

## Positive ideologies ain't enough! (Dis)junctions and paradoxes in minority language protection

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2018, I conducted research on the application of protection measures for two minority language groups (Cimbrian and Mochéno) in Northern Italian schools. The study aimed at describing linguistic learning programs but it slowly turned into something more. The anthropological holistic perspective unveiled profound contradictions and paradoxes in the implementation of minority language policies. Such discrepancies suggest that law can be both a “present and absent” social actor that influences reality in non-immediately perceptible ways. On the one side, purposes of a legislative manifesto can be soundlessly inhibited by bureaucrats’ deliberate inaction or lack of competence. On the other side, an inhibited legislative text still produces undetectable effects and ontologically impacts on individuals. Consequently, positive ideologies ain’t enough if little is known about what happens in everyday operational terms and this cannot be ignored, especially by those who are sincere in their support for linguistic and educational rights. This article endorses a critique of “the justice possible through law” upheld by early law and society research.

**KEYWORDS:** MINORITY LANGUAGE PROTECTION; LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES; LEGAL PARADOXES; ETHNOGRAPHY; TRENTINO MINORITIES.

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Trento province is predominantly Italoophone with the exception of three language groups whose communication includes – along with Italian and Trentino vernaculars – a distinct minority language<sup>1</sup>. Cimbrian, spoken by villagers in Lusérn, and Mochéno, spoken by people from Valle del Fersina (in the municipalities of Vlarotz, Garait and Palai-en-Bernstol), both have German roots although they resulted from colonial expansions with different origins and patterns. Ladin, spoken by inhabitants in Valle di Fassa, despite its many local varieties, holds an autonomous seat among Romance languages.

Based on applying State and local regulations which, by echoing a nationalist ideology, identify minorities through two exclusive criteria – namely “language” and historical “presence on a territory”<sup>2</sup> – the three groups are officially recognized under Italian law as “linguistic minorities”. This implies that Cimbrian, Mochéno and Ladin are formally safeguarded by a solid multi-layered legislative system, which makes them “super protected languages”<sup>3</sup>. This system includes (inter)national and regional provisions which, beside recognizing their existence, attempt to fight against the extinction of the three languages.

By complying with European recommendations and national law, Trento provincial legislation seems keen to embrace a genuine approach to preserving the three minority languages<sup>4</sup>. In particular, a promotional (ideal) model was chosen that acknowledges linguistic differences, provides them with rights and removes obstacles that prevent them from reaching substantial equality (Toniatti 1994). This approach is also reflected in the local educational system since language protection is conceived (at all legal levels) as including, among other things, equal rights to education in school. Owing to the risk of educational ghettoization and, above all, to the excessive financial burden compared to the small number of pupils to be protected, Trento province administration rejected school separatism (adopted towards its own linguistic minorities by the neighboring Bolzano

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1. I would like to thank *Anuac* reviewers for their positive and instructive comments that helped me to develop this article.

2. See in particular Decree Law 592/1993 and Italian Law 482/1999.

3. Cimbrian and Mochéno languages on the one side, and Ladin on the other, reached their status through different political-historical trajectories.

4. See the articulated but fragmentary soft law with which, in 2018, the European Commission (with the Minority SafePack) aimed at harmonization by creating an organic EU legal framework. See also article 6 of the Italian Constitution and Italian Law 482/1999.

province) and opted for a more socially and economically sustainable model. Therefore, in public schools situated within the traditional settlement areas of the three language groups, education is mainly given in Italian, but minority languages and cultures are taught if explicitly requested by interested parties (Palermo, Woelk 2011).

In the last decade, this configuration has been implemented towards Cimbrian and Mochéno speaking pupils who were the focus of my study.

My analysis particularly focuses on the micro level of classrooms and families but with a view to understanding both the (non)impact of legislation issued at a macro level and what role administrative organization plays at the meso level. The ethnographic data resulted from almost a year's fieldwork in schools and in the children's after school lives<sup>5</sup>. I rejected the use of questionnaires in order to seek long-term interaction with the groups of people being studied. My aim was to produce "on-site, contextualized, cross-cutting findings that are intended to account for the 'actor's point of view', for ordinary representations, for usual practices and their autochthonous meanings" (De Sardan 2009: 29). Without this participation, I would not have been able to witness what pupils learned in their minority languages, nor measure the time devoted to these languages, regardless of the formal school agenda. I would not have been able to capture forms and practices of communication. I could not have answered such questions as "who is talking to who, how and when? How many and what languages children and adults use peer-to-peer, with teachers, with younger and older people, inside the school and on the street"? I could not have accessed the manifold (evident and subconscious) language beliefs and ideologies that exist in both language groups and public institutions.

