



SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ITALY AMONG FRENCH-SPEAKING CAMEROONIAN LEARNERS OF ITALIAN: PERCEPTIONS, STEREOTYPES, AND MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract : This article aims to analyze the perceptions and knowledge that Cameroonian learners hold about the "Italy System" across three key dimensions: the Italian language, culture, and people. The central question guiding our analysis can be summarized as follows: How do Cameroonian learners of Italian (considered here as a social group) perceive the Italian language, Italian culture, and Italians themselves? To address this question, we draw on the theory of **Social Representations**, introduced by French sociologist Serge Moscovici (1984), which enables us to map the network of ideas, opinions, and judgments that are deeply rooted in Cameroonian society with regard to Italy.

Using a qualitative approach based on a corpus of textual productions from three distinct groups of informants, our study highlights recurring beliefs and stereotypes that shape learners' understanding of Italian culture. These insights may serve as a valuable foundation for the development of targeted educational programs or, at the very least, provide practical guidance for implementing more culturally responsive teaching strategies.

Index terms: Italy; Cameroon; Social Representations ; Culture

INTRODUCTION

In the field of foreign language teaching, the factors that significantly influence the learning process are commonly grouped into three broad categories: (i) linguistic variables (such as the characteristics of the first and target languages), (ii) environmental variables, and (iii) individual variables (including the learner's age, attitude, aptitude, and so on) (Diadori, 2009). An alternative yet equally valuable classification is proposed by Villarini (2014) and Caon (2022), who introduce a meaningful distinction between *internal factors*¹ and *external factors*².

However, there is another factor — arguably both internal and external— that may have been overlooked or, at the very least, relegated to the background, despite its significant impact on the learner as a *social actor* (CEFR). This factor is the learners **Social Representations** (hereafter referred to as **SRs**) of the language and culture they are engaging with³.

¹ According to Villarini (2014: 71-78), *internal factors* include age, language aptitude, motivation, cognitive styles, and affective factors. Caon (2022: 15-23) offers a slightly broader classification, identifying internal factors such as motivation, personality, age, language aptitude, types of intelligence, cognitive and learning styles, as well as learning strategies.

² With regard to *external factors*, Villarini (2014: 78-83) highlights social factors (both within and outside the classroom environment) as well as linguistic input. Caon (2022: 23-25), for his part, expands this list to include linguistic input, interaction, teaching style, and the influence of family and broader social conditioning.

³ It is worth recalling that the first analyses of representations of Italy among Cameroonian learners can be attributed to Akieudji (2010). In his study, the author explores how students at the University of Dschang perceive Italy, situating this perception within the broader context of the introduction of Italian language instruction in Cameroon. He traces enrollment trends from 1995 to 2009, and provides an overview of the curricula, teaching materials, and methodologies in use. Based on surveys conducted during the 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 academic years, he identifies the key features of the image of Italy conveyed within the educational setting. In a similar vein, Mazoua (2015) offers a complementary perspective by retracing the history of the introduction of Italian in Cameroon and analyzing the factors that contributed to its sustained presence. She then situates the Italian language within the Cameroonian sociolinguistic landscape, shedding light on the pedagogical challenges associated with its instruction. The study concludes with an analysis of the dynamics of diplomatic cooperation between Italy and Cameroon.

Despite its importance, the attempt to reconstruct the network of beliefs circulating among learners about the target language and by extension, the people and culture associated with it, remains relatively rare. Whether in instructional planning, textbook design, or studies of learner characteristics, little attention has been paid to the ways in which these **SRs** shape the learning experience.

Yet, representations of the *other* play a crucial role in the construction of collective identity. They consist of a set of ideas, opinions, values, and practices shared within a given community concerning a particular social object, be it a concept, a person, a phenomenon, or even a tangible object (Moscovici, 1961; Doise, 1985; Farr, 1991).

Before analyzing the **SRs** associated with the Italian language, people and culture triad among Cameroonian learners, we will first provide a more detailed overview of the concept of **SRs**. We will then outline the reasons for the relevance of this topic, present the methodological framework adopted for data collection, and finally offer an analytical reading of the results, followed by practical considerations for the teaching of Italian as a foreign language.

1. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The notion of **SRs** was introduced by French sociologist Serge Moscovici (1961), drawing inspiration from Émile Durkheim's earlier concepts of *collective representations* and *collective consciousness* (Durkheim, 1893). Durkheim used the term *collective consciousness* to describe the shared cognitive content (beliefs, attitudes⁴, and values) that underpin group cohesion and shape the identity of a social collective.

Moscovici extended this line of thought by defining **SRs** as a cognitive system composed of the thoughts, opinions, knowledge, and judgments that individuals or communities hold about a specific object, whether a person, concept, or phenomenon. These representations enable individuals to interpret, make sense of, and familiarize themselves with reality. **SRs** thus possess a dual nature: both individual and social. They serve as cognitive mechanisms through which groups explore, interpret, and exert control over their environment. Although this process primarily unfolds at the collective level, it also significantly influences individual actions, as members of the same society share knowledge and beliefs that can be vital for group cohesion and survival. From this framework, we can identify the two main functions of **SRs**, as formalized by Jodelet (1997): **objectification** and **anchoring**.

Objectification refers to the process by which individuals translate complex or abstract ideas into concrete images or familiar concepts, making them cognitively accessible. *Anchoring*, which typically follows objectification, involves integrating these newly formed representations into one's existing worldview, thereby providing a sense of stability, continuity, and familiarity.

It is important to note that, although **SRs** are primarily social in nature, they also possess an individual dimension. While a given society may share a common body of knowledge and beliefs, this does not negate the uniqueness of each individual's life experience and interpretive lens. **SRs** attain collective "stability" because they are circulated, shared, and repeated to the point that they become embedded as *social knowledge*.

2. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE THOUGHT

The relevance of this topic lies in the well-established notion that the knowledge and/or opinions a learner develops over the course of their linguistic and life experience regarding the target culture can play a decisive role in the language acquisition process. These representations may serve as powerful motivational factors or, conversely, act as significant obstacles to learning. In both cases, they offer valuable insights for targeted pedagogical intervention; either by reinforcing perceptions that support learning or by addressing and reshaping misconceptions that may hinder progress.

The underlying dynamic can be summarized as follows: the behaviors learners adopt to improve their language skills are often shaped by their attitudes (whether favorable or unfavorable) toward the people, culture, and country associated with the language they are studying. These attitudes, in turn, are influenced by the learner's prior knowledge and beliefs about that culture. If attitudes guide behavior, and attitudes themselves are rooted in beliefs, then it follows that what learners know or think about the target culture can directly influence their language development. Through the mediating role of attitudes, beliefs affect behavior and can trigger intentional, goal-oriented actions aligned with the learner's personal or academic objectives.

Applied to the context of language learning, this suggests that learners are more likely to succeed, and to experience steady, satisfying progress, when they hold a positive view of the culture they are engaging with. Conversely, those who harbor biases or negative perceptions may encounter psychological or emotional barriers (sometimes unconscious) that disrupt the smooth acquisition of the language, activating what Krashen (1982) refers to as the **affective filter**⁵. Therefore, understanding how Cameroonian learners perceive Italian language and culture becomes particularly valuable. Such insights can inform the design of more effective, culturally responsive teaching strategies in the context of Italian language education in Cameroon.

The study of learners' **SR** is far from being a purely theoretical exercise detached from reality. As psychosociologists consistently emphasize, representations of an object can significantly influence the attitudes of social actors. Positive representations tend to correspond with favorable attitudes, which in turn foster openness and receptiveness toward the target language and culture.

This perspective aligns with an educational approach that seeks to "stand alongside the student as a developing individual in order to understand, as fully as possible, the nature and dynamics of educational processes, particularly those related to learning (Porcelli, 2013). In this sense, analyzing **SRs** is not only relevant but essential to creating more learner-centered, culturally responsive language teaching practices.

⁴ In social psychology, *attitude* is defined as "a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which they are related" (Allport, 1935, p. 8).

