

Vitality and Erosion Of Molise Croatian Dialect*

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a presentation of the condition of an endangered language located on the southern part of the Italian peninsula, spoken by a small community of transplanted Slavic population who fled the Eastern Adriatic coast during the Turkish invasion of the Balkan peninsula and have lived in complete isolation from related Slavic languages for five centuries surrounded by a majority of Italian speaking population. The overview of contact induced changes shows a high level of interferences at all structural levels resulting in a relatively stable mixed idiom. Preservation and revitalization efforts are discussed particularly in relation to the importance of writing and codification of the language as well as possible steps that can be undertaken in view of the link between language and the group cultural identity.

Key words: *language shift, language maintenance, minority, group identity, literacy*

Introduction

A Croatian dialect has been spoken for about 500 years in three villages of the Italian province of Molise, since an emigration from the hinterland of central Dalmatia. Throughout a long period of isolation from other Croatian dialects, in contact with Italian and Molisian dialects, this idiom has changed in many ways, adapting lexical, phonological and morphological features of the languages with which it is in contact. It differs con-

siderably both from the Standard Croatian and the current vernaculars of its ancient homeland representing a challenge for scholars interested in the study of contact-induced linguistic changes and the historical development of Croatian dialects. Spoken today by about 2000–2500 speakers this archaic dialect has been seriously threatened to disappear due to a high rate of economic emigration. However, in spite of, until recently, complete

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lack of institutional support, the language shows a remarkable vitality as the majority of natives of these villages still speak it on a daily basis and transmit it to their children.

The settlements in question are located in the mountainous interior 40–50 km west of the Adriatic coast (at the port of Termoli) with about 5–10 km of mutual distance between them. The main and largest village is Živa-Voda Kruč (Acquaviva Collecroce), the second is Mundi-mitar (Montemitro) and the third is Filić (San Felice Slavo). The major economic activity of the population has always been agriculture and, until recently, cattle raising. Until forty years ago, these villages were almost inaccessible and even today they are linked only by narrow curving roads.

The ancestors of the present inhabitants came to this part of Italy during the

16th century. At that time, the Turks were advancing through the Balkan Peninsula to the Adriatic and much of the population from the continental interior fled toward the Adriatic coast, resettling in the coastal area, on the Dalmatian islands and, crossing the Adriatic, in southern regions of Italy (Figure 1). At the same time large groups of Albanians also came and formed a number of compact settlements in Molise (Montecilfone, Portocannone, Uru-ri etc.). According to historic sources^{1,2} there were fifteen Slavic communities in the beginning, with a total of seven to eight thousand inhabitants. With population growth, their number increased to over 15 thousand and later gradually decreased partly due to assimilation with the Italian population and partially due to emigration to overseas countries. Although today their descendents live in nine councils of Molise: Kruč (Acquaviva

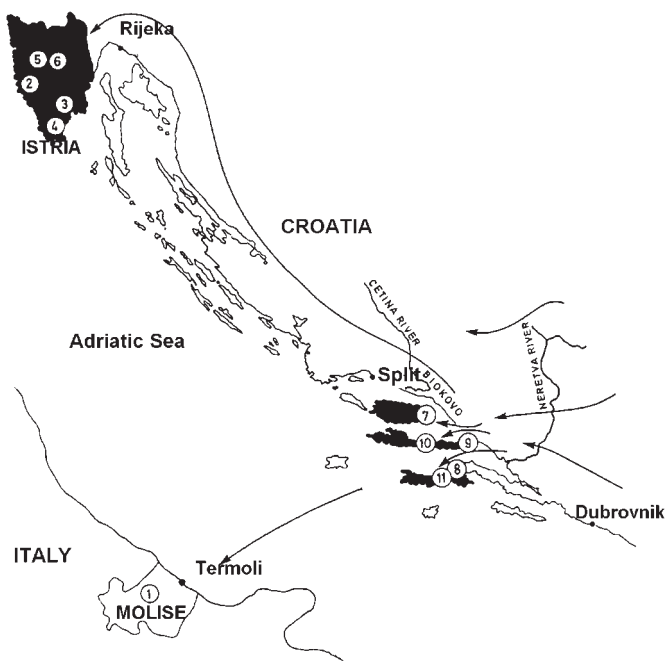


Fig. 1. Historic migrations from the Dalmatian hinterland in 15th and 16th century.

