Summary: This article is based on a case study of Slovene speakers in north-western Italy and their attitudes towards language use and policy. Although the legal protection and support for the development of minority, regional, and non-dominant languages in Europe have made a remarkable progress, minority language communities still face many serious challenges. On the one hand, the level of their respective legal protection is often not efficient enough. On the other hand, legal protection provides only formal conditions for language maintenance, which has nothing to do with motivation, proficiency, or improvement. Today, most minority speakers in Europe are allowed and encouraged to use their home language in the public; but the question is whether they are motivated to do so. By studying the speakers of Slovene in Italy, my aim is to point at importance of colloquial local and non-local (koiné) varieties in maintaining minority language and bilingualism.

Keywords: Slovene language in Italy, minority language, language exposure, language ideology, sociolinguistics

1 Introduction

In Italy, Slovene is an officially recognised minority language, spoken along the Slovenian-Italian border. Due to its specific position as well as historical, political, and social changes throughout the 20th and 21st century, the Slovene spoken in Italy has developed some particular sociolinguistic and linguistic features (Jagodic et al. 2020). At the same time, the Slovene speakers in Italy have developed a specific perception of the local varieties or lects and the Slovene language continuum,

1 Under the term lect I consider different varieties, dialects, registers, styles, or other forms of language, including standard varieties (Meecham & Rees-Miller 2001). I also use this term as potentially neutral in comparison to the distinction between “language(s)” and “dialect(s)”, which can be parti-
which is both the cause and effect of complex identity options by which members of this community define themselves (Pertot 2011).

The paper presents some contemporary challenges, especially those related to the use of various lects of Slovene – ranging from local to standard – in a given area. I start with the assumption that speakers often decide to use a certain language even if they assume they are (sufficiently) proficient and/or fluent in it (Pertot 2011); contrary to it, if speakers assume that they have a low level of communicative competence, despite other positive factors – such as their positive attitude towards the language, perceived social and legal status of the language – they tend to decide against using that language in public (Kaučič 1997; Mezgec 2011). This especially holds true for minority and non-standard language speakers when they communicate with proficient standard speakers. Due to implicit or explicit language shaming, minority and non-standard language speakers marginalise and exclude themselves from groups for whom this (standard) language is the primary communicative code,² which further inhibits the development of communicative competence and threatens the use of a certain language (Lippi-Green 1997: 113).

In this paper I show that the Slovene speakers in Italy attach a high symbolic value to both the standardized and prestigious formal varieties (Slov. *knjižni jezik*) and to the non-standard (but perceived as equally prestigious and prized) local varieties. However, I argue that the absence of promotion of any Slovene *koiné* colloquial varieties which are typically used among speakers in Slovenia, can eventually lead to attrition and loss of the (Slovene) language in areas where it is a minority language.

2 Slovene in Italy

The development, vitality, status, position, and preservation of minority languages are influenced by several factors, which, in such analyses, must be taken...
into consideration (cf. Giles et al. 1977). In order to avoid any discrimination or pressure, the Slovene community has remained opposed to any census taking; therefore, there is no official population register. According to recent studies, the number of Slovene speakers in Italy is estimated to be between 70,000 and 90,000 (Jagodic 2020). In scholarly terms, Slovene in Italy may be considered as a cross-border national minority language, as it is the official and state language of the country which has a direct geographical contact with the Slovene minority settlements in Italy which are divided into six units of the North-Eastern border region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, namely Val Canale (Kanalska dolina), Resia (Rezija), Valli del Torre (Terske doline), Valli del Natisone (Nadiške doline), the province of Gorizia (Gorica) and the province of Trieste (Trst); this area comprises of 39 municipalities of the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia (Jagodic et al. 2020; Brezigar 2020b; Vidau 2013). Today, the Slovenes in Italy form a spatially and socially mobile community, highly integrated into its environment. The Slovene speakers are generally educated above the state average and well positioned in the society (Bogatec 2015).

