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THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION OF FRIULI: FINDINGS FROM RECENT RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper presents some results from a series of empirical studies in the sociology of language that have been carried on between 1978 and 2004 in the region of Friuli (Italy), in the northeastern corner of Italy. Here about 60% of the population (i.e. ca 430.000) regularly speaks Friulian, a neo-latin language akin to the Ladin of the Dolomites (Italy) and the Raethic-Rumontsch of the Grisons (Switzerland). Friulians have been recognized in 1996 by the Regional Law n. 15 as a language minority deserving protection and promotion, and in 1999, by the national law n.482, as one of Italy's 12 "historical language minorities". Since these dates, a number of projects have been launched, and some money spent. It is too early to assess the results, but the author's outlook is not optimistic, since only 15% of the younger generation are reared in the Friulian language, and still almost nothing is happening in the school scene on behalf of instruction in that language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 1977, a number of studies have been carried out in Friuli, on commission of various administrative bodies, in order to assess the sociolinguistic situation of this region. Assuming that not everyone in the audience is familiar with the Italian and Friulian cases, the presentation of the data of that research is preceded by a brief overview of the problematique of "historical language-minorities" in Italy and by a socio-historical sketch of the Friuli case. In the conclusions, some personal evaluations on the current state of the matter and its prospects in the near future are presented.

The use of the term "sociolinguistic" may be objectionable to those that hold, as it is the case in Italian academy, that sociolinguistics is strictly a sub-discipline of linguistics. The present author is not a linguist but a sociologist, and the studies here reported, based on questionnaires and interviews to statistical samples of the population, may be more correctly termed as pertaining rather to the sociology of language; but we agree with J.A. Fishman, that a convergence of the two sub-disciplines is both possible and desirable. We also rely on his experience on the point that self-report sample-surveys, with all their well-known shortcomings, still are the most useful and efficient techniques in gathering information on these matters.

For space's sake, bibliographical references have been kept to a minimum. Those interested in deepening their knowledge of the Friulian case can find many further references in the works listed.

2. THE DAWNING OF MINORITY-LANGUAGE RIGHTS IN ITALY: ACT N. 482 OF 1999

For a long time, Italy has pretended to be a culturally and linguistically homogeneous state, with the exception of internationally-recognized small minorities along the Alpine border – “French” in Piedmont and Aosta valley, “German” mainly in South Tyrol, and “Slovene”¹ in Friuli, amounting to less than 1% of the total citizenry. The linguistic and cultural differences among the Italian regions were defined as being merely “dialectal” and folkloric, of no legal, social and political import. Article 6 of the 1948 constitution, pledging the State to protect linguistic minorities, was understood as referring only to the above mentioned “national” minorities. Immediately after the second world war, weak movements aiming at the recognition to the status of linguistic, ethnic or even national minority for some other groups cropped up only in Sardinia (Partito Sardo d’Azione), in Trentino (Partito popolare trentino-tirolese) and in Friuli (Associazione per l’autonomia friulana), but the national party system quickly managed to swallow them.

The issue resurfaced in the early seventies, when Italy too felt the winds of the “ethnic revival” blowing in many parts of Western Europe. Two events symbolically mark the birth of the new period. One is the publication of two books on the problem: *Le nazioni proibite* (1973) e *Le lingue tagliate* (1975). The author, Sergio Salvi, was a Florentine and thus immune from charges of disloyalty to the Italian nation and language; and he was a journalist of the Communist party newspaper, “l’Unità”, and thus legitimated the linguistic-minority problem in the eyes of the leftist intelligentsia, traditionally rather hostile to that issue. The other is the “International conference on minorities” convened at Trieste in 1974, which mobilized all the best Italian and also some international, scholars with some competence on the subject.

