

## Glottogenesis of the friulian language

The nationalist doctrine associated the use of a common language with the sense of national identity, and it was inevitable that also in Friuli some considered the Friulian language as the key element of the identity of this people. But things are not so simple; neither in general nor in our specific case. In Friuli, as in many other cases, differences between official and written languages have existed at least since the early Christian period, those spoken by the dominant elite and the one spoken by the illiterate people. The official written language remained (ecclesiastical and notarial) Latin for more than one thousand years; but, for six centuries the rulers spoke Germanic languages: in the first period the Lombards, then the Franks for a brief period, and finally, from the 10th to the 13th century, the German families sent by the emperors and called by the patriarchs to monitor this Italian gate of the empire.

According to some authors (Francescato), this marked Germanic character of the Patriarch State, in those centuries, entailed the cultural isolation of Friuli from the rest of Northern Italy, preventing the dissemination of those linguistic and socio-linguistic innovations that instead were concerning the Po-Veneto Valley, and which would have led the languages of those regions to differentiate themselves more and more from the Latin matrix. In particular, in the State of Aquileia, where the court and the nobility spoke German, the language of the people remained closer to ancient Latin. The “conservative” character of the languages spoken in isolated areas is a phenomenon that is well-known to linguists, and would be the most plausible explanation of the similarity between spoken ‘Ladin’ languages (instead of those based on the assumption of a common “Rhaethian” substrate). In any case, it is clear from existing sources that the Friulian language has existed, in forms that are quite close to present-day ones, for almost one thousand years.

As everywhere in Italy, the Friulian vernacular has long remained an exclusively oral language; Latin was used when something had to be communicated in writing or, starting from the 14th century, documents were drawn up in various mixes of Tuscan and Venetian. However, Friulian too was used to draw up documents for practical use such as accounting records and notarial deeds. The first literary document (a ballad) in the Friulian language dates back to the end of the 14th century, and appears to be clearly influenced by vernacular literature that for over a century had been flourishing in Northern Italy, as earlier on in Provence. One of the well-known characters of oral languages is their geographical variant: each community tends to develop its own way of expressing itself, due to the related isolation from other communities. Also the Friulian language seems to be differentiated into a dozen “local dialects”; but the situation is not as severe as in many other regions. All the varieties of Friulian are mutually intelligible to a large extent, and one of these – the ‘central’ one that is restricted to the area between Cividale, Venzone, San Daniele, Codroipo, Palmanova and Cormons with Udine at the centre – is quite homogeneous and largely prevailing over others. A common “literary” Friulian developed from this variety starting from the early 19th century. As it already happened in other Italian and European regions, the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed

the flourishing of high-quality 'local' literature. Until very recent times, Friulian was the mother tongue of almost three-quarters of the population of Friuli. In rural areas, the percentage sometimes reached up to 100%; in the more urban areas, starting from Udine, the bourgeoisie often spoke a variant of Venetian or Italian, which were deemed to be more prestigious and useful. The situation started to change quickly with the extension of compulsory schooling, the increased level of education, and mainly the spread of the media and the cultural industry. Between 1978 and 1999 the use of Friulian dropped at a rate of 1% per annum. The Friulian Philological Society was set up in 1919 to defend the Friulian language, and more recently many other associations and movements have operated along the same lines (also in competition among them). In the '70s these have also become political in nature, and have fought for the legal protection of the Friulian language; but it was only at the end of the '90s that a Regional law was obtained in this respect (Law no. 15 of 1996). It is still early to assess their effectiveness. These actions are supported by various reasons. One of these is that each language is a value in itself, as evidence of a unique historical and cultural experience. The second is that each language is the foundation of the identity of a people and that, in our case, the Friulian people want to continue to live with its own face. The third is that Friulians represent a linguistic minority that, with the others (Slovene and German), justifies why this region was granted political and administrative autonomy.