

Introduction to the German Language Islands in Italy: A Historical and Legal Overview

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The goal of this paper is to give a historical and legal overview of the German-speaking communities in Italy. To do so, I will divide the paper in four sections: first, I will introduce the topic itself; in the second section, I will describe the historical background of each community; in the third section, I will analyse the legal framework of the protection of these communities, investigating on the Italian and regional legislations. Finally, in the conclusion I will answer to the following question: Is the culture and the idiom of the German communities living in the language islands, properly protected by the national and regional legislations?

Introduction

A language island or language exclave is a territory in which the majority of the population, that historically live in that zone, speak a different language from the one spoken in the surrounding geographic areas.¹ This phenomenon can be mainly explained by two reasons: because of a documented historic pre-existence of a linguistic minority, or because of a recent migration of linguistic groups.² Two well-known examples of language islands are Brussels, where the majority of the population is French-speaking while being in a Flemish-speaking region, and the Szekler Land, in the middle of Romania, where the majority of the population is Hungarian-speaking.

In this paper, I will investigate the German language islands in Italy. In the Italian peninsula, it is stated that 0.4% of the entire population use German as their mother tongue, the majority of which live in the autonomous region of South Tyrol.³ However, in the paper I will not take into account South Tyrol, where the German speakers represent the majority, and could be treated as a national and not a linguistic community; instead, I will study the case of the German language islands, which are small and medium sized municipalities, located in the northern part of the country, along the Alps chain, disseminated from the eastern to the western Italian border.

1 PREZZI 2004

2 PELLEGRINI et al. 1984

3 TOSO 2008

The German-speaking minority in Italy can be divided in two main groups, according to their dialect: the Bavarian, also called south oriental German, and the Alemannic, also known as south-western German. The Cimbro, the Mòcheno, the Eastern Italian municipalities (Sappada, Sauris, Timau) and Canale Valley, correspond to the Bavarian group, while the Walser dialect corresponds to the Alemannic group.⁴ Moreover, each dialect corresponds to a specific group identity, which means that each community has specific traditions and cultures.

Due to the morphology of the place where these municipalities are disseminated, and the consequent isolation from the rest of the country, the language and culture of the German language communities remained almost unaltered since they settled along the Alps chain, which in some cases dates back to the Early Middle Ages.⁵ As a consequence of this isolation, in the next paragraph I will analyse each German language community in a historical point of view, since only recently, the foundation of the Unitarian Committee of the Historical German Language Communities in Italy registered a contact between them. In order to facilitate the reading, I will divide these communities in two macro-groups, according to the language family group to which they belong: the Bavarian and the Alemannic.

While in a historical point of view it is necessary to investigate over each community separately, in the third section, in which I will examine the legal protection by the Italian and regional authorities towards the linguistic minorities in the Peninsula, I will treat them as a homogeneous block. This is due to the approach run by the Italian authorities which tackled the issue in general, without a specific treatment for each of them.⁶ The same approach can be applied for the regional legislations, which applied the State Law to the local German communities.

Finally, based on the historical and legal contents analysed in the present work, in the conclusion I will answer to the following question: Is the culture and the idiom used in the German language islands properly protected by the national and regional legislations? In order to give a proper answer, I will sum up the contents of the present work, ending with the conclusion remarks.

Historical Overview

As mentioned in the previous section, in this part of the paper I will analyse the history of each German language island in the Italian peninsula. In order to assure a better understanding of this complex scenario, I decided to categorise these communities into two different groups, according to the dialect spoken by the community itself. The first one is the Bavarian linguistic group, to whom belong the majority of the communities, while the second one is the Alemannic group, to which belongs the Walser community. It is important to note that, with the exception of the Eastern

4 PELLEGRINI et al. 1984

5 PREZZI 2004

6 TOSO 2008

Italian group, all the communities I will analyse in the following paragraphs can be considered both linguistic and ethnic groups.⁷ In fact, while in some cases German dialects are spoken today only by a few hundreds of people, their cultural identity is still strong.