I scientifically chose them on the grounds of several (geo)political considerations. Although existing legislation, as well as the speakers themselves, generally show positive ideologies towards their cultural and linguistic heritage, the two minority languages enjoy a *de facto* low status. There is a palpable shortage of any institutional support in terms of

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5. The fellowship lasted one year and the ethnography covered almost a whole school term (from February to mid-June on the Cimbrian Plateau and from September to mid-December 2018 in Valle dei Mochéni). The study was carried out in four (pre and primary) schools and included ordinary scholastic activities, linguistic labs and modules, educational planning meetings as well as playtime with pupils, coffee breaks with teachers, school excursions and parties in which families were also involved. The fieldwork extended to cover after-school life and included afternoons at playgrounds with children and caregivers, coffees at the bar with parents as well as walks in the woods with teachers. The tools I resorted to were participant observation (with diary notes), ordinary conversations and two focus groups with parents. A collection of oral histories and a partial linguistic mapping of the territories were also compiled.

visibility, of plans for strengthening local economies and, more generally, of investments in the development of “micronational consciousness” (Coluzzi 2005: 251). On the contrary, economic power, along with the increasing equation of language and cultural survival, might explain why *Ladins* in the South Tyrol Province (as well as other minorities) have been more successful in their political struggle for attention, recognition and involvement. Furthermore, the sparse Cimbrian and Mochéno populations<sup>6</sup> have determined lesser critical masses compared to *Ladin* speakers who form a larger group that, once again, has had greater success in increasing its guarantees and achieving a qualitative mutation. Basically, I regarded Cimbrian and Mochéno as “minor minority languages” which is why I deemed a closer look at the preservation dynamics of their cultural specificities in school and at the language policies usage level all the more interesting.

My study found that although teaching, revitalization and awareness-raising processes are underway in the observed schools, they are, nevertheless, fragile. The amount of time actually spent on these projects is very little and teachers appear to have an over-timid approach, which results from endogenous as well as exogenous causes. In fact, on the one hand, schools are overburdened with a wide variety of disciplines and activities, which leaves little room for new projects. On the other, events taking place outside educational establishments, in the wider communities, affect the relative tentativeness of these activities – something I realized by widening my fieldwork to include people’s collective life. This holistic approach uncovered profound contradictions that are liable to affect safeguarding minority languages in school but, to this day, no meaningful public discussion has taken place.

### *Minority language protection both in and out of Trentino Schools*

Spolsky describes domains as “identifiable sectors of a speech community [...] made up of role-determined participants, social describable locations, and appropriate topics” (2014: 409). Certain rhetoric (rooted in the Euro-American cultural model and often affecting its scientific disciplinary approach) is prone to describing each domain as a resistant, airtight entity. However, domains often reveal shady boundaries which are, at times, deliberately related: see the Educative Covenant of Co-Responsibility jointly sealed by schools and families, which aims at promoting a common educative action and at strengthening respectful and collaborative relation-

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6. In 2011 General Census, 1,072 people claimed they are Cimbrian; 1,660 claimed they are Mochéni; 18,550 claimed they are Ladin.

ships. One would expect the bond between domains to result in some degree of participant coherence, especially among those who simultaneously belong to more than one domain (like a mother who is also a teacher), and vice versa. However, beliefs and practices are only supposed to inalterably flow from one domain to another as a result of their connection through individuals. In fact, since everyone plays diverse roles within multiple domains, potentially conflicting attitudes may occur.

Interpreting domains may, therefore, become a challenging activity. When dealing with minority language protection in school, one might be surprised by some unexpected disjunctions between domains that are regarded as tightly intertwined, such as law, school and home. Ethnography, as a (rather invasive) research method, deserves credit for disclosing such – otherwise undetected – disconnections: disconnections that may evolve into actual contradictions. As a result, it enables enacting policies that can no longer escape their responsibilities and that must be closer to the grassroots level.

### *(Dis)connection law-school*

The fieldwork disclosed an initial disjunction that involved the (non)relation between educational and legal domains. There were ongoing language protection projects in the four schools, developed within a *glocal* trend which, since the 1980s has been attempting to resist language shift<sup>7</sup> in diverse communities and in multiple domains of daily life. These projects also developed within a solid (inter)national and regional legal framework of undeniable strategic importance. This virtuous scenario, however, shows vulnerabilities that cannot be underestimated. This particularly applies to a significant mismatch between the abstract legislative level and the pragmatic educational level. A mismatch that risks making law appear no longer as a problem-solving tool but rather as a problem-hiding tool.

The Alpine schools under observation, attended by Cimbrian and Mochéno pupils, face enormous practical obstacles. The Mayor of Lusérn's pleas for obtaining statutory recognition and effective implementation of a 0-6 school model, have been hitting bureaucratic deadlocks (or worse, indifference) for the last 5 years. In Lusérn, this educational strategy (which might be a mere option elsewhere) is the only way to ensure the survival of the pre-school structure which risks closure every year due to a low birth rate within the Cimbrian community. This school not only improves livability within an impervious mountain area, it is currently the only place

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7. In sociolinguistics, language shift is described as the abandonment of one language for another.

where children can be immersed in the minority language on a daily basis. Keeping the school open, however, would not solve all the problems. The institutional diplomacy of silence has also been the answer to bottom up demands for receiving the financial resources required for multiple necessities, such as school supplies: infants are having to sit on adult-sized chairs at high tables because child-friendly facilities are lacking; they also have to negotiate three flights of stairs to move from one classroom to another because the logistics had to adapt to the internal layout of the building which is an old family house donated by a Swiss couple.

