The study of language islands: an interdisciplinary approach

The term linguistic minority refers to groups of people whose mother tongue is different from a majority language, i.e. the speakers of the official language of their state. According to this definition, groups speaking a “dialect” (i.e. an genetically autonomous idiom which is secondary to the language of greater prestige) or a recently imported language can be also considered as minorities. People who speak Abruzzese (or a single abruzese dialect) or the Romanian speaking immigrants are an example of this in Italy.

However, the term “linguistic minority” has a narrower meaning in Italy compared to other western countries because it basically overlaps with the word “alloglot communities”. The latter term is used to indicate minority varieties with a different origin from the official language and Italian dialects. The concept of “alloglot community” is often associated with the foreign origin of populations. G.I. Ascoli (1861) defined alloglot communities as “foreign colonies in Italy”, based on the implicit assumption there is a close correspondence between geographical and ethno-linguistic boundaries.

The confusion generated by the uncertain boundaries between the concepts of linguistic minority and his foreign origin further increases due to the use of “historicity” (ancient presence of the alloglot minority within the boundaries of the state) and “territoriality” (settlement of the same minority somewhere in the territory). By adopting such criteria, the speakers of Italian dialects and recently imported alloglot languages (immigrant languages) are excluded from the category of linguistic minority together with the nomadic or disperse populations that have been present in Italy for centuries.

Historically, the confusion between linguistic minority and foreign origin arose in Italy for two reasons. First, it is difficult to maintain the separation of the set of “minorities”, represented by the users of traditional dialects, from a “majority” which, especially in the present sociolinguistic condition, there corresponds. Second, there is a certain confusion between the concepts of linguistic minority and “national” minority. The latter term indicates groups of populations in which the use of a particular language is associated with a strong sense of belonging to a national identity other than that of the surrounding majority. The distinction between national minorities and linguistic minorities is well illustrated by the German-speakers of South Tyrol, who consider themselves to be part of the Austrian nation, and not only for linguistic reasons. By contrast, unlike the situation in Italy, one can think of a Catalan national minority in Spain where the linguistic traditions of most Alghero inhabitants do not determine a different sense of identity from their neighbours.

In any case, the linguistic distinctiveness of national minorities is due to the coexistence of linguistic and cultural features due to their original background with those derived from the Italian context, rather than to a real persistence of more traditional aspects. This is the case of Valle d’Aosta, whose status of national minority relies mostly on the use of French, together with Italian, as the official language. However, Franco-provencal dialects, and even Italian, are much more frequently used in daily activities.

The separation of national and linguistic minorities helps us better understand the important distinction between minority and endangered languages. In fact, the condition of minority usually involves a risk of loss of local traditions, and eventually obsolescence and the disappearance of languages. However, it is also evident that the languages used by national minorities appear to be much less susceptible to extinction since they are protected by international agreements and practiced in official contexts. Accordingly, German in South Tyrol, French in Valle d’Aosta and Slovene in Gorizia and Trieste are not regarded as endangered minority languages in Italy.
All of these distinctions are necessary when attempting to classify populations of alloglot tradition which can be found in situations of multilingualism and polyglossy in which the local variety is only one of the components of the language of these communities.

Among the “alloglot communities” found in Italy (whose speakers total less than 5% of the total population), populations that (together with the local dialects of Germanic, Slavic and Franco-provençal) make use of co-official German (the autonomous province of South Tyrol / Südtirol), Slovenian (Trieste, Gorizia and surrounding rural areas) and French (the autonomous region Vallée d’Aoste / Valle d’Aosta) form many national minorities which are in territorial continuity with the mother countries. Moreover, linguistic minorities that speak alloglot varieties of Germanic type include some communities scattered along the Alps in Valle d’Aosta and Piedmont (Walser groups), in Trentino and Veneto (Cimbri and Möcheni groups and the language island of Sappada) and Friuli (the Carinthian communities of Sauris, Timau and Tarvisiano). Slovenian dialects which are different from the literary language, and whose speakers are traditionally lacking in any form of cultural connection with Slovenia, are also spoken along the border between this country and the province of Udine, in the valleys of Torre and Natisone and (coexisting with Friulan and Germanic dialects) in the basin of Tarvisio. Franco-provençal dialects which have broken away from the official Italian-French bilingualism in Valle d’Aosta are also spoken in the north-western province of Turin. Alloglot communities linked to a cross-border territorial continuity can also be found in the Provençal dialects spoken in the Alpine area of Piedmont between Val di Susa and Val Vermenagna. In southern Italy and the islands, the alloglot languages appear to be more dispersed, due to the immigration of foreign populations in medieval and modern times, with the possible exception of the neo-Greek dialects of Salento and Aspromonte, whose continuity with the language that was spoken in Ancient Greece is still cause for debate.

