

Synchronic study and diachronic reconstruction of the unstressed vocalism in central Calabria

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1. Introduction

The strong conservative character, the complexity, and the wide variety offered by the dialects spoken in Calabria, in the South of Italy, have drawn the constant attention of scholars for decades.

Nevertheless, there are some topics and some geographic areas that appear to be scarcely mentioned or totally ignored by the available literature. Among these are the peculiarities of the unstressed vowels and the specificity of the dialects of the central group.

The present project takes into account this gap in the research and aims to contribute to the field by providing fresh data and a new hypothesis.

2. Background information

Two distinct unstressed vowel systems have so far been attributed to Calabrian dialects (see Rohlfs [1966]; Loporcaro [2009]):

I. the **Sicilian vocalism**, that distinguishes only three phonemes and that is widespread in most part of the region

Latin	Ā	Ā	Ī	Ī	Ē	Ē	Ō	Ō	Ū	Ū
Sicilian	a		i				u			

II. the **Cosentian vocalism**, typical of many dialects of the northern section, which has four unstressed vowels

Latin	Ā	Ā	Ī	Ī	Ē	Ē	Ō	Ō	Ū	Ū
Cosentian	a		i		e		u			

The central section belongs to the first type.

Indeed, if it is in fact true that central varieties distinguish only three vowels in the unstressed position, it must be said that the distribution of these vowels is considerably different from that which is usually expected in those dialects with Sicilian vocalism (Tab. 1).

The discrepancies with the standard Sicilian template involve those terms deriving from the third Latin declension (therefore with final -Ē) and/or the verbal entries for which a -*e can be postulated.

3. Hypothesis

Indirect evidence (mostly related to the complex working principle of metaphony within these Calabrian dialects) strengthens the hypothesis that an unstressed vocalism with four elements also existed in this part of Calabria.

It is likely that what is observable today is the result of a complex turnover of the vowel systems. It is plausible that the Cosentian vocalism was the default system in this area, and the Sicilian one overlapped at a later stage.

The alternation of [a] and [i] for *e seen in Tab. 1 is probably the result of different solutions to the problem of the loss of the -/e/.

4. Aims of the research

- a detailed synchronic study of the unstressed vowels of the varieties located in the transition area between southern and central Calabrian;
- a diachronic reconstruction of the events that led to the present outcomes, extending the research to the history of the evolution of the Sicilian unstressed vowel system;
- testing the hypothesis of the tetra-vocalic unstressed vocalism;