Keeping the Vlaroz pre-school open is not at stake but the school still faces economic issues for things that matter, such as drafting and editing pedagogical material in the minority language. Teachers borrow books from the primary school but these are not always suited to the abilities of the younger children. Moreover, this educational equipment is often provided by the primary school teachers themselves, who, on a voluntary basis, have created and published *ad hoc* books, organized into levels and disciplines, in their spare time.

Further to issues affecting each school individually, there is a crosscutting difficulty in staff recruitment, employment, administrative arrangement and substitution (from teachers to special-ed-teachers, from linguistic mediators to auxiliaries) as well as in training new skills, such as multilingual teaching. This is symptomatic of an administrative inertia that affects education as a whole but more so frail projects, like those concerning endangered languages. According to teachers, these projects are given hardly any room within the curricula and would need (at least) continuity and specific skills.

My fieldwork showed that, whereas linguistic ecology, namely “the interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen 2001: 57), reacted to stimulations and challenges by changing and adapting (albeit with unpredictable outcomes), local administrative ecology regarding school seemed to have remained unaltered in the face of introducing a legislative framework to protect minority languages.

### *The children’s after-school life*

The same inflexibility also seems to extend to the children’s after-school life, and this provocatively leads to wondering about the sense of the province’s protection law.

There is a greater sense of localism in both Cimbrian and Mochéno communities and a strong connection with the territory (with the relative customs and practices and a sense of fulfillment for having dominated the hostile land where peace has since reigned). Localism seems to be a valid

emic representation of their identities (although it is not the only one). The fact that a mother portrayed the concept of “protection” as the possibility “to stay in the valley”<sup>8</sup> is meaningful in this regard. However, it is likely that the beliefs and practices that these groups developed in relation to their territories, nurtured the dissemination of ethnic beliefs (i.e. assumptions made by outsiders) which do not fully coincide. In their discourses, urban élites often treat these communities’ sense of localism as the desire for isolation. And, from being only ideally displaced, they have ultimately become segregated owing to a process of marginalization originating from a lack of legal provisions and remedies that, if they had existed, might have soundly facilitated connections and mutual knowledge. Public transport is an example. At the beginning of 2018, Lusérn and Trento (the province capital), which are about 25 miles apart, were connected by four daily buses, all arranged according to a *metropolitan-centric* requirement. Two buses left Lusérn early in the morning and two buses returned in the evening. Lusérn was not perceived as a place where an individual might want to travel to in the morning and stay all day (either for work or pleasure). In order to work in the village, non-resident, unlicensed educators have no other choice but to move there and spend their salaries on rented accommodation (since the apartment historically reserved for the teacher is no longer available). This may be one of the reasons why, when teachers are requested to indicate the institutes they would most like to be employed at, or temporarily assigned to, from a list of provincial schools, Lusérn pre-school is among the last choices<sup>9</sup>.

According to timetables, there are a few more buses from and to Vlarotz connecting it to the closest urban center (not Trento, which can only be reached by an additional train ride). Here, when someone asks for directions to Val dei Mochéni, people indicate the main road, adding a couple of words with a reiterated wave of the hand suggesting a distant destination. As in the past (when local people used to travel by wagon), Mochéno speaking people are still seen as those living “way over there”, while they are actually only 15 miles away. In November 2017, the Alderman for Infrastructure described the introduction of three additional buses running on holy days as “a real revolution”<sup>10</sup>.

Isolation eventually affected life within the two communities too. In Vlarotz, apart from school, children have hardly any recreational space where congregating opportunities can be generated or reinforced and where

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8. Focus group, 22 January 2019.

9. Private conversation with teachers, 15 June 2018.

10. *Trentino Today*, 3 November 2017, <http://www.trentotoday.it/cronaca/autobus-domenica-val-mocheni-orari.html>, accessed on 10 January 2019.

social and linguistic interchange is possible<sup>11</sup>. There are no soccer, volleyball or tennis fields, no library, no parish. The latter was replaced by the pre-school (the municipality was faced with a choice). A couple of years ago, a multifunctional center was built but is still waiting to be officially opened due to bureaucratic issues. In the meantime, the community is wondering what will happen to it: if public administration decides to charge people for using it, hardly anyone will be able to pay because one consequence of “small numbers” is often excessive costs that everyone has to bear.

