



The Decay of a Language

Silvia Dal Negro

The Case of a German Dialect
in the Italian Alps

Peter Lang

Introduction

The object of this research is the study of the German dialect spoken in the Alpine village of Formazza (Piedmont), in the North West of Italy, from the perspective of language variation and death.

Like most language shift contexts around the world, during the twentieth century the tiny *Sprachinsel* of Formazza has undergone a radical cultural and socio-economic transformation, and has witnessed a dramatic reduction in the number of speakers of the local inherited language, as well as in the range of the latter's actual contexts of use and functions. Within the sociolinguistic context of progressive language death, the present analysis focuses on phenomena of linguistic variation, change and reduction at the level of morphosyntax. The study is based on a large body of spoken material collected during three years' fieldwork, ranging from a set of translation sentences, to semi-formal one-to-one interviews, to more casual group interactions involving on the whole 23 main informants.

As will be shown throughout the study, the results of this research highlight the rather complex nature of language shift and death on the structure of the receding language. As Nancy Dorian has recently summarized in an account of 30 years' research on language death (Dorian 1999), the effects of a decrease in language use on linguistic structure cannot be limited to the loss of obligatory rules and forms, or to an increase in the simplification of the receding language, as earlier studies on this topic seemed to imply, but must also take into account the rapid development of new and complex rules. The picture emerging from the analysis of these data reveals the maintenance of a surprisingly rich (though not necessarily functional) morphology, and even the development of new rules. In fact, while it seems impossible to attest an ideal "zero degree" as the final stage of language reduction, the last records of this dying dialect reveal a rather complex and articulated system, the ultimate phase of this process being rather a complete interruption in language use and the shift to the dominant code.

This book comprises five chapters in which the dialect and the community of Formazza are viewed from different and complementary

perspectives. The first chapter deals with the topic of language death as a field of inquiry. Here some problematic issues will be discussed, such as the definition of less-than-fluent native speakers (so called semi-speakers), or the hypothesis that first and second language loss should mirror the process of acquisition of the same language (so called regression hypothesis). These issues, together with relevant results and data from the literature, will be taken up again in the fifth chapter for a comparison with the analysis of my own data. The second chapter deals entirely with the description of the community of Formazza, first from the point of view of its history and today's sociolinguistic context, and secondly from a linguistic point of view. An outline of the traditional morphosyntax of this dialect will be sketched in order to provide a point of reference for the interpretation of this material and its variations. In the third section of the same chapter the field data will be introduced, as well as the methodology of its collection. The third and the fourth chapter constitute the main bulk of this study. A series of morphosyntactic features displaying a certain degree of variation are taken into account and their status as ongoing linguistic changes is discussed. In the fifth and final chapter different patterns of maintenance, innovation and loss are discussed on the basis of the results of my own fieldwork, emphasizing the specific linguistic context of language death in isolated minority communities.

This book is a revised version of my PhD thesis presented to the University of Pavia in 1998. I am indebted to Monica Berretta who warmly encouraged this research from the beginning, and to my supervisors Anna Giacalone Ramat, Gaetano Berruto and Paolo Ramat, for their exemplary and stimulating tutoring during the three year doctoral course in Linguistics. A very fruitful and pleasant part of my research was spent at the University of Zurich, in particular at institutions such as *Deutsches Seminar*, *Schweizerdeutsches Wörterbuch*, *Sprachatlas der Deutschen Schweiz*, *Phonogramm Archiv*. My thanks go to all the people who gave me helpful suggestions during various stages of the research, and especially to Peter Zürcher.

I am also grateful to Giuliano Bernini for reading and commenting on a first draft of this book, and to Sandro Caruana and Sergio Portelli for doing their best to improve my written English. My thanks also go to the Dipartimento di Linguistica e Letterature Compare of the

University of Bergamo, and especially the Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici of the University of Piemonte Orientale, who gave me the opportunity to revise, translate and publish my doctoral thesis.

Research projects such as this one cannot be accomplished without the friendly support of many people. To all my informants and, more generally, to the community of Formazza for their warm hospitality, goes all my gratitude. Treating me as one of them from the very beginning, they helped me to learn the local dialect quickly and to spend a very agreeable time doing fieldwork.

Finally, I especially thank my father, who first brought me to Formazza and showed me the way to the Alps.