Very slowly, the problem of ethnic and linguistic minorities inched its way into Italian political culture. In the late seventies, a number of bills on the issue were presented in the parliament, mainly by representatives of Sardinia and Friuli, but it took more than twenty years before they could overcome deep-seated hostility or indifference from all political quarters. Only at the end of 1999 the law was approved; and not so much because of pressures from within Italy, as from the European Institutions. As is well known, it was in Madrid in 1992 that, after many years of labours, the Council of Europe promulgated a convention urging all European States to introduce a legislation aimed at the protection of ethnic and linguistic minorities, and Italy too had to comply.

Act 482/99 is a very weak law. Article 1 states the Italian is Italy’s official language but that in some circumstances the local minority language can be used in public interactions; that administrative acts can be translated into the minority languages and that native speakers have a right to use the language also in courts, through in

1. The inverted commas signal that the use of national names blurs many differences within the minorities.

interpreters. The minority language can be taught and used in school, in the street signs, and in the public radio and TV broadcasts; italianized family and town names can be rendered in the old, local form; and so on. So, it is a permissive, not a prescriptive law. The incentives to act along these lines are puny: yearly five million euros for the whole of the listed 12 "historical linguistic minorities" (Albanians, Catalans, Germans, Greek, Slovene, Croatian, French, Franco-provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan, Sardinian), scattered in 10 regions (Piedmont, Aosta, Trentino, Veneto, Friuli, Molise, Apulia, Calabria, Sicily, Sardinia). How many citizens are involved is impossible to say, because the statistics in these matters are few, unreliable and hotly disputed. One estimate hovers on the 3 - 3.5 million range.

But law 482/99 is symbolically a very important law, because, after almost a century and a half, for the first time Italy recognizes the existence of a number of non-Italian speaking communities, and grants them the right to survive and develop.

3. THE CASE OF FRIULI: AN HISTORICAL NUTSHELL

Friuli is one of the smaller Italian regions with its ca. 1 million, it counts for a little less than about 2% of Italy's population as well as territory. It lays tucked in the northeastern corner, at the tip of the Adriatic, between Venice and the Austrian and the Slovene borders. The main factor of its ethnogenesis is its geopolitical position as gateway from Central- Eastern Europe (the Danube basin) into the Italian boot. In historical times, at least 17 (40, by some other counts) invasions flooded through its easily negotiable mountain passes. Here Rome in 182 B.C. established the colonial city of Aquileia, which became a large regional metropolis, and left its lasting mark on its inhabitants, formerly of Celtic stock. After the fall of the Roman Empire, in the late VI century this area was conquered and settled by the German tribe known as Langobards, who set it up as a duchy with the town of Forum Julii as capital (hence the name of Friuli). They marked it off clearly from the neighbouring regions, settled by other German and Slavic peoples; the ethnic boundaries then established are perfectly vital to this day. This is the only place in Europe where the three main European cultural areas –Latin, German and Slavic– come together.

In the IX century the langobard Duchy of Friuli became a county of the Carolingian empire, and then, in 1077, the temporal powers over this land were bestowed to the Patriarch of Aquileia. For three and a half centuries, up until 1420, Friuli flourished as an ecclesiastical principate. For the first half of the period, it was a predominantly German principate, manned by German warrior nobility and consistently siding with the Emperor in his conflicts with the Pope and with the Italian communes; and in this period also higher culture was marked by German influences. In the second half, political, social, economic and cultural influences from the interior of Italy (Venice, Milan, Florence, Rome) prevailed, until Venice, in 1420, managed to conquer Friuli. She formally left standing the two main institutions, the ecclesiastical patriarchate and the civilian Parliament, while wielding effective power through a Lieutenant (governor). This vestige of home-rule was not without consequence on the region's

cultural identity. It continued to be officially named "Patria del Friuli", and the name Patria, although really coming from Patriarchate, took on the meaning it generally has, of fatherland, homeland, heim, patrie. This helped Friulians to keep their identity clearly distinct from that of other subjects of the Republic of Venice.

