Language planning and language status of in a multilingual community: Cimbrian in Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto

1. Introduction

Paolo Coluzzi’s article ‘Language planning for the smallest language minority in Italy’ (2005), published in the journal ‘Language Problems & Language Planning’, offers a profile of Cimbrian: a minority language spoken by a handful of isolated, mountain communities in Trentino-Alto Adige and the neighbouring region of Veneto. This article, which forms part of a greater body of work on minority language planning¹, outlines Cimbrian’s status in the two regions and their differing approaches to language planning and policy.

To determine the significance of Cimbrian, it is necessary to provide a linguistic backdrop. To this end, I will give a brief overview - both nationally and regionally - before looking more closely at Cimbrian, on a local scale.

2. 1. Italy’s linguistic landscape

Despite the arrival of unification in the nineteenth century, and efforts by Mussolini to build a single fascist nation during the beginning of the twentieth century, Italy remains, culturally, very diverse, best characterised by its regionalism. This variety is mirrored linguistically, as well; Italy is the only European country where all living representatives of the Indo-European families found in Europe are represented, with the exception of Celtic (Coluzzi 2007:14). The 33 individual heritage languages² and

¹ Coluzzi, Paolo. 2007. Minority Language Planning and Micronationalism in Italy. Oxford: Peter Lang. (All information, unless otherwise indicated, is cited from this text)

² http://www.ethnologue.org/show_country.asp?name=IT
various regional and immigrant languages make for a rich and varied linguistic landscape.

2.2. Language policy in Italy

The Italian Constitution, which came into force in 1948, certainly mentions linguistic minorities, but, since the end of the Second World War, only four of them have received any serious support: the Fronco Provençals of Valle d’Aosta; the Tyrolese and Ladins of Trentino-Alto Adige; and the Slovenians of Trieste. More recently, in 1999, a law was passed (Law 482) which states that ‘The Republic shall safeguard linguistic minorities by means of special provisions’. In 2000, the Italian minister for foreign affairs signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages, which had, in fact, been open for signature since 1992. Finally, nearly two years after the passing of Law 482, regulations were issued, stating that the guarantees that had been previously outlined would, in fact, be fulfilled. Although some national language policy has been established, it has not been forthcoming, and one glance at figures for actual expenditure illustrates the government’s less than enthusiastic stance: In 2002, the entire national budget for language planning strategies was €13,784,607. To draw a comparison, in 1998, the autonomous region of Galicia, alone, put aside the equivalent of €17,054,049 for the same purpose. (Coluzzi 2009:39-54)

3. The North-Eastern regions of Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto

It must be noted that the region of Trentino-Alto Adige, is composed of two separate and autonomous provinces: Trento and Bolzano-Bozen. As stated by Dal Negro (2005), Trento has an Italian speaking majority, with a minority of German speakers, along with speakers of Ladin, Mócheno and, of course, Cimbrian.
In Bolzano-Bozen, however, the majority of people speak German (more than 60%), which shares the status of co-official language alongside Italian. This policy is stringently adhered to: all public administration and even semi-public companies offer information in both languages. Interestingly, however, such measures have done little to promote individual bilingualism (Dal Negro 2005). Residents of both language communities, having lived side by side for many years with little reciprocal integration, lead distinctly, monolingual lives; the language policy enables them to do so. In stark contrast, speakers of Ladin (4.3% of the population), as stated by Verra (2005), tend to display good language abilities in both of the dominant languages: 99.9% of Ladins claiming to know Italian and 92.3% claiming to know German. A similar pattern of trilingualism can be expected for speakers of other minority languages in the region, including Cimbrian.

Veneto, which shares only a relatively small section of its border with a German speaking country compared to the previous provinces, has a definite Italian speaking majority, many of whom, however, speak the dialectal form of Venetan. Isolated examples of Ladin, Mócheno and Cimbrian are also present.

In Bolzano-Bozen, thanks to its status of autonomy, minority languages have been given official recognition; this is not the case in Trento or Veneto.

4.1. The Cimbrians

The Cimbrians are an ethnic minority, protected by Italian State Law\(^3\). Once covering a far larger area, nowadays Cimbrian speakers are mainly limited to four areas: the

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\(^3\) Law 482/1999, as mentioned previously.
Seven Communes on the Asiago/Sleghe Plateau near Vicenza (Veneto); the Thirteen Communes in the Lessinian mountains near Verona (Veneto); the Folgaria and Lavarone plateau and the village of Luserna in the province of Trento (Trentino-Alto Adige); and the Casiglio plateau near Belluno (Veneto). Oddly, despite their common origin and shared language, the four Cimbrian communities are quite different one another, politically, administratively and sociolinguistically.