In recent years, a summer camp – *Zumberclub* – has received funds from local administration but only enough for five afternoon encounters throughout the season during which children play together for no more than a couple of hours. The *Zumberclub* is not exclusively open to children but rather to families, who cannot join because of work commitments. The kind of work that interviewed mothers referred to was not part of the high-income tourist business that other valleys in this rich region benefit from but those silent activities (making hay, clearing forests and chopping wood, collecting dung for vegetable gardens, looking after the few remaining animals) that bond individuals to the territory but which are no longer lucrative enough for survival. This work is therefore done during breaks from primary jobs and businesses that are normally carried out in major urban centers outside the valley. Because of that, community members have increasingly less chance to meet. In summertime, even the local choir suspends practice because its members are working in the fields until late. According to one interviewed mother

The future of the Mochéno child... and, therefore, of his minority language... is with one foot in the valley... doing agriculture, pastoralism, carpentry, beekeeping... and the other foot outside his territory. This valley will have a future only if its children do two jobs because they cannot survive with only a few cows... and this is exhausting<sup>12</sup>.

Existing legislation seems to rely on a positive ideology in terms of the two minority languages and on a major interest in their preservation. However, the intervention needed to make protection effective (i.e. the enactment, by local authorities, of regulatory acts able to impact and concretely modifying subjective situations) is all but absent. The apparent genuine willingness to value minority languages clashes with a substantive abandonment of schools and municipalities where the two linguistic

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11. This is especially true for children living in the most remote *heff* (housing common to the area).

12. Focus group, 22 January 2019.

minorities spend their lives. This leads to a paradox: while there is an apparent desire to preserve a language, the survival of its potential speakers is disregarded as if the two things were not inextricably linked. As in *graffiti* artwork by Banksy, the legislative framework appears to be realistic but, when you look closely, instead of seeing principles governing language protection concretely operating in all possible articulations, you come up against a brick wall: it does not produce a real system metamorphosis and is only an illusion.

### *(Dis)connection home-school*

The second disconnection affects educational and domestic domains and involves parents belonging to the protected linguistic groups. There seems to be a disjointedness between how parents use the minority language with offspring at home and in social networking and the way they speak about its protection in school.

Discourses on safeguarding their respective languages were conducted in different moods (fiery in Lusérn and pondered in Vlarotz) but all interviewed parents appeared to have a high ethnic sense and an interest in protecting their languages. They showed a positive and strong ideology towards what, in local rhetoric, is presented (and often perceived) as the mother-tongue, i.e. the primary language of socialization. However, the school-children said that they almost never spoke the minority language at home<sup>13</sup>. Whether data collected in pre-schools is less reliable (due to children's potential inability to analytically discern between different language codes), the information from the primary school children seemed to be more trustworthy. Intrigued by this study, they themselves often diverted the conversation towards language use, showing their ability to identify the difference in language. The more skilled of them turned it into a game, asking the researcher different questions in different languages, much to their amusement.

Both in Lusérn and Vlaroz, linguistic uses in families include widespread bilingualism as well as radical *Italianization*. In Vlarotz, Italian is almost entirely replaced by Trentino vernacular. According to social actors this is the result of a language shift process, developed within families over three generations, which has led to the near-extinction of minority languages as linguistic vehicles. The same transformation, incidentally, also seems to have spread outside the domestic domain into socialization areas and places providing basic commodities (playgrounds, markets, pubs, restaurants, to name a few). Administrative language also prioritizes the national language:

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13. Conversation with pupils at Vlarotz Primary School, 18 October 2018.

bilingualism in safety instructions, public notices, obituaries, etc. is almost inexistent. Opinions in favor of there being more measures in this sense so that children might have more chance to appreciate the minority language (after all, language planning should be pursued on the assumption that belief and ideologies can change) were derided (see, for example, Hadji-demetriou 2014 and Räisänen 2014).

Parents' responses (almost exclusively mothers) when asked about this disjunction, were vague but sincere. Most of them openly acknowledged their own shortcomings in minority language use. Some mothers see the increasing language shift within their own families as a result of intermarriage, i.e. marriages between native speakers and non. Interestingly, however, the shift did not appear to be the result of a hegemonic linguistic relationship where the (alleged) strongest language prevailed. It was more of a consequence of applying a communicative rule that exists in both minority languages. Languages are embedded in a wider culture of communication that, among other things, influences ways of managing the conversation. By agreeing that it is "ill-mannered"<sup>14</sup> to use a language that other people included in the conversation do not speak, these mothers unconsciously made a praxis explicit. Within these marital unions, therefore, having renounced minority language as a means, does not mean renouncing it as a practice.

Other mothers claimed that they feel uncomfortable with the language because they could not speak it correctly. They therefore informally delegated grandparents or fathers who were regarded as "indigenous" to the place. According to the schoolchildren, however, their fathers did not gladly speak the minority language and, in some cases, spoke incorrectly. Being native to a place where a minority language is (one among those) used for socialization purposes, does not automatically make an individual an active or fluent speaker, nor even a good teacher. According to Medgyes (1992), what sometimes makes a teacher able to teach a language is having gone through a formal learning process of that language himself.

An interesting fact is that not even all native-speaking teachers of Cimbrian and Mochéno, use these languages on a day-to-day basis, or transmit them to offspring and grandchildren. The young granddaughter of a native-speaking teacher stated that "she will learn Mochéno when she grows up"<sup>15</sup>. Another woman openly acknowledged that, although she regarded herself as a native Mochéno-speaking teacher, she had spoken Italian to her

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14. Focus group, 22 January 2019 and Focus group 23 May 2018.

