

Textbook: Focus on Students' National Identity

Linguistic Analysis of Contemporary Italian Language Textbook

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Abstract

Problems of foreign language textbook writing have drawn considerable attention of scholars in Russia and other countries. The textbook is an important element of the process of teaching a foreign language, being a basic teaching tool, created on the basis of the fusion of methodological and linguistic knowledge. Linguistic research determines the general principles of teaching a native language or teaching a particular foreign language, defining the general features of this language that also affect its assimilation. Through linguistic analysis and research in applied linguistics, the main principles of compiling textbooks on a foreign language are highlighted. Considering education as a sociocultural phenomenon on the one hand and as a psychological process on the other, we also note the importance of taking into account psycholinguistic (selection of materials taking into account the peculiarities of memory and mentality), pedagogical and didactic (correlating the studied material with other disciplines), methodological (selection of teaching methods), as well as sociolinguistic and sociocultural data in the preparation of a modern textbook on foreign languages. This article examines the analysis of modern textbooks on the Italian language from the point of view of linguistic science. The study presents and analyzes the phenomena of metalinguistic reflection and linguistic input, using the example of educational tasks from the most popular textbooks of the Italian language in Russia for adult students. The study examined the classification of linguistic criteria for the selection of educational texts in accordance with the norms of the modern Italian language, as well as the communication strategies and tactics used by their authors. The prerequisites for further research in the field of written educational discourse are highlighted.

Keywords: : textbook, metalinguistic competence, language input, communicative tactics.

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Introduction

Being one of the most significant linguistic categories, text is undoubtedly on the priority list of the world's linguistic studies. It is through a variety of its types that the system of a given language actually comes to life in the process of communication. A concept of text as a specific linguistic phenomenon was described in the works by R. Beaugrande, W. Dressler (Beaugrande, Dressler, 1984) and other scholars. The results obtained through observation in various areas enabled linguists to define text as a separate language unit, while the theoretical assumptions formulated, laid the foundation for inclusion of this category into modern linguistics and the current scientific paradigm as a whole (Abdulmyanova, 2010; Serebrennikova & al., 2016; Vikulova & al., 2011).

Due to a variety of the existing concepts and approaches to the notion of "text", there emerged lots of interpretations of this very term. For example, in semiotics text is defined as a sequence of any forms of signs and communication. Scientists states that textual linguistics manifests itself through speech analysis and aims to revealing the patterns defining the textual segment of speech (Dubnyakova & al., 2017). Consequently, the text is regarded as a specific level of speech analysis, which transcends the level of a sentence and includes the extralinguistic phenomena as well (Lavinio, 1990; Novikova & al., 2017). At the same time, the linguists and text analysts R. Beaugrande and W. Dressler, believe that text is just any communicative phenomenon that meets the criteria of textuality. It is a system which brings together a variety of content units verbalized in accordance with the codes of the languages used. Finally text is a speech act or a coherent sequence of speech acts, performed by an individual in a given situation (Beaugrande, 1984).

The Russian tradition of linguistics understanding text as an outcome of a finalized speech-generating process that is solidified in a form of a written document and complies with the norms applicable to regular documents of such type. Also, it shall comprise a title (a name) and a set of specific units (referred to as over-phrasal unities) woven together through a number of lexical, grammatical, logical and stylistic relations. Finally, text shall have a specific purpose, i.e. a pragmatic dimension (Zheltukhina & al., 2017).

Texts are an integral part of foreign language textbooks. The latter, in their turn, stand out against the other types of educational resources, since they convey the scientific fundamentals of a given subject and define the set of activities required for those fundamentals to be grasped by students. Any coursebook shall employ text as its main component, and also, make use of some auxiliary extratextual elements. If a good coursebook is used by a non-competent instructor, it does not guarantee that the course's objectives will be met, while a good teacher might, of course, tailor a coursebook containing lots of drawbacks to the specific

goals and objectives of the course (Matthiae, 2012). This statement emphasizes the importance of a teacher's equipment with good methodological skills, including specific skills of working with a textbook. Unlike the word and the sentence, the text is a minimal coherent linguistic unit, and thus, it always shall be used within a context (Magnani, 2009; Shshepilova & al., 2017). On its surface level, the text of a coursebook can be further divided into sentences, paragraphs, chapters etc. Besides the semantic and pragmatic relations between various elements of such text, there are also grammatical and syntactic mechanisms that tie all these units together, such as punctuation marks in listings, subordinate clauses, as well as rules of the sequence of tenses.