The Slovene minority has an elaborate network of institutions: many schools in minority language at all levels, media, theatres, research institutes, associations, and societies. Many of these institutions in the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia were already established in the 19th century, whereas the situation in the province of Udine was slightly different due to other historical, geographical, and social factors (Grgič 2019). Immediately after the Second World War, the Slovene minority in Italy was subject to bilateral and international agreements signed by the Italian Republic and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, whose constitutive part was the Republic of Slovenia. On the basis of these agreements, as well as in a broader context of the post-war cultural, social and political developments, the Slovene minority in Italy rebuilt, expanded and strengthened its institutions, which were abolished and banned during the Italian Fascist regime (e.g. schools with Slovene as the language of instruction, media, economic, professional, cultural, research and other organisations, amateur and sports associations, etc.). Thus, the Slovene minority in Italy belongs to well-protected and institutionally developed minorities in Europe (Brežigar 2020b). The independence of Slovenia and the ideological shift after the fall of the Berlin Wall also significantly changed the attitude of the majority population towards the Slovene minority and speakers of the minority language. This is also evidenced by the fact that in the mid-1990s there was a growing interest in courses of Slovene as a foreign language (Jagodic et al. 2020) and an increased enrolment of children from interethnic, Italian-speaking and other families in Slovene schools (Bogatec 2015). Although several positive changes in the status and perception of the minority language have been accomplished, the majority Italian remains the dominant communicative code, while multilingualism, with a few ex-
ceptions, is generally seen as a “burden” and the exclusive responsibility of the minority community (Jagodic et al. 2020).

Nowadays, both countries, the Republic of Slovenia and the Italian Republic, are members of the European Union and belong to the Schengen area, which enables the free movement of persons, goods and services. Moreover, the border between Italy and Slovenia has been porous since at least the mid-1970s, when Slovenia, as a Yugoslav republic, has allowed the border-crossing, which came in force particularly since the Republic of Slovenia declared its independence in 1991 (Brezigar 2020b). As regards the position and status of Slovene as a minority language in Italy, the Italian Republic adopted several laws and regulations at the national and local level which serve as the basis for the protection of Slovene – some of them are specific for the Slovene community, while some others refer to different minority groups at local or national level. Whereas in the formal sense this protection has been improved over the past two decades (Vidau 2015; Brezigar 2020b), there are still some notable deficiencies in the legal framework, its implementation and, above all, its effects. These are visible, for example, in the linguistic landscape of the Slovene settlements in Italy, which are still predominantly Italian monolingual (Mezgec 2016; Cavaion 2014). The legal framework – The Protection of Historical Linguistic Minorities Act No. 482/1999, The National Protection Act 38/2001, and The Regional Protection Act No. 26/2007 – guarantees the right to the public use of Slovene or bilingual instruction, and the right to an autonomous organization of its cultural and economic sectors (Vidau 2013).

The Slovene minority in Italy and other Slovene minorities – in Austria, Hungary and Croatia, as well as expatriate and emigrant communities – are referred to in numerous documents of the Republic of Slovenia, while at the institutional level, this issue falls under the responsibility of the Government Office for Slovene Abroad, represented by a minister without portfolio. The state supports the activities of expatriate and other Slovene communities abroad and ensures, at least formally, that Slovene is used and maintained in these environments (Grgič 2020a).

However, despite this favourable general picture, the community is facing some critical challenges. Various studies draw attention to the fact that the communicative competence of Slovene speakers in Italy is in decline (Melinc Mlekuž 2019; Brezigar 2020a; Mezgec 2011). It seems that as a means of everyday communication, Slovene in Italy is faced with new challenges, with which the existing explicit and implicit language policies are not able to cope, despite their seemingly positive social and political attitude (Grgič 2016). To date, no comprehensive studies have been conducted in this field, as research has focused mostly on “hygienic factors” (Grgič 2016), i.e. factors which provide external protection (laws and their implementation, the existence and functioning of the minority community institutional infrastruc-
ture, etc.). Thus, it remains open to discussion, how bilingualism of Slovene speakers in Italy today can be defined? Are they partial, functional, balanced bilinguals, or so called “equilinguals” (Pertot 2011)?

