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## Teaching Piedmontese

### A challenge?

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Until 2015, Piedmontese, an endangered and contested language spoken in the homonymous region of northwest Italy, had never before been taught in a university context, at least in Italy. After discussing the complex (and still unsettled) juridical status of Piedmontese, the chapter traces the teaching history of this minority language in both schools and universities, and focuses in particular on a still ongoing project at the University of Turin. The chapter further addresses the special requirements of language courses for contested languages, and offers a few suggestions on the basis of the project's preliminary results.

#### 1. Historical survey: A prototypical contested language

Piedmontese is usually dubbed in Italian an Italo-Romance “dialetto” (Avolio 2010). Even if Italian “dialetto” is a “false friend” and does not correspond to its English cognate,<sup>1</sup> “dialect” has often been used, and even by well-known scholars. Thus, Maiden and Parry titled their 1997 book *The dialects of Italy* and commented:

The often used term ‘Italian dialects’ may create the false impression that the dialects are varieties of the standard Italian language. In fact, the Italian language represents the continuation of one of the dialects [...] The other ‘dialects of Italy’ are ‘sisters of’ Italian. (Maiden and Parry 1997: 2)

The development of an Italian language in the sixteenth century led to a global restructuring of repertoires (Grassi, Sobrero and Telmon 1997: 16–17) through which all the local languages – no matter how remote from Italian – acquired the status of subordinate varieties, i.e. “dialects.”

Piedmontese faced such a destiny. However, since the eighteenth century Piedmontese (like a few other “dialects,” e.g. Sardinian) has had its own written grammar (for Piedmontese: Pipino 1783) and has developed a well-established

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1. Cf. the Introduction to the present volume.

form of regional koine which, without being “official,” was used as a lingua franca in all the continental territories<sup>2</sup> of the States of Savoy, namely in the Principality of Piedmont, in the County of Nice, in the Duchy of Aosta, and to some extent also across the Alps in the Duchy of Savoy (Telmon 2001: 54). A few eighteenth-century intellectuals tried to establish Piedmontese as an autonomous language, distinct from Italian as much as Portuguese is distinct from Spanish and Dutch from German. The idea was clearly expressed by the historian Carlo Denina (Capello 1814 and Griva 1980; see also Cognasso 1969: 245):

Sans prétendre donner ici une idée avantageuse de notre langage, je conviendrai avec M. l'abbé Charles Denina que si le dialecte Piémontais eût été cultivé du temps du premier duc Amédée VIII ou seulement d'Emmanuel Philibert, il se-rail devenu dans ce moment une langue illustre, au moins autant que le sont la Portugaise e l'Hollandaise, dont l'une est à l'Espagnole, l'autre à l'Allemande ce que la Piémontaise est à l'Italienne. (Capello 1814: ix–x)<sup>3</sup>

The House of Savoy, whose goal was to annex to their dominions as many Italian territories as possible, never approved nor supported these efforts. The ideas of Carlo Denina were overtly rejected and Denina himself was compelled to leave the Kingdom of Sardinia and take refuge in Prussia.

On the other hand Piedmontese, widely spoken in the mainland States of Savoy, was not only tolerated but even encouraged as a means to learn Italian (Regis 2012: 307). In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, lexicographers like Sant'Albino were proud to declare that their aim was to lead readers to a better knowledge of the national (i.e., Italian) language:

Tali sono in breve le basi sulle quali è fondata la compilazione di questo Dizionario, intorno al quale mi adoperai senza posa, e senza perdonarla a fatica, colla fiducia di far cosa non men grata che utile a' miei concittadini, e nell'intento di diffondere specialmente fra 'l popolo la cognizione della lingua patria.

(Sant'Albino 1859: xii)<sup>4</sup>

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2. I.e., with the exclusion of Sardinia.

3. “Without pretending to give here too favorable a view of our language, I will agree with Abbot Mr. Charles Denina that if the Piedmontese dialect would have been cultivated since the time of the first duke, Amadeus the Eight, or even since Emmanuel Philibert, it would have become at these times an illustrious language, at least such as Portuguese and Dutch, which stand in comparison to Spanish and German exactly like Piedmontese in comparison to Italian” (translation by the chapter's authors).