Purpose and objectives of the study

Developments in the methodology of foreign language teaching could hardly take place without taking into account the up-to-date achievements of other humanities, especially linguistics. The object of methodology is the process of teaching a foreign language, however, the language itself is the object of linguistics. Therefore, linguistic dimension of foreign language teaching is made manifest in various aspects of the language, specific syntactic patterns, structures, communication models and tactics, and speech genres built into the functional styles of a language. All the above-listed phenomena are represented and can be traced not only in oral teacher-student interactions, but also in a written discourse whose primary source are methodological manuals and handbooks for teachers. This article aims to analyze both the didactic potential and the subject matter of contemporary Italian textbooks for foreign learners. Analysis of the coursebooks from the point of view of linguistic pragmatics will help to expand the approaches to making up-to-date Italian language textbooks.

Literature review

The ability to critically review practical resources is an essential constituent of a foreign language teacher's professional competence. Consequently, teacher's handbooks used in teacher training courses, always feature an array of must-have tools or criteria for an adequate analysis of materials applied by the teacher in a class. Resource analytics might be regarded as a tool which could potentially facilitate the teacher's and student's ability to speak out their needs while maintaining a substantial degree of control over materials they are working with (Cortés Velásquez & al., 2017). To master the skill of reading and understanding a text, one needs to take not only grammar and vocabulary into account, but also certain culture-specific information.

Academic publications refer to a vast array of tools which facilitate procedures of text analysis (Mezzadri, 2017a). Our research aspires not to create a general taxonomy of such tools, but rather to review the

specific traits helping to distinguish them from one another, along with general criteria underlying their classification.

The first of such criteria is the scope of application of these tools. Firstly, there are methods of analysis applicable to foreign language textbooks of any kinds (Littlejohn, 2011). There are also methods referring to a specific coursebook of a specific foreign language (e.g. the Italian language – Biral, 2000). And lastly, there are tools applicable to such textbooks that were designed for a specialized category of students. Secondly, analytical tools can be classified according to the purpose of their study. Drawing on this criterion, we could divide them into those designed for basic description of contemporary textbooks (Byrd, 2001), and those employed for analysis thereof from the point of view of how valuable their subject matter is, in accordance with linguistic principles and approaches (Tomlinson, 2003). The next criterion has to do with how detailed the analysis of those materials is. In various monographs written by Italian scholars one might come across long lists of such criteria of analysis which include up to 10 or more items, as well as linguistic maps enabling scholars to carry out a detailed research of all the parameters of the language which the specific textbook was written in (Cherkashina, 2009; Kuitche Talé, 2012).

As they go along with the analysis of written teaching resources, one must also consider the profile of readers a specific coursebook was written for, alongside the taxonomy of the texts it contains, linguistic input at writing the textbook, activities it offers to boost specific language skills and competences, and the graphical aspect. Also important is the approach to the language that the textbook's author relied on, and also how that textbook refers to grammar and culture-specific information related to the country of study (Mezzadri, 2016).

Methodology

In recent years there have come out lots of Italian language textbooks aimed at students of various age groups and occupations. Among the most popular resources for adults, we can mention *Nuovo* and *Nuovissimo Progetto* published by Edilingua; *Nuovo Espresso* and *Domani* published by Alma Edizioni. The following criteria can be put forward in for their analysis:

- the target audience (teachers and students);
- the structure;
- the language input characteristics;
- the graphical aspect;

- references to theoretical and culture-specific data.

In the course of the analysis of these resources, the descriptive method, and the methods of componential / contextual analysis were applied.

Recently published textbooks of the Italian language, such as *Nuovissimo Progetto*, *Nuovo Progetto*, *Nuovo espresso*, *Domani* feature a wide range of graphical elements. Besides textbooks, Italian schoolteachers often use magazine and newspaper articles, tourist brochures and photos in their foreign language lessons. The skill of creating texts featuring both language and visuals is a fundamental competence of a teacher, serving either as an immediate mediator between the language and the students, or as an author of a specific foreign language coursebook. One of the most common practices is a selection by the teacher of various sets of ads, extracts from authentic magazine and newspaper articles. Such resources largely employ visual images, and they are used in the classroom for conversational practice based thereon (Korzhujev, 2016). A pictorial serves as a substitute for subject matter of speech, being in itself a medium for expressing thoughts in the course of communication. Any opportunity to use visual stimuli builds skills and improves memorization, and the use of the visual code is instrumental in language learning (Chirkova, 2015).

Writing Italian language textbooks implies the use of the modern literary language compliant with the abstract model of communication. To this end, fragments of fiction and newspaper / magazine articles serve as authentic texts. Such textual genres as fairy tales and short stories, though might be more relevant to students' life, are much less common (Matthiae, 2012).

Results

Linguistic research reveals that texts of Italian language coursebooks are characterized by:

- heterogeneity of speech types (arguments, definitions, descriptions, etc.)
- complexity of linguistic structures and informational density;
- graphical peculiarities impairing search for information (absence of paragraphs) (Matthiae, 2012).