Meanwhile, a number of studies have shed light on some characteristics of the Slovene in Italy. Due to the contact with the majority language, along with other factors such as geographical periphery and the lack of intensive contacts with speakers in Slovenia, the Slovene language in Italy has gradually developed unique features that are visible not across dialects and regional varieties, but to a lesser extent also in the lexis and phonetics of what is perceived as standard Slovene, and used in media, schools, public speaking etc. (Jagodic et al. 2020). However, although being a minority situated at the periphery, the Slovene speakers developed positive attitudes to their local varieties, which provided them a social prestige and established an aura of “authenticity”. The Slovene minority speaker’s linguistic repertoires, nevertheless, tend to be reduced to fit in a binary ideological frame, which is shaped by the contrasting construction developed within the communities in order to support the primacy of both the standard, codified Slovene language on the one hand (knjižni or zborni jezik), and the local “authentic” rural dialects on the other (Grgič 2019), excluding and stigmatizing not the local, but the cross-regional koine colloquial varieties of Slovene. This double-sided ideology does thus not take into account the plurality of the varieties used by the speakers and produces a sharply contrasting set of beliefs. As a result, the speakers are somehow forced to choose between a “proper” language in terms of normative correctness, and a “genuine”, mostly archaic village dialect, the first being far too formal and unsuitable for everyday needs, and the second constricted to a limited space (a few villages) and time (“the good and glorious past”). Both these ideologies exclude, in fact, interactions between standard and local varieties, as well as language change and diversification, pragmatic admixtures of different varieties, codes and registers in speaker’s everyday life.

In order to explain this linguistic ideology, I outline the basic characteristics of the Slovene speakers’ language repertoire. Namely, this linguistic repertoire includes the following varieties (Gorjanc et al. 2015):

A) local (e.g. village) dialect, which speakers and policy-makers consider “authentic”;
B) regional lect, the so-called zamejščina, i.e., the Slovene colloquial variety spoken by people “beyond the border” (za-mejo) in Italy;
C) colloquial Slovene varieties (različice splošnega pogovornega jezika, (cf. FN 3), which represent a kind of linguistic koiné of informal communication in Slovenia;
D) standard variety of Slovene (knjižni or zborni jezik).
The lect which I described as local (e.g. village) (A) is used at home, among friends or neighbours within a very limited geographical area (e.g. a few villages. The regional lect, the so-called zamejščina (B) is used for inter-group communication of Slovene speakers in Italy. The colloquial varieties (C), however, are used for daily communication in non-formal and semi-formal settings (shops, restaurants, social media, popular radio programs, etc.), in Slovenia. These varieties are a mixture of local elements, foreign loanwords and expressions (especially English and Serbian/Croatian), and slang, besides some formal components. They differ considerably from formal variety (D); they are so widespread that they have become de facto a communicative norm in everyday life and are taught, besides the standard variety, in the courses of Slovene as a foreign language. If Slovene speakers in Italy are not exposed to these colloquial varieties (C), they face the paradoxical danger to become proficient in a “high”, formal, and prestigious, yet rarely used variety, but not fluent in varieties that are essential in everyday communication with their peers, commercial partners, and other interlocutors (Gorjanc et al. 2015). In the following sections, I outline the objectives, methodology and results of my research and fieldwork among the Slovene minority speakers.

3 Aims and methods

The aim of my paper is twofold: on the one hand I investigate domains and interactional settings in which speakers in Italy actually use Slovene; on the other, I attempt to analyse if the choice of language means by Slovene speakers’ in certain contexts and settings fulfilled their communicative needs and if this performance can be considered as efficient and properly contextualised in different communicative situations. In that regard I pay special attention to the pragmatic competence, especially regarding the use of borrowings, code switching, hybridisation/relexification and similar bilingual and translingual strategies.

In the period of 2015–2016, 2017–2020, and 2019–2020 I conducted three different but related research projects focused on groups of (younger) Slovene speakers in Italy; this research has continued until nowadays. Some of the findings were published (Grgič 2019), but the main results are presented in this paper for the first time.

3 In this paper, I use the term pragmatic competence as opposed to terms such as linguistic competence, proficiency etc. The pragmatic competence entails the ability of a purposeful use of different language means in different contexts (Sickinger & Schneider 2014). In this regard, the pragmatic competence seems to be radically inclusive, taking into account not only the communicative competence in one variety (the standard or the local one), but the speakers’ adeptness and his/her ability to combine, select and use different language varieties.
time. Besides, I draw upon selected studies on the Slovene minority language and community in Italy, particularly regarding the speakers’ fluency, features of regional/local language varieties (calques, interferences, false friends, etc.) in order to complement and check my findings (cf. Kaučič Baša 1997; Carli et al. 2002; Köpke & Schmid 2004; Dal Negro 2005; Pertot & Kosic 2014).

