

Maintaining Minority Languages; Evidence from Italy

Authors : Carmela Perta

Abstract : Following the example of both International and European legislation, on 15 December 1999 the national law 482/99 Regulations regarding the protection of historic language minorities was approved, providing a national framework for the preservation and renaissance of minority languages «The Italian Republic sustains the language and culture of people speaking Albanian, Catalan, German, Greek, Slovene, Croatian, French, Francoprovençal, Friulan, Ladin, Occitan and Sard». The legislation made it possible to use these languages in education, in public offices, in local government, in the judicial system, in mass media, and allowed for the reinstatement of place and personal names. However, several practical problems have emerged, particularly those concerning the variety that should be used in education, in official documents and in other formal domains, i.e. the local variety, the standard of reference (if there is any), or an over regional koinè. In minority settings, it might seem eminently sensible to use the ready made standard of reference, accepting the Ausbausprache, rather than the language as practice, that is the local variety. However, this process seems to be pointless, as is demonstrated by the results of a fieldwork that was carried out in a small town in the South of Italy where members speak Faetar, the local variety of Francoprovençal. Here the language is largely used by the community members in all domains, moreover a deep sense of loyalty towards the variety they use and a manifested minority identity can be observed analysing the speakers' attitudes. However, these positive attitudes are towards the vehicle for their distinctive history and culture, and not for an "external" standard, a system which local authorities and planners are trying to introduce in the community. In other words, according to the speakers' reactions, there is little point in struggling to maintain a language, if what is conserved is not the group's language but another.

Keywords : maintenance, minority languages, endangered languages, francoprovençal

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