⁵ The **affective filter** is a concept developed by linguist Stephen Krashen (1981/1982) as part of his theory of second language acquisition. It refers to a psychological barrier that can either hinder or facilitate language learning by influencing how much linguistic input a learner is able to process and internalize. According to this theory, the **affective filter** acts as a mental mechanism that regulates access to comprehensible input: when the filter is "high," due to negative emotional states, it obstructs input and impedes learning; when the filter is "low," it permits more effective acquisition by allowing input to be processed with fewer emotional or psychological barriers. The primary factors influencing the affective filter are **anxiety**, **motivation**, and **self-confidence**. High anxiety or low self-esteem can raise the filter, limiting input intake, while high motivation and strong self-confidence help lower the filter, creating optimal conditions for language acquisition.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

From a methodological standpoint, studying **SRs** presents particular challenges due to two key factors:

- i. The information sought is primarily mental and often operates at a subconscious level, making it difficult to access directly.
- ii. Such information is highly susceptible to distortion, whether intentional or unconscious.

To illustrate, consider a researcher conducting direct interviews with informants about their experiences or thoughts. This approach is inherently challenging not only because interviewees may struggle to articulate or frame what they truly know or feel, but also because, in an effort to preserve their social image, they might consciously or unconsciously provide inaccurate or distorted responses.

Given these complexities, our study employed an indirect method designed to collect the desired information without explicitly revealing the research objective. In other words, we aimed to elicit essential insights while minimizing the informants' awareness of the specific focus of our inquiry. Accordingly, we chose as our investigative method a written task in which participants were invited to express the reasons behind their interest in engaging with the Italian cultural universe.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

For the fieldwork, we chose to collect data through the production of written texts. This approach is grounded in the psychoanalytic view of human behavior as the outcome of both conscious and, more often, unconscious psychological forces. Consequently, written texts (like any human action) are shaped by an interplay of these conscious and subconscious dynamics, which can be discerned beneath the surface. As Bucci (2024) explains, the words within a text can reveal deep-seated desires, internal conflicts, or unconscious impulses. From this perspective, the text functions as a space where the conscious and unconscious intersect. By analyzing recurring motifs and symbols, researchers can explore the author's hidden motivations and underlying emotions, thereby uncovering deeper layers of meaning.

Textual analysis thus enables the emergence of ideas and feelings that illuminate profound aspects of the author's personality. Although the text is the product of the author's deliberate and conscious thought, it simultaneously carries subtle traces of the subconscious, expressed through lexical choices and patterns that the author may not intend to reveal. These subconscious imprints provide valuable clues for reconstructing the author's underlying mental landscape.

3.2. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

To ensure the representativeness of our research sample, data were collected from three distinct regions of Cameroon: the Littoral, West, and Far North regions, respectively in the cities of Douala, Dschang, and Maroua. Participants were selected from both high schools and universities, as our aim was to observe learners within structured educational settings.

The sample included 180 participants, balanced across the two main centers for Italian language instruction in Cameroon: secondary schools (80 participants) and universities (100 participants). Participants were of both sexes and all were at least 16 years old, thus currently at the second cycle (Upper Secondary); the reason underlying this choice was to focus on learners presumed to have reached a higher level of cognitive maturity. University participants were enrolled in the first, second, or third year of the Bachelor's degree program at the University of Dschang, or in the first or second year at the Higher Teacher's Training College of Maroua.

3.3. RESEARCH CORPUS

Respondents were asked to write a simple text of at least one page in French, explaining their reasons for learning Italian. The choice to have them write in French (their native language) was deliberate, aiming to minimize any potential distortions caused by limited proficiency in Italian. By expressing themselves in their first language, participants were able to communicate more freely and fully, enabling the researcher to gather richer and more nuanced insights into their perceptions of the Italian language, Italy, and Italian people.

3.4. CORPUS ANALYSIS TOOL: T-LAB⁶

To analyze the collected corpus, we employed T-LAB, a software designed for processing large volumes of text and performing various text mining operations. This tool enables us to identify significant components, whether they appear individually or systematically co-occur with other thematic elements.