In all three research projects, I combined different methods. The first field research, which I conducted with my colleague Maja Mezgec as part of the Live Slovene/Živa slovenščina project (Grgnič 2019), was based mainly on testing students attending schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Trieste and Gorizia. The aim of this testing was to determine whether the target population i) recognises regionalisms and localisms and phenomena related to language contact in (A) and (B) varieties, ii) is familiar with the lexemes and syntactic structures in Slovene colloquial language (C), and iii) is able to compose simple texts which require the use of vocabulary from daily life which is not usually learned in the school; we used the context of a visit to the shopping center as our example, where students had to name objects such as cotton candy, lifts, dishwashers, etc. We cross-referenced our results with data on the communicative habits and repertoire choices of our respondents, their family background, and social networks (cf. Dal Negro 2005; Milroy 2002).

The second research was carried out in the period from 2017 to 2020, when I have been implementing an extensive project with colleagues Andreja Kalc, Maja Melinc Mlekuž and Damjan Popič. As part of our applied projects, we collected and analysed a corpus of over 5,000 pages (or over 1,500,000 words) of text created within the Slovene minority settlement area in Italy, intended for public use and considered by their authors as texts written in the standard language. The research is still ongoing and is carried out at two parallel levels: my colleague Damjan Popič is conducting a (quantitative) corpus analysis, while I have taken on qualitative data analysis on micro-samples of texts. My part of the survey is focused on a) phenomena which are considered to be the consequence of language contact, mainly the influence of Italian on Slovene; b) phenomena which are believed to be the result of the speakers’ linguistic (self-)marginalisation of and (self-)exclusion from the linguistic area of the reference language; c) phenomena which may occur as a result of the

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4 The research is focused on texts created in public administration (local self-governing communities), where official Italian texts are typically translated into Slovene; on media texts authored by journalists and other associates of media houses; and on texts authored by various representatives of Slovene organisations and associations intended for public announcement (invitations, notices, websites, etc.). Texts were collected within the projects aimed at language counselling and text review implemented by SLORI – Slovene Research Institute in Italy, and various stakeholders.
attitudes towards language and the speech community and the speakers’ identity options.

The third research in 2020, launched a qualitative analysis of the communicative habitus and language/social networks of students who have graduated from schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Italy and continue their studies in Italy or Slovenia.³ My hypothesis is that studying in Slovenia has a notably positive effect on the development of the communicative competence in Slovene, but that, at the age of 20, complete immersion in an environment where Slovene is the prevalent language is too late for the influence to be decisive in establishing new habitus.

Based on these research projects, I argue that while the Slovene speakers in Slovenia use different local and regional colloquial varieties (A, B and, above all, C), the Slovene speakers in Italy have only very limited access to the colloquial variety spoken in Slovenia (C). This restricted access de facto weakens the community: the choice of linguistic means is no longer a choice, but a necessity. If the speakers are not effectively exposed to a variety, they do not have any possibility to include this lect in their repertoire. Instead of empowering the minority speakers, a strict “local/formal variety ideology”, which privileges the varieties A, B and D, tends to unintentionally marginalize the minority speakers and, ultimately, to exclude them from many communicative settings and environments where different varieties of the Slovene language are spoken.

4 Preliminary results

The final results are only available for the first study, which was completed, whereas the results have been partially published (Grgič 2019). Despite some shortcomings in the questionnaire and the testing, which we noticed only during the implementation of the survey, the results can be considered as satisfactory and credible indicators of the actual situation. Virtually all the students included in the poll had only attended schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Italy; and four students had been schooled in Slovenia. The introductory questionnaire reveals that the interaction with the Slovene community in Slovenia is minimal. The majority of respondents (67.9 %) are in contact with people (even peers) who live in the Slovenia only a few times per year or never (Grgič 2019). Moreover, most re-

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³ The analysis is part of the research programme “Slovenhood Dimensions Between Local and Global at the Beginning of the Third Millennium”, conducted by the Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia, and the Institute for Ethnic Studies of Ljubljana, Slovenia, in cooperation with the Slovene Research Institute – SLORI in Trieste, Italy.
spondents watch films and read books (with the exception of compulsory school syllabus) in Italian only; while in terms of the use of the Internet and social networks, exposure to content in Italian is almost 80%, followed by English (15%), Slovene (3%), and other languages. Although this survey was intended to be an introductory study, it revealed a general trend which should not be overlooked by language planners, and especially experts in the field of language didactics: having completed eight years of schooling in Slovene, almost half of the respondents are not familiar with Slovene names for everyday objects they interact with outside the school environment (Grigč 2019).

