

Discourse markers in the curricularization of ‘academic language’. A mixed methods analysis of *tipo* and *praticamente* in Italian secondary schools

*Abstract*⁴

Curricularization is the process by which specific elements of natural language are rendered teachable, learnable, and assessable skills for the purposes of schooling. A mixed methods analysis of discourse and texts from ethnographic and corpus linguistic projects illustrates how curricularization occurs by examining the central role of teachers’ metapragmatic commentary in the local definition of so-called ‘academic language’ in Italian secondary schools. To do this, we focus on student language use during the *interrogazione* ‘oral exam’, and other oral displays, and how the appropriateness of this language is explicitly or implicitly evaluated by teachers. Specifically, we examine the use and uptake of discourse markers *tipo* ‘like’ and *praticamente* ‘practically, basically’, as a means of understanding how local forms of ‘academic language’ come to be enregistered – that is, linked to the social identity of the successful student – and then curricularized – that is, taught as discrete skills to be mastered.

1. *Introduction*

Academic genres such as the *tema* ‘essay’, and the *interrogazione* ‘oral exam’, in Italian secondary schools, and their associated registers and performative rituals, are tightly defined by community expectations, by tradition, and by curricular standards. While written academic texts and their language have been examined in depth, via an *a posteriori* view and more quantitative methods (e.g., T2K-SWAL Corpus, Biber 2006; for Italian see Spina 2010), the oral exam genre has not yet been exhaustively described (but see Sposetti 2008 for one exception). The present mixed-methods analysis draws on multimodal and metapragmatic frameworks to explore the role of discourse markers in *interrogazioni* in the local enregisterment and curricularization of ‘academic language’⁵ in Italian secondary schools.

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⁵ Regarding the possible ambiguity of the term *accademico* in the Italian scholarly tradition on the topic, we refer to the discussion in Mastrantonio (2021: 351), who highlights how the term *accademico* has been used to refer to the variety of language employed in university settings and by the academic community. Only recently (D’Aguanno 2019), the adjective *accademico* has acquired a meaning closer

The linguistic anthropological concept of enregisterment (Agha 2003) affords an analytical perspective on register formation as an ongoing process whereby individuals and institutions define, create, or reinforce indexical links between ways of speaking and social identities. In schools, the enregisterment of ‘academic language’ seems to operate in lockstep with its *curricularization* (Valdés 2015), whereby naturally acquired language is rendered – via curricular intervention – a skill linked to institutional standards, student ability levels, assessment, and other measurements of learning outcomes and student performance.

Since the concept of ‘academic language’ is far from unified (Thompson & Watkins 2021; Valdés 2004) and since the teaching of ‘academic language’ has been extensively debated (Jensen & Thompson 2020) and critiqued (e.g., Flores & Rosa 2015), we do not approach it as a self-contained register (hence the single quotation marks here and elsewhere). Instead, we examine how local and often idiosyncratic models of ‘academic language’ emerge via students’ use of discourse markers (henceforth DMs) and teachers’ metapragmatic commentary about them in oral displays. Throughout this analysis, we also consider how written norms and models find their way into orality through students’ socialization to use (or not use) specific DMs in both written and oral academic displays of knowledge, thereby providing a complement to existing research on orality in writing (e.g., Prada 2016; Roggia 2010). This analysis addresses three questions:

1. Which DMs used in *interrogazioni* key specific modality(ies)?
2. Which DMs are considered inappropriate in the context of *interrogazioni*, and how does this relate to the modalities they are keying?
3. How does metapragmatic commentary during *interrogazioni* contribute to the local enregisterment and curricularization of ‘academic language’?

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1 The role of DMs in (academic) discourse

Since Berretta’s (1984) article about *connettivi testuali* in expository monologues, abundant discussion has occurred about the definition and internal systematization of DMs (cf. Bazzanella 2006) and the functions they perform. Undoubtedly, all DMs perform a procedural function, instructing the interlocutor as to how a given utterance should be interpreted with respect to the linguistic or extralinguistic context (Sansò 2020); some of them also display an indexical function which links the user of specific DMs to registers, social characteristics, and modalities (Ghezzi 2018; Fiorentini 2020). The fact that DMs are highly modality- and register-sensitive (Voghera 2019) is particularly relevant when analyzing their intertextual and resemiotized use in schools, where language functions along with a constellation of other factors as a third-level indexical (Silverstein 2003) of person/student types (e.g. Wortham 2004).

