

Symbolic acquisition planning? The case of Cimbrian in Italy

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Introduction

The Cimbrians are an ethnic minority, some of whom still speak the ancient Bavarian dialect known as Cimbrian (*cimbro*), and as such they are now one of the minorities protected by various regional laws and by Italian State Law 482 of 1999. Once covering a much larger area extending from the Brenta River in the North and the East, to the Adige valley in the West and the valleys north of Verona and the northern part of the province of Vicenza in the South, the Cimbrians today are mainly limited to four areas: the so-called Seven Communes (Sette Comuni/Siben Komoinen) on the Asiago/Sleghe Plateau in the province of Vicenza (Veneto region), the so-called Thirteen Communes (Tredici Comuni/XIII Comaun) on the Lessinian mountains in the province of Verona (Veneto), the Folgaria/Folgrait and Lavarone/Lavrou plateau¹ and the village of Luserna/Lusern in the province of Trento (Trentino-Alto Adige), and the Cansiglio plateau in the province of Belluno (Veneto). The four Cimbrian areas, however, in spite of their common origin and shared language, are quite different from each other, not only from the administrative and political point of view,² but especially from the sociolinguistic point of view.

The language

Cimbrian is a Bavarian dialect³ that has maintained many characteristics of early Middle High German; on the other hand, over the centuries it has undergone an independent development which has been mostly influenced primarily by the

¹ The first document we have attesting a German presence on the plateau of Folgaria/Folgrait and Lavarone/Lavrou dates back to 1216. Linguistic analysis confirms that it was around 1100 AD when peoples coming from Bavaria and Western Tyrol began to occupy the area.

² Due to its historical past (it passed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Italy at the end of World War I) and its large German minority, Trentino-Alto Adige is one of Italy's five autonomous regions.

³ Here are a few lexical examples to show the differences/similarities between the Cimbrian from Luserna/Lusern and Bavarian on the one hand, and standard German on the other (Cavasin, 1998, 40):

Cimbrian	Bavarian	German	English
foat	pfoat	Hemd	shirt
khrãnebit	kranewitt	Wacholder	juniper
erta	erta	Dienstag	Tuesday
fintza	pfintza	Donnerstag	Thursday

Venetan/Trentino dialects, which have always been the second (nowadays mostly the first) languages of the Cimbrians.

From being the main language of the large area described above, nowadays Cimbrian has ended up being spoken in just three places: in Giazza/Ljetzan, a hamlet belonging to the Commune of Selva di Progno/Brunghe in the area of the Thirteen Communes (Verona) by approximately 20 people out of a population of 90; in Roana/Robaan and Mezzaselva/Toballe in the Seven Communes (Vicenza) by no more than a few dozen people out of a total population of about 3,400; and in Luserna/Lusern in Trentino by about 220 out of 259 residents.⁴ In total, fewer than 300 people can therefore still speak Cimbrian in the original area,⁵ i.e. between about 0.5 and 0.6% of the total number of 'ethnic' Cimbrians, that is of all the people living in areas where Cimbrian is or used to be spoken until not long ago (between 50,000 and 60,000 according to various estimates).

Therefore we can see that the best situation in sociolinguistic terms is found in Luserna/Lusern, where the majority of its inhabitants, children included, can speak the local variety of Cimbrian, whereas in Giazza/Ljetzan and Roana/Robaan only a few dozen older people can still use the language.⁶ This substantial difference may be explained by the fact that Luserna/Lusern was until the First World War part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where linguistic tolerance was very high and where German was considered one of its most prestigious varieties.

The language shift which the Cimbrian community has experienced has been quite dramatic if we consider that, according to the 1921 general census of the Kingdom of Italy, as many as 3,762 people were able to speak Cimbrian in that year (Bellinello 1998, 181). The causes of this language shift are basically the same as for all other minorities, i.e. the low status enjoyed by the language and the lack of any sort of institutional support (if not hostility proper, particularly in the period between the two wars, because of anti-Austrian feelings, first, and then Fascism), with two aggravating

⁴ The estimates for Giazza/Ljetzan and Roana/Robaan were given to me in the summer of 2001 by Giovanni Molinari, president of the Curatorium Cimbricum Veronense, and by Sergio Bonato, director of the Institute of Cimbrian Culture. The figures for Luserna/Lusern are taken from the 2001 regional census.