In the classroom, the teacher's role is that of a mediator between their students and the textbook. To facilitate their perception of a text written in a foreign language, it is highly recommended that they:

- while explaining topics, keep on referring to situations and notions, that their students are familiar with. It will help students to relate the new information to the one they are already aware of;

- use pictorials and visuals, which will help activate students' sensory perception (pictures, photos, charts, diagrams etc.);

- encourage students to always remain within the foreign language domain, even through the use of body language, giving them prompts and rendering other kinds of support.

Problems of codification of the modern Italian language are being widely researched by linguists and are consequently reflected in teaching resources. One of the objectives of linguistic analyses of coursebooks in Italian language is, therefore, to find out the "pure", i.e. normative level of the coursebooks' texts and their compliance with the laid-down language standards and requirements to foreign language teaching (Mezzadri, 2017b).

Teaching resources are analyzed based on the following criteria:

1. Selection of real-life situations for exercises in accordance with the target language repertoire;
2. Availability of communicative strategies and tactics for teaching Italian as a foreign language and their application in an appropriate fashion;
3. Conformity of the texts to the standards of the official language of the Italian Republic;
4. Cases of language transfer resulting from substantial influence of the English, French and German languages (Lavinio, 1990).

Placing emphasis of the educational process on building informational competence in the foreign language, determines the criteria of selecting teaching resources and the principles underlying their structure. C. Matthiae, Professor of the Italian and French languages of «La Sapienza» University of Rome states that a contemporary Italian language textbook shall:

1. Focus on communication;
2. Feature various kinds of authentic texts (dialogues, interviews, letters, advertisements, technical manuals);
3. Cater for the stated level, age and needs of the students;
4. Be clearly structured and contain well-phrased texts;
5. Build grammar skills based on inductive method, since it boosts abstract thinking, and stimulates students to

autonomously operate the grammar system. It also helps them develop their ability to think and make logical conclusions in a foreign language;

6. Meet the standards of cooperative studying and feature the resources suitable for it;

7. Comprise diverse exercises to develop all modes of speech, as well as key to those exercises and audio track transcripts;

8. Feature high-quality graphics (Matthiae, 2012).

As a result of intensive development of teaching methodology and linguistics, there emerged another important criterion essential for foreign language textbooks and accepted by Italian teaching community, namely, metalinguistic reflection.

Metalinguistic reflection can be viewed upon from various angles. Firstly, it is regarded as a rational use, analysis and evaluation of various facts of language, including correlation of such evaluation with others, and with the standardized language usage. Secondly, it can be viewed as a mindful attitude to everything related to language and its use. Reflection is represented both in the speaker's generative activity, and in the addressee's receptive activity. Traditionally, it is the speaker who is identified as the subject of metalinguistic activity (Shnyukova, 2015). In this case, metalinguistic reflection is considered as a verbal actualization of a rational attitude to language tools, made manifest in somebody's speech. The popularity of communicative approach in Italy triggered a certain decrease in people's linguistic mindfulness. Currently, due to incorporation of various tasks building metalinguistic competence into textbooks, grammar can regain its status of one of the most important aspects of foreign language learning and thus the knowledge of the language structure can be reintegrated into the process of communication.

The following factors determine the necessity for the inclusion of such tasks:

1. Self-check of student's own speech patterns' conformity to the authentic language-in-use chunks they come across are a solid foundation for efficient studying;

2. Linguistic reflection can not be reduced only to grammatical analysis;

3. Linguistic competence includes awareness not only of the structural elements of the language and the rules regulating their coherence, but also of certain cultural and emotive aspects;

4. Communicative function of the language presupposes speaker's skill of reflection upon its structure and use,

as well as being able to explain how it works.

Metalinguistic reflection is activated by certain actions and undergoes several stages:

- a) noticing textual phenomena and patterns of use in the textbook;
- b) comparing and contrasting;
- c) manipulation;
- d) formulation of hypotheses;
- e) verification of hypotheses (Ferrari, 2014).

Assisted by textbook and teacher's guidelines, students (working individually, in pairs or in groups) discover mechanisms underlying the language, spanning its morphosyntactic, graphemic, phonological, lexical, textual or communicative levels. Cognitive style lying at the foundation of reflection, is usually inductive, since it draws general conclusion from a given evidence through analogy.

A good example of a textbook meeting all the standards and clearly demonstrating the link between building grammar skills and metalinguistic reflection is *Domani*. *Domani* is a coursebook of the Italian language placing a strong emphasis on culture specificity. The course is based on an integrated approach implying multi-sensorial involvement of students. Thus, students are given an opportunity to wholly immerse into the atmosphere of interaction and cooperation.