Being aware of this, there have been calls to formally teach students the meaning in context of less frequent ‘academic’ DMs, specifically connectives, “to support [...] the

to the one common in anglophone contexts, namely a synonym of *language of schooling*. We use it here to indicate what is variously referred to in schools as CALP, formal language, *linguaggio dello studio*, as opposed to their counterparts BICS, informal language, *linguaggio della comunicazione*.

use of connectives that indicate an academic voice in their writing” (Crosson & Lesaux 2013: 197; see also Rati 2020 for Italian). Crossley and McNamara have also used automated quantitative methods to show that this strategy seems to help students respond to examiners’ standards, stating that “argumentative essays judged to be of higher quality by expert human raters are more linguistically sophisticated, but at the same time contain fewer cohesive devices” (2011: 185). This also holds true for (causal) connectives in particular: highly trained students use fewer but more sophisticated causal connectives in their essays with respect to students who are novices in the genre (Bienati & Frey forth.).

Raters’ partiality to higher lexical sophistication, concatenated with pedagogical interventions which pointedly teach more ‘academic’ connectives, confirms that there is some shared concept of ‘academic language’ linked to the use of low frequency DMs. However, the cyclical logic of using rater judgements as both the motivation *and* the justification for teaching ‘academic language’ risks reifying and naturalizing it as a gatekeeping device in schools. In other words, while explicitly teaching DMs deemed ‘academic’ may empower students to gain greater access to resources in the short term, it does not problematize why there are linguistic barriers to these resources in the first place. The perception among expert human raters (and, more concretely, teachers) that a stable register of ‘academic language’ *exists* will only perpetuate its use as a tool for exclusion, continuing to put the onus of academic success on students. The gatekeeping functions associated with perceived mastery of ‘academic language’ are in actuality an institutional, ideological, and political issue which belies deep systemic inequity (Thompson 2021).

2.2 The metalinguistic labor of enregistering and curricularizing ‘academic language’

To interrupt this cyclical definition of ‘academic language’, we draw on the concept of enregisterment (Agha 2003). Unlike register, enregisterment describes an ongoing process of semiotic recontextualization between people and institutions, not a static product (Rhodes et al. 2021). In other words, a register is a “cultural model” (Agha 2003: 145) which exists only insofar as it is constantly (re)enregistered via situated interactional, ideological, and sociohistorical factors pertaining to a given population of speakers (*ibidem*: 168), such as teachers and students in (an) educational institution(s). *Metapragmatic commentary* is a key component of the process of enregisterment in that it creates, confirms, or validates indexical connections between ways of speaking and social identities (Rymes 2014). Thus, the use of certain DMs does not alone determine the enregisterment of ‘academic language’: this occurs via the coordinated actions, or *metalinguistic labor*, of the members of an institution as a whole. Carr (2006: 647), speaking from her linguistic anthropological research in a clinical setting, defines metalinguistic labor as “speakers’ explicit claims about what good [...] language is and the activation of those claims in clinical practice”, which can be easily applied to the analysis of language in educational institutions. The metalinguistic labor required to uphold the concept of ‘academic language’ includes innumerable components, so we focus here on explicit and implicit metapragmatic commentary about DMs and about what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate language during

interrogazioni and other oral displays. This metapragmatic commentary and metalinguistic labor then, in turn, enregister local forms of ‘academic language’.

In schools, as mentioned in Section 1, the enregisterment of ‘academic language’ appears to parallel its *curricularization*, whereby some types of language are deemed a skill to be taught, learned, and assessed (Valdés 2015; see also Lewis 2022). That is, the more a way of speaking is academically rewarded, the more it becomes a model for academic success, the discrete components of which are rendered discrete academic skills, such as the teaching of low frequency DMs for academic writing discussed in Section 2.1. Studies such as Crosson and Lesaux (2013) show that DMs are already fairly curricularized in the written mode. The same is not true, however, in the *interrogazione* and other types of oral displays, despite the fact that GISCEL (1975, VII.B⁶) long ago highlighted the need to focus research and pedagogy on the *interrogazione* in particular. In the following sections, we analyze whether and how the language used in classroom discourse is keyed as academic, and if this language overlaps with some of the hallmarks of academic writing.

