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THE ALBANIAN DIALECTS IN SOUTHERN ITALY:
A TENUOUS SURVIVAL

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Abstract

This study explores the problems of language shift via the example of Arbëresh, a language spoken by groups of Albanians who have migrated to the south of Italy in different waves since the 15th century. The aim of this article is to offer a picture of Arbëresh vitality from the perspective of the speakers' linguistic competence and language use, along with the attitudes towards the language. The focus will be on four Albanian enclaves which form a geographical continuum, a factor which bears on the vitality of the Albanian dialect. On the basis of the overall findings a clear hierarchy of Arbëresh vitality emerges: the four villages form an Arbëresh language-use continuum that improves as one moves from the coast towards inland locations. Moreover, a general negative attitude toward Arbëresh can be observed among the villages, even though at different levels, which was sharpened by the arrival of the "new Albanians" whose highly negative ethnolinguistic image throughout Italy has provoked a shift among Arbëresh speakers in favor of the Italian language.

Keywords: Albanian; language minorities; vitality; maintenance; loss.

1. Introduction

One of the most macabre anthropomorphic metaphors linguists have come up with, language death, describes a common phenomenon among minority languages today. In one familiar pattern recognized by students of language endangerment and death, a minority population that can be shown to suffer from political, economic, and social disadvantages responds to their negative situation by using the distinctive language of their group less and less, or giving up its use altogether, so as to dissociate themselves from a disadvantageous ethnic identity. Such a shift is an aspect of sociocultural change intimately linked to

phenomena such as urbanization, industrialization and secularization, albeit not predictably proceeding from any of them. As a consequence of this, minorities internalize the negative views held of their group and may experience identity conflicts and uneasiness. These may then induce the community to suppress a part of itself, inhibiting the process of transmission. Put differently, multilingual parents no longer consider it necessary or worthwhile for the future of their children to communicate with them in a low prestige language. However, focusing on points of commonality among endangered situations¹ may mask the fact that there could be interesting departures from the general pattern (Grenoble and Whaley 1998).

Here, I will explore the problems of language shift in Arbëresh, a language spoken by groups of Albanians who migrated to the south of Italy in different waves from onward the 15th century. To date the descendants of these immigrants and their language are generally called Arbëresh or Arbënesh, which is the name they used to refer to themselves and their mother tongue in the Middle Ages. It is not easy to establish the current number of people speaking Arbëresh in Italy because the national census does not record the number of Italian citizens who speak a minority language (Gambarara 1994). The only data available derive from scholarly research. According to previous studies, the Arbëresh diaspora comprises approximately 100,000 people (Pellegrini 1994) distributed in about 50 villages. These dialects may experience the threat of language decay and, in some cases of death, due to their intense contact with Italian and surrounding Italo-Romance dialects, even though their socio-linguistic vitality differs from one case to another.

The aim of this article is to offer a picture of Arbëresh vitality from the perspective of the speakers' linguistic competence and language use along with their attitudes towards the language. The focus will be on four Albanian enclaves — Campomarino, Portocannone, Ururi (in the province of Campobasso) in the region of Molise, and Chieuti (in the province of Foggia) in Apulia. These communities form a geographical continuum, a factor which bears on the vitality of the Albanian dialects (see Figure 1). While there is a considerable literature about the Arbëresh communities in Italy, mostly concerning villages in Sicily and Calabria, there are no recent surveys for the status of this language either in Molise or in Apulia,² where it seems to be disappearing fast.

Campomarino, an important port for tourism and fishing, and its nearby town Chieuti are situated near the Mediterranean coast. Most citizens work in the industrial area of Campomarino, some of them are involved in tourist activities while others work the land, which was the main source of income until the second half of the 20th century. On the top of a small hill that is ideal for several types of cultivation sits Portocannone, while Ururi can be found further inland. Although some residents work in the nearby industrial area, their economy is mainly based on agriculture and construction.

