PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCES AMONG SICILIAN DIALECTS: PART I. PHONOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the form of the Sicilian language that we are here calling Standard Sicilian, but we can legitimately ask whether there is in fact a standard Sicilian language. Many European languages have enjoyed the advantage that at some point in their history someone of great prominence wrote in that language, thus contributing greatly to its normalization. By this we mean that it acquired thus a standard literary form that other authors of that language sought to emulate.

Such social usage also helped establish what can be called a high language (HL). A high language represent, in both its written and spoken forms, acceptable norms; deviations from these norms are more tolerated in the spoken language than in the written language. However, excessive deviation even in the spoken language produces what are typically called substandard forms of speech.

In the early seventeenth century William Shakespeare (1564-1616) greatly helped to establish what can be regarded as a HL in English, using the dialect of London as the standard. Cervantes, his full name was Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616), accomplished the same for Castilian (which is today called Spanish) in the early years of the seventeenth century. Earlier Martin Luther (1483-1546) had done this for the German language, and of course Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) and Francesco Petrarca (1304-1375) did much to establish the regional language of Tuscany as a literary norm for Italy in the fourteenth century.

However, this Tuscan literary norm didn't begin to assume the semblance of a spoken HL until the beginning of the twentieth century, largely spurred on by the unification of Italy, increasing compulsory education, and the spread of the communicative media, such as films, radio, and the now ubiquitous television.

In the case of Sicilian, unfortunately too few of its great writers chose to write in it. Thus, the attempts to create a literary Sicilian language were inconsequential and were limited to a few movements that failed to attract the support of the Sicilian intellectuals and political powers.

Lacking these, it was not possible to create a literary Sicilian idiom around which acceptable grammatical, lexical, and syntactic forms could coalesce. In summary, Sicilian has remained largely a spoken language with strong oral traditions. Of course, there's nothing wrong with this, except that the lack of a strong literary standard has allowed each Sicilian dialect (*i parrati siciliani*) to express itself through slightly different linguistic norms.

It is beyond the scope of this article to set forth the many varied dialectical deviations of Sicilian. Such an endeavor would require a detailed scholarly work delving into the linguistic mode of each separate *parrata*. This article does not pretend to be that exhaustive. All it is intended to do is set forth in sketch form some of the most prominent ways in which one Sicilian *parrata* differs from the others.

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Bear in mind that the dialectical situation in Sicily is very complex. Putting aside the complicating issue of the incursion of Italian in Sicily, the various features pointed out in this article depend on several things, among which are:

- The geographical area of the speaker
- Costal area versus inland area (predominantly agricultural)
- City/town versus village/countryside
- The socio-economic level of the speaker
- Most likely the sex, age, and formal education of the speaker
- The speaker's exposure to other *parrati* and to Standard Italian

However, if the Gallo-Italic Sicilian dialects and the Albanian dialects are excluded, it is possible to expose a set of features by which it is reasonably easy to proceed from one *parrata* to another since the *parrati* are essentially mutually intelligible. If we begin with that premise, then the next step is to ask ourselves what are the differences and what the similarities.

Many of the differences among the various Sicilian *parrata* are found in the phonology, that is, the sounds used to articulate the language. There are also some grammatical differences, and syntactical ones too, but if we can distinguish the phonological principles at work, we can go a long way in distinguishing how one *parrata* differs from another. The intent is that the reader be able to recognize changes occurring in different words in the different *parrati*.

The principal phonological differences to be considered in this article are these:

(1) Metaphony of the thematic vowel.
(2) Substitution of *d* by *r*.
(3) Substitution of *-gghi-* by *-gli-*.
(4) Substitution of *ci-* with the strongly aspirated sound here symbolized by *x-*.
(5) Substitution of a voiceless consonant by a voiced consonant.
(6) Substitution of *gghi* by *ggi* and of *chi/cchi* by *ci/cci*.
(7) Disappearance of initial hard *g-*.
(8) Disappearance of hard *g* in the initial cluster *gr-*.
(9) Substitution of initial *gu-* before a vowel by *v-*.
(10) Substitution of *-dd-* by *-ll-*.
(11) Disappearance of internal *r* with consonantal lengthening: Case #1.
(12) Disappearance of internal *r* with consonantal lengthening: Case #2.
(13) Insertion of a *-v-* between two vowels.
(14) Variation of vowels in the penult syllable when the accent falls on the antepenult.