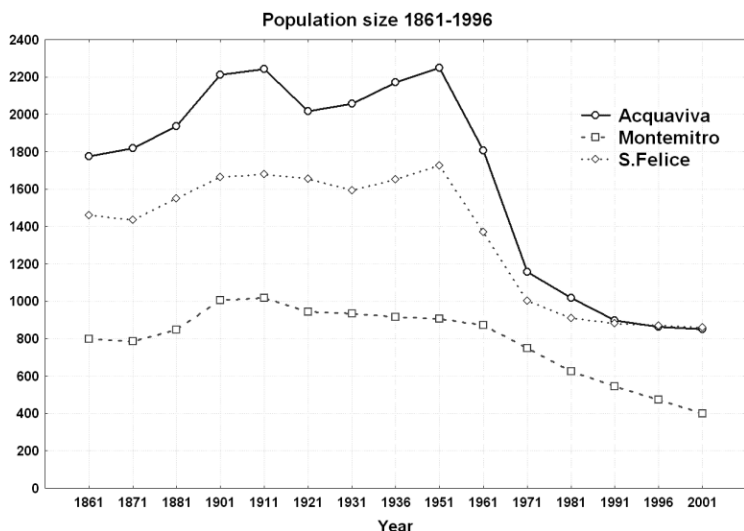


Fig. 2. Population movement in the three villages during the last 140 years.

Collecroce), Filić (San Felice Slavo), Mumditar (Montemitro), Mafalda (Ripalta), Tavenna, Palata, Montelongo, Stijakov (San Giacomo degli Schiavoni), San Biase and Petacciato, the Slavic language was preserved only in the three villages. With the development of transportation and the modernisation of lifestyle, the assimilation of Slavs in southern Italy has increased, the process of cultural assimilation being aided by the fact that they do not refer to themselves by a specific ethnic name, and simply say that their ancestors came »z *one bane mora*« (from the other side of the sea). It should be mentioned, however, that in the Slavic settlements undergoing a process of Italianisation, there was also a process of Slavicisation of the Italian population. When an Italian woman married a Slavic man, she usually had to learn the Slavic language spoken in the house in which the children were raised². As sociologically and ethnologically today this group does not differ significantly from the surrounding population, its active bilingualism remains the

main distinctive feature of their cultural identity.

Despite the fact that the Slavic language is still spoken in all three villages, the number of individuals and families speaking it has greatly decreased through economically motivated migrations to other regions of Italy and overseas countries. The statistical data show a clear depopulation trend of these villages over the last 140 years (Figure 2)³. Two major waves of migration affected them: the first occurred at the beginning of the 1900s and the second took place in the 1950s. The first wave was to the United States and South America while the second wave involved northern Europe and Western Australia where today Molisian Slavic is also spoken by a relatively large number of bilingual English-Molise Croatian speakers.

Language Type and Status

The linguistic research carried out by various authors throughout the last century shows that despite its truly unfavor-

able position, this linguistic idiom is still recognisably a štokavian-ikavian dialect with a number of čakavian elements and that it is genetically close to Croatian dialects spoken in Middle Dalmatia.^{3,4} However, this dialect from the late 15th and early 16th century, in the new circumstances, gradually underwent some evolutionary processes which have resulted in an idiom, considerably different from those of the original language spoken on the other side of the Adriatic sea⁵. It has undergone considerable contact induced changes – under the influence of standard Italian and neighboring dialects of Molise and Abruzzo regions. It was excluded from the *Ausbau* (standardization and development) process of the Standard Croatian and unlike varieties of Croatian spoken within Croatia was also excluded from the possibility of borrowing from Standard Croatian. The consequences were a considerable reduction of the possible sources of internal growth and reduced opportunity of regeneration by borrowing from both other Croatian varieties and Standard Croatian. Instead, it has depended on the lexicon of the surrounding Italian dialects to satisfy the communicative demands of the speakers with subsequent processes of mixing and code switching as well as gradual functional and domain shrinkage of this variety. Sociolinguistically, it is not considered as a subvariety of an overarching linguistic unit, but as a language by distance (*Abstand*) with one unrelated roof language – Italian and one related roof language, i.e. Standard Croatian,⁶ which means that it should be regarded as a language in its own right, due both to its isolation from Standard Croatian and to its minority position.

This unique manifestation of this language situation is also reflected in different emic and etic labels of the idiom. By the members of the speech community it is simply referred to as *Na-našo* (to speak

in our way) indicating the new collective identity. According to the reports from the beginning of the last century when they were discovered, they were completely unaware of the existence of similar language groups anywhere in the world. By the neighboring groups they are called *Schiavone – Škavun* or *Slavo* while officially and by language professionals the idiom has been recently labeled Croato Molisano – Molise Croatian. In spite of a few attempts at creating an own literature, which started already in the 19th century, and continued sporadically until today, Molisian Slavic still must be seen as a spoken language without written norms. It is also included among seriously endangered languages listed by *UNESCO Red Book of Endangered Languages*.

