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

Mirna Jernej Pulić, Anja Iveković-Martinis
Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb (Croatia)
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)
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

- „ča-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, Banićići)

„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!