⁵ This number may be tripled if all the emigrants now living outside the area of origin are included.

⁶ Each of these varieties has gone through some corpus planning quite independently of the others, particularly standardization and graphization, with very few attempts directed towards the modernization of the language, which is almost exclusively used orally in informal situations. However, as far as graphization is concerned, we can see that even though the three varieties use different orthographies, they are all based mainly on the Italian orthography with various contributions from German and other languages, and do not differ a great deal from one another. Had a little more collaboration and practical sense prevailed, a common writing system could have been adopted. This would have stimulated the printing of more copies of each single published work, thus reducing costs and raising the number of publications in Cimbrian available in the three areas.

factors: the small size of the community (actually the smallest language minority in Italy) on the one hand and the lack of economic and educational opportunities for residents, which has brought about massive emigration (particularly from Luserna/Lusern, which is particularly isolated) on the other.

Sociolinguistic situations

In the Cimbrian areas today, three languages are used, each in definite situations, albeit with much overlapping among them: Italian, Venetan/Trentino⁷ and Cimbrian, a situation that Cimbrians share with most other small minorities in Italy. However, if we consider the whole Cimbrian area, only a small percentage speak or even understand Cimbrian, and a much smaller one reads or writes it, while, even though Cimbrian now enjoys the official status of a minority language, the only official language used in all 'high' domains is Italian. Venetan and Trentino dialects, on the other hand, like all other Italian 'dialects' (in reality regional languages⁸), are not recognized or protected, and mostly spoken in 'low' domains, even if they are still quite frequently used in spite of the rapid language shift that is taking place.

In spite of the recent recognition of Cimbrian as a minority language, there are no plans (nor funding) for giving it some visibility in the whole Cimbrian area or even to teach it to the 'ethnic' Cimbrians who live outside the three villages where it is still spoken, if we exclude some attempts that have been and are being carried out in Lavarone/Lavrou and on the Cansiglio plateau and plans to do it in Asiago/Sleghe as well. The problem is that micronational conscience, both in a Cimbrian and in a Venetan sense, is not much developed in the Cimbrian area⁹, and the financial provisions that Cimbrians can rely on for the development, not of Venetan/Trentino, but only of the local variety of Cimbrian are not remarkable.

Language planning

⁷ Venetan dialect in the Seven and Thirteen Communes and on the Cansiglio plateau, and Trentino dialect in Luserna/Lusern and the Folgaria/Folgrait and Lavarone/Lavrou plateau. Both varieties, however, belong to the same linguistic group and are very close to each other.

⁸ On the difference between Italian minority and regional languages, see Coluzzi, Paolo, 2004. *Regional and Minority Languages in Italy. An General Introduction on the Present Situation and a Comparison of Two Case Studies: Language Planning for Milanese (Western Lombard) and Friulian* (Working Paper 14), Barcelona: Ciemen, available on-line at: <<http://www.ciemen.org/mercator/pdf/wp14-def-ang.pdf>>.

⁹ However, as far as attitudes are concerned, Cimbrians appear to value their language positively, particularly in Luserna/Lusern, which is part of an autonomous region sensitive to the issue of minority languages.

In the Cimbrian area the following institutes and associations have been established with the object of carrying out research on Cimbrian language and culture and of preserving and promoting them (more the former than the latter):

-*Istituto Culturale Mocheno-cimbro (Kulturinstitut Bersntol u. Lusèrn)* ¹⁰ (Luserna/Lusern, established in 1987), which publishes the *Quaderni dell'Istituto* and the quarterly community paper *Lem Bersntol-Lusèrn (Identità* before 1996), part of which is written in Cimbrian.

-*Kulturverein-Lusern* (Luserna/Lusern, established in 1972).

-*Centro Documentazione Luserna* (Luserna/Lusern, established in 1996).