Among the many functions available in T-LAB, we focused on five key analyses that yielded the most relevant insights:

- **Thematic Analysis:** This initial exploratory step identifies the main thematic units within the corpus. Its purpose is to provide a broad overview of dominant themes, recurring concepts, or topics without delving into detail. This preliminary categorization helps guide the subsequent, more focused phases of analysis.
- **Samson Analysis:** Acting as a phase of semantic refinement, this analysis deepens the understanding of identified themes by clarifying their meaning and nuances. It helps differentiate between superficially similar concepts that carry distinct meanings in context, thus disambiguating and fine-tuning thematic categories.
- **Analysis of Characteristic Lemmas:** This phase identifies the lemmas (basic word forms) that are most representative or distinctive of each theme. By doing so, it breaks down macro-themes into their semantic subunits, enriching the qualitative interpretation by revealing the lexical elements that define each theme. This approach uncovers subtle or implicit concepts embedded in the text.
- **Correspondence Analysis:** This technique examines the relationships among different thematic units by assessing their co-occurrence within texts and the strength of these associations. It is crucial for understanding the corpus's overall thematic structure, highlighting which themes tend to appear together and whether these links are statistically significant or incidental.

⁶ <https://www.tlab.it/?lang=fr>

- **Sequential Analysis:** Unlike correspondence analysis, which focuses on co-presence, sequential analysis explores the order of thematic units and subunits within the text. This phase identifies recurring narrative or discursive patterns where certain themes consistently follow others, revealing the flow and structure of the discourse.

4. SURVEY OUTCOMES

Given the large volume of data in the corpus, we applied relevance criteria to identify the most salient elements. The dominant thematic cores were prioritized not only based on their frequency but also on their alignment with existing social and sociological knowledge specifically, insights derived from previous ethnological studies of Cameroonian society.

4.1. PREVALENT THEMES

The data analysis revealed four primary thematic groups, visually represented by circles sized proportionally to the relevance or frequency of each theme within the informants' discourses (see Figure 1).

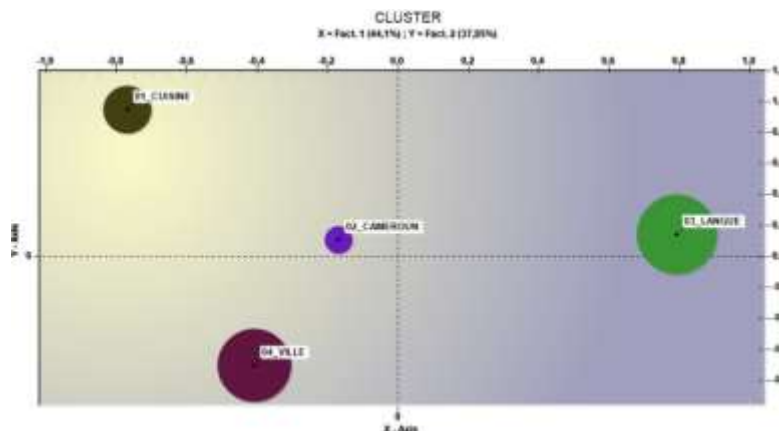


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

This visualization enables us to quickly identify the most significant areas of interest or engagement within the analyzed corpus. The four main thematic groups identified are presented and examined in greater detail below:

- **i. The Italian Language:** The most prominent theme centers on learning the Italian language, explicitly cited by informants as a primary objective. This interest can be understood both instrumentally (as a tool for accessing university education, employment opportunities, or social integration) and symbolically, reflecting a desire to connect deeply with Italian culture in its most authentic form. The emphasis on language also underscores a personal and identity-driven investment in the learning process.
- **ii. The Lemma “City”:** The second thematic group revolves around the word “city,” which rarely appears alone but functions as a semantic anchor linked to specific locations (e.g., “city of Rome,” “city of Milan”). This pattern suggests that informants envision Italy through concrete references to particular urban centers. These cities likely represent ideal destinations for study or future residence, associated not only with academic and professional prospects but also with rich cultural and symbolic significance.
- **iii. Italian Cuisine:** The third group relates to gastronomy (a field with broad international appeal). Italian cuisine is widely regarded as a national cultural emblem, evoking notions of conviviality, tradition, and quality. The frequent appearance of this theme indicates that cuisine serves as a privileged point of contact between Italy and the informants, potentially being the first channel through which many began to explore the country.
- **iv. Cameroon:** Finally, the last group refers to Cameroon, the homeland of all informants. Its emergence as a distinct thematic category highlights a strong sense of identity and cultural rootedness. This theme can be interpreted from two perspectives: firstly, as a point of comparison with Italian cultural, linguistic, and educational realities; secondly, as a foundational reference for constructing a path of mobility, personal growth, and transformation.