4. “These are in brief the bases on which the compilation of this Dictionary is based and that I worked out without respite and never sparing my best efforts, with the trust to be doing a thing more useless than grateful to my fellow citizens and in the aim of spreading – specially among the common people – the knowledge of the national language (i.e. Italian)” (translation by the chapter's authors).

At that time, Piedmontese had a clearly Italian-oriented bias: unlike French, Italian was scarcely used, and its prestige was strictly bound to its scarcity.

Since then many things have changed. The roof “protection” of Italian has become more and more oppressive, while active speakers of Piedmontese have dramatically dropped in number in the second half of the twentieth century (Cerruti and Regis 2015: 62). Many scholars and language planners have theorised and observed an opposite ideological movement (a “swinging away of the pendulum;” Tosco 2012), this time not *towards* Italian but rather *away* from it (Regis 2012).

## 2. Teaching piedmontese: Experiences in primary schools

Though it has never been taught in universities as a language on its own, Piedmontese has a long tradition in educational contexts: Coluzzi (2007: 49) emphasises that since the end of the Seventies Piedmont has granted the strongest legal protection to its language among Italian (non autonomous) regions.<sup>5</sup> The first regional law for protecting and promoting Piedmontese in the schools dates from 1979. Eleven years after, in 1990, it was replaced by a new law (n. 26/90), through which a number of initiatives were deployed in order to organise courses in Piedmontese for both adults and children. In schools, the “Prima Mignin” project took place for the first time in the school year 2000–2001 under the aegis of the Region-funded *Ca dë Studi Piemontèis* (“House of Piedmontese Studies”). Within this project, a good number of introductory language courses in Piedmontese (mainly catering to primary schools, though in a few cases to kindergardens and intermediate schools) were launched; they reached a total number of 75 courses in the school year 2008–09; each course was ten hours long, for a total of 750 hours of teaching in that year). Some 22 teachers and 2,000 children were involved. Considering that the courses organised by the *Ca dë Studi Piemontèis* were only a part of the total number (many others being organised by different cultural clubs and organisations), the results were certainly very promising (Duberti 2010, 2012, 2013). Among the textbooks written within this project, one can mention Ferrero, Lupo and Lupo (2006) and Tosco, Rubat Borel and Bertolino (2006), both of which have been used – for different purposes – during the first university lectures given in the academic year 2015–2016 and whose results will be discussed in the following section.

Unfortunately, there are no Piedmontese courses in Piedmont’s schools anymore – at least, not with the financial support of a regional law. In fact, there has

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5. Italy is divided into 20 regions; five of them have autonomous status and varying degrees of freedom in several matters, among which culture and language.

not been any law for promoting and protecting the language since the last one (no. 11/2009) was overruled as unconstitutional by the Italian Constitutional Court (resolution no. 170/2010). As a consequence, the law was amended on October 18, 2016 with the unanimous vote of all the members of the Regional Assembly, making it acceptable to the central government and the Constitutional Court: Piedmont is now allowed to promote its “patrimonio linguistico” (“linguistic heritage”) but without mentioning the Piedmontese language. Nevertheless, since then six years have passed without any new language courses in schools (and it is unclear whether such courses will be resumed in the future).

A few remaining classes still live on thanks to the good will and passion of many individual teachers, and in both primary and intermediate schools scattered in various towns and villages of Piedmont.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they amount to no more than a drop in the ocean: it is with an eye to such a gloomy situation that we turn now to universities.

### 3. The first university experiences: 2015–2016 and 2016–2017

Maybe paradoxically against the backdrop of such a bleak panorama, for the first time in its history the University of Turin decided to open a course in the Piedmontese language during the academic year 2015–2016.