3. Data collection and methods

Data from audio recordings and fieldnotes from two ethnographic projects were used as a departure point for an analysis of DMs in reference corpora of written and spoken Italian and in corpora of written essays from students. While the corpora provide a large selection of texts and utterances by which to study the context and frequency of use of DMs, the ethnographic data provide a longitudinal and metapragmatic perspective on the use of DMs in the classroom.

3.1 Linguistic ethnographic data

The linguistic ethnographic data come from a year of data collection (2016-2017) in third-year classes at three high schools⁷ in Umbria (Leone-Pizzighella 2022) and from a year of data collection (2022-2023) in second-year classes at two middle schools⁸ in Northeastern Italy (Leone-Pizzighella 2023a, 2023b). Fieldnotes and audiovisual recordings were collected approximately once per week (~6 hours) in each focal class (2-3 total visits per week for +/- 30 weeks for each project). Fieldnotes were then coded qualitatively to identify salient themes and were then used as a basis for the analysis of audio and video files, as well as their transcription and further examination via classroom dis-

⁶ “La pedagogia tradizionale bada soltanto alla produzione scritta, non cura le capacità di produzione orale. Questa è messa a prova nel momento isolato e drammatico dell’ «interrogazione», quando l’attenzione di chi parla e di chi ha domandato e ascolta è, nel migliore dei casi, concentrata sui contenuti dalla risposta e, nei casi peggiori, sulle astuzie reciproche per mascherare e, rispettivamente, smascherare quel che non si sa. La capacità di organizzare un discorso orale meditato o estemporaneo cade fuori dell’orizzonte abituale della pedagogia linguistica tradizionale...”

⁷ We use middle school to refer to lower secondary school (ISCED 2 / grades 6-8 / ages ~11-14) and high school to refer to upper secondary school (ISCED 3 / grades 9-13 / ages ~14-19).

⁸ Project “STEMCo” (Stances Toward Education in Multilingual Contexts), H2020-MSC-IF no. 101030581.

course analysis (Rymes 2016) in the tradition of interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and educational linguistics (Hornberger 2001).

3.2 Corpus data

We chose the CORIS corpus (Rossini Favretti et al. 2002) and the KIParla corpus (Mauri et al. 2019) as reference corpora representing written and spoken Italian registers respectively. In addition to the reference corpora, we used corpora containing student writing collected in Italian middle (LEONIDE, Glaznieks et al. 2022) and high schools (ITACA, <https://itaca.eurac.edu/>) in the multilingual province of Bolzano/Bozen from 2015 to 2022.

3.3 Methods

Considering linguistic ethnographic and corpus data in an iterative and mutually informing manner enhances our overall understanding and interpretation of complex social systems. Starting from the ethnographic data about students' use and teachers' uptake of specific DMs in *interrogazioni*, we establish via the use of register scores which of these DMs carry a keying function for specific registers of written or spoken language. This methodology (Durrant & Brenchley 2019; Durrant & Durrant 2022) determines how characteristic a certain lemma is for a given target register based on relative frequencies of that lemma in different registers (here operationalized as subcorpora of our reference corpora) in which it appears. We then used network graphs to illustrate the DMs and strength of association with particular registers and modalities using the register scores provided and filtering out DM-register relations that lay under a threshold register score of 0.09 (indicating thus that the DM is not particularly specific to a given register). We complemented the analysis of salient DMs in ethnographic data by looking at students' use of one specific DM, *tipo*, in their writing from middle to high school. This was done by using normalised frequencies per million words, observing how DMs marked as inappropriate during *interrogazioni* are used in student's writing over time.

4. Analysis and results

In this section we first present findings about how the written modality is taken up as a model for oral performances of 'academic language'. We then focus on two specific DMs typical of the oral modality, *praticamente* and *tipo*, to exemplify the metalinguistic labor which appears to contribute to the enregisterment and curricularization of spoken 'academic language' (especially in its negative definition of what is not spoken 'academic language') across several Italian secondary schools.