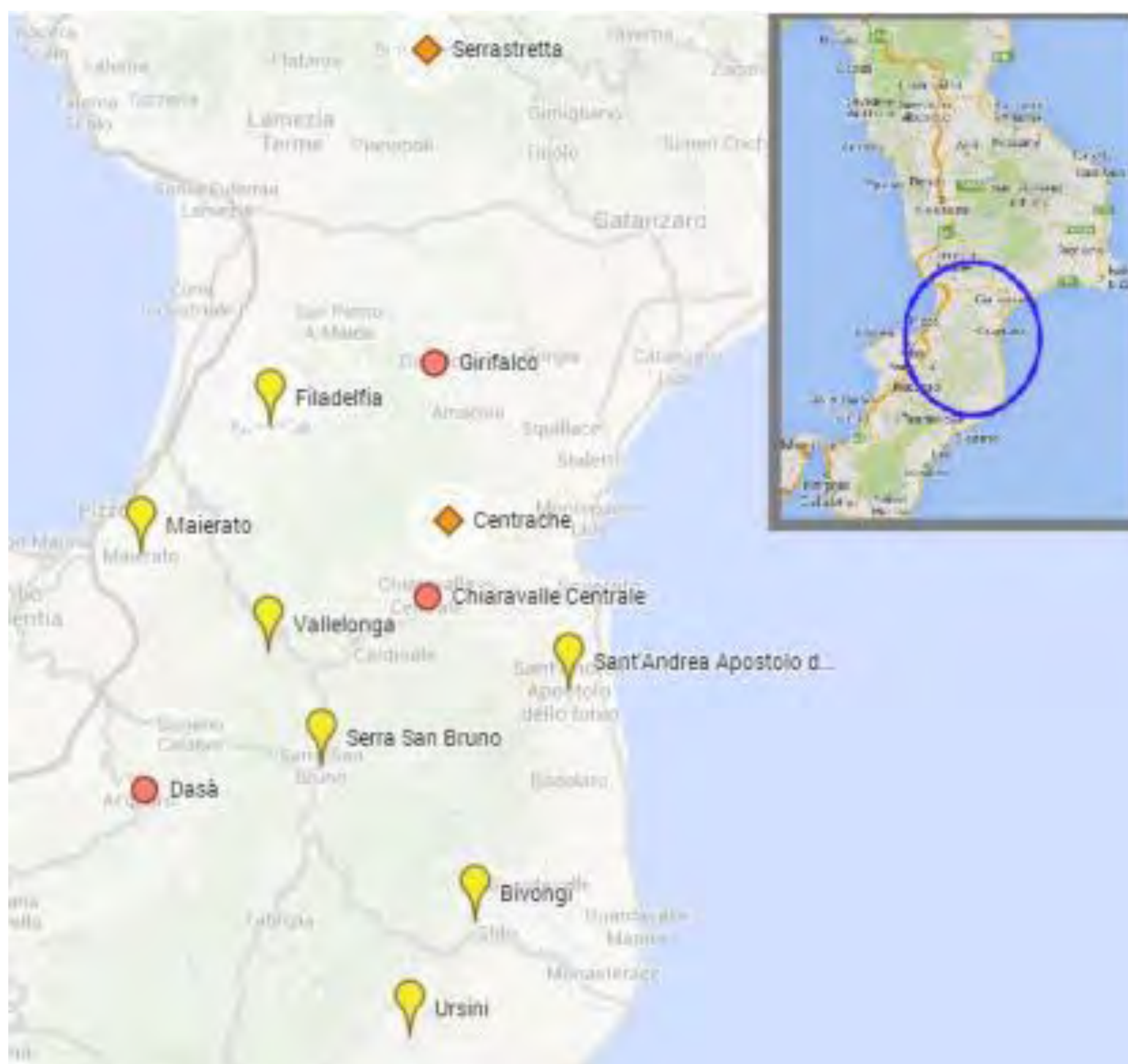


Fig. 1: The geographic location of the dialects under investigation. The orange rhombuses indicate the AIS points available for the selected area, while the red circles represent the ALI locations.

5. Methods

The synchronic study

- data coming from fieldworks carried out in 12 different villages (Fig.1)
- 6 speakers for each location (3 women; 3 men)
- recordings of spontaneous speech and responses elicited by means of a questionnaire
- acoustic analysis of the collected material
- graphs of existence and dispersion of vowels for each dialect

The diachronic reconstruction

- meticulous and rigorous philological examination of the documentary material
- particular importance will be given to the texts belonging to the Greek-Romance tradition (some of which still unpublished) which allow to go back to a higher dating (XI-XIII sec).

Preliminary results

At the present stage, the initial assumptions seem to be confirmed.

The data collected after a year of fieldwork confirm the peculiarity and the great heterogeneity of central Calabrian dialects.

In particular, the hypothesis about the wider diffusion of the tetra-vocalic system is strongly corroborated by the presence of final -e attested in the dialects of Dasà and Vallelonga, two villages located far away from the area in which the Cosentian vocalism is usually documented (Fig. 2).

Additional evidence, moreover, comes from a preliminary review of some medieval documents originating in this area. In a significant number of Greek-Romance documents (i.e. written using the Greek alphabet, but Romance in the content) dating from the 11th century, I found distinct outcomes for the letter <i> and the letter <e> (see Distilo [1990], Cacciola & De Angelis [2008]).