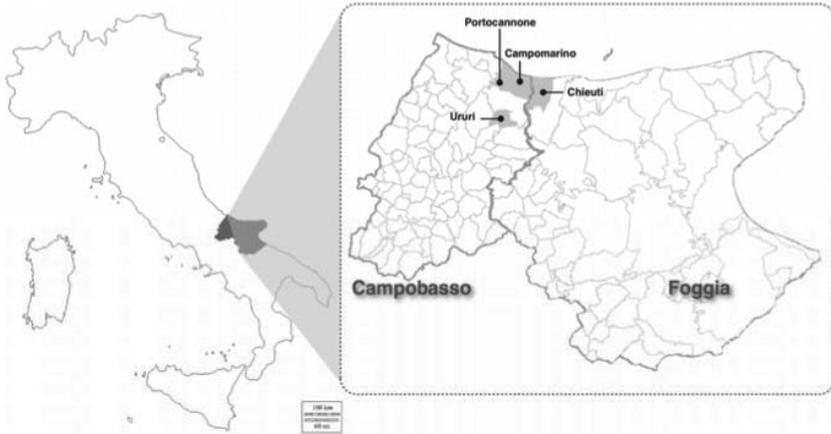


Figure 1. *Albanian enclaves in Molise and Apulia*

2. Albanian dialects: a historical presence

The Arbëresh presence in Italy dates back to the middle of the 13th century (Altimari 1994), but only in the second half of the 15th century did this presence begin to constitute an identifiable ethnic community, with its own identity, language, culture and religion. With the Albanian immigrations, Calabria and the south of Italy in general witnessed a new phase of demographic expansion. It is in the society of this time, which was experiencing a great economic development but lacked sufficient workforce, that these immigrant populations found favorable conditions. The settlements of Albanian exiles in the communities surveyed were encouraged by the King of Naples Ferrante I, Pope Pius II, and the Bishops of Larino, the last of whom was the owner of the fiefdom of Ururi that was destroyed by a terrible earthquake in the second half of the 15th century. The new inhabitants rebuilt the village, named it Ruri, and later on some of them moved to the Biferno and Fortore areas, establishing the villages of Portkanuni (Portocannone), Këmarini (Campomarino), Qefti (Chieuti)³ and Munxhfuni (Montecilfone) (Tria 1774). These Albanian communities devoted themselves to agriculture and cattle breeding, while the noblemen, trained in the art of war, kept fighting for the Kingdom of Naples, obtaining favors as a reward. For all the other Albanian people almost nothing was done in order to improve their conditions (Giammiro 1994). Whether privileges were granted or denied depended on the specific attitudes and strategies of different feudal lords and bishops. Furthermore, the negative relations with other inhabitants of the region aggravated their situation: the differences in language,

culture and religion was the source of several misunderstandings between them, and provoked forms of ethnic hostility bordering on racism towards Albanians (Flocco 1985).

At the end of the 17th century the Arbëresh people were required to convert to the Latin religious rite, an event that broke an important link with their native culture, although it started a new connection with the “Latin people”, who began to see Albanian speakers as less different. Notwithstanding this, these communities have maintained a deep sense of distinctive identity as ethnic Arbëresh and were extremely resistant to the construction of Italian national identity following the political unification in 1861, a period which saw the enforcement of a national policy based on the suppression of Italo-Romance dialects and minority languages, which were considered to be an obstacle to the acquisition of Italian and, therefore, to social emancipation.⁴ Still, notwithstanding the official pressure for standard Italian, intra-community life favored the use of Albanian. This was mostly due to their agriculture-based economy: the fertile lands favored farming and allowed most Arbëresh tenant-farmers to become owners of the land they worked on. Moreover, Arbëresh communities were closed to the outside world, even in the case of marriage: endogamy was the norm, whereas exogamy was seen as a “cultural betrayal” by other members of their group. Interestingly, the social transformations of the second half of the last century only partially affected those towns. The only medium for disseminating Italian was primary school, mostly attended by boys, and it was not established until 1958 (Flocco 1985). Thus some factors favored the maintenance of Arbëresh, even though a migratory movement toward the industrialized north of Italy resulted in a huge loss of speakers. It is mainly for these closed-community reasons that despite the variables that usually lead to convergence — media, national education, transport infrastructure — the Arbëresh retained their specificity. This is confirmed by research carried out by Rother in 1966. According to his data,⁵ in Portocannone 90.1% of the population were full speakers of Arbëresh, in Ururi 86.4% while in Chieuti 83.5% of the residents were competent in the Albanian dialect. The exception was Campomarino, where in less than half the century the number of citizens had increased massively and the proportion of Arbëresh speakers had steadily decreased: 54.8% of the population retained their ethnic language.

