



NOTHING WILL EVER BE LIKE BEFORE  
MICHELE LOPORCARO

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Michele Loporcaro is Professor of Romance Linguistics at the University of Zurich. He was born in Rome in 1963 and obtained his Ph.D. in Linguistics at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa) in 1993, after studying in Pisa and Vienna. He held previous positions at the Universities of Padova and Cosenza, in addition to visiting professorships in several universities in Europe and the USA (Graz, Napoli/Istituto di Scienze Umane, Pavia/ Collegio Ghislieri, Pisa/Scuola Normale Superiore, Madison/Wisconsin, Vienna) and a visiting fellowship at Magdalen College Oxford (2012). He is also a Fellow of Academia Europaea and a past president of the Collegium Romanicum. In 2012, he received the Premio Antonio Feltrinelli from the Accademia dei Lincei. His research interests include historical linguistics, linguistic historiography, and the phonology, morphology, and syntax of Italo-Romance languages. His papers have appeared in *Archivio Glottologico Italiano*, *Belfagor*, *Diachronica*, *Folia Linguistica*, *Lingue e Linguaggio*, *Linguistics*, *L'Italia dialettale*, *Revue de Linguistique Romane*, *Rivista di linguistica/Italian Journal of Linguistics*, *Romance Philology*, *Studies in Language*, and *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*. He is the author of several books, including *Profilo linguistico dei dialetti italiani* (2009); *Cattive notizie. La retorica senza lumi dei mass media italiani* (2005); and *Sintassi comparata dell'accordo participiale romanzo* (1998). – Address: Romanisches Seminar, Universität Zürich, Zürichbergstrasse 8, 8032 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: loporcar@rom.uzh.ch

During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, my chief preoccupation was the work on my Oxford University Press monograph on grammatical gender from Latin to Romance, as announced on the Wiko website. I reported on this at the Tuesday Colloquium on

February 4, 2014 as well as in a lecture on *Romance gender in typological perspective* held at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Department of Linguistics, Leipzig, on May 12, 2014. The work on the book has progressed, thanks to the Wissenschaftskolleg facilities (I've been able to read many things) and atmosphere (I've received lots of valuable input in daily discussions with other Fellows), and I am envisioning turning in the final manuscript at the end of the next teaching term in Zurich, during which I'll lecture on the topic.

In addition, my Wissenschaftskolleg stay allowed me to complete a series of other projects, some thematically related to the main endeavour, some not. In what follows, I'll briefly enumerate them, distinguishing between disciplinary (§1) and interdisciplinary projects/work (§2).

### 1. Disciplinary Work (in Latin-Romance [Historical] Linguistics)

One thing that kept me busy for quite some time was the proofs of another OUP book, due to appear in September 2014, on which I had worked during my visiting fellowship at Magdalen College Oxford in Autumn 2012 and whose manuscript I had sent to the publisher in Summer 2013. This is on an entirely different issue, viz. *Vowel length from Latin to Romance*. Though I did not, strictly speaking, conduct research in this area while at Wissenschaftskolleg, during proofreading I benefitted from linguistic advice from Mitch Cohen, which I gratefully acknowledge in the foreword. Kathleen Coleman too is mentioned there, since she generously volunteered to help me check several English doubts.

Among the papers I finished during my stay, some relate to the main project. First and foremost:

*Gender*, in Adam Ledgeway and Martin Maiden (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, ch. 56 (8,000 words), to appear in 2015.

This is an invited chapter in an OUP reference work that condenses some of the main insights that will be discussed in more detail in the *Gender* book. Another related paper I completed in Berlin is:

Michele Loporcaro and Giuseppina Silvestri, "Residui del genere neutro come categoria morfosintatticamente funzionale nell'italo-romanzo meridionale," in Éva Buchi, Jean-Paul Chauveau and Jean-Marie Pierrel (eds.), *Actes du XXVIIe Congrès international de linguistique et de philologie*

*romanes* (Nancy, July 15–20, 2013), Strasbourg, Société de linguistique romane/ÉliPhi 2014.