To deepen our understanding of the significance and specific content of these themes, we conducted further analyses, including the **Samson method**, **Characteristic Lemma Analysis**, **Correspondence Analysis**, and **Sequence Analysis**. These approaches allowed us to identify key terms associated with each thematic core and to cross-verify the meaningfulness and non-random nature of their recurrence. The results of these analyses are presented in the following graphs.



Figure 6. Words Association (Keyword: Italian language)



Figure 7. Words Associations (Key word: Italian)

4.2. DATA ANALYSIS AND INSIGHTS

We will interpret the software-generated graphs by focusing on key insights derived from the lexical analysis of the corpus. Special attention will be given to the most frequently occurring linguistic elements, meaningful co-occurrences between lemmas, and central nodes within the semantic networks. This lexical data serves as a crucial lens for understanding the distribution and significance of terms throughout the corpus, as well as for uncovering underlying thematic and structural patterns. Our goal is to align the visual representations with the linguistic data, enabling a comprehensive interpretation and informed conclusions based on the analyzed content.

4.2.1. THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE: AN EASY LANGUAGE

Italian is perceived, in most cases, as an easy language to learn. While this result may not be entirely unexpected, it is nonetheless significant and warrants careful analysis, particularly in light of the linguistic background of the study participants. Given that the learners are French-speaking (native or highly proficient in a Romance language), the perceived ease of Italian can be attributed to the structural similarities shared by both languages, rooted in their common Latin origin⁷.

However, this perception of ease⁸ should be approached with a critical mindset. It is largely based on a superficial linguistic resemblance that may indeed facilitate the early stages of acquisition but does not necessarily lead to deep or automatic mastery. The similarity between French and Italian can create a “false sense of security,” leading learners to underestimate the target language’s complexity. This, in turn, may result in negative outcomes such as language interference, the fossilization of errors, and overgeneralizations; for instance, the incorrect use of false cognates (false friends⁹).

4.2.2. KEY FACETS OF ITALIAN CULTURE: FASHION, FOOTBALL, MUSIC, CUISINE, AND LITERATURE

From a cultural perspective, the survey revealed recurring themes in the informants’ discourse that clearly illustrate Cameroonian perceptions of the “Italy System”. The most frequently cited elements include fashion, football, music, cuisine, and less frequently

⁷ From a linguistic perspective, this proximity manifests across several levels: **lexical**, with a high percentage of cognates or words exhibiting clear morphological similarities; **morphological**, through comparable inflectional patterns in verbs and nouns; **syntactic**, with sentence structures that are relatively alike; and even **phonological**, thanks to a greater transparency in grapheme-phoneme correspondence. Given these parallels, it is understandable that Italian appears more accessible to French-speaking learners than languages from other linguistic families, such as German or English.

⁸ It is reasonable to hypothesize that the results would have differed significantly had the study population included English-speaking participants, given the greater morphosyntactic and phonological distance between English and Italian. In such a case, it is likely that Italian would have been perceived as less accessible, and that attitudes toward the language might have been shaped by increased initial difficulty, the adoption of different learning strategies, or a more cautious emotional investment.

⁹ Widely regarded as the emblem of the Italian literary tradition, Dante Alighieri is considered the father of both Italian literature and the Italian language, as well as one of the most influential poets in the history of Western civilization.

literature. It is worth noting that these themes do not appear with equal frequency; some occupy a more prominent place in the collective imagination and carry greater symbolic and cultural weight.

Fashion stands out as one of the most central and recognizable themes. For many informants, Italian haute couture brands such as Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, and Versace represent some of the most visible and admired expressions of Italian creativity and excellence. These brands are not only globally recognized, but also serve as markers of social status, modernity, and sophistication. As such, they help construct an image of Italy that is closely tied to elegance and aesthetic refinement. This also underscores the effectiveness of Italy's cultural industry in exporting symbols that resonate far beyond its borders and significantly shape international perceptions.