-*Curatorium Cimbricum Veronense* (Giazza/Ljetzan, established in 1974), which publishes the half-yearly magazines *Tzimbar Naugaz* (Cimbrian news) and *Cimbri-Tzimbar* (life and culture of the Cimbrian communities).

-*Istituto di Cultura Cimbra 'A. Dal Pozzo'* (Roana/Robaan, established in 1973), which publishes the biannual journal *Quaderni di Cultura Cimbra*.

-*Associazione Culturale Cimbri del Cansiglio* (Cansiglio, established in 1983).

Before moving on to the language planning strategies that have been adopted in the Cimbrian area in the field of education, I would like to stress the fact that effective language planning in this area cannot be separated from effective economic planning. This is true for any minority, but it becomes vital for small isolated and economically underdeveloped realities like the one in Giazza/Ljetzan and Luserna/Lusern. As Nettle and Romaine wrote, 'a community of people can exist only where there is a viable environment for them to live in, and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger, when languages lose their speakers, they die' (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 5). If no jobs can be found in these villages or nearby, if commuting for work or education is so difficult and time-consuming, emigration will continue, young people will leave and the community will die together with its language. On the Asiago/Sleghe plateau the situation is a little less serious as tourism has managed to create some jobs, and the road to Vicenza and the plain is satisfactory, but in Giazza/Ljetzan and even more in Luserna/Lusern there is still a long way to go, even though it must be acknowledged that the local authorities in Luserna/Lusern have made some remarkable efforts to improve the situation. Jobs must be created, and if knowledge of the local language is required for

¹⁰ From January 2005 there will be two separate institutes for the Mocheno and the Cimbrian communities. The one for the Cimbrian community will be called *Istituto Cimbro/Kulturinstitut Lusèrn*.

at least some of them, this will be a tremendous stimulus for people to learn or improve it.

At this point it is worth looking at a crucial issue regarding language planning in the Cimbrian area, which has hardly been touched upon. This is whether and to what extent Cimbrian (or, in theory, Venetan/Trentino, even though this is not recognized as a regional language) should be reintroduced into the historical Cimbrian areas that have lost it. This is a huge and complicated issue, which to some extent might be viewed as merely hypothetical considering the present lack of resources and ethno-linguistic conscience on the part of most inhabitants of the historical Cimbrian areas. I have already expressed my view above that all three languages of the community should be somehow protected, and even though in most places one of them, Cimbrian, has died out, it should still be taught at school even to those who have never spoken it, as is actually happening in the primary school at Selva di Progno/Brunghe. In the same way it should gain some visibility in public signs and the mass media, in spite of the fact that the chances of it being actually revitalized are extremely low.¹¹

Acquisition planning¹²

As far as education is concerned, the situation of Cimbrian is not very encouraging.

At the pre-school level, it has only been present in the nursery school of Luserna/Lusern since the middle of the 90s,¹³ and for only 2 hours every day, which means that the main language of instruction is Italian, not Cimbrian.

As regards primary education, some basic Cimbrian and Cimbrian culture have been taught in the primary school of Selva di Progno/Brunghe (there is no primary school in Giazza/Ljetzan), but only to children in the 4th and 5th grades for 1 hour each week, while in Luserna/Lusern Cimbrian was taught for a few hours in the primary school until 1998 when it was replaced by standard German taught both as a subject

¹¹ Many factors seem to point to this, some of which have been already mentioned: the lack of working and educational facilities, the isolation of the population, the low language density, the advanced age of the remaining speakers (particularly in Giazza/Ljetzan and Roana/Robaan), the lack of ethno-linguistic conscience, etc. (see the conclusions).

¹² All the data in this section has been provided by Fiorenzo Nicolussi and Luigi Nicolussi Castellan (Luserna/Lusern), Sergio Bonato (Seven Communes), Giovanni Molinari (Thirteen Communes), Francesco Azzalini and Lorenzo Slaviero (Cansiglio). They have been supplemented with information from the following sources:

Bonato 1996, Nicolussi Zatta 2000, Piccolboni 2002, Zambaldo
(<http://www.cimbri.it/Giornale/articoli/news/radio.htm>) and Rosanelli
(<http://www.educational.rai.it/corsiformazione/intercultura/scaffale/approf/approf30.htm>).

