Although they were a well-known phenomenon in most belligerent nations, the trench journals were long regarded as a curiosity among First World War paraphernalia, or as collectors’ items coveted by many a bibliophile (Pegum 2007). In the wake of Isnenghi’s work (1977) on the ideological implications of Italian trench journalism and, above all, Audoin-Rouzeau’s ground-breaking study (1986), which uses the vast corpus of French trench journals as a source for an unconventional histoire des mentalités, the genre has become a legitimate object of academic study, in particular in relation to the German army (Lipp 2003; Nelson 2011) and to the armies of Great Britain and its dominions (Fuller 1991; Seal 2013).

Even though trench journals differed widely as to print runs, reprographic techniques, physical characteristics, periodicity, duration and hierarchical scrutiny, and as to the circumstances in which they were edited and printed, the definition of the medium is quite straightforward. Most scholars agree that the term refers to publications that present themselves as both made by soldiers and meant for soldiers, in the context of the First World War.

Whereas scholarship has focused primarily on particular ideological implications of trench journalism, or on aspects of the trench journals’ content that may explain the resistance of the armies throughout more than four years of unspeakable ordeal, the present contribution addresses the question of language use as a formal aspect that may yield insights into the socio-cultural dynamics underlying the ostensibly participative and inclusive discourse trench journals used with regard to the soldiers, whom they considered as both their collaborators and their target audience. This approach is illustrated by means of the
example of *L’Astico*, an Italian trench journal that showed much explicit attention to the use of language as part of its editorial strategy.

Although trench journals had been published within the Italian army since 1915, the number of titles exploded in the first months of 1918. At first view, the newly created journals seemed to resemble their predecessors. In reality, however, they were quite different in nature. The first trench journals developed spontaneously within small units. Edited and stencilled with improvised means, they were full of private allusions and in-jokes among men who knew each other personally.

In contrast to this ‘trench microjournalism’ (Isnenghi 1977: 40), the new titles were much more ambitious. They were part of the Italian High Command’s new and comprehensive strategy of ‘propaganda, vigilance and assistance’ (Gatti 2000), which received considerable scholarly attention (Gatti 2000; Belardelli 1997; Poredda 1991; Della Volpe 1989). A response to the crushing defeat of the Italian forces at Caporetto in October 1917, the new approach aimed at improving troop morale. Before Caporetto, troop morale had been largely neglected or taken for granted. In those few cases in which it had faltered, the Italian supreme commander, General Luigi Cadorna (1850–1928), had reacted with strong repression in order to restore his troops’ ‘readiness’ for self-sacrifice. Since widespread defeatism among the exhausted infantrymen was generally, but wrongly (Ceva 1998), considered to be the principal cause of the army’s collapse at Caporetto, the Italian army’s new supreme commander, General Armando Diaz (1861–1928), quickly abandoned Cadorna’s repressive attitude in favour of a more proactive and comprehensive approach to troop morale. In order to prevent another collapse, a system of cautious monitoring was put in place, combined with a strong communication strategy, in which the creation of a front press was of pivotal importance.

Since they were intended for larger units and had larger print runs than their more authentic predecessors, the editorial responsibility for the new journals was entrusted to officers who, in civilian life, had been professionally active in the field of culture. Some of them, like the writer Piero Jahier (1884–1966), who was in charge of editing *L’Astico*, added an almost personal touch to their journal or at least to its editorial formula, since ideological choices were determined to a large extent by the propaganda service of the army.

In accordance with the characteristics of the media format, the new trench journals offered distraction and relief to the troops while they were on duty in the relative isolation of the war zone. Below this surface of cheerfulness, however, their more profound objectives were to