

The status, corpus planning and speakers' attitude on Romagnol (ISO 639-3: rgn)

Romagnol language is considered among Romanist scholars a variant of the gallo-italic continuum which covers all northern Italy (with the exception of Veneto and Liguria). It has been recognized by Ethnologue with a clear ISO code since 2009, but in the general discourse it is, not surprisingly, considered an Italian dialect, and therefore underestimated. Traditionally it is called *e' dialèt* (the dialect) by its speakers, but also *rumagnôl*. It is not included in the official list of Italian historical minorities recognized by the law 482 of 1999 and it subsequently do not receive any public funding for explicitly linguistic revitalization or defense.

But things are starting to change in terms of public perception and some speakers, even if still a few, are perceiving the importance of the preservation of a languages which since a few years ago was probably doomed to death and addressing to local institutions to recognize the linguistic diversity of Romagna. This region is roughly 6,400 square kilometers wide and it has around 1,100 inhabitants, even if there are no clear surveys about the number of speakers. Approximately, it can be said that people born before 1930 are mostly monolingual in Romagnol language; the following generation, those born between 1930 and 1950 are bilingual, with a higher competence in Romagnol than Italian; speakers born between 1950 and 1970 are mainly bilingual with more competence in Italian; finally, those born after 1970 are Italian monolingual speakers with a passive knowledge of Romagnol.

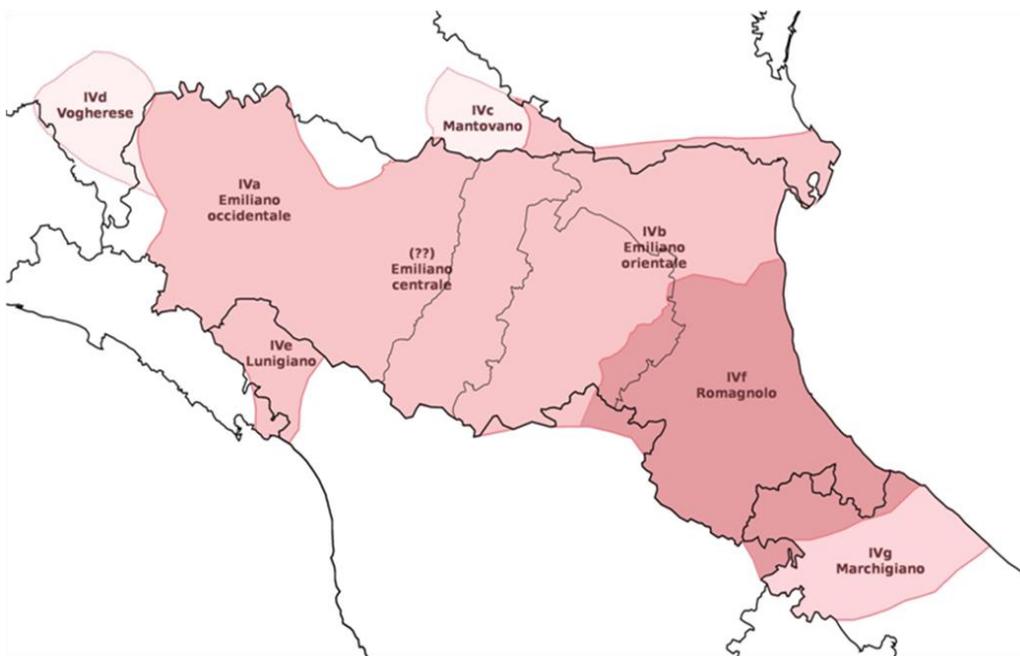
As it can be seen, there has been a drastic and abrupt change in the mastering of Romagnol among its speakers in the last century. But this does not necessarily mean that the situation is definitely compromised. Ethnologue categorizes this language as *dormant*, meaning that it does not have fully-proficient users any longer. This definition is not totally true, according to our study and experience. First of all, most of those speakers born in the first half of the twentieth century are still alive and, secondly, there are signals that suggest an inversion in this tendency.

This can be due to the fact that Romagnol has always had a strong linguistic identity. It is well determined as *Abstandsprache* with regards to *Marchigiano* in the south-east border and, even more, everybody perceives the difference in the south-west end where it meets Tuscany. This border, marked by the Appennine Mountains, is in fact is the famous Massa-Senigallia (or Rimini-La Spezia) line, which is unanimously considered (and dialectometric analysis confirm that) the biggest isogloss bundle, the greatest fracture in Romania.