As the analyses in the remaining two studies have not yet been completed, I can currently only present some preliminary results. However, the second study (text analysis) has already been carried out almost completely so we can publish the first fairly reliable findings, especially for its qualitative part. Our observation and analysis of texts showed that what authors perceive as standard language (see above, varieties C or D) is in fact a regional lect (B) with some elements of non-local high-codified variety (D). The texts – public announcements not intended for local speakers only – show some specific elements which reveal a strong influence of Italian as the majority and dominant language, a high degree of speakers’ marginalisation and their recourse to compensatory strategies, presumably due to speakers’ weaker communicative competence in standard Slovene. The use of local colloquial varieties (A or B) instead of non-local varieties (C or D) is not problematic in itself; it is questionable only when the speakers would opt for a certain variety but are unable to do this because of their low proficiency. In the texts, for example, we can find examples of archaic usage (e.g., sluga, postrežnik ‘servant’ instead of hišnik, vratar ‘janitor, doorkeeper’, respectively) which is meaningless in varieties C or D; on the other hand, from the collected text emerges the absence of more recent words, phrases and communicative patterns, which have become established in the reference area (i.e. in Slovenia) over the past two or three decades (e.g. dobroimetje, parkirnina, cestnina, napoved za odmero dohodnine, regija for ‘credit, parking fee, toll, tax return, region’, respectively). The most extensive lexical-semantic phenomenon is certainly paronymy, which can be complete (lexemes in Slovene and Italian which do not share a single meaning or shade of meaning, e.g., It. morbido ‘soft’ / Sl. morbiden ‘morbid’; or partial, e.g., It. lezione ‘lesson’, ‘lecture’, ‘reading’ / Sl. lekcija ‘private, individual lesson’. In the context of paronymy, we observe a neglect or ignorance of the influence of co-textual and contextual elements, e.g. collocability

6 The results of this and similar studies formed the basis for the design and implementation of the EDUKA2 – For a Cross-Border Governance of Education applied international project. The project was funded by the European Regional Development Fund under the Interreg Cooperation Programme V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014–2020 (http://www.eduka2.eu/eng/).
and text pragmatics. At the level of word formation and syntax, calquing is also present when a certain lexical or narrative pattern is already present in a given language and there is no need to look for semantic synonyms in the target language, which may then lead to communicative misunderstandings (Sl. odvisni delavci: calqued from It. lavoratori dipendenti = Sl. zaposleni delavci ‘employed workers’; actual meaning of odvisni delavci in Slovene: ‘employees suffering from (substance) dependence’). There seems to be frequent terminological calquing, i.e., the creation of translation duplicates and word-for-word translations in specialised fields, e.g., in legal terminology, where synonymy is supposed to be reduced to a minimum (terminska pogodba instead of pogodba o zaposlitvi za določen čas ‘fixed-term employment contract’). We also observe an expansion/contraction of the semantic field of certain lexemes, e.g. pobuda, poseg, teritorij ‘initiative, intervention, territory’, and the occurrence of collocations perceived as unusual in Slovene (grda ocena ‘ugly grade’ instead of slaba ocena ‘poor grade’, sadeži dela ‘work fruits’ instead of sadovi dela ‘fruits of labour’). Our analysis also revealed the presence of phenomena such as the change in grammatical gender according to the Italian pattern (vitamina (feminine) instead of vitamin (masculine), garaž (masculine) instead of garaža (feminine), etc.). We will obtain a more detailed overview with statistically relevant data when the quantitative comparative analysis of the data on the corpus of Slovene-language texts created in Italy and the reference corpus for the Slovene language (Gigafida 2.0) is completed.\footnote{For more details see https://viri.cjvt.si/gigafida/; last time accessed: 06.03.2024.}

