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## **Making Democracy Speak: Linguistic Foundations of Social Capital**

In linguistics, northern Italy is widely known for the fact that the dialects spoken in this area, including all regions north of the Appennines as well as part of Tuscany, require overt subject clitics in declarative sentences. Clitics are weak pronominals (similar to the French pronouns *je*, *tu*, *il/elle*, etc.) that have to be put in front of the verb regardless of the presence or absence of lexical subjects. Thus, agents taking a role in social or technical relationships receive explicit mention in every well-formed sentence. By contrast, dialects spoken in the South (including standard Italian) license no subject pronouns

in declarative sentences unless the subject is given special emphasis. The presence of subject clitics in northern Italian dialects parallels the situation in many European languages, where, unlike the majority of languages worldwide, mandatory subject pronouns have been grammaticized since about the late Middle Ages. Given this particular distribution and timing, and in the light of recent insights in the field of cognitive linguistics, I hypothesize that mandatory subject pronominals reflect and convey modern (Western) concepts of agency, topicality, and transitivity. These, in turn, constitute important conceptual prerequisites for modern norms and habits concerning individual rights and duties,

liberties, responsibilities, etc. which are the cornerstones of all kinds of advanced competitive and cooperative types of behaviour. In the face of these considerations I suggest that grammar represents an important form of social capital. Language structures carry cultural information and play a crucial part in the inter-generational transmission of habits and attitudes. In particular it seems that pronounced individualism and democratic as well as socio-economic performance have been fostered by grammar in all countries where modern European languages prevail. Cross-national comparison lends support to this hypothesis. As for Italy, it is natural to suppose that the observed differences in dialect syntax, notwithstanding other cultural and non-cultural factors, have contributed to the well-known persistence of the North-South-divide in social capital endowments over the centuries.