

Multilingualism in Friuli

Friuli can be considered as a multilingual region par excellence, also due to its geographical position. The 'linguistic repertoire' of Friulians, i.e. the ability to use one or more languages for verbal communication, is quite varied and includes, besides Friulian itself (in its varieties), also Italian, perhaps at different levels of expressive adequacy. The multilingualism of Friuli is also enriched by the Germanic and Slavic dialects, spoken in the northern and eastern borders of the region respectively. The Germanic dialects are typical of the so-called 'linguistic islands' of the Carnic Alps, therefore Sauris/Zahre, Timau/Tischelwang, in the municipality of Paluzza, and Sappada/Plodn, in the province of Belluno; besides these dialects there are also the Carinthian dialects of the Val Canale, with the main centres of Pontebba/Pontafel and Tarvisio/Tarvis. The Slavic dialects, and more precisely Slovene, are instead typical of all the valleys that border Slovenia.

In the province of Udine, apart from Val Canale, where a Slovene dialect is still spoken in a number of areas, the dialect of Val Resia, of upper Val Torre, from Tarcento towards north-east, and the dialects of the Natisone valleys, past the Ponte San Quirino area are important also due to the linguistic peculiarities that characterise them. Finally, in the province of Gorizia, the Slovene dialect is spoken in the Collio area and going further down in the Karst up to including almost all of the Trieste area. Earlier on we also mentioned that in Friuli we can find a number of Venetian varieties. These dialects have different origins that also quite different from one another. In particular, some of these dialects are considered to be indigenous i.e. present on the territory since time immemorial: here we refer to the Venetian dialect spoken in the Marano Lagoon and Grado area, but also the 'bisiaco' dialect of the municipality of Monfalcone. Whereas the dialect of Grado and Marano is still quite alive, the 'bisiaco', which in its authentic version has many features in common with Friulian, is experiencing a sharp decline, in recent years, being seriously threatened by the influence of the Trieste dialect.

Besides this type of 'indigenous' Venetian, we have already reported the presence of Venetian varieties, in particular the 'livenzino' or dialects spoke in the Livenza area bordering Veneto, straddling the course of the Livenza River. Other Venetian dialects, defined 'colonial' or 'imitation' dialects, are also present in some of the main Friulian towns, such as Udine, with the udinese dialect, Pordenone with the pordenonese dialect, Palmanova with the palmarino dialect, etc. The existence of these Venetian dialects, in the middle of the Friulian-speaking area, is explained by the political and economic influence exercised by the Republic of Venice on Friuli for a number of centuries and which especially concerned the bourgeois classes of the cities, that were mostly interested in the relationships with Venetian merchants and administrators. Going back to Friulian, it should be stated that its dissemination within the region is not at all homogeneous. Friulian is stronger and more compact in mountainous, piedmont and hilly areas, isolated zones and areas that tend to be far from the main centres and principal communication

routes. As regards occasions to use the language, it can be stated that Friulian fully meets the communication needs of day-to-day life, the rural and traditional environment, whilst its use in administrative or official areas is quite recent. Finally we can state that the data concerning the number of languages spoken in Friuli is not absolutely accurate. This depends on the fact that the censuses carried out every ten years do not include specific questions on the linguistic skills of the population, as opposed to Trentino-Alto Adige for example. Based on the findings of a recent sociolinguistic survey conducted by the University of Udine, the population that actively speaks Friulian, i.e. that has the ability to speak Friulian, should be around half a million people, whilst the passive knowledge of the language, i.e. the ability to understand is more or less general. In addition to this half million Friulians resident in the region there are some thousands emigrants. Or children of emigrants, that often continue to use their fathers' mother tongue at home. As it is known, today the largest Friulian communities can be found are in northern Europe, Germany and Belgium, the Americas, especially Canada (Toronto) and Argentina (the town of Colonia Caroya is, for example, wholly Friulian-speaking) as well as Australia; these communities keep the relationships with Friuli alive through a network of immigrant associations, such as the Fogolârs furlans (Friulian hearth) and the Fameis furlanis (Friulian families). Accurate data is not available also on the size of alloglot communities. The German-speaking people living in the region probably do not exceed two or three thousand units, whilst, from the numerical point of view, the Slovene-speaking minority is larger and probably counts 50,000 units, obviously including the province of Trieste.