

*NYELVI ÉS KULTURÁLIS KÖLCSÖNHATÁSOK
INTERDISZCIPLINÁRIS KERETBEN
INTERACȚIUNI LINGVISTICE ȘI CULTURALE
ÎN CADRU INTERDISCIPLINAR
LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS
– AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH
SPRACHLICHE UND KULTURELLE
WECHSELWIRKUNGEN IM
INTERDISZIPLINÄREN RAHMEN*

*Szerkesztette/Coordonatori/Editors/
Herausgeber:
PLETL RITA
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SAPIENTIA ERDÉLYI MAGYAR TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
MŰSZAKI ÉS HUMÁNTUDOMÁNYOK KAR, MAROSVÁSÁRHELY
ALKALMAZOTT NYELVÉSZETI TANSZÉK

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2015. május 28–29.
28–29 mai 2015
28–29 May 2015
28–29 Mai 2015

Szerkesztette/Coordonatori/Editors/Herausgeber:

PLETL RITA
FAZAKAS NOÉMI

| Scientia Kiadó |
| Kolozsvár · 2016 |

A kiadvány megjelenését támogatta:



**SAPIENTIA
ALAPÍTVÁNY**

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A szakmai felelősséget teljes mértékben a szerkesztők, illetve a szerzők vállalják.

Első magyar nyelvű kiadás: 2016

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

Nyelvi és kulturális kölcsönhatások interdiszciplináris keretben = Interacțiuni lingvistice și culturale în cadru interdisciplinar = Linguistic and cultural interactions - an interdisciplinary approach = Sprachliche und kulturelle Wechselwirkungen im interdisziplinären Rahmen / ed.: Pletl Rita, Fazakas Noémi. - Cluj-Napoca : Scientia, 2016

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606- 975-000- 1

I. Pletl, Rita (ed.)

II. Fazakas, Noémi (ed.)

81:008

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DIALECTS AS MARKERS OF REGIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CROATIAN REGION OF ISTRIA

Introduction

The Europeanization project, being much more than a European integration process, results in numerous changes on the identity level (Radaelli 2000), not exclusively among member states but also among those aspiring to get the member status as well (Vink 2002). This implies various relations between supranational, national, regional, and local identities, often resulting in so-called nested identities (Medrano–Gutierrez 2001). The growth of Euroregions, especially after the 1990s (Perkmann 2003), could be perceived as one of the outcomes of the Europeanization processes. The Euroregions project, institutionalized by the Assembly of European Regions, often helps regions and their leaders to achieve their own goals (from political – including the struggle for autonomy – to purely economic) (Perkman 2003). The Istrian region, comprising the major part of the Istrian peninsula located in the Northern Adriatic,¹ was the first region in Croatia that actually used the idea of *Europe of regions* in order to resist the centralization of power in the 1990s in Croatia (Banovac 1998: 73). The regional Istrian identity, embedded in the concept of “Istrianity”, played a crucial role in these processes. This specific regional identity is mentioned also in the Statute of the Istrian Region (as a “traditional expression of the regional affiliation of the Istrian multiethnos”) and is strongly promoted by the current regional policy (the local political party, the Istrian Democratic Assembly – IDS, mentioned “Istrianity” in its programmatic declaration). The Declaration assumes that this specific regional consciousness is the result of the common territory and historical destiny and that the main actors of cultural heritage and cultural values are the “Istro-Slavic” and “Istro-Venetian” cultures (Programmatic Declaration of IDS). The efforts of the Istrian politicians to celebrate Istria as multiethnic and multicultural region has been already analysed as quite instrumental and primarily referring to the Italian minority in Istria (Orlić 2008).

Besides multiculturalism, celebrated as a distinctive Istrian feature, the local dialects also play an important role in the construction of the regional identity. An awareness of the complex linguistic situation is apparent in the

1 Smaller parts of the Istrian Region belong to the Republic of Slovenia and the Italian Republic.

following statement from the Statute of the Istrian Region, which is the only region in Croatia that has included this aspect in its Statute: “The Istrian Region promotes Istrian folk customs, national holidays, the protection of autochthonous toponyms, and the preservation of local dialects (Chakavian, Cakavian, Cokavian, Cekavian, Kajkavian, Istriot, Istro-Venetian, Istro-Romanian, and others) through education about the homeland and through other means” (Statute of the Istrian Region, Article 18).