15. Conversation with pupils at Vlarotz Pre-School, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018.

kids since when they were born because “it came naturally”<sup>16</sup>. According to Marquis and Sallabank (2014), being a minority language teacher valorizes the self-image of those who suffered negative attitudes by affirming their linguistic skills and outweighing the guilt of not having transmitted that language to their descendants. There could be “a blurred line between language revitalization and personal revitalization” (*ibidem*: 158). A further aspect, however, is employment opportunities and economic gain. Some of the teachers and mediators interviewed had held a number of temporary jobs before they considered capitalizing on their linguistic knowledge through teaching.

According to other mothers, especially in Vlarotz, the language shift was the result of being obliged to go to major urban centers for work on a daily basis. They perceived Ladin people as having more chances of remaining in the valley<sup>17</sup>. In these mothers’ view, by working and studying within their own territory, Ladins were more inclined to keep speaking their own minority language throughout the day, with no need to use other language media. Two mothers who complained of this, however, worked in the local public administration office and did, therefore, spend their days within the territory but they still only occasionally used the minority language.

### *Latent answers to the disconnection home-school*

Rindstedt and Aronsson (2002:724) coined the expression “paradox of ethnic revitalization” when referring to discrepancies between uses-of and discourses-about minority languages by would-be speakers. In Cimbrian and Mochéno groups, such a paradox seems to result from a combination of factors, some of which have been explicitly set out by would-be speakers themselves. Others, however, take the form of latent beliefs. Most interlocutors appear to have been influenced by what Silverstein (1996: 284) refers to as a “monoglot standard”. *Monoglossia* dominates in the European West, where linguistic and cultural homogeneity is perceived as normal (Jaffe 1999). Such ideology lies at the root of language standardization, which designated specific names, precise norms and national boundaries for each language, therefore turning it into part of a national identity (Silverstein 1996). According to Jaffe (1999), *monoglossia* can also be naturalized by minority language speakers thus increasing their linguistic uncertainty and

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16. Private conversation with a primary school teacher, 7 November 2018.

17. The economy of Ladinia is closely related to the natural environment. The combination of mountain scenery and aspects of the Ladin culture (architecture, local cuisine, fairy tales and legends) has led the tourism industry to develop considerably over the years. Most local families are involved in activities for visitors and are therefore rooted to their own territory.

desires to silence other languages. In fact, although they are polyglot (i.e. able to use multiple linguistic systems) almost all the members of the two language groups lean more towards either Italian or a Trentino vernacular. They argue that it is easier to use only one register and that Italian is better suited to modern-day life.

The idea that Italian is a means to modernity might be strengthened by the (un)conscious celebration of a *naïf* rhetoric of the two minority languages, whether in school or in cultural manifestations, to the potential detriment of their value in current non-rural use. This seems to particularly disturb activists within the two communities, who appear to perceive minority languages in terms of “use”. Cimbrian is often presented and taught as the language “of the elders”, of ancient traditions and historical heritage, while Mochéno is associated to the jargon of “farms and forests”. Although genuinely true, such recurring references are likely to develop the perception that these languages are of limited use and unable to adapt to today’s multiple domains. Teachers openly admit that they find it difficult to teach certain topics (like geo-history or astronomy) without revised vocabularies that provide suitable jargons, contemporary words and proper grammatical and phonological elements. But they do not endeavor to overcome this deficiency and at least attempt multilingual teaching, finding it easier to resort to Italian. According to one teacher,

There is no point in addressing all topics using the minority language. On the one hand, [such topics] must also be known in Italian; on the other, so many neologisms are required that understanding by a linguistically heterogeneous group becomes too difficult<sup>18</sup>.

This can also happen when teaching sociocultural aspects related to the minority languages themselves. In fact, “identity is not all about assimilating a language, it is also about “knowing who we are” and that purpose can be created and transmitted in many languages”<sup>19</sup>.

There is a kind of resistance, especially among older teachers, in addressing the local academic excellence of linguistics, although, either through individual scientific commitment or training courses, it could provide the best linguistic remedies and methodologies for extending the usage of minority languages in school. According to some interlocutors, although there is a need for linguistic adaptation, words that emerge from linguists’ efforts (albeit their extraordinary commitment) do not reflect “the soul of people”. This is particularly evident in some terminological options

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18. Conversation with a primary school teacher in Vlarotz, 19 September 2018.

19. *Ibidem*.

used by local TV news channels and also promoted in school, which are perceived as too sophisticated by some Cimbrian and Mochéno speakers. A dominant static perspective of minority languages is likely to reduce any opportunities where a dynamic vision of said languages might otherwise be encouraged: to some extent this is true. However, figuring out a way to bridge linguistic gaps and find methods that everyone agrees with appears to be extremely difficult. It is especially not clear yet whether, and to what extent, the two language groups themselves actually want this adaptation to occur. In fact, to this day, no ethnographic study has been carried out on their emic ideas concerning the nature and models of linguistic change and the meaning of past linguistic usages in their current identity.