¹³ Before that and until 1990, Cimbrian and standard German courses were organized outside school hours by the Kulturverein Lusern.

and used as a medium of instruction for 13 hours each week. There is now a project for the introduction of Cimbrian alongside German.

As for secondary education, as of now, some projects centred around Cimbrian culture have been successfully completed in the lower secondary school of Lavarone/Lavrou.¹⁴ However, it should be introduced soon into the Asiago/Sleghe secondary school for about 1½ hours each week and in the primary and lower secondary schools in Farra d'Alpago and Tambre (Cansiglio) for one hour each week.

As regards adult education, Cimbrian courses have been organized in all the Cimbrian areas. The one in Giazza/Ljetzan has been taking place at the Cimbrian Museum twice a month since 1994¹⁵, while the one in Roana/Robaan (since 2003-2004 in Asiago/Sleghe) takes place weekly¹⁶. Similarly, Cimbrian courses have taken place in Luserna/Lusern for many years (in October 2004 two courses started twice a week, both in the day and in the evening, aimed mainly at the local civil servants), whereas a summer course (*Lentig Tzimbrisce Gaprecht-Cimbri Vivo*, five Sundays) is organized every year by the Cimbrian Cultural Association in Cansiglio with the money provided by Law 482/99, using the variety of the Seven Communes (*tzimbris*). The first course, financed by Law 482/99, ran in 2003, but Cimbrian courses had been held in Cansiglio since 1998.

As far as Cimbrian teachers' training is concerned, something has been done as well; in the Seven Communes, for example, two short courses (four sessions each) on Cimbrian language and culture for teachers were carried out in 2002/2003 and 2004. In January 2005 two extensive teachers' training courses for Cimbrian teachers (80 hours in total) are due to begin, one in Verona and one in Asiago/Sleghe. In Luserna/Lusern, too, some courses for teachers have taken place.

Finally, as regards teaching material, only two primary school textbooks for the learning of Cimbrian have been published so far, one for Luserna/Lusern (*Moi earst libar*, published in 1998 by the Mocheno-Cimbrian Institute) and one for the Thirteen Communes (*Bar lirnan tàuc'*, published in 2001 by the Curatorium Cimbricum Veronense with the financial support of the European Union)¹⁷. As for the Cimbrian of the Seven Communes, two books and a CD-rom on both the local Cimbrian language and on Cimbrian culture are now available,¹⁸ while a book on Cimbrian culture for the

¹⁴ The book *Viaggio nella terra dei Cimbri* edited by Franca Cavasin is the result of one of these projects.

¹⁵ This is called *Tzimbar Lentak* (Living Cimbrian).

¹⁶ This is called *An minsich simbro* (A little Cimbrian).

¹⁷ A CD-rom has been published together with the book, and the whole course is also available online at: <<http://www.cimbri.it/lingua.html>>.

¹⁸ Sergio Bonato, *De Tzimbar von Siben Komoinen: storia, cultura, letteratura cimbra* and Ermenegildo Bidese, *De Tzimbar von Siben Komoinen: corso di lingua cimbra – glossario cimbro-italiano* (Asiago: Comunità Montana Altopiano Sette Comuni 2001). An abridged version is also available on the net at:

school (*Terra e vita dei Sette Comuni*, written by S. Bonato and P. Rigoni) was published by the Institute of Cimbrian Culture in 1987. The Cimbrian Cultural Association in Cansiglio has just published a very interesting and appealing first Cimbrian course for children on book and CD-rom (Costante Azzalini and Carmen Gandin, *Enghel e Lisa nel villaggio di Canaje*, Associazione Culturale Cimbri del Cansiglio, 2003) with the funds provided by Law 482/99.