The third study, which was launched in 2019, based on research among sample of students who have passed the final exam in schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in Italy and are currently studying in Slovenia (Group A) or in Italy (Group B), is still in its initial phase. However, the structured interviews I have conducted to date (N=9) show a distinct locality of Slovene language networks, even among those students who are studying in Slovenia. In these students, it is particularly noticeable that they occasionally, especially at the onset of their studies, avoid contact with their Slovenian classmates, as they do not feel comfortable speaking Slovene. When coming into contact with non-local speakers of Slovene, they usually find out that their communicative competence in colloquial Slovene (see above, variety C) is poor and they this comes as surprise as they “had good grades in Slovene”. Prior to their arrival in Slovenia, they had often found themselves in social situations where other speakers did not speak Slovene, but it had never happened to them that no one around could speak Italian. This is why they were always able to use Italian as a “lifeline” if they could not think of a certain word in Slovene. Having arrived in Slovenia, some of them noticed for the first time that their interlocutors
could not understand them. This was all the more common in informal circumstances (talking to their peers, running errands such as shopping, visiting the doctor, etc., where the above-mentioned variety C is typically used) than in formal circumstances (university lectures, essay writing, etc., where a codified variety, as the above-mentioned variety D, is required). Some respondents have explicitly pointed out that “it is hard to change things if you’re so used to them; you don’t notice some things at all, maybe those who study linguistics notice them, I don’t.” They notice difficulties not only in language production (speaking, writing), but also in comprehension: “Sometimes they laugh at a joke, but I don’t understand why. Then I’m embarrassed and I laugh too, without knowing why.” Respondents who have been intensively exposed to Slovene since their childhood tend to experience fewer problems: “I’d say that I haven’t experienced such problems, because I have always had friends from Slovenia and also relatives who came over [to Italy] because my mother is from Slovenia. And I also read books and comics and magazines from Slovenia, watched cartoons and the like. I’d say that my problem was the other way around: they laughed at me here [in Italy] because I was too similar to Slovenes from Slovenia and I sometimes spoke like them – that’s why they told me I sounded odd.”

5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The social contexts in which Slovene is used in Italy (schools, sport and cultural activities, media, etc.), offer to the Slovene speakers mainly contact with the local community and, consequently, also with local language uses (see above, varieties A and B), which are sometimes significantly distanced from other varieties of Slovene language continuum (see above, varieties C and D). These “differences” are visible mainly at the level of partly standardised and partly formal communication codes, e.g. at the level of the colloquial language in Slovenia (variety C), which is considered to be the Slovene communication koiné. The very formal, standard language use which speakers learn in school (variety D) is less problematic, especially when it comes to writing/talking about topics which are also related to school.

This is typical of the phenomenon of inverse diglossia (Grigorč 2020b), which has been observed over several years in minority communities, especially those with a high level of legal protection. What is, exactly, the inverse diglossia? Contrary to the situation in the past, speakers in some places are paradoxically familiar only with the formal variety (D) of Slovene, as they learn it mainly or exclusively in schools or are exposed to it only in formal communicative circumstances. On the other hand, these same speakers lack contact with various informal, daily communicative circumstances in which they could use various lects, genres, and styles of even “non-
local language varieties (Pertot & Kosic 2014; Bogatec 2015). In other words: we find that formal education is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a successful and effective acquisition of different lects (Cummins 1989; Hickey 2001). This is all the more evident when we are talking about contexts in which a particular language is a minority or non-prevalent communication code – where speakers are thus not adequately or sufficiently exposed to its various communicative contexts and varieties (Saxena 2014).

Schooling certainly deepens this gap between the communicative competence in the standard lect (variety D – which is only rarely used in practice) and the communicative competence in the colloquial lect (variety C). This is based upon the assumption that pupils and students acquire the knowledge of different informal genres from their environment, while in school they learn highly standardised genres which are less present in everyday life (Melinc Mlekuž 2019). This assumption rests on the perception that a minority language is also the first and primary language of (most) pupils and students, may be completely unrealistic and ideologically motivated – if it was once valid in the past, it may no longer be valid today (Bogatec 2015). Furthermore, it is no longer the case that the minority language is necessarily prevalent in students’ environment, or that it is present in this environment at least to the extent that it facilitates an adequate level of exposure to various communicative practices (Hickey 2001). In Italy, there are few situations in which children and adolescents can come into contact with colloquial Slovene (variety C) through the system of total immersion. The local context, being separated from the territory in which Slovene is the predominant communication code, enables (and even requires from) speakers to use almost exclusively local language phrases and communicative practices (see above varieties A and B) which differ from those which are otherwise characteristic of the Slovene language continuum, e.g. code switch, code mixing, hybrid lexical and syntactic forms, etc.