Other articles on different topics were entirely written during my Berlin stay:

“Contre le principe de maximisation du thème: le témoignage de la flexion verbale du sarde,” in *Morphologie flexionnelle et dialectologie romane: typologie(s) et modélisation(s)*, edited by Société de linguistique de Paris, 51–65. Leuven: Peters, 2014 (Mémoires de la Société de linguistique de Paris, Nouvelle série, 22).

“Auxiliary selection and participial agreement,” in Adam Ledgeway and Martin Maiden (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, ch. 48 (10,000 words), to appear in 2015.

Michele Loporcaro and Tania Paciaroni, “The dialects of central Italy,” in Adam Ledgeway and Martin Maiden (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, ch. 14 (12,000 words), to appear in 2015.

Especially for the last of these, I relied massively on the Wissenschaftskolleg Library’s support, which kindly led an intensive correspondence with local libraries in Italy in order to get hold of publications that appeared in small centers of central-southern Italy. This was not just helpful: I could not even have dreamt of completing this essay in Berlin without the invaluable competence of the Wissenschaftskolleg Library staff.

Moving on now to new research projects, early in 2014 I worked on a grant application (requested funding about 700,000 SFr.), which I submitted on April 1, 2014 to the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research, with the aim of realizing “The Zurich database of agreement in Italo-Romance”.

This focuses on Italo-Romance dialects that display typologically highly interesting (qua unusual) traits in the domain of agreement. Again, the final writing of the grant proposal would not have been possible without the Wissenschaftskolleg library services and the help by Mitch Cohen, who proofread the English. Also, in the grant proposal I gratefully acknowledge the liberality of the Wissenschaftskolleg, which on September 23–25, 2013 hosted Francesco Cangemi (Zurich/Cologne), who supported me with the technical part of the database design, and Jürg Fleischer (Marburg), who agreed to serve as an international consultant on the project. His advice was instrumental for the grant proposal, due to his experience in the direction of a major agreement database project

(*Diachrone Entwicklung von Kongruenzsystemen in vier flektierenden indogermanischen Sprachen*, <http://www.uni-marburg.de/fb10/iksl/sprachwissenschaft/forschung/projekte/kongruenz>) investigating diachronic change in the working of agreement in four Indo-European languages.

## 2. Interdisciplinary Work

While all of the above concerns areas in which I have been doing research over the past decade or so, new input during the fellowship year resulted in the opening of new files, which have in part already produced results and in part no doubt will in the future. First, I had the opportunity to consult many of the Fellows on their mother tongue expertise, to enable me to give at least some hints, in my presentation at the Colloquium, of the linguistic diversity represented at the Wissenschaftskolleg this year, from the vantage point of grammatical gender systems. In this connection, I have to thank especially Hari Sridhar, who patiently answered my questions on Tamil during endless table tennis matches: from him, I've learned a lot on both fronts.

As I was viewing the data on gender in the Fellows' mother tongues, I promptly realized that the best opportunity to start a new project was in the area of West African Studies. This is due to Cheikh Anta Babou's presence and interest in the matter; he received excellent training in linguistics during his studies and showed himself enthusiastic about my proposal to work together on the gender system of Wolof. In fact, it turned out that although Wolof is one of the best-investigated languages of Africa, current accounts of its gender system, described traditionally in African linguistics under the heading "Noun classes", were highly unsatisfactory. Thus, together we started last January analyzing primary linguistic data during regular weekly working sessions, which resulted in a joint paper on *Noun classes in Wolof*, which proposes a novel account of this aspect of Wolof grammar. The paper is presently under English revision (thanks to Mitch Cohen, again). In the meantime, we have received valuable comments from colleagues specializing in African linguistics, theoretical morphology and linguistic typology, either via e-mail or during their visits at Wissenschaftskolleg, where I had the opportunity to host Tom Güldemann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) on June 18 and Horst Simon (Freie Universität Berlin) on June 23, 2014 to discuss a previous draft of our paper. We are going to submit it to a scientific journal before the end of our stay in Berlin. Needless to say, in the asterisk note, we express our gratitude (in Wolof: *jëjëjëf waay!*) to the

Wissenschaftskolleg for making this possible and especially to Sonja Grund and the whole library staff, who rode a true bibliographical Paris–Dakar rally to provide us with the necessary literature (including several 19th-century books).