Bavarian linguistic group

The Mòcheno

The Mòcheno community lives in a small valley between the cities of Trento and Bolzano, which in Italian is called Fersina and in Mòcheno Bernstol, which means the “Valley of the Mòcheno people”. The first documents attesting the presence of a German community in the Valley is dated back to the 13th century, when a small group of Bavarian families moved in this zone to work in the mines.⁸ After the First World War, when the region where Mòcheno people lived became part of the Italian Kingdom, the language spoken by this community suffered strong nationalist policies by the Liberal governments, and later by the Fascist regime.⁹

According to the survey made by the Italian National Institute of Statistics in 2016, the number of people who currently speak the Mòcheno language is 1,660, in the following municipalities: Palù, Fierozzo and Frassilongo. Even though the Mòcheno language is slowly switching from being a mother tongue to solely being a second language, in the municipality of Palù and in a village close to Frassilongo named Roveda, all the inhabitants use Mòcheno in their daily life, including children.¹⁰

The Cimbri

The Cimbri communities are distributed in two administrative regions: the Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto, in the municipalities of Luserna, and in the Provinces of Verona and Vicenza. There are two theories behind the origin of these ancient community. On the one hand, some historians state that the Cimbri community in Italy are descendants of the Cimbri community of the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark.¹¹ On the other hand, the most probable theory is that the Cimbri community was founded by Bavarians who escaped in this area the decade after the 1053 famine.¹²

Concerning the use of the Cimbri language, there are great differences between those living in Luserna and those living in the Veneto region. This difference is mainly attributable to the regional law on minority languages adopted by the respective

7 TELMON 1992

8 PREZZI 2004

9 PELLEGRINI et al. 1984

10 PREZZI 2004

11 PREZZI 2004

12 PELLEGRINI et al. 1984

regions, which is the argument of the next section. Out of the 3,000 Cimbri individuals living in Veneto, only 230 of them are able to properly speak the language, while 84% of the 1,072 Cimbri people in Trentino-Alto Adige use Cimbri as their mother tongue.¹³

Eastern Italian

The last group belonging to the Bavarian dialect is the so-called “Eastern Italian”, because of the geographic position in which the language islands are settled, in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia autonomous region, located in the north-eastern part of Italy. There are four municipalities that belong to this group, namely: Sappada, Sauris, Timau and Valcanale, with a total of 2,500 people.¹⁴ Each municipality has a different history, and the German spoken in each village has different peculiarities.¹⁵ This is mainly because of the several linguistic and ethnic communities living in this region. For example, in Sappada people speak a mix of German and Italian, while in Sauris and Timau they speak a mixture of German and Slavic languages, and in Valcanale the language spoken is standard German, with an influence of the Carinthian dialect.¹⁶

Alemannic linguistic group

The Walser

As already mentioned in the previous sections, the Walser community is the only one that belongs to the Alemannic linguistic group. Members of this community are descendants of peasants coming from the Swiss Canton of Valais (or Wallis in German).¹⁷ In fact, the word “Walser” is the contraction of the German word “Walliser”, the inhabitant of the Wallis Canton. As a matter of fact, the Walser settled in the Aosta Valley and Piedmont regions around the 12th and 13th centuries. Nowadays, there are twelve municipalities where Walsers live, with a population of 3,400 people.¹⁸

The Legal Protection of the German Linguistic Islands in Italy

The legal protection of the German linguistic islands in Italy is structured by three levels: the European, the National and the Regional legislation. In the following paragraphs, I will analyse the National and Regional legislations. Additionally, I will

13 PREZZI 2004

14 ROSSI 2016

15 PELLEGRINI et al. 1984

16 Ibid.

17 PREZZI 2004

18 Ibid.

briefly mention the European regulation, in order to better understand the general framework under which the National and Regional laws were established.

At the European level, the very first document addressing the protection of linguistic minorities in Europe was the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted by the European Council in Strasbourg in 1992. The treaty defines the goal and objectives, that each signatory member should follow to protect and promote minority languages in their countries. These measures encompass civil and judiciary administration, school, mass media, cultural, economic and social life. Following the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, other measures were taken, such as: the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and the 2013 Report on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union.

National legislation

In a national perspective, the protection of linguistic minorities is first assured by the 1948 Italian Constitution, in which Article 6 states that “The Republic safeguards linguistic minorities by means of appropriate measures”. However, for more than 50 years, no measures were taken by the Italian authorities to protect the linguistic minorities and promote their culture. Only in 1999, with the State Law No. 482, regulations on linguistic minorities were finally taken.