4. THE FRIULIAN LANGUAGE

The other mark of distinction is, of course, language. There are indications that already in late-Roman times the language spoken here was different enough from the standard Latin as to counsel at least one bishop to write his commentaries to the Gospel in "sermo rusticus"; and early linguists (G.I. Ascoli, ca 1850) attributed such difference to the "celtic substrate" and to "rethian" influences, and suggested that Friulian, the Dolomite "ladins" and the Swiss "Retho-rumontsch" belong to a single neo-latin language group, distinct from the other northern-italian dialects. But the theory has been criticized by C. Battisti and more recently by G. Francescato. According to them, Friulian is basically a northern-italian dialect like any other, different from the rest basically only in its more peripheral and hence conservative character. Be that as it may, Friulian is clearly more similar to Latin and to other Western neo-latin languages (Provençal and Catalan included) than to Italian. The celtic substratum is well recognizable in the places of names and in some single words; less in the structure of the language. Historically, Friulian certainly emerged in the early middle ages, is documented in written form in the XIII century and endured in remarkably stable form up (almost) to our days. It has been for many centuries basically a spoken language, with only limited written usages. Official documents in this area have always been written first in Latin, and then in Italian (Tosco-venetian) languages. Also for this reason, Friulian has evolved in one "central" and half a dozen peripheral varieties, plus, of course, many local micro-varieties. The variances are slight and easily understood.

Friuli has been up to recent times a largely peasant society, and Friulian has been the language of peasants and common workers. The ruling elite, the cultivated classes and the small urban bourgeoisie tended to speak venetian and/or Italian among themselves, although they would speak Friulian to the lower classes. We do not know the extent of diglossia among the populace in former times, but it can be ventured that all friulians, had a working knowledge of Italian. For instance, there is no evidence of the use or request of interpreters in court proceedings.

Evidence of literary use of Friulian goes back to the late XIV century, and some production sporadically emerged in the following centuries, usually in the satirical and humorous keys. But a substantial, continuous output of printed literature (poetry and prose) only takes off in the early XIX century, and in these two hundred years it has grown to thousands of titles. In 1919 scholars and authors of Friulian language, literature and culture formed a Friulian Philological Society. It managed to survive the fascist hostility to these matters, prudently fusing Friulian and Italian patriotism; and flourished in the decades after the Second World War. For almost 90 years now the SFF has promoted studies, publications, events, festivals, courses and every

conceivable other means on behalf of the language and culture of this region. In its heydays, the Society amounted to several thousand members.

5. FRIULIAN AUTONOMIST MOVEMENTS

The Friulian Philological Society has also been the cradle of the Friulian Autonomist movement. After the conquest by Venice, Friulians showed very few, if any, signs of resistance and separatism, although some of the widespread turmoil obtaining specially in the XVI century can be interpreted, very partially, in this key. After the fall of Venice in 1797, Friuli came first into Austria's and then into Napoleon's, and then back into Austria's hands, without the flinching of an eye. The Risorgimento movement for the unification of Italy developed here along more or less the same pattern as in any other Italian northern and central region. Both Napoleon, Austria and Italy recognized the unity and distinction of Friuli as a province with Udine as its capital; nothing more was ever asked by Friulians. Some vague ideas of a stronger provincial autonomy, within the Italian state, emerged after the first world war, in view of the enormous damages suffered during the war and also of the geopolitical position and linguistic and cultural peculiarities; but such ideas were immediately muted by the centralistic fascist regime. They were revived after the second world war, when the new Italian Republic headed toward a regionalistic setup, and the opportunity arose to obtain for Friuli the status of an Autonomous Region (the alternative was to become again a province of Veneto; a perspective which appealed to many). For about three years a lively political discussion on these perspectives occurred, and among the main advocates of Friulian autonomy was a group of people associated with the Philological Society; among them, a learned priest, Giuseppe Marchetti; a young Communist poet, Pierpaolo Pasolini; a lawyer, politician and former leader of catholic farmer unions, Tiziano Tessitori; and a young literate, Gianfranco D'Aronco. They developed a political platform, or ideology, for Friulian autonomy, and fought bravely to have it accepted first by Friulian themselves, and secondly by the Italian Parliament. They succeeded, but only halfway. The Italian Constitution of 1948 granted Friuli the status of Autonomous Region with Special Statute (meaning a reinforced autonomy, relative to ordinary Regions), but only in an un-natural and un-requested union with "Venezia Giulia", i.e. Trieste. This town in recent centuries had a story quite different from that of Friuli, and had developed different culture and structural interest. The second disappointment was that the implementation of the Region was deferred until further notice; the reason being that Trieste in 1948 (and up to 1954) was detached from the Italian sovereignty and under Anglo-American administration, and that Friuli was placed right on the Iron Curtain, and thus in a peculiarly sensitive position in the context of the Cold War. After this blow, the first autonomist movement soon lost stamina and was quickly absorbed into the national Italian party system.