Another domain of interdisciplinary work in which I had the opportunity to have interesting conversations with other Fellows during my stay was (the many facets of) the relationship of language and biology. In this area, I had a series of meetings over coffee with Kasia M. Bieszczad and, less regularly, Michael Hochberg, as a result of which I read and discussed with them several papers on the processing of acoustic stimuli by both humans and (other) animals, including the perception of music, as well as the mathematical modeling of language evolution. Michael Hochberg also kindly invited me, on April 14, to a joint lunch with Julia Fischer (Deutsches Primatenzentrum, Leibniz-Institut für Primatenforschung, Göttingen), which resulted in my reading her *Affengesellschaft* (Berlin, Suhrkamp 2012). I single this out among the many things outside of my domain of expertise that I had a chance to read while in Berlin (as a follow-up to conversations with other Fellows), because I reported on the comparative evidence on the origins of human language stemming from this and other work in primatology in the address (*Streifzüge durch die [Zürcher] Linguistik*) I was invited to hold in the Aula magna in Zurich on May 28, 2014, in the presence of the UZH authorities, as a *Festrede* on the occasion of the *Gründungsfeier des Instituts für Vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft, Universität Zürich*.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

This brings me to the last point. Apart from obligations such as the one just mentioned, which I could not possibly have escaped, I was careful to turn down invitations (including some from universities with whose research centers in Romance and/or general linguistics I am in close contact, e.g. Leiden, Padua, Vienna) that would have distracted me from my work in Berlin. My policy during 2013/14 was to accept only “local” commitments, either in Zurich, Switzerland or Berlin and surroundings. These include, in addition to the ones already mentioned:

December 16, 2013 (with Tania Paciaroni): *Indefiniteness, mass and the neuter gender: evidence from Central-Southern Italo-Romance*. Paper given at the workshop “Mass and count in Romance and Germanic languages”, organized by the University Research Priority Program of the University of Zurich on “Language and Space”, in which I participate.

January 28, 2014: Freie Universität Berlin. Talk on: *The impact of morphology on change in agreement systems*.

May 23, 2014: Bellinzona, Archivio di Stato. Speech on the occasion of the annual ceremony of the Premio Migros Ticino, bestowed on my Ph.D. student Rachele Delucchi for her UZH Ph.D. thesis on *Esiti di – A finale e armonia vocalica. I dialetti della Svizzera italiana in prospettiva romanza e generale*.

June 13, 2014: Freie Universität Berlin. Talk on: *Viaggio in Italia: tre buone ragioni per studiare i dialetti italiani* at the Institut für Romanische Philologie, organized in cooperation with the Italienzentrum.

Apart from these commitments, which I kept to a minimum, I concentrated on my work, both that planned in advance (§1) and that unplanned (§2), arising from the intellectual stimuli I received while at the Wissenschaftskolleg. As I said, I have mentioned just one single reading not related to my own domain of expertise, out of the dozens books and papers that the – I do not hesitate to say – magic combination of conversation with other Fellows and input from the Tuesday Colloquia, on the one hand, and the Library service, on the other, made available to me. I do not doubt that this year has made me a better and more accomplished scholar than I was upon my arrival in Berlin, last September: it is therefore with deep gratitude to the institution that made this possible that I take leave from Berlin. Not only will this year stay in my memory as one of the most productive periods of my scholarly career; I also hope to have an opportunity to further profit from this intellectually stimulating environment in the future and stay in touch with the Wissenschaftskolleg by joining the Fellows' Club, on the one hand, and by occasionally taking part as a listener, if at all possible, in future events such as the workshops planned in the framework of the focus group on “Biological, Cultural and Social Origins of Language” to be hosted by the Wissenschaftskolleg in 2015/16.