Football, another frequently mentioned theme, occupies a space between popular entertainment and expressions of national pride. **Music** and **cuisine** complement this picture, contributing additional layers of familiarity and attraction toward Italian culture. In contrast, **literature** holds a far more marginal position. The fact that Dante Alighieri is the only literary figure referenced suggests a form of recognition that is largely academic or symbolic, rather than rooted in an active or nuanced engagement with Italy's broader literary tradition.

In sum, the image of Italy that emerges from the data is heavily shaped by accessible, emotionally resonant, and visually driven elements (such as fashion and football) rather than by more abstract or intellectual dimensions like literature. This raises thought-provoking questions about how Italy is culturally "consumed" in the Cameroonian context, and more broadly, in African settings.

4.2.3. PERCEPTIONS OF ITALIANS: BETWEEN ADMIRATION AND STEREOTYPE

With regard to Italians, the discourse reveals both positive and negative stereotypes. On the one hand, they are often associated with favorable traits such as physical attractiveness and friendliness; on the other, negative prejudices (particularly related to racism) also emerge. This duality reflects a tension between an idealized image and a more critical perception, pointing to a complex and ambivalent process of identity construction. Such ambivalence may be shaped by a range of cultural and historical influences, as well as by contemporary forces including globalization, migration, and media representations. These dynamics contribute to the formation of a multifaceted image of Italians, one that blends admiration with skepticism, and attraction with critical distance.

4.2.4. REPRESENTATIONS OF ITALY

The responses provided by our informants regarding Italy reveal a level of knowledge that, while factually accurate in many respects, remains limited and largely anchored in stereotypical representations drawn from mass culture. References to Italy's European identity, the role of Rome as its capital, and its status as an industrialized country do appear; but these are largely surface-level observations that only hint at the country's broader cultural complexity. Much of this information appears to stem from early educational exposure or incidental encounters with media, rather than from sustained engagement with Italian culture. This is particularly noteworthy given that the respondents, being learners of the Italian language and culture, one might reasonably expect a deeper familiarity, not only with basic geographic or economic facts, but also with more nuanced aspects such as Italy's historical evolution, regional diversity, artistic and literary traditions, local cuisines, and contemporary societal dynamics.

The superficiality of these cultural representations suggests that, for many learners, their engagement with Italian culture remains at an initial or exploratory stage. This highlights the need for a more deliberate and structured intercultural education, one that goes beyond iconic imagery and clichés, and instead encourages learners to explore the plurality and depth of Italian cultural life in a more critical and meaningful way.

5. CAMEROONIAN LEARNERS OF ITALIAN: NAVIGATING HIGH CULTURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

As observed, Cameroonian learners' representations of Italian culture predominantly center on themes associated with "popular culture," rather than what might be categorized as "high culture." This tendency should not be simplistically attributed to a presumed preference for lighter or more accessible content. Instead, it reflects the consistent impact of Italy's communication and promotional strategies abroad. In fact, major cultural promotion campaigns (both institutional and commercial) tend to highlight elements tied to the "Made in Italy" brand: fashion, gastronomy, design, automobiles, and the art of living. While these aspects are undeniably vital components of Italy's cultural heritage, their emphasis promotes an image of Italy largely framed by an aesthetic and consumerist dimension. This approach facilitates media consumption and quick assimilation but risks oversimplifying and diminishing the richness and complexity of Italy's broader cultural legacy.

It is important to highlight that this partial narrative carries significant educational and formative implications. Cameroonian students exposed to such a selective portrayal of Italian culture tend to develop a limited or stereotyped image of Italy, one that often overlooks academic achievements, literary and scientific contributions, as well as intellectual and philosophical traditions. This narrow perspective not only restricts learners' cultural horizons but may also diminish their motivation to engage with Italian as a language that grants access to rich, complex, and intellectually stimulating content.

Therefore, it is essential to critically examine how Italian culture is presented in international educational and promotional contexts. While emphasizing captivating and easily exportable elements is understandable, a more balanced approach is needed; one that integrates both popular and scholarly dimensions. Such a shift would provide learners with a richer, more nuanced, and inspiring image of Italy, encouraging them to see the Italian language not merely as a medium for entertainment or cultural consumption, but as a gateway to an intellectual tradition of remarkable depth. This is particularly vital in contexts like Cameroon, where educational institutions play a key role in shaping human capital and fostering an informed, conscious society.

