

Dialects as markers of regional identity in the Croatian region of Istria

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Istria – a multicultural and multilingual region



- ▶ border region divided between 3 countries
- ▶ heterogeneous cultural influences
 - multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual reality
 - historical multiculturalism
 - coexistence of 22 minorities

Aims and methods of the study

AIMS:

- ▶ to what degree do local varieties and specific forms of multilingual communication represent ordinary forms of everyday communication in Istria?
- ▶ to what degree do they carry symbolic value for their speakers and act as a marker of their regional identification?

METHODS

- ▶ ethnographic approach
- ▶ qualitative methodology:
 - semi-structured interviews
 - observation of language practices
- ▶ observation of linguistic landscape (photos)



Language (dialect) as identity marker

- ▶ language as symbol of belonging and solidarity
- ▶ marker of cultural and group identity
(e.g. Fishman 1989; Joseph 2004; Edwards 2009)
- ▶ multilingual communities: the use of multilingualism and mixing practices as important elements for cultural identification
 - **identification with linguistic pluralism**, not with a specific code (Ansaldo 2010)

Contemporary linguistic situation

- ➔ Official level: *standard Croatian and standard Italian bilingualism*



„The Istrian Region promotes Istrian folk customs, national holidays, protection of autochthonous toponyms, and **the preservation of local dialects** (Chakavian, Cakavian, Cokavian, Cekavian, Kajkavian, Istriot, Istro-Venetian, Istro-Romanian and other) through education about the homeland and through other means”

(Statute of the Istrian Region, Article 18)



Contemporary linguistic situation

- ▶ **Everyday language use: *multilingualism***
- ▶ **different local non-standard idioms:**
 - ▶ *South-Slavic (Chakavian, Cakavian, Cokavian, Cekavian, Kajkavian)*
 - ▶ *Romanic (Istro-Venetian, Istriot, Istro-Romanian)*
- ▶ **minority languages** (*e.g. Albanian, Macedonian, Serbian*)
- ▶ **code-switching, code-mixing, receptive multilingualism**

Code-switching; code mixing

- „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 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***. That's how people speak here“ (F, 1954, Zadar/Pula)
- „*Mi sono andata a **tržnica**, Questa profesoressa di **tjelesni odgoj** i tako“ (M, 1976, Pula)*



Receptive multilingualism

„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)

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



Regional identity - „Istrianity”

- ▶ the specific regional identification of the inhabitants of the Istrian peninsula:

Census: 1991: 37 027 (16,1%)

2001: 8 865 (4,30%)

2011: 25 203 (12,11%)

- ▶ **Statute of the Istrian Region:** „*traditional expression of the regional affiliation of the Istrian multiethnos*” (Art. 20)
- ▶ IDS Programmatic Declaration
- ▶ crucial role of local dialects and forms of communication in the formation and preservation of the authentic regional identity
- ▶ „č̌a-val” - popular and rock music played in the Istrian Chakavian dialect

Local varieties and regional identification

- ▶ the importance of the local languages for **individual and group identification** processes of Istrians
- ▶ the importance of **bilingualism for the regional identity**
- ▶ resistance to **symbolic domination of standard languages**
- ▶ local varieties perceived as **mother-tongue**
- ▶ code-switching, code-mixing, receptive multilingualism
 - **markers of specific Istrian mentality**: openness toward multiculturalism, tolerance and solidarity
- ▶ Restricted multilingual practices as symbol of regional identity
 - **exclude all other minority languages** (only Istrian Slavic and Romance variants)

Dialect as mother tongue

„Yes, **we always speak Istro-Venetian. Never the standard**, never. I can count on my fingers, maybe three or four persons who normally use the standard [Italian] language” (F, 1982, Pula)

Q: What does this local speech mean to you, if you think that it is ok for children to learn it as well?

A: Look, I think that the identity of a person is important. (...) I think it is nice to be aware of the fact **that our roots are here**, regarding the culture, the language, everything“ (F, Baničići)

„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)

Dialect as marker of belonging

„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, has **a deeper meaning** than words in Italian or in Croatian have“ (F, 1976, Pula)

„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)

„Well, I feel, actually, because I don't feel like an Istrian in the sense of ...indigenous, which means that **I don't speak the dialect...so I don't have my roots here**“ (F, 1971, Pula)

„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 he doesn't speak Chakavian**“ (F, 1987, Opatija/Pula)

Concluding remarks

- ▶ Regional/local varieties and multilingual practices/competences
 - **symbolic capital**
 - value for **group solidarity**
 - **authentic identity** of Istrians
- ▶ **Exclusionary identity** – based on restrictive multilingualism
(Istrians vs non-Istrians)
- ▶ **Legal protection of local varieties** and forms of communication ?
- ▶ Adequacy of **European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages** ?



**THANK YOU FOR YOUR
ATTENTION!**