The Region was set up only fifteen years later, in 1963, and soon the contrast between the interests of Friuli and those of Trieste flared up. The heart of the problem is the designation of Trieste as the capital of Friuli; which was something like naming

Marseille as the capital of Savoy. Friuli was then marked by a modest agricultural economy, solidly rural culture, and scattered population, while Trieste has been for two centuries a lively and splendid harbour city, very composite ethnically, and basing its fortunes on commerce and finance of international scope. The differences between Friuli and Trieste in economic needs and perspectives were compounded by those in their mentalities and ethnic identity. In 1966 the Friulian autonomist yearnings lead to the birth of the Movimento Friuli. The ideological and cultural base of the new movement was similar to the previous one (a mixture of Catholic-center and socialist-left positions), and similar was also the social base (lower-middle class and higher lower class: small entrepreneurs, artisans, clerical workers). What was new was the focus on socio-economic complaints: Friuli was exposed as a poor region, suffering loss of population because of heavy outmigration toward richer regions of Italy and the rest of the world; a region sorely in need of public investment in industry, infrastructures, schools (university); and oppressed by a disproportionate amount of military bases, hindering civilian development. The emerging paradigm was that of "internal colonialism": a peripheral region oppressed and exploited not only by the Central state (Rome) but also by a "foreign" capital city (Trieste). But some radical groups also espoused the the mini-national idea, based on the "foundation myth" of the Celtic and Rethic Langobard, on the "golden age" myth of the sovereign Patriarchate and on the differences between the Friulian and the Italian languages. According to them, all this defined Friulians as a distinct nation from Italians and entitled them to full statehood. In the early seventies, the radical left-wing-nationalists took command in the Movimento Friuli, causing the exit of the more moderate, catholic wing. The movement, which in the 1968 regional polls had reached a high point of 12% in the province of Udine, and had become a relevant force in many municipal administrations, survived at decreasing levels until it suspended operations in the late Eighties. Friulian autonomists disbanded and tried a number of other political expressions.

6. THE 1976 EARTHQUAKE AND THE REBIRTH OF FRIULI

In 1976 Friulian self-consciousness received a powerful boost thanks to a severe earthquake that caused about 1.000 casualties and left 100.000 homeless. The wide publicity given by media to the catastrophe, and to the bravery of Friulians in enduring and reacting to it raised "Friulian pride" to unprecedented levels. This time the national parties were ready to respond to it, and in the reconstruction laws issued by the Roman parliament most of the abovementioned complaints of Friuli found an answer. Money for the reconstruction flowed abundantly, and in a few years Friuli, which had experienced a modest industrial take-off in the previous two decades, became one of Italy's fastest-growing and more prosperous regions. Among other investments, one of the more significant, symbolically, was the founding of the University of Udine, whose statute commits it to "*contribute to the civil and social progress, and to the economic re-birth of Friuli; and to become an organic tool for the development and renewal of the distinctive features of Friulian culture, language, traditions and history*".

