

Linguistic history of friulian

Now that the geographical borders of the Friuli region have been outlined, we can move on to present some of the main elements concerning its linguistic history. A clarification is necessary at this point with regard to the origin of the language: it is a language that is the result of an evolution that stems directly from Latin. We state this because it is not unusual to hear that, even if to a lesser extent than in the past, Friulian would be «Latin matter with a German soul», as stated by the famous scholar Theodor Gartner. Such a definition leads us to erroneously think that the Friulian language is a sort of ‘mixed’ language, a combination or mixture of Latin and Germanic traits.

There is no doubt about the fact that the Friulian language, especially its lexicon, contains some Germanic elements (e.g. the Gothic *bearç* ‘grassy enclosed land next to the house’, Lombard terms such as *bleòn* ‘bed sheet’ or *cjast* ‘barn, as well as German terms like *cràmar* or *cramâr* ‘itinerant haberdasher’, *bêçs* ‘money, *licôf* ‘snack, banquet’, *lùstic* ‘happy, good-natured, *russàc* ‘rucksack’, etc.), however its structure is that of the Romance language.

The substrate elements essentially depend on the presence of some Celtic populations or people conquered by the Celts, especially the Carnic Gauls, populations that left traces not only in the toponymy of our region, but also in the Friulian lexicon. Besides the Carnic Gauls, mostly present on the mountains, there were also settlements of ‘Venetian’ or ‘paleo-Venetian’ populations in Friuli, and these were completely absorbed following the Roman colonization.

There is no doubt about the fact that our region was deeply Romanized and to such an extent that it was not classified as a ‘province’ (hence a sort of colony, such as Gaul, Dacia or other lands) but as a ‘region’, i.e. an integral part of the Roman empire. In ancient times the centre of the region was Aquileia, a town that, founded as municipium in 181 B.C. (the other municipia in Friuli were Forum Iulii ‘Cividale’, Iulium Carnicum ‘Zuglio’ and Iulia Concordia ‘Concordia Sagittaria’), later became the capital of the X Regio Augustea ‘Venetia et Histria’. The linguistic physiognomy of Friulian acquired its final features in the period from the 6th to the 10th century, like other Romance languages, but the first quotation of the existence of a particular idiom, in Friuli, however dates back to an earlier period. In one note written by Saint Jerome (from *Liber de viris illustribus* ‘On Illustrious/Famous Men’, *Patrologia Latina*, Book XXIII, chapter 97, columns 735-738) we learn that already in the mid-4th century and for the first time in Italy, the Bishop of Aquileia, Fortunaziano, had written a comment of the Gospels in the *rusticus sermo*, i.e. the language of the people or rustic language, hence in the regional Latin of the inhabitants of Aquileia.

According to glottologist Giuseppe Francescato (1922- 2001), the Friulian language is characterised by a number of fundamental phenomena: the continuity of the neo-Latin dialect also after the centuries-old Germanic occupation (in chronological order the Goths, the Lombards and the Franks); the belonging of the same dialect, though characterised by

specific phonological and morphologic evolutions, to the linguistic scope of northern Italy; the character of the Friulian as language of the people, especially at the Farmers Age; the ever increasing gap between the vernacular (i.e. the Friulian) and Latin, the written language of worship and administration. We can talk about Friulian as a neo-Latin language with well-defined characteristics starting from about 1000 A.D. Evidence of the above is the total absorption, by the Friulian language, of the dialects spoken by the Slavic settlers called by the patriarchs around the 10th-11th centuries to repopulate the areas of the middle Friulian plain that had been raided by the Avars and the Hungarians. To further confirm this, one should consider the resistance of Friulian to the linguistic and cultural pressure exercised by the German world also in the period of the Patriarchy of Aquileia which ruled for more than three centuries (1077-1420), an institution that was closely linked to the Germanic empire and which was administered and controlled, at least until the middle of the 13th century, by nobles beyond the Alps.

In patriarchal times, the linguistic physiognomy of Friuli was, in the end, well defined. In this respect it is interesting to read the testimony of an anonymous traveller that, between the 13th and the 14th century thus wrote about Friuli: *Forum Iulii est provincia per se, distincta ab aliis provinciis prenominate, quia nec Latinam linguam habet, nec Sclavicam, neque Theotonicam, sed ydioma proprium habet, nulli Italico ydiomati consimile. Plus tamen participat de lingua Latina quam de quacumque alia sibi propinqua* (Codex Vaticanus Palatinus no. 965, 13th-14th centuries) [Friuli is a province in its own right, separate from the other provinces mentioned above, as it does not have either a Latin language, or a Slav or German language, but its own idiom which differs from all other Italic idioms. However, it participates to the Latin language more than any other language close to it]. Friuli's function and role as a 'hinge' between the East and the West, as early as in the Late Middle Ages, is surely interesting as the region was an ideal bridge between the Latin, Germanic and Slavic world, but what amazes us the most is the sharpness and modernity of the observation made by this traveller.

Between the 13th and 14th centuries, Friuli appeared as a region in its own right, clearly separated from the other Italian lands but not just for its different customs, State laws or other – a difference that nonetheless existed – but due to the use of a different language. Friulian is perceived as a language that is clearly different not only from Latin (and here we obviously refer to the late rather than the classic Latin), Slavic and German – that are neighbouring languages – but also from the group of Italian-Romance dialects, in general, which in any case were idioms linked to common Latin origins. This is undoubtedly a very 'modern' criterion for evaluating the single communities, i.e. by directly tying the identification of a population with the language spoken by that population.

A clear autonomy of Friulian, also expressed through a rather negative opinion, is recognised by Dante Alighieri, who in *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Eloquence in the vernacular) wrote: *Post hos Aquilegienses et Ystrianos cribremus, qui Ces fas tu? crudeliter accentuando eructant.* (Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, Book I, chapter XI, paragraph 5) [After these people we express a negative opinion on the people of Aquileia and Istria, who say *Ces fas tu?* stressing the related pronunciation]. As it is known, the *De vulgari eloquentia* is an essay offering an overview of the different Italian dialects examined by Dante in the search for what he considers to be the 'illustrious vernacular', a dialect which he considered to be superior to Latin for literary expression. The way he treats the people of Aquileia and Istria, i.e. the Friulians, is not very flattering. In particular, it is worth

noting the sequence of three terms with negative connotation «crudeliter accentuando eructuant» ‘unpleasantly (to the ear) they stress the pronunciation’, an opinion that clearly communicates Dante’s idea i.e. that the language spoken by the people from Aquileia and Istria is quite far from his Tuscan and therefore unsuitable for literary expression.