After the 1970s, waves of ethnic revival as a general reaction to prior nation-building affected several Western societies (Wright 2004) and were also felt in Molise, and particularly in Ururi and Portocannone. Several young men, after coming back from the north of Italy where they received higher education, established associations and journals for promoting Albanian language and culture. However, the following decade saw decreasing interest in the Arbëresh language and culture among these communities, as a result of the introduction of Italian into all layers of society and of the massive spread of secondary

education, of media and of all modern means of communication. The main difference between the present and past situation was that new generations started accepting the higher prestige of Italian, even though members of the old and intervening generations continued valuing their group identification very highly.

The first signs of another revived interest in the use of Arbëresh appeared at the start of the 1990s, particularly in schools in Portocannone and Ururi, mainly due to the individual initiative of some teachers. However, lack of competent teachers and difficulties in recruiting them in the absence of special funding caused the termination of the courses that had been offered in Albanian. In 1997 this problem was partially solved, first with the approval of a regional law and subsequently by the passing of a national law providing for maintenance and protection of the minority languages present in Italy.⁶

3. Albanian dialect vitality

Data about Albanian dialect vitality were collected during fieldwork I carried out in these communities;⁷ the informants of a stratified and proportional sample⁸ were interviewed on the basis of a questionnaire, where they self-reported their degree of competence in the Albanian dialect along with its use in different domains. The reason I chose the methodology of guided interviews is that I wanted all the informants to discuss certain specific topics, rather than simply to talk freely; this proved to be a successful approach, mainly because the informants all dealt with the same questions but added other information, thus giving a more complete picture of their attitudes towards the Arbëresh language.

Determining how best to recruit subjects was not an easy task. After careful consideration, I decided to use schools as the starting point for the informants' recruitment. Here, I was allowed to spend some time with my young informants, particularly in the nursery where I had the possibility to observe the children, and get some information about their competence in Arbëresh. Then, after obtaining their parents' permission, I was allowed to go to the children's homes to interview other family members; by means of this procedure, cross-generational data within a family were obtained.

On the basis of these findings, different levels of vitality of the Albanian dialect have emerged. In particular, two trends can be distinguished, the former for Portocannone and Ururi, the latter for Campomarino and Chieti.

In Portocannone and Ururi, Arbëresh vitality is high: in Portocannone, 73% of the informants have active competence in the Albanian dialect, while in Ururi, 82% of the informants are full speakers of Arbëresh. Moreover, it is possible to isolate the factors which might affect the maintenance or predict the

disappearance of the family language, which are age, education and occupation:⁹ the degree of competence in Arbëresh is related to rural areas, increases in relation to the speakers' age, and decreases in relation to their level of education. In these two villages the whole set of speakers' attitudes towards Arbëresh can be defined as a socio-psycholinguistic continuum: attitudes among older speakers are ambivalent — showing a tension between recognition of the binding or solidarity function which Arbëresh performs among members of the same generation but also embrace of the idea that children should not be taught Arbëresh. In the in-between generation an almost negative attitude appears, while among young speakers completely negative attitudes emerge. This is to be seen primarily in some informants' intention not to transmit Arbëresh to the next generation. In point of fact, most of the children of the in-between generation do not possess full competence in Arbëresh and show a negative attitude toward it.

In the other two villages the situation is even worse. In Campomarino only 9% of the informants are active speakers of Arbëresh and they do not use the dialect for intra-community communication; moreover they are more than seventy years old, thus making the future prospects for language maintenance even worse. In addition, the low degree of Arbëresh vitality in Campomarino is directly proportional to the strong negative attitude its members have towards the Albanian dialect. As for Chieuti, there is a huge reduction of full speakers in comparison to Rother's data: only 33% of the interviewed speakers declared that they know Arbëresh actively and there is a proficiency continuum whereby the relation between the speakers and their language competence is determined by their age. Moreover, the low diffusion of Arbëresh in the community, particularly in the intervening generation and their offspring, seems to depend on the fact that for the majority of the informants transmitting the minority language to the next generation is considered useless and unnecessary. This negative attitude is accompanied by a low degree of language loyalty: apart from some elderly speakers who showed a sense of identification with the minority language and culture, all the other informants do not feel proud to know Arbëresh, thus showing a deeply rooted negative attitude towards the Albanian dialect.