Technically, some teaching of Piedmontese at university level occurred abroad as early as the 1960s: in 1964 a young Gianrenzo Clivio (Turin 1942 – Toronto 2006), who was later to become a renowned Professor of Italian Linguistics at the University of Toronto, was entrusted with teaching Piedmontese at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Since then, Piedmontese has been the subject of many university courses, but never by itself, neither at Brandeis nor in any other North American or European university – and still less in Italy, where the status of Piedmontese has often been seen as making it unfit for university lectures, at least as an academic subject. This does not mean that nobody has been studying Piedmontese in Italian universities: on the contrary, many scholars have done so very well, but always within classes in Romance philology (e.g., Giuliano Gasca Queirazza; Rome 1922 – Turin 2009) or Italian dialectology (e.g. Tullio Telmon, Professor Emeritus of Italian Dialectology at the University of Turin) or Piedmont’s cultural and linguistic heritage (e. g. Alda Rossebastiano, formerly Professor of History of the Italian Language, University of Turin). It is only in Córdoba (Argentina) that for

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6. To give just an example, in the schoolyear 2017–18, 42 children out of a total of 110 took a course in Piedmontese in the intermediate (junior high) school of Ròca de Baldi (Italian: Rocca de’ Baldi).

the past ten years Piedmontese has been offered *per se*, albeit as an extracurricular subject, within the local Department of languages.<sup>7</sup>

The Turin course is therefore something fundamentally new: first of all, it is privately, externally funded, i.e., it was made possible by a private donation specifically targeted to the teaching of Piedmontese, and consists (as is standard practice at the University of Turin) of 36 hours of face-to-face teaching, and has so far always been repeated. The first two installments were entrusted to one of the co-authors of this chapter (Nicola Duberti), who was specially hired for the course and has no permanent position at the University of Turin.

The official denomination is *Laboratorio di piemontese* “Laboratory in Piedmontese.” The name was chosen to quash any quarrel about the status of its object: pending the official recognition of Piedmontese by legislative bodies, Piedmontese is not labelled a ‘language’ nor a ‘dialect.’ Nor is the sociolinguistic status of Piedmontese part and parcel of the syllabus, which is instead devoted to teaching its orthography and basic structures only. “Laboratory” is the technical term used for learning activities concerning subjects (such as computer sciences, Italian style, Latin, modern foreign languages, etc.) where a good degree of continuous engagement and attendance on the part of the students is required. Unlike most academic lectures, laboratories, mostly attended by small number of students, foster a totally different kind of relationship both with fellow students and with the teacher.

At the laboratory, the course in Piedmontese has been organised as just another language course of a “major” language: the teacher had acquired a previous experience in teaching Piedmontese to children in primary schools; he is a native speaker of some peripheral south-western varieties of Piedmontese, in which he has written several books of poetry. The last piece of information means a lot: Piedmontese is seen as an established language in which many diatopic varieties co-exist. In fact, public opinion in Italy is often puzzled when the teaching of local languages is proposed, because, it is claimed, “every village has its own dialect” and there is no standard to be taught. For Piedmontese, which has boasted a regional literary koine for at least a few centuries, this is of course utterly false. The regional koine is based on the Turin variety, but it is of course unnecessary to be a native speaker from Turin in order to master and even teach it.

The regularly attending students were just 10 (5 males and 5 females) in 2015–2016 but their number increased in the following year to 16 (9 males and 7 females), and has steadily increased in the following years. The gender ratio seems to reflect the real situation of the language: in the more conservative south-western lowlands of Piedmont, for instance, it is easy to find teenagers actively speaking Piedmontese,

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7. <http://sitios.fl.unc.edu.ar/agenda/e/piamontes>.

but almost all of them are boys from the countryside, to the point that Piedmontese could sooner or later become a “language of country boys.”<sup>8</sup>

Not all the students were Italian citizens and Italian-language first language speakers. In the year 2015–2016 there were two foreign students (both from Spain), while in the following year there was only one foreigner (from Romania).

The percentage of students with a previous knowledge of Piedmontese declined, too: if in 2015–2016 60% already knew it before attending the laboratory, in 2016–2017 only 7 students (out of 16; i.e. 43%) already had any knowledge of the language. In the second year the laboratory was forced to become more and more a foreign language course: in other words, Piedmontese, that had been treated in the first year more as a regional contested language, has been taught since the second year as a fully-fledged established language.

In fact, the second year’s lectures were organised as a “language and literature” course: more space was devoted to conversation and writing, while the dialectological subjects were strictly linked to the active practice of the language. As far as literature is concerned, a subject-related course was developed on the depiction of women in nineteenth and twentieth century literature.