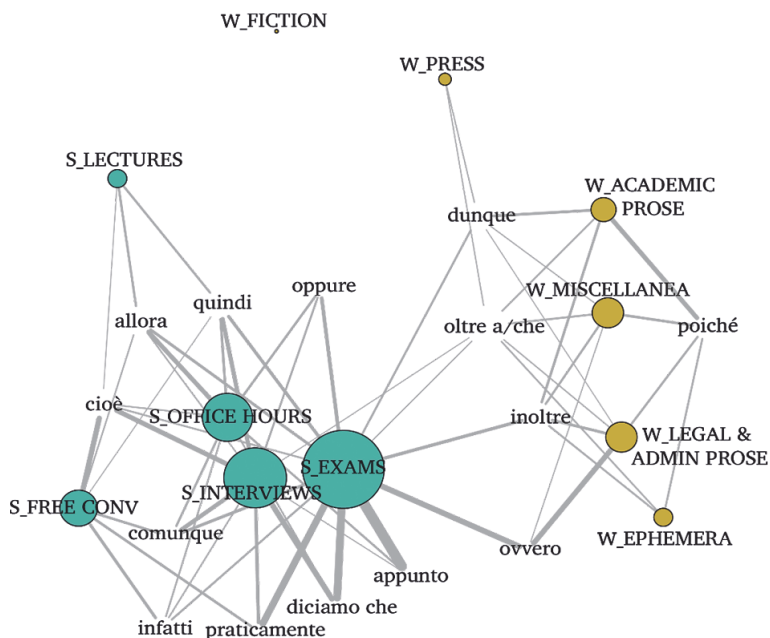
4.1 The *interrogazione* as a genre between the written and the oral

The *interrogazione*, particularly at high school⁹, was immediately identifiable in both ethnographic projects as a distinct genre which required a shift in formality charac-

⁹ Especially in the classical lyceum.

terized by DMs not often used and/or used in a different way in peer-peer speech. A review of recordings and notes about four *interrogazioni* from a high school show that the most common DM¹⁰ was intrasentential *appunto*, followed by *diciamo che*, followed in almost equal measure by intrasentential *infatti* and *allora*, but also including a variety of other DMs which are typically reserved for the written modality, such as *poiché*, *dunque*, *ovvero*, *inoltre* and *oltre a/che* as well as other DMs more typical of the spoken modality including *oppure*, *praticamente*, *cioè*, *quindi*, *comunque*. A quantitative evaluation of the typicality of the mentioned DMs across written (in yellow in Figure 1) and spoken (in blue in Figure 1) registers in reference corpora shows that DMs typically used in the written registers are also fairly strongly associated with oral exams performed by university students (but not with other formal oral displays; e.g., lectures), suggesting that students are socialized over time to use more sophisticated lexical items alongside features typical of the oral mode, and that that (some) standards for writing may be transposed onto the *interrogazione*.

Figure 1 – A network representation of the degree of typicality of selected DMs across genres



Beyond the overlaps shown above, the conceptual closeness between the *interrogazione* and the written modality was highlighted on several occasions by teachers' metapragmatic commentary on students' oral displays. In middle school Biology in Veneto, after the teacher needed to heavily scaffold one student's *interrogazione*, she instructed the class, "*Dovete fare un discorso che sta in piedi da solo*" "You need to make a speech that

¹⁰ Two of these *interrogazioni* were not recorded due to privacy reasons, so no specific count of tokens is provided here.