The Albanian-speaking communities settled in southern Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. During the same period Slavic (Croats) groups arrived in Molise. Conversely, Alghero, in Sardinia, was repopulated by people from Catalonia in the fourteenth century.

Provençal speaking groups (originally of Waldensian origin) settled in Calabria during the fifteenth century (Guardia Piemontese). At some point (time unknown), other groups speaking Franco-provençal dialects settled in northern Apulia (Faeto and Celle San Vito). This latter peopling event should not to be separated (regarding both time and circumstance) from the immigration of populations speaking northern Italian dialects of the areas of Liguria and southern Piedmont (Gallo-italici) in Sicily, Basilicata and Cilento. This can also be defined as an alloglot language if one considers the dialect continuum in which they are found.

The language island of Tabarchini in Sardinia can be rightfully considered alloglot because it is integrated within a context which can itself can be considered an alloglot when compared to the rest of Italy. Finally, the Sinti and Roma groups in Italy speak an alloglot language with ancient historical traditions (dating back at least to the fourteenth century). They are dispersed in nomadic communities belonging to the strains of Sinti (predominant in northern Italy) and Roma (increased by recent immigration from Eastern Europe).

The concept of “alloglossia” in Italy, is commonly also extended to the system of Sardinian dialects, which are considered to be a Romance autonomous group. This is to be kept distinct from the one encompassing Italian, Ladin and Friulian dialects, which are often integrated into a “Rhaeto-Romance”
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unit whose peculiarity is linked to the persistence of more archaic traits compared to neighbouring northern Italian dialects. The maintenance of local dialects has occurred in a predominantly Germanic cultural sphere for at least a part of the Ladin area. Furthermore, the development of a specific Ladin identity followed, until recently, the events related to the local Tyrolean context. This has increased the collective sense of specificity of the population involved.

A genealogical classification of the idioms involved in the category of alloglot communities make it possible, in turn, to appreciate the richness of such linguistic and historical heritage in Italy, which is certainly among the most varied in Western Europe. In fact, it includes languages classified as Indo-European (Greek, Albanian), Indo-Iranian (Roma dialects), German (standard German in South Tyrol and dialects in minor groups in the Alps), Slavic (standard Slovenian and Slovenian dialects between Friuli and Venezia Giulia, Croatian of Molise), Neo-Latin Gallo-Romance (French, Franco-Provençal and Provençal dialects), Ibero-Romance (Catalan), Italo-Romance (Southern gallo-italic and Tabarchino), Neo-Latin (Sardinian dialects, Friulian and Ladin dialects).

The picture of the historical alloglot communities in Italy is very diverse and articulated especially when considering its demographic weight. Sardinian (over one million speakers) and Friulan (at least 400,000 speakers), South Tyrolean (over 250,000), Sinti and Roma (about 120,000) are the largest communities. Other groups have a smaller dimension, but total more than 50,000 speakers: French speakers from Valle d’Aosta (French is, however, only the mother tongue in exceptional circumstances), Slovenian, Albanian- and the Sicilian gallo-italic speakers. Finally, in the context of a classification based on geographical distribution, we can identify minorities settled in lands of considerable area (Sardinian, Friulian, German of Tyrol) and others which are much more confined, and which are often few in number. These latter are generally referred to as “language islands”.

The term “language island” identifies a community (or a small number of geographically close communities) speaking a language variety which is markedly different from the one spoken in the surrounding area. As we have seen, this situation is mostly the result of ancient immigration – this is the case, for example, of the establishment of Albanian speaking communities in southern Italy in the fifteenth century and of the communities of Tabarchini in Sardinia in the eighteenth century – but also of the survival of ancient languages despite the emergence of other linguistic layers – exemplified by Greek speaking communities in the South. There is also an echo of geographical metaphor in the concept of language archipelago which indicates non-contiguous and geographically dispersed alloglot communities sharing a same origin.