The existence of specific local uses is of course not problematic in and of itself. The phenomena related to language contact do not pose a threat to language, nor are they widespread only among the less educated, socially vulnerable, or otherwise uninformed speakers. Linguistic diversity with developed local lects is not in any way controversial. On the contrary; research conducted among different communities of speakers shows that such phenomena can even be regarded as indicators of speakers’ well-developed language and pragmatic skills and that these elements are widespread in diverse social environments (Woolard 2004: 75). From the aspect of language planning, these phenomena are problematic when the development of language skills and communicative competences among minority language speakers is unbalanced; while these individuals may be nominally bilingual, their primary language is exclusively the majority language (e.g. Italian), while the minority language (e.g., Slovene) is markedly weakened and reduced to local lects alone – in
the case of the Slovene in Italy, the above mentioned varieties A and B (Cook 2003; Schmid 2007). According to my previously published socio- and psycholinguistic studies and on the basis of the first results of our ongoing research, I argue that a restricted access to different language varieties (A, B, C, and D) weakens the community: the choice of linguistic means is no longer a choice, but a necessity. The language means and the repertoire of the Slovene speakers in Italy do not meet all their communicative needs in different situations, particularly in their interactions with Slovene speakers from Slovenia.

The speakers who identify with the Slovene minority in Italy, a) are not familiar with (and consequently cannot use) certain generally established structures and elements of Slovene and communicative practices characteristic of the Slovene language continuum, i.e., of the environment in which Slovene is prevalent; b) do not recognise the distinctly local character of certain uses or patterns and consequently cannot replace them with the uses or patterns which are more characteristic of the central Slovene area, when and if necessary; c) use strategies which enable them to communicate within their local network of speakers, like code mixing, code switch, lexical borrowing, language hybridisation, etc., even when they interact with speakers who are not able to understand this patterns.

Today, in Europe, more specifically in terms of “autochthonous” national minorities, (yet) another relation which was previously regarded as self-evident and unproblematic is now garnering critical attention: the relation within the continuum of a given language, namely between its centre and periphery (Sanchez-Stockhammer 2012). The formation of language islands (enclaves), which have to date been known in sociolinguistics mainly in the context of expatriate or migrant communities (Myers-Scotton 2002; Schmid 2007; Benmamoun et al. 2010), is also a current phenomenon today in cross-border territories, in areas which are geographically directly related to the so-called country of origin. Based on my findings, I argue that the Slovene minority in Italy distances itself from the centre – at a time when in the light of border removal, improved transport connections and new technologies would sooner suggest the contrary.

The perception of the continuum of Slovene at the level of daily communicate practices is in decline. Among the speakers who are only familiar with local language varieties, there has been a growing doubt whether they are still part of the Slovene language continuum, or instead another (Slavic) language. Although this perception is a legitimate option available to speakers, in smaller communities it can be an additional risk factor as it does not allow speakers to be included in larger social networks and consequently weakens the local variety (lect) and turns it into a merely heritage language. Among the Slovene minority in Italy, these phenomena are particularly noticeable in the province of Udine (Jagodic et al. 2020).
The consequences of a strictly exclusive ideology, promoting a highly codified and conservative formal language on the one hand (variety D) and the traditional, local, archaic dialect on the other (variety A and, partially, B), are already clearly noticeable. What speakers lack is the code which we use most frequently for meeting our daily communication needs – a colloquial lect (variety C) which for Slovene language speakers represents a sort of universal communicative koiné. Consequently, the phenomena of linguistic secessionism, (self-)marginalisation and (self-)exclusion of speakers from social networks which use different lects of the Slovene linguistic continuum are becoming more frequent. This, in turn, may lead to language attrition and the weakening of the communicative competence among minority language speakers.

Based on the studies conducted to date, I argue that in the settlement area of the Slovene minority in Italy, certain processes characteristic of language attrition have already begun which lead mainly towards the folklorisation of Slovene. These processes are not the result of an inadequate legal and formal protection or an inferior status of the minority language, but above all the lack of passive (input) and active (output) exposure to various uses of the Slovene general language and other language varieties of the Slovene language continuum. Ideological assumptions, based on promotion of only selected varieties, accelerate processes of weakening and marginalisation.

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