stands on its own two feet' (Fieldnotes 6 February 2023), implying that the *interrogazione* should not rely on dialogue and should instead follow the logic of a standalone text. On other occasions, in Literature class in Veneto, the teacher offered both a negative and a positive example of *interrogazione*-appropriate language to her students. Once, when a student finished an *interrogazione* in which he confidently and thoroughly answered all the questions asked of him, the teacher told him, "Allora Giuseppe¹¹, la sostanza mi va bene, ma il linguaggio no. [...] 'Prendono quella roba là, 'quella cosa'; quando si fa un'interrogazione non vanno bene," 'Alright Giuseppe, the substance is acceptable for me, but the language is not. ... 'They take that stuff there, 'that thing;' when you do an *interrogazione* [those words] are not acceptable' (Fieldnotes 3 November 2022). Conversely, on another occasion when a student used discipline-specific language and the *passato remoto* in response to the teacher's question, the teacher almost ecstatically responded, "Ti darei 10 se mi scrivessi così!" 'I would give you a 10 if you wrote like this!' (Fieldnotes 6 February 2023), linking the language used in the students' oral display to a positive evaluation in the written domain. Here we see teachers explicitly instructing students to use precise, decontextualizable language when doing *interrogazioni*, much like the language that is used in monologic writing such as *temi*.

4.2 Praticamente

During a review session in Geography at a middle school in South Tyrol, a student began her response to a known-answer question (Mehan 1985) with *praticamente*. The teacher immediately stopped her and said, "*Praticamente non lo diciamo perché è un avverbio inutile. Non vuol dire niente*" 'We don't say *praticamente* because it's a useless adverb. It doesn't mean anything' and then invited her to continue with her response (Fieldnotes 29 March 2023). The same DM was also observed to be policed at the high school in Umbria, as observed during a round-robin review session in Italian literature class as shown in transcript (1)¹² (Audio recording, 5 May 2017):

(1) Policing *praticamente*¹³

- 1 Stu: si incrociano sia gli elementi comunque del passato,
 2 >che gli elementi::< del futuro.
 3 Prof: mm.
 4 Stu: e::: praticamente utilizza uno schema metrico=
 5 Prof: =<praticamente>? ((frowning))
 6 Stu: eh. hh.(1.0) in pratica:: utilizza uno schema metrico:::
 7 molto rigido↑. e infatti Leopardi porre alla fine questa::
 8 questa rigidità inventando appunto uno:: (.) >una canzone
 9 libera<.
 10 Prof: mm. ((looks down at her book))
 11 Stu: ((dabbing)) °ciccia:::°

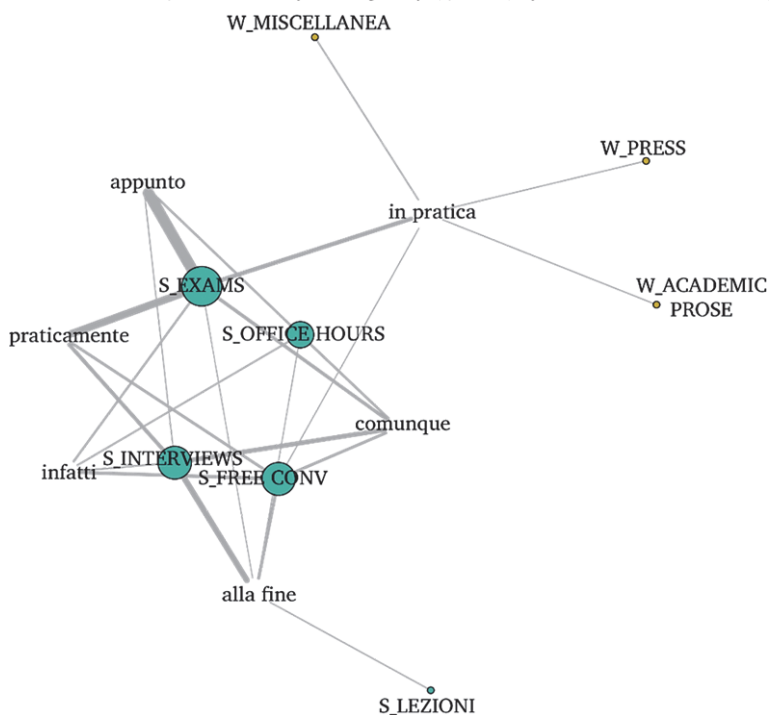
¹¹ All names are pseudonyms.

¹² An analysis of other aspects of this extract, and an English translation of it, can be found in Leone-Pizzighella 2022, p. 140.

¹³ Transcriptions of classroom discourse follow the conventions in Jefferson (1984).