In conclusion, on the basis of the overall findings, a clear hierarchy of Arbëresh vitality emerges. The four villages form an Arbëresh language-use continuum that improves as one moves from the coast towards inland locations that is from Campomarino, Chieuti, Portocannone to Ururi. In the last two communities the vitality of the language is apparently quite high — even though there was a reduction in the percentage of speakers in both the villages in comparison to 1966; but in Campomarino and Chieuti the language has lost domains (including informal ones), and consequently is hardly spoken nowadays. The difference in vitality in these last two villages compared to the others

reflects the fact that the second half of the last century witnessed a complete shift from their position as two historical Albanian communities to their current position as conventional Italian villages; the main reason for this shift is to be found in their geographical position. The coast, which favors tourist activities, has been the front line of several migration waves from the inland in the region and also from other southern regions of Italy. In contrast, in Portocannone and Ururi Arbëresh remains more widely spoken because of a greater isolation which still allows the ethnic population to remain linked to their language and culture. This is indicated by the several initiatives these two communities have undertaken since the second half of the last century in order to maintain their ethnic language.

4. Arbëresh vs. Albanian

As remarked above, a general negative attitude toward Arbëresh can be observed among the villages, even though at different levels. In those places where the vitality of the language is high, a shift from a positive to an almost negative attitude can nonetheless be noticed, while in those villages where the vitality is low it seems that the negative attitude has been reinforced in the recent past: an influx of new Albanian immigrants into Italy has produced the recent sharp exacerbation of negative attitudes. Starting at the beginning of the 1990s Albanians opposing the Communist regime took refuge in Italy, settling mostly in the “historical” Albanian enclaves where they initially found widespread support. However, Italian people’s warm reception of Albanian refugees has gradually changed as the flow of Albanian emigrants has intensified. The refugees’ difficult position at the margins of economic activity has left the impression among the majority of Italians — also encouraged and reinforced by the mass media — that they are involved in criminal activities. Consequently they began to be seen as illegal migrants largely associated with criminality and moral decay, and the wave of Albanian migration was increasingly viewed as a problem for Italy, an invasion, and ultimately as a threatening flood. The result is that Italians’ stereotypical biases about Albanians have grown to the point where associating with Albanians and their language has become less attractive for Italians and above all for the Albanian-origin Arbëresh people.

The historical and social difference between the Arbëresh-speaking people and today’s Albanians is not generally known throughout Italy, and because of the language an easy association is made between the Arbëresh people and the new Albanians. As a result, Italians’ negative perceptions of Albanian immigrants have caused changes in Arbëresh speakers’ attitude towards use of their ethnic language even in Portocannone and Ururi, where one way to distance

themselves from Albanians is not speaking Arbëresh. Most of the older speakers in these two communities had previously called the language they speak “Albanian”, but they now feel the necessity of adding that their language is the “real” Albanian, in contrast to the Albanian of the new immigrants, which they often consider “bastardized”. This reflects the fact that the symbol of their identity, the heritage language, has undergone deep changes, causing them to renegotiate their identity. If even in the cases of Portocannone and Ururi the “Albanian” stigma has produced changes in attitude towards the use of both Arbëresh and Albanian, in Campomarino and Chieuti the stigma attached to Albanians has reinforced an already quite negative bias towards Arbëresh. In these two communities native Italian residents have distanced themselves even geographically from new Albanians, since the latter are forced to live in the part of the towns traditionally used by summer residents, a way of marking their non-Italian identity.

5. Final discussion

As discussed above, while it is possible to identify factors that operate to make the disappearance of an ethnic community language predictable, there remain other factors that may affect language attitudes and language vitality more unpredictably. In the Arbëresh case the least predictable development may have been the shift to the national language, in view of the fact that the Arbëresh communities had maintained a deep sense of distinctive identity for so long and had been extremely resistant to the construction of an Italian national identity. In the past, knowing Italian provided a certain kind of urban-oriented cultural capital (Bourdieu 1982) which could be “cashed in” by taking a job in the city, thus providing social mobility. This was balanced by a different kind of local cultural capital which came from knowing the Arbëresh language and which ensured an individual’s link to the place of origin. This “economy” of language-capital was altered by the arrival of the “new” Albanians, whose highly negative ethnolinguistic image provoked a shift among Arbëresh speakers in favor of the Italian language. This means that their original language is no longer considered a core value in their culture (Smolicz 1988) and loses in this way its role in maintaining their distinctive identity. It is generally accepted that the maintenance of core values mostly depends on the prestige a minority group’s culture has in the dominant culture: lack of prestige of Albanian seems to be the cause for the loss of this core value. In other words, there has been a passage from a strong dichotomy between the in-group, the Arbëresh community, and the out-group, Italians, a dichotomy which previously guaranteed Arbëresh language maintenance, to a situation where the in-group boundaries are perceived by Arbëresh people as soft and permeable; this re-