The two groups' monoglot practice may also result from a previous diglossic phase. Although Hudson (2002) and Marquis and Sallabank (2014) maintain that low level diglossia does not mean an inferior status, it is possible that younger members of the two communities have inherited the idea that the national language (and its speakers) are allegedly superior. The rarely mentioned memory of a past, when their native languages were vilified in favor of Italian (the latter being used in the highest domains and as the official written language), is still fresh in the minds of adults. Moreover, Cimbrian and Mochéno speakers were stigmatized as half-human and half-beasts due to their strange languages and lifestyles associated with woods and animals. The elderly in Lusérn recall being called "bears"<sup>20</sup> by inhabitants from the neighboring suburbs. Several villagers in Vlarotz had experienced insults because of their origins: "We were told: *I want to see what a Mochéno looks like!*"<sup>21</sup>. Not only did the prevalent ideology depict non-national languages as (alleged) proof of sociocultural and economic backwardness but, at a time when human and linguistic rights were basically ignored, those who continued to speak minority languages could sometimes incur serious abuse. A pre-school teacher's memories of being bullied at school due to her cultural origins were so painful that she still could not bear to share them.

### *Cimbrian and Mochéno languages in a transformed family model*

*Monoglossia* and *diglossia* are both appropriate justifications for language shift in the two groups. However, they may not be sufficient and are likely to reinforce a colonialist portrait of inert societies which passively underwent historical and cultural mutations. On the contrary, native language abandonment could also be seen as the result of a conscious, culturally

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20. Among other, conversation with two elderly women in Lusérn, 7 May 2018.

21. Among other, conversation with pre-school teachers in Vlarotz, 8 October 2018.

agentive action by would-be speakers themselves. If so, a further factor that may underlie the home/school disjunction, regards responsibility. It might be easier for parents to support a campaign for introducing the minority language into the school curricula rather than change daily domestic communicative habits and resume speaking the language at home. This could be seen as shelving the responsibility and delegating custody of the language to the school (King 2001). A Mochéno-speaking teacher described the linguistic approach adopted with older scholars as “calibrated, due to greater linguistic articulation of disciplines”<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, she ironically described the method used with younger pupils as “a bombshell that the school has taken over, since most of them do not speak [the minority language] at home”<sup>23</sup>.

This would be consistent with a relatively recent anthropological study on educational responsibility in Northern Italy according to which, the sociocultural framework in which parents now play their roles has significantly changed over time (Biscaldi 2013). On the one hand, a patriarchal system has now become a democratic one, where democracy has also been extended vertically to include children, whose rights proliferate indefinitely. Family has been expropriated of several functions (economic, educational, formative, etc.) along with authority (on this, see also Meyrowitz 1985) to become an exclusive affectivity space. On the other hand, from a solid construction built on lasting and stable relationships, family has now become a fluid entity where everything rapidly changes and where contents have been replaced by negotiations (on this, see also Beck 1986). In this new model, parents are always in a hurry and have less time for letting their children deal with every-day life practices. What is broken (whether an item or a relationship) is replaced: the care dimension has almost disappeared. Parents have lost their role-model in politics and faiths and indifference towards social commitment spreads. Children’s skills, experiences and autonomies seem to have replaced individual and social responsibilities. Parental responsibility appears to have lost its previous sense of daily integration in the social and relational dimension of individual identity. References to community and to shared social projectualities are almost absent (on this, see also Han 2010). One wonders whether, and where, transmitting values and practices, including minority language, and being aware of them, might fit within this screenshot of a transformed sociocultural parenting model.

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22. Conversation with a primary school teacher in Vlarotz, 19 September 2018. The same concept was reaffirmed in the conversation of 12 November 2018.

23. Conversations with a primary school teacher in Vlarotz, 19 September 2018.

There were only one or two children in each of the two observed communities who spoke Cimbrian or Mochéno fluently and they were only prone to use the minority language with adults and solely when previously addressed in that language. The same children instinctively used Trentino vernaculars or Italian with peers and siblings, even when the latter were also minority language speakers, in fact, sometimes they used it to speak with one brother but not with another. All the other children could be defined as semi-speakers in that they did not regularly speak the minority language in their daily lives and their receptive abilities were higher than their productive ones (Grinevald and Bert 2011). Most of the children in both communities had a good understanding of Cimbrian and Mochéno insofar as messages were formulaic (on this, see also Marquis and Sallabank 2013), well contextualized and never exclusively verbal. Given the general absence or limited use of the minority language within the home, it is likely that the children improved their receptive skills thanks to hearing the language at school. According to King, however, no scientific evidence shows that children who learn a minority language in school will speak it outside and will realize why they learned it thus developing language consciousness (King 2014). If minority language usage is not reinforced within the domestic domain, it will likely remain as an “additional language”, i.e. an alien language compared to the linguistic repertoire and practices of the speech community. Lave and Wenger (1991) associate learning with social participation: learning is not just a cognitive process of acquiring a set of skills and knowledge but part of participation in practices performed in communities where the latter are intended as both local, tangible, accessible communities and non-immediate social networks, namely, “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991; Wenger 1998). This clearly also applies to language learning. The question is: what communities do these parents envision for their children’s present and future?