Numerous studies have shown strong connections between language and identity. Joseph (2004: 13) assumes that “language and identity are ultimately inseparable”, while Edwards states that “the single most important aspect of human language (...) lies in its relationship to group identity” (Edwards 2010: 3) and understands speech accommodations as identity adjustments made to increase group status and strengthen group distinctions (Edwards 2009). In one of his prominent works, Fishman (1989) also considers language to be inseparable from identity by claiming that “language is the recorder of paternity, the expresser of patrimony” (Fishman 1989: 32). Through their individual use of language, speakers proclaim their own identity and reveal their sense of group belonging and solidarity – therefore, every speech act can be considered an “act of identity” (Le Page–Tabouret-Keller 1985). By using a specific language, speakers differentiate themselves from others by marking their own belonging to a certain group by means of a similar use of language. In this respect, the role of language is crucial for the speakers’ identification practices and the formation of their group boundaries. Based on the fact that identity is flexible and dynamic (Hall 1996) and constructed in interaction (Barth 1969), in this context, language is considered to be one of the most important markers of group and cultural identity, a symbol of belonging and a resource for community solidarity. The importance of language for regional identification is therefore very important. According to Auer, in certain types of bilingual speech communities, code-switching “is related to and indicative of group membership” (Auer 1998: 3). Moreover, Ansaldo (2010) states that in multilingual communities speakers use multilingualism and mixed practices as important elements for cultural identification and they identify with linguistic pluralism, and not with a specific code.

Languages, especially the endangered ones, are often enjoying various levels of protection, usually because of the above-mentioned strong ties with speakers’ identity and culture. The Council of Europe is striving to “protect and promote regional and minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe’s cultural heritage and, on the other hand, to enable speakers of a regional or minority language to use it in private and public life”, by the convention called European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). Croatia signed the ECRML in 1997 and the languages that are now “covered” by the ECRML in Croatia are Italian, Serbian, Hungarian, Czech, Slovakian, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, German,

Romani (including Boyash Romanian), Slovenian, and Istro-Romanian (European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – Languages covered, May 1st, 2015). ECRML is, as some authors emphasize, the “first legally binding document for the protection of minority languages and clearly states the areas in which states have an obligation to take action on behalf of speakers of minority languages” (Hogan-Brun–Wolff 2003: 4). Our paper, based on the example of the case study of the Istrian region, will add to the body of critique of the Charter, primarily regarding the fact that it explicitly excludes dialects of the official language and the languages of immigrants² (Soldat-Jaffe 2015: 373).

“Istrianity”: The Specific Regional Identification

The most prominent cultural contacts through several millennia, which have left their mark in Istria, were those between the eastern and western coast of the Adriatic. The division of the Istrian territory between the Austrian Empire and Venice, which lasted until the fall of Venice in 1797, left its mark on the history of the region as well as on the subethnic identifications in the region (Blagonić 2013). From 1797 to 1918, the Austrian Empire i.e. the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was in charge over the whole territory, and it was followed by the period of the Italian Kingdom. After WWII, when Istria became part of Yugoslavia, the situation for Italians in Istria drastically changed. From the position of the elite minority with power (the status they had even during the Austrian rule), they became a national minority. The current cultural and linguistic situation in Istria is therefore the result of many centuries of coexistence and intertwining of numerous cultural, ethnic, and linguistic communities.

Today in Istria, the number of people who put a strong emphasis on their regional identity, rather than on national identity, is considerably higher than in any other Croatian county. Starting from 1981, the inhabitants of Istria have been declaring their regional identification in national censuses (Banovac 1996). In the 1991 census, 37 000 inhabitants (16.1% of the total population of the Istrian Region) declared their national affiliation in the sense of a regional affiliation. In 2001, the number significantly decreased to 8 865 (or 4.3%), while the last census in 2011 again showed a drastically higher number of regionally declared Istrians: 25 203 (12.11%).

The reasons behind the strong regional identification are very heterogeneous and complex, but previous studies (Kalapoš 2002; Banovac 1996, 1998; Sujoldžić 2008) have shown that the sense of regional belonging is not opposed to feelings of ethnic and national identity in the population (and does not exclude them) but that it represents only one level of a multi-layered identity.