In scientific literature and common usage, the term “island” often overlaps with probably the more suitable term “language colony” which stresses the alloglot characteristic of the variety in question. The idea of island, while suitable from a territorial point of view, seems to imply a condition of “isolation” that often does not correspond to the reality of these communities, which are often related (not only linguistically) to the reality in which they have integrated.

It should also be noted that the concept of linguistic insularity is applied to very different situations. Regarding the environmental aspect, there are “islands” characterized by the urban value of the settlement (the Catalan in Alghero), while others have formed from villages characterized by ancient economic specializations (miners or lumberjacks in the case of certain German-speaking groups in north-eastern Italy). There are also centres which do not differentiate from the surrounding economic and social context except for their linguistic peculiarities (Greek speaking communities of Southern
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Italy). From a sociolinguistic point of view, the range goes from the regressive character (close to obsolescence) of the local variety compared to the wider regional spread (German-speaking islands in the North, the South Greek speakers), to the dynamism of some communities such as the Tabarchini, in which the linguistic integration of those coming from the surrounding area is promoted by the minority variety.

Another peculiar condition is represented by language islands which have integrated in a context which is already minoritarian. In these cases, we can distinguish between a minority language of the first degree (e.g., Friulian compared to the official language, Italian, and the Germanic dialect of Sauris and Timau) and the second degree (the Walser spoken in the Franco-Provençal landscape and French-speaking of Valle d’Aosta, the Tabarchino in the Sardinian context). The traditional constitutive multilingualism of most of the language islands can reach the extreme. An example of this is the Tarvisio, where single communities of Germanic, Slavic and Friulian dialects are integrated in a framework where Italian and (at least formally) standard Slovenian and German share the status of official language.

The unifying characteristic underlying the concept of insularity, given by the punctual or spread distribution of the communities to which it refers, must not overshadow the variety of situations that exist within a category. The Italian context offers, as we have seen, a particularly rich set of language types. In any case, the language islands seem to be an ideal ground for the study of cultural, social and geographical factors which shape the genetic profiles of human populations. From this point of view, the results obtained by the research network of the University of Roma-La Sapienza, Bologna, Cagliari and Pisa, which are presented here, cover a broad spectrum of situations. Evidence obtained by the research units offer different keys of interpretation, denying or, sometimes, supporting the traditional idea of linguistic insularity as a kind of “sanctuary” of conservatism and relictualism, so seeming to confirm the extreme variety of the types considered.

It is true, indeed, that the analysis of genetic structure, in most cases, highlights a substantial differentiation of alloglot communities from the surrounding areas, as in the case of most German-speaking groups in north-eastern Italy. However, there are also some exceptions to this view – the Cimbri of the Dolomites, Greek speaking communities, the Croats of Molise and Albanian speakers of Calabria – which suggests that the genetic isolation is determined mainly by geographic rather than linguistic isolation, even if the language seems to be a factor which is capable to some degree of enhancing the physical constraints to gene flow. At the same time, if the Tabarchini for example, reveal a greater genetic similarity to the population of their country of origin rather than the surrounding Sardinian communities, some Germanic groups seem to have diverged from both their surrounding and their population of origin. This interesting result is also confirmed by linguistic data since, differently from the Tabarchini language which still shows high affinity with the Genoese, the distance between the dialects of the German language island of Friuli and the language of their areas of origin is substantial. This may be explained, at least in part by the different settlement history of the colonies. However, the importance of a documentable continuity of relations with their homeland is evident in the case of the Tabarchini, as much as the isolation of the language islands of Friuli. These communities are characterized by a high degree of endogamy, which seems to be based on the construction of a “local ethnicity”, are basically not interested, except for recent “recoveries”, in claiming cultural and linguistic features rooted in the Germanic sphere.
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The research presented in the paper by Capocasa and colleagues (this volume) provides, therefore, a contribution of considerable importance from a glottological point of view. In fact, it offers an original interpretation of the linguistic insularity issue and new tools for a better definition of the types that are linked to this category of interest, which is crucial for the study of inter-linguistic, contact and multilingualism phenomena. It emerges quite clearly that an interdisciplinary approach is needed in future studies on alloglot communities, where the comparison between data obtained from different analytical methods and thinking over on a common “object” will undoubtedly open new and interesting perspectives for research and interpretation.

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