Contact induced changes

The intensity of specific external factors have changed throughout the history with gradually increasing contact between the Slavic population and neighboring communities. So, today we can find evidence of such changes at all levels, in both lexicon and structure of this idiom. They include all possible phenomena observed in contact situations elsewhere, such as: loss of features, addition of features and replacement of features. They are most obvious at the level of **lexicon** and evidenced by numerous borrowings from both the neighboring dialects (spoken in the regions of Molise, Abruzzo, Campania and Puglia) and Italian compensating the communicative needs related to modernization of lifestyle and changes in the socio-economic ecologies of speakers. Though it has preserved some archaic Slavic words which disappeared from related Croatian idioms, it also experienced a significant loss of vocabulary related to ancestral traditions and activities that ceased to exist.

At **phonetic and phonological level** these changes can be easily observed pronunciation in changes of the inherited tonic (both ascending and descending) Štokavian accents and intonation which display high variability under the influence of the Italian unique descending accent. Vowel reduction or loss both at initial and final position with respect to Croatian equivalents given in brackets is very common under the influence of neighboring dialects:

dovic^a (*udovica* = widow)

tvorit / *tvori* (*otvoriti* = to open)

sutr (*sutra* = tomorrow)

The loss of consonants occurs frequently in all positions:

oš (*još* = and)

sa (*sad* = now)

sekar (*svekar* = father-in-law)

Although the basic Croatian phonemic inventory has been preserved, the adaptations to the Italian phonological system which are foreign to the Croatian system include:

- the introduction of sound *dz* – in borrowings like *minorandza* (= minority) but also in words of Slavic origin like *sunze* (= sun),
- the insertion of the sound *b* between consonants *m* and *l* or *r* as in *mblad* (*mlad* = young) or *umbri(t)* (*umriti* = to die),
- alteration of consonant cluster *cv* into *sv* or *sf*, *cvitja* < *svitja* (*cvijet* = flower),
- and the use of geminates or double consonants in both borrowings and native words, otherwise non-existent in Croatian dialects: *tunna* (*tutti*), *kravv* (*kra-va*), *jiddeš* (*ideš*).

Some of these changes have been recorded for other minority languages in southern Italy. The research on Faetar, an isolated dialect of Francoprovençal

spoken in an isolated mountain area of southern Italy where its speakers have lived for several centuries, presents such a case⁷. The geminates are found in native Faetar words as well as in borrowings from Italian, attesting to a thorough nativization of the phonological process.

The consequences of contact-induced phonological changes extended to morphological and even syntactic domains resulting in the reduction of agreement morphology. At the level of **morphology** these changes can be seen in the following features:

- complete loss of neutral gender category – *vino crni*, m. (*crno vino* = red wine),
- loss of one noun declension, inflectional suffixes and categories like vocative and locative,
 - nom. = voc., *žen(-a)*
 - dat. = acc. = loc., *žen-u*,
- frequent use of prepositional phrases for genitive function – *muž d'one žen* (*muž one žene* = that woman's husband),
- pervasive use of imperfect tense (obsolete in Croatian dialects),
- replacement of higher cardinal and almost all ordinal numbers by Italian,
- replacement of Slavic comparison: *on je veće dobar* (*on je bolji* = he is better).

At the syntactic level an intense intrasentential code-switching is common to the dialect. The two examples given in Table 1 clearly illustrate complex relationships between Standard Croatian, Italian and *Na-našo*. Although the morphology is similar to Croatian, the use of non-Slavic nouns and one verb, article and prepositional phrase, and forms of both verbs used makes the example A highly deviant from Standard Croatian. Though the deviance from Standard Croatian is smaller in the example B from everyday speech its specific pronuncia-

TABLE 1
LEVEL OF INTRASSENTENTIAL CODE-SWITCHING

A (text from bilingual local newspaper *Riča Živa-Parola viva*)

Prvi sporazum je potpisan u Zagrebu 26. veljače. Govori i o inicijativama za našu manjinu. (Croatian)

Il primo accordo è stato firmato a Zagabria il 26 febbraio. Si parla pure delle iniziative in favore di nostra minoranza. (Italian)

Prvi AKORD* je *bija FIRMAN* u Zagreb LU 26 FREBARA. *Se govore PUR do inicjativi za našu MINORANDZU.* (*Na-našo*)

(*The first agreement was signed in Zagreb on 26 February. It also contains initiatives for our minority.*)

B (everyday speech)

Jednom nedjeljno jedemo domaću tjesteninu. (Croatian)

Una volta la settimana mangiamo le lasagne di casa. (Italian)

NU VOTU* *na nedilj* idemo LAZANJE *do doma.* (*Na-našo*)

(*Once a week we eat homemade pasta.*)

* Capitalized lexemes are of Italian origin

tion would also make it unintelligible anywhere in Croatia.