### *Conclusions*

The two disjunctions that emerged from the school ethnography reveal a complex situation wherein law plays a controversial role despite not being the only engine that regulates everyday practices. Law clearly intertwines with the geopolitical situation that characterizes the context in which the two communities live their daily lives and it is hard to establish “who influences whom”, without running the risk of coming up against an excess of determinism. In regard to these two groups, law is either a present or absent social actor that influences reality in non-immediately perceptible

ways. Consequently, positive ideologies ain't enough if little is known about what happens in everyday operational terms and this cannot be ignored, especially by those who are sincere in their support for linguistic and educational rights.

On the one hand, the positive ideology underlying current national and local legislation on minority language protection is of major importance but, to a certain extent, it is only words in the wind. The only way a political promise is ever fulfilled is through bureaucracy. According to Handelman (1998), no political system can exist without bureaucracy inasmuch as order is not only created by means but also by actions. However, people seem either to have forgotten that or not been informed of it. Dazzled by the transcendental, formalistic and (allegedly) neutral State personality and its formalized performances, they tend to ignore that implementing the law necessarily requires the action and performative capacity of real people, namely bureaucrats. They are the ones to whom action is delegated and, as such, they become what Herzfeld (2001: 267) defines as “the locus of the arbitrariness” towards citizens (whether positive or negative).

Pervasive State perspectives of social order, mechanistic top-down formulations and formal languages of classification, conceal the actual formative power that bureaucrats have (even when they invoke “the system”) in shaping, altering and controlling change and its effects, which are sometimes in the people's interests, sometimes for personal interest or in the interests of the overlords (Herzfeld 2001). As is often the case, a protection policy suffers this fate. Unless it goes hand in hand with the bureaucrats' interstitial regulatory activity (one that fits between the legislative manifesto and people's everyday lives and accommodates all domains of existence), it is likely to become merely aesthetic: a facade behind which things evolve differently or do not evolve at all. In the latter case, citizens may be unconscious victims of an operation of mimesis under which law exists but does not produce effects.

An initial question therefore arises as to whether or not bureaucrats, who silently play such a fundamental intermediary role, share the same positive ideology contained in current legislation and are serious about pursuing it. Their inaction, in fact, could be interpreted as a way to inhibit the multiple effects on the existing legislative framework by shutting that positive ideology into an invisible metal box.

The same inertia, however, could also result from an (less monstrous but no less significant) inability to deal with the topic. Therefore, a second question arises as to whether bureaucrats know anything about language

itself or about language policies, the politics of language use and its interaction with the complex dynamics of minority language group survival<sup>24</sup>. The juridical world does not seem to provide guidance on this for at least two reasons.

The first is that it epistemologically and methodologically conceives law as consisting of, and proceeding by, typified aspects of human life, i.e. by reducing certain objective characters into a type (Asaro 2012). This produces a greater sense of order and harmony but often leads to excessive abstraction: a rift between legal and real worlds. The second reason is that legal scholarship anchors State law to essentialist assumptions about culture and language. Methodological essentialism mirrors the broader Euro-American nationalist model, according to which “cultural unity is created through a shared language that expresses the essential spirit of a group” (Freeland, Gómez 2014: 174). On that basis, juridical and legal actors deal with (to be) protected communities “as though they were discrete and homogeneous nation-like entities, identified by, and identifying with, equally discrete, homogeneous languages” (*ivi*. See also Jaffe 1999 and Freeland, Patrick 2004). As a consequence, they avoid taking into account some key aspects of such a complex phenomenon as language. What about “the beliefs [...] that a speech community has about language... in general and its language in particular”? (Schiffman 1996: 5). How do individuals customize political ideas and language ideologies? What power dynamics and local socio-cultural conditions have an impact on maintaining and transmitting a language? How much can economic struggle for survival influence the politics of language use? By never seriously questioning the myth of cultural and linguistic unity, Western juridical discipline maintains, and is itself affected by, a “linguicentric approach” (Spolsky 2004: 104). It continues to focus on “what happens to languages rather than what happens to the people who speak them” (*ivi*). Duranti (2000) points out that grammarians adopt a perspective that sees speakers as representatives of an abstract human species. Legal scholarship does the same although the consequences are different. In fact, while grammar develops and remains on an abstract level, law has a concrete impact on people’s lives.