4.2. The Cimbrian Language

_Hia Lebeten a zait sobeldar leûte_
‘Here many lived once’

_Hia gabûart, hiar borraat der, un der ander_
‘Here were they born, here they married each other’

_Alle saint toat; na affan tak vu heûte_
‘They are all dead; now’

_Vûghent net de Stoane mear âber annander!_
‘The stones stand on each other no longer!’

_Vume Toode des naideghe slaghen_
‘Under death’s power fallen’

_Giunghe, un alte unghezelene ‘iz’ Grapp_
‘Young and old, endlessly into the grave.’

_Un nijl ofte den alten Fan stapp_
‘Very often an old man on his stick’

_Spaart, u’ stijltúz den roschorsten Knegh_
‘Is spared, and the strongest youngster taken away’

This example of Cimbrian comes from an inscription found on a dilapidated house in the Seven Communes area (Veneto).

4 In fact, as Coluzzi states in a later text, Cimbrian has now completely died out on the Casiglio plateau.
5 Translation as offered by Coluzzi in Coluzzi, Paolo. 2007. _Minority Language Planning and Micronationalism in Italy_. Oxford: Peter Lang.
Cimbrian is a dialect of Bavarian and has maintained characteristics of Middle High German. Although spoken in rather isolated communities, over time, Cimbrian has been influenced by the surrounding Venetan and Trentino dialects, which have often been the Cimbrians’ second languages.

4.3. Sociolinguistic Status: past and present

Today, only a scattering of Cimbrian speakers remain: in Roana and Mezzaselva in the Seven Communes by a few dozen out of a population of 3,400; in Giazza, found in the area of the Thirteen Communes, by approximately 20 people out of a population of 90; and in Luserna in Trentino by about 220 out of a population of 359. In total, no more than 300 people speak Cimbrian. Two to three centuries ago, that figure would have been about 20,000, yet, even by the time of the 1921 census, as few as 3,762 speakers of Cimbrian were recorded. Such a remarkable language shift is not so difficult to explain; beyond the usual factors facing minority languages the world over (e.g. low status and lack of institutional support), Cimbrian speakers tend to live in a small communities, which lack economic and educational opportunities. This understandably leads to the emigration of individuals to urban areas, where Cimbrian has no presence.

5. Language Planning

As identified in section 4.1., Cimbrian is spoken by only a few, rather unconnected communities. Consequently, I shall give an overview of language planning structures, divided according to area:
Roana

The Institute of Cimbrian Culture was founded in 1973 and is involved with the preservation and promotion of Cimbrian language and culture. Besides running the Museum of Cimbrian Tradition, the institute carries out historical and linguistic research, organises various events and conferences and has published a number of books and journals.

Giazza

Similarly in Giazza, in 1974, the cultural association Curatorium Cimbricum Veronense was founded. It functions much in the same way: organising events, carrying out studies and publishing books on Cimbrian language and culture. In addition to this, however, the association is responsible for organising the Festa dei Cimbri, an annual festival held to celebrate the Cimbrian people.

Luserna

The Mocheno-Cimbrian Cultural Institute and Cultural Association of Luserna combine to offer variety of activities: literature competitions; a Cimbrian summer camp; theatrical performances and language activities in local schools; Cimbrian language classes; Cimbrian folk music events; and various publications.

The vitality of language planning initiatives for each area seems to correspond closely to the abundance of Cimbrian-speakers found there. However, it is difficult to distinguish whether an imaginative and varied approach to language planning, as seen in Luserna, is responsible for maintaining a relatively high use of Cimbrian, or rather
that in a fairly well established language community, there is simply more demand for such initiatives.

6. Conclusion

Superficially, there would seem to be a substantial and invested interest in keeping Cimbrian alive. However, with a total speech community of no more than 300, the outlook for the Cimbrian language is decidedly bleak. With regards to education, besides adult education courses, which are fairly widespread, Cimbrian has very little presence. Where it is found in a formal teaching environment, it never appears as the main language of instruction, but an additional subject and is never taught for more than a couple of hours a week.

Taking a closer look at structures and initiatives in place, it becomes apparent that the core focus of these institutes and associations is on maintaining and promoting the Cimbrian culture and heritage, rather than the language. Unless it becomes more widely introduced into formal education and its status is greatly improved, there is little hope for Cimbrian language. This, then - the documentation of the language and the promotion of culture - is, perhaps, a more attainable and realistic goal.
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