Of course, it must be strongly borne in mind that not every single *parrata* will exhibit all of the above phonological changes. In most instances, a particular one will display only one or possibly two of the differences:

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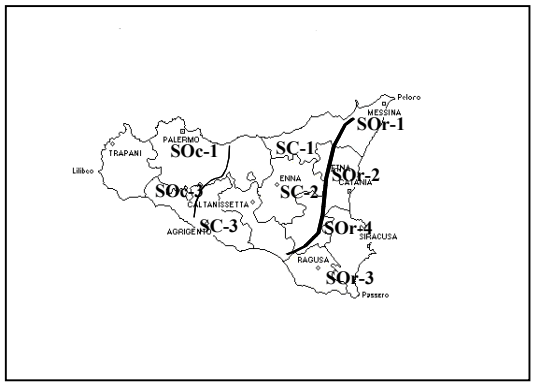


FIGURE 1. *Linguistic map of Sicily*

We will try to point out where each difference is likely to be observed, that is, in what part(s) of Sicily the divergence has been recorded. Some grammatical differences, chiefly in verb endings, will be noted in Part II of this article.

To indicate the areas of the different *parrati*, it is appropriate to set forth a linguistic and political map of Sicily (considered an autonomous region by the Italian State), dividing it into its various nine provinces, each named after the principal city within the respective province. See Figure 1. These provinces are given using first their Italian name followed by their Sicilian name and then in parenthesis, the abbreviation of each province.

(1) Messina/Missina (ME)
(2) Catania/Catania (CT)
(3) Siracusa/Siraùsa (SR)
(4) Ragusa/Raùsa (RG)
(5) Enna/Enna (EN)
(6) Caltanissetta/ Catanissetta (CL)
(7) Agrigento/Girgenti (AG)
(8) Trapani/Trapani (TP)
(9) Palermo/Palermu o Palemmu (PA)

2. GEOGRAPHY OF THE SICILIAN DIALECTS (*PARRATI SICILIANI*)

The Sicilian dialects can be divided into three broad regions. These are:

- Western Sicilian (WS)
- Central Sicilian (CS)
- Eastern Sicilian (ES)

Each of these in turn can be subdivided into ten (10) dialects thus:

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Western Sicilian (WS)	Dialect of Palermu (WS-1) Dialect of Trapani (WS-2) Dialect of Girgenti (WS-3)*
Central Sicilian (SC)	Dialect of the Madonie (CS-1) Dialect of Enna-Catanissetta (CS-2) Parrata di Girgenti (CS-3)†
Eastern Sicilian (ES)	Dialect of Missina (ES-1) Dialect of Northeast (ES-2) Dialect of Southeast (ES-3) Dialect of Catania-Saraùsa (ES-4)

* Girgenti – western portion of the province
† Girgenti – eastern portion of the province

3. PHONOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES AMONG THE *PARRATI*

All of the examples given in the Sicilian version of this article are given as transformations from the more general Sicilian (Standard Sicilian) into a form used in one or more of the *parrati*. Since it makes no sense to repeat the Sicilian variations here, this version of the article merely gives English translations of the words and sentences. In the case of the word examples, the Standard Sicilian word is given followed by the English translation. The sentences are merely translated into English.

3.1 METAPHONY OF THE THEMATIC VOWEL

Metaphony means the diphthongization of the stressed vowel. In Sicily there are two dialectical areas exhibiting metaphony, namely Central Sicilian (CS), particularly CS-2 and CS-3, and Southeast Sicilian, ES-3. The general transformations are:

Examples
bonu > *buonu* = good (o > uo)
pedi > *piedi* = foot (or feet) (e > ie)

Sentences translated into English
(1) This book is good
(2) My feet hurt[1]
(3) The man is old and deformed

Note: Within the city of Palermo and its outlying areas metaphony of the thematic vowel has been recorded, but this phenomenon is of recent origin. It's very likely that the metaphony observed in Palermo is due to the growing influence of Italian, which also displays metaphony of the same thematic vowels.

[1] The sentence presented in 2-a exhibits both rhotacism and metathesis of the *r* and *l*: *I pieri mi luorunu.*

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3.2 SUBSTITUTION OF *d* BY *r*

This transformation is characterized by the substitution of *d* by *r*. At first glance, this substitution may appear odd, but the *r* in question in Sicilian[2] is produced by a single flap of the tongue against the upper alveolar ridge, and this actually sounds like a kind of *d* sound. This phenomenon is known as rhotacism, that is, the substitution of *r* for another consonant, and it is commonly found both in Eastern Sicilian (ES) and Western Sicilian (WS). It can occur internally, or it can affect initial *d*.