The student's turn is rich in DMs (*comunque, praticamente, in pratica, infatti, alla fine, appunto*) which are commonly used in the oral modality, but only her *praticamente* (line 4) is repeated by the teacher in a disapproving tone (line 5), which cues the student to rephrase her contribution, after some trepidation, to *in pratica* (line 6) which is tacitly deemed acceptable by the teacher who allows the turn to continue. *In pratica*, which is here functionally identical to *praticamente*, seems to be preferred as more appropriate. In fact, upon quantitative inspection, *in pratica* is the only DM among the ones used in the interaction that is connected to written registers, as is shown by the DM network in Figure 2. While other DMs could also have been policed as oral features, only *praticamente* is flagged as inappropriate.

Figure 2 – A network representation of the degree of typicality of DMs used in (1) across genres.

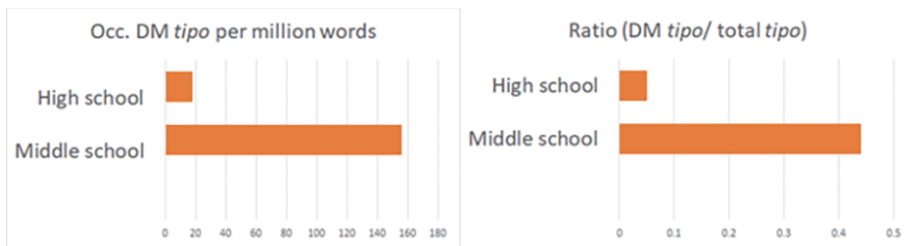


4.3 Tipo

During a review session in middle school Literature class in South Tyrol, the subject teacher called on a student to recount the topic that they had studied in the previous lesson. When his response began with *tipo*, the support teacher – seated at the back of the classroom – called out, “TIPO NO”. Later in the lesson, during an enthusiastic discussion led by the subject teacher, the students shifted into a more colloquial register, using *tipo* several times. The support teacher then wrote *TIPO* on the blackboard and crossed it out with a big X, commenting, “*Tipo non si può sentire*” lit. ‘*Tipo* is unheardable’, i.e., ‘We don’t say *tipo*’ (Fieldnotes 28 September 2022).

The DM *tipo* is also well attested in the corpora analyzed, with a total of 15 occurrences when it functions (broadly) as an exemplification marker¹⁴ and 171 occurrences across all syntactic categories and functions. The distribution of the occurrences of *tipo* functioning as a DM, however, is not even. Figure 3 shows that the highest rate of occurrences (normalized per million words) is found in the middle school texts. A decrease in occurrences in the high school texts goes hand in hand with a decrease of the ratio between *tipo* used as a DM and *tipo* pertaining to other syntactic categories. This result speaks for acquired register awareness on the part of the students, who become aware that the DM *tipo* indexes at least a certain register, if not also a certain maturity level, and thus seem to avoid it when aiming for a more formal register.

Figure 3 – Frequency per million words of the DM *tipo* & ratio of use of the DM *tipo* on the total occurrences of *tipo* in Italian middle and high school students' temi.



5. Discussion

Returning to the questions posed in Section 1, the analysis of the data above illustrates that:

1. DMs used in *interrogazioni* index a mix of oral and written modalities,
2. DMs *tipo* and *praticamente* are considered, at least by some teachers, inappropriate for oral display, and
3. metapragmatic commentary about DMs in *interrogazioni* may account for the decreased use of specific DMs in both the oral and written modality over time.

Taken together, these phenomena are explained, at least in part, by the ways that students at middle and high schools are socialized to participate in oral displays of academic knowledge. In middle schools, where students are actively undergoing *scolarizzazione* (lit. scholarization) and where *interrogazioni* are a new type of assessment for many students, oral displays co-occur more frequently with explicit metapragmatic commentary about how (not) to perform the genre. The overlap between the *interrogazione* (as seen in the ethnographic data) and the *tema* (as seen in the corpus data) is made evident by teachers' metapragmatic commentary in the

¹⁴ The annotations of the functions of *tipo* have been done manually, following Voghera (2014).

moment, explicitly linking students' language use during oral displays to the type of language used in the written mode (Section 4.1). We also see these standards become curricularized in high school. The high school in Umbria used a rubric for students' self-evaluation of their own *interrogazioni* which included 'knowledge of the subject,' 'oral display (use of language, both Italian and subject-specific),' and 'organization, or the ability to build an argument' (Fieldnotes October 21 2016¹⁵), which are the same evaluative criteria typically applied to *temi* of the type collected in the corpora cited above (MIUR 2018). The overlap in the evaluation criteria of these two genres also suggests that *interrogazioni* and other types of evaluative oral displays are analytically comparable to *temi*.