It is evident that popular culture forms the core of Cameroonian learners' understanding of Italian culture. The most frequently mentioned references revolve around areas such as pop music, traditional cuisine, and fashion; sectors heavily promoted by media and Italian cultural diplomacy. While these elements are valid and representative aspects of Italian identity, they offer a partial and often superficial portrayal of the country's rich cultural complexity.

The fact that most learners refer almost exclusively to popular aspects suggests that their contact with Italy primarily occurs through easily accessible, consumable content disseminated via informal channels such as social media, television, and commercial cinema. While these media have significant communicative value, they do not necessarily encourage a deep or critical understanding of Italian culture. Even the occasional references to high culture confirm this limitation: when names or concepts from Italy's intellectual heritage arise, they tend to focus narrowly on iconic figures like Dante Alighieri. However, such references, while

prestigious, often appear isolated and decontextualized, cited more as symbolic emblems than as points of genuine engagement with Italy's rich literary and philosophical traditions.

This narrow scope of cultural references risks reducing Italy's image to a simplistic dichotomy: on one side, a vibrant and captivating popular culture; on the other, a highbrow culture confined to a few academic, often mythologized figures. This presents a significant challenge for Italian language education. There is a pressing need to rethink cultural content delivery, moving beyond what is immediately recognizable or dominant in the media, and progressively incorporating more complex, thought-provoking elements that stimulate intellectual curiosity and critical thinking.

Expanding learners' knowledge beyond the familiar "music-cuisine-fashion" triad not only honors the full breadth of Italy's cultural heritage but also contributes to shaping more aware individuals; learners who can engage with the Italian language on a profound and lasting level. To this end, educational programs must progressively integrate literary masterpieces, influential thinkers, artistic movements, scientific achievements, and contemporary debates, offering students a vision of Italy that is not only appealing but also intellectually enriching and instructive.

5.1. CAMEROONIAN LEARNERS SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ITALY

As emphasized at the outset of this article, **SRs** play a powerful role in shaping individuals' attitudes toward the social objects they reference. **SRs** are not mere personal opinions; rather, they are collective constructs that crystallize over time through shared experiences, social discourse, media influence, and environmental interaction. They serve as interpretive frameworks guiding how individuals perceive, evaluate, and engage with cultural or linguistic phenomena.

Within this theoretical framework, it follows that if Cameroonian learners (as this survey reveals) hold a generally positive view of the Italian language and culture, attributing to them qualities such as beauty, musicality, relative ease of learning, and broad cultural appeal, then these **SRs** naturally cultivate attitudes of openness, interest, and motivation toward studying Italian. In essence, the positivity embedded in these **SRs** provides fertile ground for linguistic motivation, pedagogical engagement, and symbolic identification with the language-learning process.

These findings are particularly significant within the educational context of Cameroon, where instrumental motivations such as career advancement or academic opportunities intersect with more intrinsic cultural and emotional drives. The construction of a positive image of the Italian language, often reinforced by social media promotion, can serve as a powerful catalyst for more engaged and effective learning. Learners do not merely approach Italian as a subject to be studied; rather, they begin to perceive it as part of an appealing, welcoming, and symbolically rich imaginary.

However, this positivity also warrants critical reflection. When social media primarily promote superficial or stereotypical notions (such as the idea that Italian is "easy" or that Italy is solely defined by fashion and cuisine) these favorable representations risk being fragile or inconsistent when learners encounter the real challenges of mastering the language or confront the more complex, less glamorous facets of Italian culture. Enthusiasm unsupported by a solid, nuanced understanding can lead to frustration or disillusionment, particularly when faced with the grammatical complexities of Italian or its less "spectacular" cultural dimensions. For this reason, language teaching must go beyond simply fostering positive attitudes. It should also support learners in deepening and critically revising their initial representations. In this process, the teacher's role is crucial; not only as a transmitter of knowledge but as a cultural mediator, guiding learners toward a more conscious, nuanced, and realistic understanding of the Italian language and culture.