Examples
pedi = foot (or feet)
cudu = tail
diri = to tell, to say
denti = tooth (or teeth)

Sentences translated into English
(1) My foot hurts
(2) The woman was used to laughing at the man
(3) He saw the one with the tail

3.3 SUBSTITUTION OF *-gghi-* BY *-gli-*

This linguistic phenomenon occurs chiefly in Central Sicilian (CS), more precisely in CS-3 and probably extends into CS-2.

Examples
figghiu = son
ogghiu = oil
mugghieri = wife
pigghiari = to take

Sentences translated into English
(1) The son carries oil to his mother.
(2) I don't like dishes made with garlic.
(3) My wife takes me for a fool.

3.4 SUBSTITUTION OF *ci-* BY A STRONGLY ASPIRATED SOUND HERE REPRESENTED BY *x-*

This phenomenon has a similar distribution to the one above, namely, WS-3 and CS-3, and it probably extends into CS-2. Note that *x* is used to represent this sound orthographically, whereas the phonetic representation is given by /h'/.

Examples
ciumi = river (or rivers)

[2] There are several distinct sounds in Sicilian that are represented by *r* orthographically. Example: The trilled *r* that is made by rapidly trilling the tip of the tongue against the upper alveolar ridge.

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ciuri = flower (or flowers)
ciamma = flame
ciatu = breath

Sentences translated into English
(1) I feel her breath next to me.
(2) Flowers blossom in the spring.
(3) The river was almost over its banks.

Note: In some of the *parrati* the words starting with *ci-* are written instead with *sci-*. Examples are given. Examples: *ciumi* > *sciumi*; *ciuri* > *sciuri*; *ciamma* > *sciamma*; *ciatu* > *sciatu*.

3.5 SUBSTITUTION OF A VOICELESS BY A VOICED CONSONANT

This linguistic phenomenon generally affects hard *c* and *ci* (soft *c*). These sounds are normally voiceless in Sicilian but are at times voiced. Some of the Eastern Sicilian *parrati* show this feature; however, in Standard Sicilian such sounds are typically voiceless.

Examples
manciari = to eat
lacrima = tear
sfocu = discharge, relief
ricordu = memory, remembrance

Sentences translated into English
(1) It's time to eat.
(2) I like memories of the past.
(3) Tears fell down the woman's face when she learned the bad news.

3.6 SUBSTITUTION OF *gghi* BY *ggi* AND OF *chi/cchi* BY *ci/cci*

This phenomenon is pretty much confined to the dialect of the Southeast (ES-3), and not all words containing these clusters are affected. This dialectical area is noted for its metaphony and also for rhotacism.

Examples
arraggghiu = bray, braying
occhiu = eye
tanticchia = a little
chianciri = to weep

Sentences translated into English
(1) The donkey gives out a nice bray.
(2) I'll drink a little wine.
(3) His poor mother is crying a lot for her dead son.

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3.7 DISAPPEARANCE OF INITIAL HARD *g-*

This phenomenon is very widespread throughout all of Sicily and is found in both Western Sicilian (WS) and Eastern Sicilian (ES). This disappearance of hard *g* occurs also if the hard *g* is found between two vowels, that is, intervocalic hard *g*. In Western Sicilian the *g* simply disappears, but in Eastern Sicilian it leaves behind a consonantal *i* when it disappears.

Examples
gaddu = rooster
gaddina = hen
rigalu = gift, present
prigari = to implore, to pray

Sentences translated into English
(1) The cat licks the milk and likes it a lot
(2) The rooster crows when the hen lays an egg
(3) I'll give a present to my sister

3.8 DISAPPEARANCE OF HARD *g* IN THE INITIAL CLUSTER *gr-*

Like the preceding phenomenon, this one is also widely distributed throughout all of Sicily and is found as commonly in Western Sicilian (WS) as in Eastern Sicilian (ES). It is certain that the original form is that of *gr-* and not the other way around, that is, that the form *ranni* clearly springs from *granni* since the latter is derived from the Latin GRANDIS/GRANDE.

Examples
granni = large; great; adult
grossu = large, big
grutta = cave; grotto
grassu = fat

Sentences translated into English
(1) This child'll grow up large.
(2) My book is large.
(3) That woman is short and fat.

3.9 SUBSTITUTION OF INITIAL *gu-* BEFORE A VOWEL BY *v-*

This phenomenon is found in various areas. It is very common in both Eastern Sicilian (WS) and Western (ES).