2 The Charter’s Article 1 clearly states that “it does not include either dialects of the official language” (<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm>).

Contemporary Linguistic Situation, Local Varieties, and Regional Identification in Istria

There are twenty-two national minorities that coexist in the Istrian County today. Istria has the highest proportion of Italians in Croatia and, due to specific historical circumstances mentioned above, the Italian population in Istria has the special status of an indigenous minority. Their status and specific rights are recognized at the national, regional, and local level. The Croatian and Italian standard languages are in equal official use in administrative bodies at the level of the county, while in towns and municipalities inhabited by members of the Italian national community Croatian and Italian are in equal official use, in accordance with individual statutes.

Even though Istria is a bilingual region at the official level (standard Croatian and standard Italian), multilingualism is a distinctive feature of Istrian reality. The everyday linguistic situation shows different patterns of communication: many local non-standard South-Slavic (Chakavian, Cakavian, Cokavian, Cekavian, and Kajkavian) and Romanic (Istro-Venetian, Istriot, and Istro-Romanian) idioms, different minority languages (Albanian, Macedonian, Serbian, etc.) as well as code-switching, code-mixing, and receptive multilingualism are in everyday use and represent ordinary forms of communication.

Throughout the past, local dialects in Istria, especially those of Slavic origin, were considered inferior to standard languages – they were perceived as a sign of a low level of education and their speakers were often designated as “primitive” because these varieties were mostly spoken in rural areas (villages surrounding urban centres which were populated by speakers of Romanic urban varieties). The regional policy, which has been significantly promoted since the 1990s (and which stresses “Istrianity”), has led to a growing appreciation of all Istrian varieties. This trend was also a reaction to purist tendencies and to the imposition of the new Croatian standard language, which was seen as alien to the local Istrian population (Sujoldžić 2008). Also, the phenomenon of the “ča-wave” (“ča-val”), popular and rock music with lyrics sung in the Istrian Chakavian dialect(s), which came to prominence in Istria in 1994 as another expression of Istrian regionalism, played a major role in the promotion and popularization of the Istrian Chakavian dialect (i.e. of different local idioms). Through the medium of regional musical expression, the local dialect has received strong support in the mass media, even beyond the borders of the Istrian County, which has further strengthened the sense of regional belonging in the Istrian population (Kalapoš 2002).

Previous studies on the issues of identity and local language in the Istrian setting (Kalapoš 2002; Sujoldžić 2008, 2009; Skelin Horvat–Muhvić-Dimanovski 2012) have stressed the importance of the local language for the identification processes of Istrians. As Sujoldžić (2008) reports, the results of a quantitative study on language attitudes and perceptions of the standard and of regional varieties

among 1 154 secondary school students in Istria have shown that a high proportion of students consider one of the local dialects as their first language (55% of all students stated a Croatian and 7% an Italian dialect as their mother tongue). They have a positive attitude toward local idioms and demonstrate resistance against the symbolic domination of the standard language in everyday use.

Our qualitative research has confirmed the fact that local varieties, as well as specific linguistic practices and multilingual forms of communication such as code-switching, code-mixing, and receptive multilingualism, are very present in everyday interactions in public and especially in private space, which is illustrated with some excerpts from our interviews:

“Since we are here in Istria, we have a mixed language, we have Italian and Croatian words. (...) We have Italian, Italian-Croatian. Istrian, **it is a kind of a mix**. A mixture of everything, of people, of languages and, I mean, of culture, of ways of life, ways of cooking” (F, 1934, Rovinj).

“He starts speaking in Italian, then continues in Croatian, says two, three words in Croatian, and then he starts in Italian again, and so on” (M, 1978, Rovinj).

“I find it very interesting to listen to older women on the bus; they speak the Italian dialect, and when they can’t remember the words they insert a Croatian word. I was listening to two of them, one said: *Ga preso bolovanje*.³ That’s how people speak here” (F, 1954, Zadar/Pula).

“The situation is interesting in our house. **Dad has always spoken Italian and my mom spoke Istrian, Chakavian**. Which means Croatian-Chakavian. And I know that he used to reply in Italian and she would speak Croatian. And they always understood each other” (M, 1938, Pula).