2. Attitudes toward Friulian language and culture (attachment, affection, indifference, contempt, etc.)
3. Opinions and evaluations on the future of Friulian language and culture (development, maintenance, decline, extinction);
4. Attitudes and opinions on the teaching of Friulian language and culture in schools.

The overall results of these surveys can be summarized as follows:

- a) In the older generation, Friulian is (was) spoken by 75% of the regional population; in the younger one, by 28,1 %. In the average, in the last four generations there has been a loss of 10% at each generation; but the trend has accelerated in the last two ones.
- b) 1999, Friulian was regularly spoken by a comfortable majority of the sample (57.2%). Another 20.3% speaks it only occasionally; another 20% does not speak, but understands it. Only 2.6 % does not understand it. Extrapolating these percentages to the whole of the regional population, it can be estimated that 60% , i.e. 430.000 people, regularly speak Friulian.
- c) The use of Friulian declined, in the 21 years between the first the third survey, 20 %; i.e 1% yearly.
- d) Friulian is spoken more in the community than at home, because parents, who speak Friulian between themselves and with other friends, tend to shift to Italian when speaking to their offspring. In the 1999 survey, only 34 % of the respondents speak Friulian with their offspring; and this percentages decreases rapidly with the parent's age. This phenomenon had clearly emerged in the first two survey and confirmed in the third.
- e) Promiscuous use of both Italian and Friulian in the family is relatively rare but growing: it hovered between 2 and 8 % (depending on the kind of family relationship) in the first survey, and between 4 and 14 % in the last one.
- f) Only about 15 % of children are reared in Friulian; another 9 % both in Friulian and in Italian. These percentages, resulting from younger parent's report to our sample survey, have been perfectly confirmed by a census survey carried out in 2003 by Silvana Fachin Schiavi in all primary and middle schools of Friuli.
- g) Only 22.3 % of those who cannot speak Friulian are interested in learning it.
- h) Friulian is more spoken than "loved". While 57% use it regularly, only 50% considers it "the language of my heart".
- i) Friulian is more spoken than written. Only 5 % report to use it in personal notes, messages, and other written usages. This percentage corresponds very well to the number of friulians that, in another study, report to routinely read printed materials in this language; which is also not far from the number of affiliates to the Philological Society.
- j) Friulian is almost exclusively the language of primary, informal interactions (i.e. with friends, relatives). Only 10 % use it also in addressing "strangers". However 75% think it is quite acceptable if a stranger, addressed in Italian, answers in Friulian.
- k) Those who regularly speak Friulian do so mostly out of habit and tradition; few out of conscious identity and ideological motives.

- l) The large majority of people favour the coexistence of Italian and Friulian. Almost all (94.1%) are in favour of the protection and promotion of Friulian in some way.
- m) Ca 86 % favour the teaching of Friulian in schools. It is remarkable that this percentage has been perfectly stable in all the three surveys. Many observers, cognizable of the school environment, deemed it as wildly optimistic. However the soundness of the sociological surveys was vindicated in 2003, when school authorities officially asked parents on their willingness to enroll their children in Friulian classes. To everybody's amazement, the rate of affirmative responses ranged, in different schools and areas, from 70 to 40%.
- n) Males appear to be a little more sanguine about the Friulian language (use, favour, etc.). Young age and high schooling are clearly correlated to the loss of Friulian.