What is important to highlight here is that learning Cimbrian must be seen as leading to some kind of reward. People, particularly young people, will be more prone to learn the local language if they can see some practical advantage coming from it, whether it be getting a job for which knowledge of the local language is required (e.g. in the local Town Hall) or having access to an interesting and stimulating culture (literature, music, etc. in Cimbrian).

Conclusions

Will Cimbrian survive? As we have seen so far, cultural initiatives have not been lacking. One of the strategies normally employed in language planning, i.e. the teaching of the language to children, has begun to be implemented in Luserna/Lusern and Selva di Progno/Brunghe, but in a weak form. As we have seen, some magazines do circulate in these areas, but their use of Cimbrian is totally insufficient. In this respect another problem is the lack of general agreement on the importance of the use of a common writing system.¹⁹ Its adoption would make publishing and diffusion much easier and cheaper (more copies could be printed of each book or magazine). However, perhaps the greatest problem Cimbrian faces is the fairly low prestige it has – too many still see it as an old language devoid of any practical usefulness – which is accompanied by a fairly low ethnolinguistic conscience. Only official status and good language planning coupled with a strong sense of belonging to a minority can improve the esteem and prestige of a minority language and thus stimulate its use. In this respect, the regional laws for the protection of Cimbrian have had too limited a scope and Law 482/99 has probably arrived too late, at least so far as the areas of the Seven and Thirteen Communes are concerned. Fifty years ago, when many more people spoke Cimbrian, the chances of salvaging the language would have been much higher. In spite of this, the law is here now. If Cimbrian is introduced into the school

<<http://www.cimbri7comuni.it/>>. Another basic course, *Il cimbro per i turisti* (Zimbrisch Gaprècht vor Vrömade), written by Remigio Geiser, is also available on the net at: <<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/didact/zimbr/course/lesson1/einleit.htm>>.

¹⁹ In contrast, the Ladin area now does have a unified standard form of Ladin (*ladin dolomitan*).

curriculum at all levels (across the entire Cimbrian area), if more is published in Cimbrian – perhaps a weekly magazine of current events and material for children (including comics) –, if at least one radio station were to broadcast in Cimbrian even for just a few hours every day, if at least some official documents were drawn up in Cimbrian or local elites – teachers, artists, politicians, administrators – used it in official situations (to enhance its prestige), if there were more music groups or singer songwriters singing in Cimbrian (to attract young people²⁰) and, most importantly, if Cimbrians were able to find jobs and educational facilities within their own land, then the situation might slowly improve, or at least we could be confident that the situation in Luserna/Lusern would not deteriorate to the extent that it has in Giazza/Ljetzan and Roana/Robaan. I also believe that a common coordinating body for the entire Cimbrian area, a kind of 'Academy of the Cimbrian Language' along the Galician or Asturian lines, would greatly enhance the chances of success of any language planning, as would some form of autonomy or self-government. As Cooper wrote (1989, 115), 'champions of vernaculars for high-culture functions are unlikely to succeed unless they, or those they represent, **control the economic and political apparatus** in which the community operates' (emphasis added).

Even if Cimbrian were eventually to be lost, language planning efforts would have been still worthwhile, since the cultural and social (and perhaps even economic, through cultural tourism) advantages are definitely worth it. In my view, language planning is **always** worth carrying out even when the result may be a mere symbolical retention of the local language.

As Nancy Dorian wrote (Dorian 1987, 63-64), there are at least three reasons why language planning should be attempted anyway: 1) to give the speakers of the minority language a self-confidence and self-respect that the official policy of the state has undermined 2) to create an interest in local traditions and history, with all this entails 3) to create jobs in the areas related to language planning (translators, teachers, civil servants, etc.). To these positive results, we should add the literary revival that language planning always brings about, as John Edwards reminds us (1995, 123), and the musical revival that we have witnessed for example in Spain's regions where the local language is protected. Perhaps more important than all this is that language planning efforts 'help people to find identity and purpose, self-realization and fulfilment' (Fishman 1991, 407).

²⁰ Young people and children should be the main focus of any language planning. It is among them that language shift is greatest, and it is them who will be responsible for the maintenance of the language in the next generation.

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