Among the textbook's tasks focusing on building metalinguistic skills, we might single out the following:

- Gap fills based on finding similarities / differences. There are no exercises based on precise criteria;
- linguistic puzzles;
- complete-the-telephone-conversation gap fills;
- paraphrasing exercises;
- comparison / contrasting ("match the..." tasks);
- "Chase the mistakes" exercise (correcting factual, word-use, syntactic and stylistic mistakes);

- comparative grammar (tasks based on comparing and contrasting your first and second language. For example, students are requested to answer such questions as: “Are there any irregular verbs in your first language?”, or “How are your adjectives used in terms of their position in the sentence?” etc.;

- gap fill in verses;

- the “What have I learned?” section.

The textbook’s appendix contains a grammar reference section, which is definitive for verifying hypotheses formulated by students while doing exercises. Students are constantly encouraged to practice term extrapolation and text manipulation, and those are priority skills for formulating grammar rules. In the Teacher’s book, the authors underline the central role of “ways of reflection” and state that any linguistic analysis – be it grammatical, stylistic, lexical or conversational, - is a research method that keeps pushing students to discovering rules underlying the texts. Without the texts, however, those rules will remain to be merely a theory.

Besides the tasks focused on building metalinguistic skills, contemporary Italian language textbooks comprise another unique feature, namely linguistic input. It is a teacher’s speech in the foreign language addressed to students and enabling him to bring his own speech-generating patterns more in tune with the conventional usage (Maltseva, 2016). From the textbooks’ own perspective, input helps teacher to draw students’ attention to extralinguistic elements relevant to the textbook’s subject matter. It also enables them to apply a spiral approach, due to which students keep getting back to the rules they learned, using them in various contexts. The following types of linguistic input, pertaining to foreign language learning, are commonly singled out:

1. Teacher’s oral speech inside / outside the classroom;
2. Groupmates’ speech;
3. Textbooks used in the classroom.

This case is an example of a bilateral communication: while the teacher supervises all the linguistic aspects and controls the communication in the classroom, the students go on processing the language chunk represented in the teacher’s speech. Teacher, in their choice of communicative strategies and tactics for the provision of linguistic input, shall take into account the specifics of perceptive modality and data processing / storage (Matthiae, 2012).

Linguistic input varies depending on the following factors:

1) Type of speakers

a) the teacher;

б) the students

в) native speakers

2. Type of text

a) pragmatic or transactional (e.g. introducing a friend, exchanging greetings);

б) exemplifying (description, explanation, illustration of facts or opinions)

в) regulatory (instructions);

2. Types of utterances that are most frequently used in day-to-day communication:

a) questions

б) directives

в) explanations

The main communicative purpose of teaching resources is building skills of interaction in a foreign language (Mezzadri, 2017a). To this end, a set of communication strategies is used, and those are commonly divided into main ones (cognitive) and auxiliary ones (pragmatic) (Malah, 2015). For pedagogical discourse cognitive strategies are the main ones as they are related to such elements of resource materials as headlines, text segmentation, sets of questions and answers etc. In this case, strategy of teacher-student interaction is defined as a set of principles of an interlocutor's speech behavior in a classroom setting directed at achievement of communicative objectives and goals of communication / education. Every strategy includes a variety of speech tactics, each of them employs its own means of verbalization (Gerasimova, 2018). In Italian textbooks, the most frequently used are informing, explanatory, controlling and manipulative / consolidating strategies. Teacher's books packaged into Italian language textbooks sets (*Nuovo Progetto*, *Nuovo Espresso*, *Nuovo Contatto*) give a unit-by-unit (lezioni) summary of reference information. Prefatory notes to the textbook enable the author to maintain the focus on the subject matter, due to the prospective mode they are written in.

Discussions

Among the skills of key importance for a teacher we, of course, must mention the ability to use authentic materials in the classroom and also evaluate their current value. To this end, they need to be able to critically assess a given textbook in terms of how it suits the needs of their audience, the teacher needs to be equipped with not only didactic and methodological skills, but also linguistic competences. Also, they should consider the peculiarities of the language taught. Now, linguists and language teaching experts are facing the need for creating concepts of the analysis of Italian language student's and teacher's books in full accord with the current linguistic science. In our research, we have characterized the main linguistic criteria of selection of teaching resources and described phenomena of input and reflection represented therein. Every textbook gives a vast array of materials for discourse research.

Conclusion

At the outcome of the research, we obtained the material, whose analysis led us to the conclusion that recently published teaching resources in the Italian language present a significant interest to the linguistic science. The wide range of communicative strategies and tactics employed thereby, the diversity of authentic texts they feature, along with the presence of the phenomena of metalinguistic reflection and linguistic input – all these are definitive foundation for broadening the horizons of pedagogical discourse and methodology of foreign language teaching. Finally, textbooks in themselves may be regarded as a specific type of a discourse.

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