As a result, bureaucrats may feel confused when they come face-to-face with language in its own fundamental reality, i.e. “a resource to be used in social interaction as well as the outcome of social interaction itself” (*ibidem*: 17). They realize that language group boundaries are constantly redefined and renegotiated through multiple linguistic acts and cannot be exclusively

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24. I particularly refer here to “political economy of language” (Grillo 1988: 8; Hetcher 1975).

and prejudicially designated as having one single set of sufficient and necessary (and immediately visible) traits. Members of a language group may identify with the use of the same linguistic medium/a; with a perception of speaking the same language; with a historical-linguistic memory (a past of persecutions, for example); with political use (recognition strategies); with prestige; with an idea of authenticity; with alliance; etc. They may regard none of these traits (and perhaps even others) as essential and sufficient and resort to them in multiple ways, all relevant for self-definition.

Furthermore, language groups vary considerably in their own interpretations of the relationship between the multiple languages they use and in their decisions about whether or not to engage in revitalization efforts. This results from feelings and (sub)conscious beliefs that, although treated as general predispositions, vary enormously from one group to another and, above all, differ greatly within the group itself.

The rule is variability rather than homogeneity. Confronted with this, even the bureaucrat who sincerely supports language protection can get lost and be susceptible to lobbying from authorities or from community members who presume to speak for the group and decide what should be done.

It might be worth adopting a fluid cognitive and methodological approach, which Piasere refers to as a “polyvalent logic” (1998: 4). A nuanced attitude may better describe pluri-linguistic realities and the inner heterogeneity of linguistic practices and ideologies in particular. The latter often result from the interaction of two (equally powerful but potentially contradictory) forces: the individual inclination to coherence and a social proclivity to conformism (Spolsky 2009). By rejecting objective truths and describing cultural processes as liquid and dialogical dimensions, fuzzy logic makes it possible to see them more realistically but the question is: is this what law really wants?

In fact, there is another side of the coin. The legal operation of mimesis can also move in the opposite direction and result in undetectable effects silently produced by law: in other words, law exists but its presence is not perceived. A legislation advocating minority language protection is able to exert indirect forms of influence from a backdrop of general unawareness, even though it is not concretely implemented. The mere existence of a legislative text has the power to shape the interested groups: the legislative manifesto ontologically impacts on individuals who respond to the input they receive. As such, law must be seen as one of the many living forces that influence people’s lives.

The anthropological holistic perspective is based on the assumption that there is no absolute distinction between society and individuals. More profoundly, there is no clear separation between collective and personal ideas or practices – although the individual retains a certain leeway in exercising human agency (namely, freedom of interpretation, understanding and purposing). Legal ideologies and practices are no exception. As such, the monoglot ideology behind existing legislation can influence minority language speakers who eventually act as if linguistic and cultural homogeneity were normal (Jaffe 1999). According to Jaffe (1999) this can encourage individuals to abandon other languages in favor of the national one. This, however, can also encourage them to prioritize (if not pragmatically, at least ideally) their endangered language so that a language group which, according to ethnographic data, shares a repertoire of idioms and variants, can present itself (and often perceive itself) as a group of people who only speak the (to be) protected language. At times, this process can take the form of strategic essentialism, in other words, a conscious “essentialization” of the self that allows the minority group to interface with the majority, which holds political and legislative power (Spivak 1996). By forwarding a simplified or static image of group identity (one that better suits the majority categories), the minority believes it has a greater chance of being understood and of achieving certain goals, such as equality. This might be true for some economically weak and substantially forgotten communities (like the ones in this study) who can see protecting their language as a way to gain attention and support to improve their general condition.

Strategic essentialism, however, is a (not always satisfactory) way-out from a greater truth: State (and by extension autonomous regions) is a political, ideological and administrative project that, whether through repression, consensus, symbols or frontiers, is constantly dealing with the problem of retaining its sovereignty. A piece of legislation that preserves minority language groups sets out how (and with what features), where and when said groups can exist. While this unambiguity facilitates legal recognition, it mainly aids control. This also happens in the democratic State where, it should be remembered, law is in any event “created by the dominant users” (Nader 1984: 951) and supports power structures. According to international standards, every State is entitled to determine its own linguistic regime and to discretionally name languages. The assumption is that defining languages and vernaculars is a fundamental factor in preserving identity (Palermo, Woelk 2011). The whole point, however, is: whose identity? The individuals’ or the nation’s?

What State law establishes can either be a framework for the existence of a cultural identity or a straight-jacket that prevents that identity from evolving and diverging from a given model, on pain of exclusion from the catalogue of fundamental rights. This might result in individuals (even when applying strategic essentialism) turning out to be what State law, prejudicially, decided they ought to be. Like pets, they might be coddled, cared for and deemed to be part of the family (at times they may even be “super-protected”), yet still kept on a leash in order to monitor and limit their movements. In the latter case, the Trentino school might turn out to be a concrete bureaucratic ramification of State ideology... that, under the guise of ideally safeguarding minority languages and cultural pluralism, conceals the actual intent to create “Italian citizens” and delegates bureaucrats’ human agency with the more or less conscious task of preserving a “mono-cultural” context for the pupils’ lives.

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*Positive ideologies ain't enough! (Dis)junctions and paradoxes in minority language protection*

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