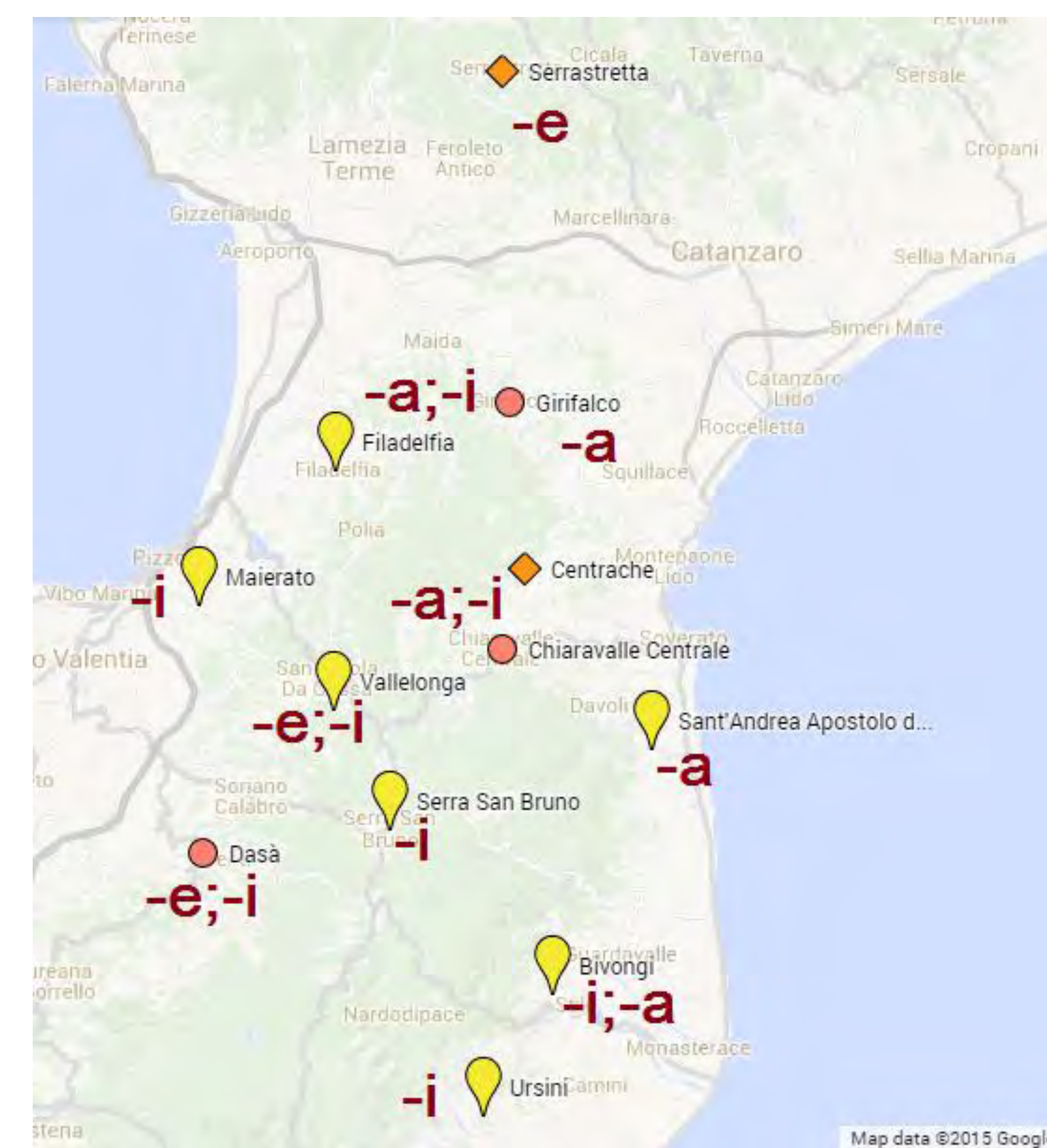


Fig. 2: The areal distribution of final -Ē outcomes according to the data coming from field investigations.

References

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	Sicilian	Serrese	Bivongese
'the bone'	<i>l'òssu</i>	<i>l'ùssu</i>	<i>l'ùssu</i>
'the rope'	<i>a còrda</i>	<i>la còrda</i>	<i>a còrda</i>
'the wheels'	<i>i rroti</i>	<i>li rùqti</i>	<i>i rùqti</i>
'the dog'	<i>u cani</i>	<i>lu cani</i>	<i>u cana</i>
'the night'	<i>a nòtti</i>	<i>la nòtti</i>	<i>a nòtta</i>
'the foot'	<i>u pèdi</i>	<i>lu pèdi</i>	<i>u pièdi</i>
'he stayed'	<i>stèsì</i>	<i>stèza</i>	<i>stètta</i>
'nothing'	<i>nènti</i>	<i>nènti</i>	<i>nènta</i>
'eight'	<i>òttu</i>	<i>ùottu</i>	<i>ùottu</i>

Tab 1. The table provides a comparison of the outcomes of the final vowels in three different varieties with Sicilian vocalism. Here the label *Sicilian* stands for a typical realisation of the selected words in a southern Calabrian dialect, while *Serrese* and *Bivongese* are two dialects belonging to the central section, namely from Serra San Bruno and Bivongi (see Idone [2009]; [2012]).

Such heterogeneous outcomes suggest that, at least in central Calabria, the evolution of the unstressed vowels was not as linear and peaceful as the literature implicitly states.