Some linguistic features that characterizes Romagnol and contribute to shape its Abstandsprache are the following:

- a) basically, all non-stressed vowels fall (HOSPITALE(M) > sbdêl, TEPIDU(M) > tèvd)
- b) à in open syllable becomes ê (MARE > mêt, PALU(M) > pêl)
- c) there is a very strong nasalization (CANE(M) > cã)
- d) vocalism in open syllable is different from vocalism in closed syllable, e.g. metaphony from -i, which makes for a very typical verbal and noun paradigm, all governed by changing the degree of openness [Gat / ghêt (cat / -s) – fiôr / fiur (flower / -s) – can / chen - t vid / e' véd (you see / he sees)]

Less clear are the boundaries towards west, where there is a dialectal continuum with Emilian (egl). In fact, this shares with Romagnol many features, in a typical “continuum” situation. But with respect to Emilian, Romagnol is developing as Ausbausprache, being strong and clear the perception the community has of a Romagnol history, territory, ethnicity, separated from that of Emilia. In fact, Romagnol people have always had a clear perception of their territory (from byzantine times and throughout all the Papal State period, where the territory was unified under the name of Duchy of the Pentapolis. Linguistic borders are in this case drawn according to historical, cultural and diocesan borders.



Linguistic situation in Romagna

However, a fundamental step to be taken at this particular time of history would be the creation of a relevant factor for a status increase of every endangered language: a written standard form. This extremely important need in nowadays world, which is mainly dominated by written communication, gives rise to some identity and political issues.

The fragmentation of oral varieties of Romagnol has never been a communication barrier, but nowadays it is perceived as a problem in terms of a written standardization. The Italian equation that “the language is written as it is spoken” causes the misleading belief that every difference in pronunciation must be registered in writing. It is actually the opposite: after six years of age we do not read letter by letter but we register the entire word "photographing" it. Therefore, it is not obviously necessary that the phonetics matches the spelling.

But minority speakers often get confused between speaking and writing, and fear that the standardization of the language may harm their local dialect. A standardized spelling only makes sense for a written language. If there were, for example, a talk show in Romagna, the titles and explanatory signs would be in standard Romagnol, but the presenter and the guests would talk in their own dialects (as it happens in German Switzerland or in Norway).

At the same time, the speakers who fear standardization, also reject the use of tools such as electronic instruments for spellchecking (according to the belief that everyone writes in his or her own way) and do not accept the creation of neologisms because they are alien to the traditional language these speakers learned as children. These attitudes contribute to relegate minority languages such as Romagnol to the status of dialects and prevent them to evolve and flourish.

One important factor which can contribute to the solution of this problem is the existence in Romagna of a very unifying body in terms of linguistic fragmentation: the Institute “Friedrich Schür”. This is one of the most active associations in the field of language support and, strangely enough in the world of minority languages, it is the only recognized authority in the field. The institute publishes a monthly magazine “La Ludla” which covers various topics and aspects of Romagnol culture and it is recently becoming more interested in linguistic topics as the publication of the article “*La scrittura standard del romagnolo: un’urgenza non rimandabile*”, C. Zoli, among others, in September 2012 shows. The article has risen a very useful debate among activists which, even if not all agreeing on standardization, start perceiving the urgency of some critical actions.

Fortunately and differently from other realities, Romagnol language is not promoted by various concurrent organizations which compete for the leadership, but its whole preservation and

revitalization is managed by this single entity which groups all activists and sympathizers. The avoidance of fragmentation is necessary when a change of course is needed and this is the case of Romagnol. Institute "Friedrich Schür" has to do a crucial step: from an amateurish and folkloric activism to a real effort for a shared recognition of the language. The creation of a standard spelling is the path to follow for public presence, even if there is still big tension between the old and the new vision.

A significant step towards the new vision is the project of a DVD "Pimpa, a special day," subtitled and dubbed in Romagnol language, that the institute has addressed to local authorities. The aim of producing such a cartoon is that of conveying a sense of "normality" to a language which has been more and more increasingly relegated to vernacular use. The same cartoon, by Francesco Tullio-Altan, has been already subtitled and dubbed in 13 minority languages and distributed in distributed in several thousand copies. Being dedicated to children in the age range of 3-10 years, it will hopefully contribute to confer a modern and up-to-date status to a language which has been neglected for many years but that still has some good chances to survive and flourish among new generations.

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