunciare, e specialmente da chi non è praticho nel li vocabuli et accenti furlani, imaginai in tal translatione dovermi acostare più tosto a la lengua trivisana che a d’altra, per essere asai expedita e chiara et intelligibile da tutti, come quilla che, secondo il mio giudicio, participa in molti vocabuli con tutte lingue italiane.” On Capretto as humanist and translator see Costituzioni della Patria del Friuli, 82–84. In this introductory chapter all translations into English are ours except where noted.

2 “ho l’un parlar con l’altro temperato, seguendo il dir toscano tuttavia, pur che non sia oscuro o poco usato” (Costituzioni della Patria del Friuli, 86).

3 On the use of ‘zone’ see n12 below.

4 On urban communication and the Habermanian term ‘public sphere’ there is an ever growing literature, especially in the areas of early modern political history and history of print culture. Key contributions from the last twenty years include Peter Burke, Varieties of Cultural History (Ithaca, NY: Polity, 1997), 111–12; The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Elizabeth Horodowich, Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice


7 We take the view that written texts were also produced and delivered as performance. See Samuel Mareel, “Performing the Dutch Rederijkers Lyric: Eduard De Dene and his Testament Rhetoricael (1562)”, Modern Language Review 108 (2013): 1199–1220, at 1201 (source taken from Interactions Between Orality and Writing, 9 n36).


12 For the use of ‘contact zone’ as a venue for social, linguistic and cultural interaction see Hong Hsy, Trading Tongues, 4, and Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992).


15 Scholarship on communication in medieval Europe has delineated the constant renegotiation of registers and literacies within and beyond oral and written communities. See Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain, ed.
See Peter Howard, Luca Boschetto, Stefano Baldassarri, Anna Siekiera in this volume.


18 See for instance Cortesi’s *De hominibus doctis* (1489–90), or Facio’s use of the *hominis docti* in his *De viris illustribus* (1456), both discussed in Baker, *Italian Renaissance*, 66–76.


20 This is the full passage of Friar Lazzaro da Gallineta’s preface to his vernacular version of Bruni’s *Laudatio inclite urbis Florentiae*: ‘a mi parso cosa convenevole et degna alquanto il mio ingegno adoperarvi et transpuorlo nella nostra lingua vulgare acciò non solo li huomini litterati et dotti ma ancho li indotti et semplici possino il suo splendore et excellenza cognoscere’ (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 705, fol. 32v).


23 See the chapters by Mario Casari, Federica Cicoletta, and Cedric Cohen-Skalli in this volume.