sults from the attempt of the “new” Albanians to get into the in-group. A negative social identity may act as a motivating factor for social change as the negatively impacted group tries to bring about a more satisfactory social identity. Put more simply, the members of the in-group wish to distance themselves from the group which is causing them so much comparative discomfort and to associate themselves with a more positively valued one (Turner and Oakes 1986), which is in this case the dominant Italian ethnic community. Previously, recognizing the Italians as the “others” was one way of creating cohesion within their own group; the “Italians”, as far as the Arbëresh were concerned, were those “other” people surrounding them. Today, however, the need to set themselves apart from Albanians has caused the Arbëresh to prefer association with the “old others”, that is the Italians. In this way the signifier “the others” has remained identical, but the meaning associated to it has changed and now is used to refer to Albanians. In conclusion, the Arbëresh speech community has asserted an ethnic distinction based on the dichotomy between “old Albanians” and “new Albanians”, and as their Albanianness became undesirable they affirmed their Italianness, that is their Italian national identity.¹⁰

This shift in attitudes is mainly due to the fact that Italian public opinion towards historically established minorities is extremely different from that toward new immigrant groups. Italian policy towards language established minorities is expressed in Art. 6 of the Constitution: *Italian Republic sustains language minorities with special regulations*. However, the application of the Constitutional provision was not regulated until the end of the last century when national Law 482/1999 was passed, giving a national framework for the preservation and renaissance of minority languages. Thus, even before signing the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages,¹¹ the Italian State had provided instruments for some recognition of minority language rights and the status and prestige of historic minority languages appeared to be strengthened. Modern nationalist sentiment has also been given voice in this law, however: before listing the language minorities which are supported by the Italian State,¹² Article 1 of the law asserts the status of Italian as the national official language. Thus the atmosphere of linguistic tolerance is only apparent, because the legislators do not enforce norms supporting *all* minority groups, but rather exclude from protection important components of the current Italian sociolinguistic situation, such as the “new minorities”. This is the case with regard to the new Albanians who have linguistically weakened old Albanian speakers, with the former trying to shake off the negative label imposed on them by shifting to Italian as well. Today, consequently, the outlook for all varieties of Albanian in Italy is unfavorable: the “old Albanians” do not fit into the recognized pattern of language shift and death, but now, in a way that was not predictable, they are affected by a new social contamination from the association of their language with that of the negatively viewed “new Albanians”. By contrast, the

new refugees, suffering from political, economic, and social disadvantages, do fit into the pattern, since they respond to their negative situation by using the distinctive language of their group less and less, or giving up its use altogether, so as to dissociate themselves from a disadvantageous ethnic identity.

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Notes

1. See among the others Sasse (1992); Edwards (1992).
2. Apart from Rother's survey (cf. Section 2) the only sources of data are synchronic descriptions of particular linguistic aspects of Arbëresh spoken in Molise: Lambertz (1923–1925); Breu (1993, 1995). The former analyses the phonological, morphological and syntactical systems of the Arbëresh spoken in Puglia and Molise. The latter analyses the contact between Arbëresh and Croatian (1993) and in 1995 he describes the morphology of Arbëresh spoken in Montecilfone.
3. Chieuti was at the time part of the area of Molise.
4. See De Mauro (1963) for a detailed discussion of the linguistic situation in Italy after its unification.
5. Complete data are in Rother (1968).
6. Cf. Section 5.
7. For the complete results about Albanian communities in Molise see Perta (2004), while for data about Chieuti see Perta (2009).
8. The size of the samples has been calculated applying the basic statistical procedures for sampling on the basis of the results of a pilot study.
9. To analyze the correlation among the variables, the statistical SPSS packet, through the categorical regression, was used.
10. See Joseph (2004) for a comment on this.
11. At the time of writing (March 2010), the Charter was still to be ratified in Italy. The Berlusconi Government halted the process. It is expected that the ratification will now be enforced, since the parliament gave their approval in 2001.
12. Article 2 of the law states that: "The Italian Republic supports the language and culture of people speaking Albanian, Catalan, German, Greek, Slovene, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulan, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian."

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