B) The 2003 survey on the 15-18 age cohort

In 2003 a study on the younger generation, 15-18, was carried on (n=388), with the aim of exploring their behaviours and attitudes on the same issues explored in previous survey on general population. The questionnaire was a simplified version of the "adult" one. The main results are as follows:

- a) 28.1 % report to speak Friulian regularly, another 33.2 % declare to understand it and use it only occasionally, and the same percentage to understand it but not to speak it at all. Only 5.4 % reports not to understand Friulian at all. This latter percentage corresponds to those of the adult surveys.
- b) 28.1% speak Friulian to their fathers; a little less (25.9%) to their mothers. Another 18 % speak both languages. Much higher percentages obtain in the interactions with grandparents .
- c) Only 15 % speak Friulian to their siblings, and another 5.4% use both Italian and Friulian.
- d) In 32,6% of the cases, Friulian is spoken along with Italian in interactions with friends; The exclusive use of Friulian is reduced to 8.3 %, while the exclusive use of Italian amounts to 57.4 % of the cases
- e) Only 23.5% of non-Friulian-speakers are interested in learning the language.
- f) In general, it appears that the younger generation has no strong feelings in linguistic matters; it tends to see them in a rather instrumental way, with little identity- or ideological overtones. It also appears to be more influenced by the interview- situation (parents were usually present at the interview), then is the case with adults; adapting the answers to the perceived expectations of the by-standers and of the interviewer.

C) The study on the personnel and students of the University of Udine

In 2002 and in 2004, two mail-questionnaires were sent respectively to the staff and faculty (N=1594) and to the students (N=16.785) of the University of Udine. The goal of this research was to measure the degree of "Friulian consciousness" of these categories. The return rate was rather high: 42% of the personnel, and 28% of the students. As staff and students come mostly from the region (students, up to 75%) the data from this survey can also be used as further indicators for the regional socio-linguistic situation; while in the case of faculty this cannot be done,

because a) the University of Udine is relatively young (dating back only to 1978) and b) the faculty is recruited on a national basis anyway. Thus it is very difficult to assess the number of faculty who can be defined as members of the Friulian community.

The main results of the research on the personnel are as follows:

- a) There is an overwhelming agreement (80 %) in principle and in general on the protection of linguistic minorities; but only about 56% are in favour of the University's concrete commitment, and only 24% are personally available to do something in this field;
- b) 32% of the personnel speaks Friulian regularly, and another 20% occasionally. These rates are much lower than those in the general population.
- c) Only 24.7 % of those who do not speak Friulian are willing to learn it.
- d) Younger age and lower academic status is correlated with more support for Friulian; this can be explained by the fact that younger faculty tend, more than the older ones, to come from the region; moreover, the issue of minority-language protection is more typical of modern, i. e. younger, political culture. On the other side, longer years spent at the University favour identification with and rooting in the regional community.

As for the students, these are the main results:

- a) Friulian is spoken regularly by 26.2 % , and occasionally by another 20% of the respondents. This datum is slightly lower than in the previous study on teen-agers; the difference can be accounted for by the higher degree of schooling of university students. Males speak friulian remarkably more than females (regularly, 29,8% vs. 23.3 %)
- b) only 23.8 % of the non-friulian-speakers report to be interested in learning this language, while those interested in learning something of Friulian history and culture rise to 62.2 %. 31.3% would be interested in joining an Association of Friulian students.
- c) a weak majority (52.7 %) of the respondents agree with the use of Friulian in institutional circumstances
- d) Almost all respondents (88.5 %) state to be "very much" or "rather" in favour of the protection of linguistic minorities in general.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the "Euro-mosaic" study directed by G. Williams, and regarding 34 European language minorities, the Friulian one ranks in the lower-middle range: it is still regularly spoken by a majority of the population in the area, it has a literary tradition and institutions supporting it, it is recognized by local and now also by national governments. However, its use has declined remarkably in the last two or three generations, and at present only 15 percent of children are reared in Friulian at home.

most of them voted in favour of a Triestino governor, and also the regional minister responsible for language policy is now a non-friulian. This leaves some doubt on their commitment on behalf of Friuli and its language. Only the Provincial administration of Udine, is presently, under the leadership of Marzio Strassoldo, active in the struggle to advance both Friuli's autonomy and its language; but the prospects are not very promising, because the province of Udine only represents the 43% of the regional population.

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