Examples
guardari = to look
guadagnari (*varagnari*)[3] = to earn

[3] Also exhibits rhotacism.

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guastari = to waste, to ruin
guarniri = to adorn, to furnish

Sentences translated into English
(1) We didn't look out for the millipede.
(2) The tomatoes were ruined with all that water.
(3) The young man won first prize.

3.10 SUBSTITUTION OF *-dd-* BY *-ll-*

This phenomenon is found in various areas, and in fact the cluster *-ll-* characterizes Old Sicilian.

Examples
beddu = beautiful, handsome
nuddu = no one, nobody
chiddu = that, that one, he

Sentences translated into English
(1) The stars are really beautiful.
(2) No one saw me.
(3) That's really cool.

3.11 DISAPPEARANCE OF INTERNAL *r* WITH CONSONANTAL GEMINATION: CASE #1

This phenomenon is observed in Western Sicilian, especially in WS-1. Normally, it occurs when the *r* is preceded by a vowel and followed by a consonant, as shown in the Sicilian examples. When the *r* disappears, it is replaced by an *i* sound followed by subsequent lengthening of the following consonant (consonantal gemination).

Examples
purtari = to carry
porcu = pig
forti = strong
corpu = body; blow

Sentences translated into English
(1) The mother gave her bad son strong blows.
(2) The donkey is carrying a heavy load.
(3) The pig is a disgusting animal that'll eat anything whatsoever.

3.12 DISAPPEARANCE OF INTERNAL *r* WITH CONSONANTAL GEMINATION: CASE #2

This phenomenon is observed in Eastern Sicilian. Again, it occurs when the *r* is preceded by a vowel and followed by a consonant, as shown in the Sicilian examples. But when the *r*

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disappears, it is replaced only by subsequent lengthening of the following consonant (consonantal gemination).

Same examples and sentences as in § 3.11.

3.13 INSERTION OF A *-v-* BETWEEN TWO VOWELS

This phenomenon is observed in Western Sicilian, especially in WS-1. The intervocalic *-v-* is pronounced like the *v* in Spanish, that is, as a bilabial fricative and not like *v* in English, which is a labio-dental fricative.

Examples
niuru = black
autru = other
causi = pants
cauciu = kick

Sentences translated into English
(1) Another man wants to buy the book.
(2) This morning the boss (owner) gave me some good kicks.
(3) He took off his pants.

3.14 VARIATION OF THE VOWEL IN THE PENULT WHEN THE ACCENT FALLS ON THE ANTEPENULT

This variation occurs since unaccented vowels in Sicilian are not articulated as tensely as those of Italian. Whatever the vowel of the antepenult happens to be, the unaccented vowel in the penult will be an *a*, an *i*, or an *u*.

Examples
monacu = monk
portanu = they carry
fradiciu = rotten
muzzicu = I bite

Sentences translated into English
(1) The donkeys are carrying the pack saddles on their backs.
(2) The sacristan got rotten drunk.
(3) The little boy's biting his fingernails.

4. EXAMPLES OF THE APPLICATION OF THE RULES GIVEN ABOVE

The transformation rules given in the Sicilian portion of this paper are applied to these seven words: *gargi*, *gridu*, *ciauru*, *gattu*, *detti*, *arrigalari*, *guastedda*.

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(1) Some possible variations of the first word: *gargi*, *gaggi*, *gaiggi*, *argi*, *aggi*, *aiggi*, *iargi*, *iaggi*.
(2) Some possible variations of the second word: *gridu*, *ridu*, *griru*, *riru*.
(3) Some possible variations of the third word: *ciauru*, *sciauru*, *xiaru*.
(4) Some possible variations of the fourth word: *gattu*, *attu*, *iattu*.
(5) Some possible variations of the fifth word: *detti*, *retti*.
(6) Some possible variations of the sixth word: *arrigalari*, *arrialari*.
(7) Some possible variations of the seventh word: *guastedda*, *guastella*, *vastedda*, *vastella*.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article was published in the journal *Arba Sicula*, vol. XIX (1998), pp. 96-121. However, between that time and now I made some changes that I hope are real improvements. The goal of this article is to aid in distinguishing one Sicilian dialect (*parrata*) from another. The treatment given here helps explain why words vary from one dialect to another.

The knowledge of these differences also help to establish a genuine Standard Sicilian so that the Sicilian language might be preserved and communicated to future generations. In my book dealing with Sicilian grammar, that is, *Introduction to Sicilian Grammar* (New York: Legas, 2001), I sought to propose a genuine Standard Sicilian with its own unique orthography.

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