

Abstract

In 2014, the Friulian language was a very much alive one, fully integrated in a context which is once and for all a multi-lingual one, experiencing a phase of "cultural rebound" and profound changes.

Currently, 600,000 people who speak in the Friulian language live in the provinces of Udine, Gorizia and Pordenone. Of these, 420,000 speak it regularly, 180,000 occasionally.

These figures account for more than 60% of the population of the three provinces. If the inhabitants of the Province of Trieste are taken into account, the speakers of Friulian are basically half of the total population of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region.

Almost the whole of the population of the three provinces mentioned understands the Friulian language, even among those who do not speak it: in the province of Pordenone and Gorizia, more than 83% of the population understands Friulian. This percentage is over 96% in the case of the province of Udine.

The loss over time of the number of speakers has scaled down compared to what occurred until 2000. In the last decades of the 20th century, Friulian was "fading" with a rate of about 1% of speakers lost per year, as parents stopped teaching the language to their children starting with the '60s. Today, this loss rate is at 0.6% py, and tends to decrease over time.

By contrast, a new and extremely interesting phenomenon is emerging: young people under thirty actively speak Friulian more than those in their thirties and forties, who are quite close to the former, age-wise.

This "rebound" is a solid fact. In addition to our research, in fact, the phenomenon has emerged in other recent studies, and is consistent with the observation of society, the territory, the cultural events that take place there and their turnout. This seems to be the most obvious sign, but not the only one, of a turning point and a profound change in the very meaning of speaking in Friulian, which opens the doors to a future with very different prospects compared to past predictions.

Opinions in favor of an active language-protection policy are a strong majority in all three provinces. This view is also shared by many non-speakers, as is the opinion regarding the presence of the Friulian language in schools, where more than two thirds of respondents are in favor. Specifically, at school level, the data obtained in our research are aligned with the high percentages that are actually found in schools when it comes to choosing whether or not to study Friulian.

The percentage of those who state that "if both parents are Friulian they should speak to their children in Friulian" is well-nigh unanimous, with percentages in all three provinces close to 90% of the population. This figure has increased by more than 15 percentage points from '98 to today. Regarding the actual language transfer within families the numbers are lower, but still significant: 55.9% of speakers speak in Friulian (or "both languages") to their children.

They watch more radio and television programs in this language than in the past, but they read less. The use of writing in Friulian is still meager, in particular the digital writing using new technologies, and there seems little attention is paid to issues relating to "correct" spelling. Young people write in Friulian more than the elderly, particularly emails, texts, and on social media.

To sum up, by looking at the data as a whole, negative stereotypes associated with the use of Friulian have disappeared over time and similarly, the strength of the "ideological" claims of those who associated the use of the language to some cultural or identity "extra" has diminished. In 2014, the Friulian language is seen as a "connotation-free", "normal" or "local" language, its past linked with its present, without any

particular "apologies" or "heroism" stemming from its use but also without net and radical opposition to undermine its linguistic and cultural status. In other words:

1. the protection of Friulian, the opportunities to use it in public, its presence in schools have reduced the negative stereotypes about the language and have "raised its status" at cultural level;
2. in the new social context, globalized and digital, what is different or a "minority" is not necessarily disregarded anymore, but considered special and "anchoring";
3. society has shed its "ideology-drive", and in this context also languages are not heavily charged with ethical, value-based or political significance, but are simply used ("a code as good as any", for better or for worse),
4. the young have begun to speak Friulian more frequently. These, in our opinion, are the coordinates where the future use of Friulian lies.