The references offered to students in the two years reflect this difference: Telmon (2001); Brero and Bertodatti (1988); Tosco, Rubat Borel and Bertolino (2006); Duberti (2016) were the reference books for the 2015/2016 course, while for the 2016/2017 iteration two documents were added, both assembled *ad hoc*: first, a collection of dialogues (Duberti 2017), the very first since Clivio (1964), and, second, an anthology of poetry and literary prose concerning gender issues. Most of the texts were taken from Clivio and Pasero (2004) and from Brero (1983).

Even teaching methods changed. In the first year most lectures were offered in Italian and the audience was essentially passive. Many invited professors took part in lectures, and all of them were academics at the University of Turin. On the contrary, during the 2016–2017 course a real laboratory method prevailed: students were invited to hold conversations in Piedmontese since the very first lesson, while peer-teaching and group works rapidly became the prevailing ways to learn grammar rules and lexicon. The teacher spoke Piedmontese, even with students without any previous knowledge of the language. Videos and songs in Piedmontese were widely introduced in the lectures and students were invited to criticise and comment. In other words, Piedmontese was treated as a useful living language fit to express any possible content. The sociolinguistic status was deliberately left aside, while diatopic variation, on the other hand, was constantly addressed: some of the students who were already able to speak at least a little Piedmontese often knew only

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8. Unfortunately, there are no scientific studies on this topic and it is not possible to provide any number. Researches are urgently needed.

a local peripheral variety. Therefore, they were invited to speak and write in their own dialect, offering to their fellow students an interesting sample of comparison with the standard koine and with other local dialects. Students who knew different Romance languages were asked to provide further possible terms of comparison.

#### 4. Conclusion: Why and how to study Piedmontese in a university context?

The students in both courses were invited to express their opinions and their feelings about their experience, using whatever language they preferred. All of them chose to do so in Piedmontese.

It comes as no surprise that the approval rating rose in the second year, since the laboratory of 2016–2017 was organised taking into account the suggestions and advice offered by the previous year’s students. Many of these suggestions were unexpected: for example, the students felt the lack of a “true” language course, in which it would have been possible to learn more than basic Piedmontese. They also wanted to know more about Piedmontese history, literature, tradition, music, dances, and so on. Students wanted a completely new project, since all the past experiences of university courses concerning local languages had a dialectological/linguistic content (Bidese 2011). The 2016–2017 laboratory offered students exactly what their predecessors had asked for: and therefore it succeeded.

There is one more fact to take into consideration: the very first lecture of the 2016–2017 laboratory was delivered by Albina Malerba, director of the *Ca dë Studi Piemontèis*. During her lesson she offered the students a warmly encouraging speech addressing the basic question: why study and learn a regional language like Piedmontese? The answer is that there are many things to do with it. There is a vast literature to catalog and analyze through philology, dialectology and literary theory. There is rich written and oral material to collect and study for historians and anthropologists. And there is a rich treasure to unearth through linguistic research and fieldwork. For all these purposes it is important and useful to know Piedmontese, to speak it at least to some extent, and to read its literature. Her speech achieved its goal: during the whole course, students were enthusiastic and deeply motivated.

Finally: can we draw any general conclusions? Certainly, the key for the successful teaching of a contested language is not the denial of its sociolinguistic status: one can simply *pretend* it is a full-fledged, established language. In a kind of “Pascal’s wager,” here the stake is not the existence of God but the status of a language. The teacher and the students alike learn and act on the assumption that Piedmontese is an established language. The students start behaving in the classroom as if the



contested language is simply a language: and through this acting they learn, and they also start loving the language they are learning, and have fun with it.

And then: is to have fun a problem? To paraphrase the Italian writer Gianni Rodari: why should a university student get bored learning the same contested language he or she can learn and at the same time have fun?<sup>9</sup>

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9. Gianni Rodari's (1920–1980) original line reads: “Vale la pena che un bambino impari piangendo quello che può imparare ridendo?” (“Why should a child learn crying what he can learn laughing?”) (translation by the chapter's authors).

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