What is interesting here is that the “mix” used in everyday communication is actually a mix of Croatian and Italian dialects, sometimes with few words from the standard variety (usually the words used in administration).

The standard Croatian and Italian languages are used only in very official and formal contexts and our interlocutors consider their dialects to be equal to the Standard Croatian (and Italian) language. Our research has shown that most of them have multilingual competences in different idioms and urban vernaculars and that their various linguistic practices represent for them markers of their specific mentality (openness, tolerance, and solidarity), which is one of the key elements of their regional identity, their “Istrianity”:

“You greet an Italian ‘*Buon giorno*’ and he says ‘*Dobar dan*’. It’s **a sign of respect**” (M, 1968, Pula).

3 Croatian (standard) word for sick-leave.

“I see that those people who once didn’t bother, today they try more to speak Chakavian. That’s very positive. I think it’s very good because **it positively affects the local identity**” (M, 1969, Pula).

The frequent use of regional and local varieties (primarily in family interactions but also in the public sphere) and of mixed codes (i.e. the simultaneous use of two or more dialects or languages) are considered elements which contribute to the richness of Istrian culture as well as important means of identification with their community, markers of belonging:

“But I think it’s important to remain somehow with your mother tongue. Because **that’s your mother tongue**, that’s your root, that’s a connection with the place where you come from, where your family is from, your ancestors, and because it is a richness, no matter which language it is, a world language or perhaps a language used only in one village, but still it represents your roots” (F, 1967, Pula).

“By knowing the dialect, you simply work on **the preservation of your identity**. (...). Absolutely, because this is what links you to your affiliation, because that word means for you something different than in Italian, it has **a deeper meaning** than words in Italian or in Croatian have” (F, 1976, Pula).

The local population, as stated by our interlocutors, holds the view that those newcomers in Istria who strive to learn local varieties spoken there and use them in everyday communication would become better integrated and accepted by the local population:

“If they [the newcomers] spoke Chakavian, it would be easier to accept them as Istrians. For me, **it is inconceivable to consider someone an Istrian if they don’t speak Chakavian**” (F, 1987, Opatija/Pula).

Concluding Remarks

Our research has shown that the regional and local varieties are very present in everyday Istrian reality and that they function as symbolic capital in terms of the authentic identity of Istrians. In multicultural communities, there are a number of types of linguistic resources available for speakers to choose in order to construct and index their identity, as confirmed by our results. Therefore, we also argue that specific linguistic practices and multilingual forms of communication (code-switching, code-mixing, and receptive multilingualism) represent acts of identity – they are important as identity markers and for the self-representation of “true” Istrians as well.

Although the EU's multilingualism policy is striving to protect and promote Europe's rich linguistic diversity, especially indigenous regional or minority languages, it protects only those entities which have the (political) status of a language, but it does not take into account dialects, varieties mainly used in oral form or other non-standard and non-official varieties, as well as specific forms of multilingual communication. The scholars examining the role of ECRML criticized the situation "where only the languages that can be construed as heritage language of the respective nations, languages that can show historical ties to the nation can expect support and protection" (Soldat-Jaffe 2015: 383). Soldat-Jaffe claims that ECMRL actually takes the language user out of the discourse, making efforts to protect the language, and not the speaker (Soldat-Jaffe 2015: 381). Neither any of the local varieties present in Istria nor the specific forms of multilingual communication used there are taken into account by the Charter. Considering the results obtained by the research, our opinion is that the aim and the applicability of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages should be re-examined, particularly having in mind its primary goal: "the protection and promotion of language and cultural diversity in Europe" (McMonagle 2012: 3). If this goal is truly to be achieved, the Charter should include dialects as well because most often dialects (and not the standard variety) are among the most important markers of regional and local identities as well as the "secret ingredient" contributing to the so much proclaimed linguistic and cultural diversity.

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was supported by funding from the Croatian Science Foundation under grant IP-11-2013-3914 for the project *Historical Perspectives on Transnationalism and Intercultural Dialogue in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (TIDA)* and by the 6th Framework Programme of the European Commission under the grant 2006-28388, for a larger programme of research within *LINEE – Languages In a Network of European Excellence*.

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