Given the overlap between the standards of the written mode and the *interrogazione*, it is possible that prescriptive rules expressed in classroom discourse contribute to the disappearance of certain DMs like *tipo* not only from spoken discourse but also from written texts as students move from middle to high school. Notably, while there was a specific prohibition of *tipo* at the middle school, this DM occurred very rarely during the *interrogazioni* observed at the high school and did not emerge as a salient characteristic of this genre in that context. As seen in Section 4.3, the same also appears to occur in student writing during the transition from middle to high school. Indeed, when one high school student was presented with a researcher's observations about the frequency of specific DMs in *interrogazioni*, she readily listed off which DMs were most commonly used by her peers for this type of oral display, namely, "*appunto, comunque, inoltre... c'è un sacco di parole così!*" 'indeed, however, furthermore... there are tons of words like that!' (Fieldnotes 21 October 2016). This students' preliminary analysis, taken with the data presented herein, strongly suggest that implicit socialization – and the development of register awareness – continue over time, despite a reduction in teachers' overt metapragmatic commentary as students' expertise in the genre grows (see Section 4.2).

The policing of particular DMs and the acceptance of others provides very clear ideological commentary about what 'academic language' does and does not consist of, suggesting that teachers orient to a specific set of linguistic features as being desirable, appropriate, and/or academic, but that the socialization to use these features in the oral mode mostly occurs via examples of what *not* to do. This is consistent with Lippi-Green's (1994) unicorn metaphor with which she describes the concept of 'standard language': everyone has an idea of what it looks like, but everyone's ideas are slightly different because, in fact, no such entity exists. This hints that there are several local school norms for 'academic language' which are not entirely stable or coherent in themselves, in that they accommodate the idiosyncrasies of a small group of teachers, or even a single teacher (see Section 4.3), to decide what is appropriate in a specific moment of interaction. Teachers' uptake of particular DMs *keys discourse as 'academic' or 'non-academic'* in the context of Italian secondary education, and it is precisely this metapragmatic commentary about student discourse that comprises the metalinguistic labor around maintaining 'academic language' as a construct.

¹⁵ Translated from the original Italian.

6. Implications for Research with Students and Practitioners

When teachers at middle schools were presented with textual and audiovisual examples of classroom discourse from their own and their colleagues' classrooms, some of them reconsidered their definitions of 'academic' and 'non-academic' language, how they personally contribute to their enregisterment and curricularization, and what role these concepts play across the many subjects they teach. A lively discussion emerged among teachers in South Tyrol, where the group was divided on the merits and drawbacks of maintaining high standards for students' oral expression: some maintained that this was a fundamental aspect of scholarization, while others found it restrictive, exclusionary, and antiquated. One teacher called to mind Bunch's (2014; Bunch & Martin 2021) work on the "language of display" and the "language of ideas" when she suggested that an insistence on using 'academic language' might actually obfuscate the work that teachers are supposed to do with students, suggesting that the role of informal language might be comparable to that of a rough draft in terms of its purpose and utility, saying "*Il linguaggio informale è un po' come parlare in brutta copia*" 'Informal language is kind of like talking in a rough draft' (1 February 2023). At another teacher workshop in Veneto, one support teacher reflected on her own use of so-called 'academic language' and, laughing, realized that she doesn't actually use it in her work with students, stating, "*A pensarci bene, il linguaggio formale... non lo uso!*" 'Thinking about it carefully, formal language...I don't use it!' (Audio recording, 6 December 2022). It is fundamental to interrogate and unpack the taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie much of the project of teaching and learning, especially when the curriculum leans on commonsense notions which go relatively unchecked. By delving into the details of these social processes, we are able to better understand where potential interventions are possible and what can make such interventions have the desired impact on e.g., inclusive education.

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