

POLITENESS AND IDEOLOGICAL MANIPULATION: ITALIAN *LEI* DURING FASCISM

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Italian address system features a series of nominal forms and a tripartite pronominal system with *tu* 'you.SG', *lei* 'she.SG' and *voi* 'you.PL'. While *tu* and *voi* are inherited from Latin, *lei* is the result of ana-phoric agreement to several nominal allocutive forms such as *Vostra Signoria* 'Your Lordship'. These phrases have abstract female names as head nouns and trigger agree-ment with the third person, which gives the pronoun of reverence *ella/lei*. Although its grammatical origin is rather straightforward, from the 16th century conduct manuals (and other sources) spread the unsubstantiated theory that the *lei* form was attributable to Spanish influence. Fascism considers the *lei* form an enemy to its ideals (pure race, pure language, masculinity) and therefore decides to fight *lei* in its language policy. The attempt to abolish the use of *lei* has no lasting success, as demonstrated by original materials (administrative documents, newspapers and schoolbooks) and metalinguistic papers discussed in this study. This article shows how manipulating politeness rules can also be part of a rhetoric of power, and how address systems can be shaped and modified according to ideological perspectives and political needs.