5.2. TEACHING ITALIAN IN CAMEROON: THE IMPERATIVE FOR A PEDAGOGY CENTERED ON SCHOLARLY CULTURE

We argue that the predominant focus on popular culture in learners' conception of Italy poses a significant limitation for Italian language teaching in contexts like Cameroon. Italian popular culture (encompassing cinema, pop music, fashion, sports, and television) undeniably has strong communicative appeal and offers an accessible, engaging introduction to the language and customs. However, relying on this as the foundation of language instruction presents critical challenges, especially from a broader educational standpoint.

While popular culture can serve as a valuable motivational tool and initial entry point, it cannot substitute for a richer, more structured cultural framework that provides critical, historical, and intellectual perspectives. In the Cameroonian context¹⁰, it is essential to promote a pedagogy of Italian grounded primarily in scholarly culture, encompassing literature, philosophy, art history, science, political thought, and linguistics. This approach not only raises educational standards but carries profound symbolic significance. Introducing students to models of critical thinking, leading Italian intellectual figures, and major literary and philosophical movements effectively offers complex worldviews that inspire aspirations for both individual and collective advancement.

Scholarly culture should not be viewed as distant or elitist; rather, it is a powerful tool of emancipation that can inspire learners and open new horizons. Therefore, it is crucial to rebalance content and pedagogical strategies; not to exclude popular culture, but to integrate it within a broader, deeper framework where Italy's rich cultural heritage is made accessible, meaningful, and relevant. This holistic approach contributes to forming globally aware, culturally literate citizens capable of critical engagement and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of our analysis, we would like to summarize the key content before drawing final conclusions. This article explored the **SRs** that French-Speaking Cameroonian learners of Italian construct around the "Italian System" (the Italian language, the country, and its people). The primary goal was to understand how these learners perceive and interpret this complex cultural and linguistic system.

After introducing the theoretical framework of **SRs**, we detailed the methodological approach and analytical tools employed. We also clearly defined the reference sample, a crucial step for building the corpus that formed the basis of our subsequent analyses, the results of which were presented throughout this study.

¹⁰ A developing country with continually evolving educational systems and a pressing need for cultural, scientific, and technological advancement.

Among the most significant findings, the affective dimension stands out, expressed in two main areas. First, learners generally exhibit a positive attitude toward the Italian System, characterized by sympathy and openness. Second, there is a notable perception of Italian as an “easy” language, largely attributed to the structural and linguistic proximity between Italian and French, the informants’ native language

Another notable observation concerns the dichotomous perception of Italian culture among Cameroonian learners of Italian, whose representations tend to split between “highbrow culture” and “popular culture,” with a clear preference for the latter. This tendency is understandable, considering that the international promotion of the Italian language often emphasizes “Made in Italy” elements such as fashion, design, and aesthetics. Consequently, many young Cameroonians encounter Italy primarily through popular cultural products and the economic influence of the Italian brand.

While this focus on popular culture is not inherently negative, it is important for educators involved in teaching Italian to encourage greater engagement with Italy’s academic and specialized cultural heritage. This broader approach would align with learners’ evident interest in both practical and theoretical knowledge (ranging from traditional crafts to advanced engineering) which are among the many areas of excellence in Italian culture and tradition.

Another notable aspect that emerges from the collected representations is the image of the average Italian, often described as attentive to aesthetics, fashion, and personal appearance. This positive stereotype is reinforced by frequent references to fashion, cinema, elegance, and the visual arts; elements deeply embedded in popular culture and widely disseminated by the media.

However, alongside this idealized portrayal, a more problematic perception also surfaces: several learners mention experiences or awareness of racism. While this is not a generalized view, it reflects a sense of social closure, largely shaped not by direct encounters but by media reports of discriminatory incidents. Simultaneously, a positive stereotype prevails that depicts Italians as warm, hospitable, and sociable. The strong emphasis on family, community ties, and interpersonal relationships contributes to an image of Italy as a “humane country,” characterized by welcome and relational closeness.

Ultimately, the representations gathered reveal a nuanced and complex Italian identity in the minds of Cameroonian learners; one where seemingly contrasting elements coexist: on one side, aesthetic refinement, kindness, and openness; on the other, perceptions of racism and social introversion. This tension between cultural idealization and social critique highlights the dynamic, layered nature of **SRs** and underscores the need for a thoughtful, multifaceted pedagogical approach when promoting Italian language and culture in Cameroon.

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