First, the State Law 482/1999 officially recognises 12 linguistic minorities on the Italian territory, including German.¹⁹ Moreover, it stipulates the norms that each public entity should follow in order to assure the complete equality between members of linguistic minorities and ethnic Italians, such as the translation of official documents, the establishment of toponomy signs in the streets, etc. Furthermore, this law gives the possibility to each administrative region to implement the local jurisdiction, which I will analyse in the next chapter.²⁰

Later on, State Law No. 38 entered into force in 2001, in relation to the Slovenian Minority in the Friuli-Venezia region. However, it also refers to the German linguistic minorities mentioned in the previous section. The peculiarity of State Law 38/2001, is that it is the only one that directly addresses a regional case, while in other circumstances, the Regional councils are the ones that usually legislate on these topics.²¹ Finally, on the 5th of July 2017, the Italian Government finally ratified the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. With the ratification of this treaty, Italy adopted all the European measures for the protection of linguistic minorities, adding to the three national laws outlined in this section.

19 Toso 2008

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

Regional legislation

As mentioned before, State Law 38/2001 gives certain freedom to each administrative region to implement the measures to protect and promote linguistic minorities in the regional territory. However, there are great differences in the protection of these minorities, between autonomous regions and all the others. In fact, in 1970, 20 administrative regions were finally officially recognised by the 1948 Constitution.²² However, five of them were given autonomy status, because of economic or political reasons; these regions were Sicily, Sardinia, Aosta Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

While some autonomous regions, like Aosta Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, are characterised by a strong presence of linguistic minorities, which is why they obtained an autonomous status; in the other regions, the linguistic minorities are numerically insignificant.²³ To better understand the differences between an autonomous and a non-autonomous region, let us take the Cimbri language islands as an example. In fact, this minority lives in both the Trentino-Alto Adige (autonomous) and the Veneto (non-autonomous) regions, and while in the first case, large funds are allocated for the promotion of their culture, and also for the economic revitalisation of their mountain communities, in the second case, the Veneto region only recognises their historical presence in the territory and established toponym signs in some municipalities.²⁴ As a consequence, it is not a coincidence that 84% of the Cimbri people living in Trentino-Alto Adige currently speak the Cimbri language, against only a few dozens in Veneto. The same situation can be applied to the Walser community, which is divided between the Aosta Valley (autonomous), and the Piedmont (non-autonomous) regions.²⁵

This difference between autonomous and non-autonomous regions can be explained in two different ways. On the one hand, because of the greater funds granted to the autonomous regions and their special taxation regime, which allows them to retain two-thirds of the taxes, while the other regions cannot retain more than one-fifth.²⁶ On the other hand, as mentioned before, the autonomous regions have more “know-how” on minority policies, while other regions started to face their own minority issues only in the past few years.

22 DUGGAN 2014

23 TOSO 2008

24 PREZZI 2004

25 Ibid.

26 TOSO 2008

Conclusion

In the present work, I outlined the complex situation of the German language island in Northern Italy. To do so, I briefly investigated the history and the current condition of each community, illustrating with the use of data. In the second part, I analysed the national and legal frameworks for the protection and promotion of the language and culture of the German islands. Moreover, in the second part, I also introduced the European framework of minority protection, in order to give a broader view on the issue itself.

Given that the issue of the German islands is complex, the aim of the paper was to answer to an equally complex question: Is the culture and the idiom of the German communities living in the language islands properly protected by the national and regional legislations? Starting from the national legislation, the two most important sources of law in Italy, namely the Constitution and State Laws, provide a great range of rights to the linguistic minorities, in many fields of their life.

However, the case of the regional laws is different, which also differs from region to region. In fact, on the one hand, in the autonomous regions, the rights and opportunities given to minority members are much more developed compared to the regions where there is an ordinary status. In fact, while in the former the affirmative actions ran by the local authorities towards minorities brought the safeguard of the minorities' identity, in the latter, the inertia of the regional councils brought the weakening of their identities. Finally, to answer to the paper's question, I would state that both the national and regional legislations do protect German islands communities in Italy, even though it is necessary to implement new policies, especially towards the ordinary status administrations.

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