The given examples show a type of new language variety or what Thomason⁸ in her typology of language contact results calls a bilingual mixed language characterized by a highly mixed lexicon and its compartmentalization. The local dialect is restricted to home, bar and shops, everyday life in the streets and traditional activities, while Italian language has absolute domination in church, school, administration, media. Grammatical features are not strictly restricted to separate subsystems but we can see their progressive intrusion from Italian into *Na-našo*.

The comparison of current conditions with the description of this language provided in an elaborate study by Rešetar in 1911² indicates a gradual and slow accumulation of interference features and only minor new changes introduced through a period of almost 100 years^{9,10}. In spite of unfavorable conditions and the forecasts

by Rešetar himself that the language will die during the second half of the last century it is still alive due to a slow rate of change and relatively stable situation.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality

The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is defined as »that [which] makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations«¹¹. According to Giles et al.¹¹, if ethnolinguistic minorities have little or no group identity, they would eventually cease to exist as distinctive groups. The structural variables most likely to influence the vitality of ethnolinguistic groups are: 1) Status variables: economic status, social status, sociohistorical status and language status, 2) Demographic variables: sheer numbers of group members and their distribution throughout the territory, 3) Institutional support variables: the extent to which a language group receives formal and informal representation in various activities such as mass

media, education, government services, industry, religion and culture. Allard and Landry¹² reconceptualized the social-structural variables into four categories or »capitals«: »demographic capital«, »political capital«, »economic capital«, »cultural capital«, and introduced the belief system as the cognitive representation of subjective vitality.

Summarizing the external historic factors favoring language vitality of Molise Croats it can be said that the major role was played by geographic isolation and culturally compact settlements, high endogamy rate (60–70%), self-subsistent economy which required little contact with the outside world, the related type of traditional and collectivistic culture in

which language is seen as an important marker of group solidarity and identity. An important role was also played by the Southern Italian context itself, peripheral with respect to northern Italy, and the vicinity of both Italian and Albanian groups with similar status characterized by strong local patriotism on one hand, and a long-term struggle for regional autonomy of the Molise region itself obtained only in 1963. In addition to the long-term search for an ethnic-cultural identity and political and administrative autonomy with respect to the neighboring regions, the Molisan province as a whole has been characterized by the objective historical isolation, chronic underdevelopment and poor economic conditions.



Fig. 3. The distribution of Italian dialects by Salvucci¹³.

Linguistically, the region belongs to the distinct zone of the Intermediate Meridional dialects that occupy the southern half of the peninsula, including the regions of southern Lazio, Abruzzi, Molise, Campania, Basilicata, and parts of Apulia (Figure 3). The speakers of these various dialects, quite different from Standard Italian are found in a similar situation to that of linguistic minorities such as the Croatian one. Dialects are still their primary spoken idiom, and for most Italians their first contact with the standard language comes in primary school. Though dialect is preferred for local communication, Standard Italian is used in almost all situations and institutions mediating local relationships with society at-large (e.g. schools, public administration and services and the church) and it is virtually the only written language. With the process of modernization, economic changes and internal migrations, however, the dialects are increasingly losing ground in favor of the written, Standard Italian¹³.

Due to the same processes, the Molise idiom *Na-našo* shows today many characteristics of a declining language: bilingualism, a prevalence of older, rural or uneducated native speakers, intense word-borrowing from the encroaching language, a lack of standardization, and a shrinking sphere of language use. Although the local dialect is still transmitted at home to children, as Croatian is not written and has never been systematically taught at school, Italian as language of primary education has replaced it in a wide range of areas that require a more formal language. In view of social factors and language use, the recorded data from the beginning of the 20th century indicate predominant use of the Slavic language in the three Croatian villages, with a considerable proportion of Slavic monolinguals in addition to increasing bilinguals (*Na-našo/Italian*). Today, however, the

weight of each language has changed so that communities demonstrate relatively widespread trilingualism (*Na-našo*, local Molise dialect, Italian) or bilingualism (*Na-našo/Italian*) though in varying degrees in the three villages¹⁴. About 65% of the population report *Na-našo* as their mother-tongue, for 10% the first language is local Molise dialect and for the remaining 26% it is the Italian language.⁹ Among them, about 47% are trilingual, 17% bilingual using Italian and *Na-našo*, 11% bilingual using Italian and local Molise dialect, while about 25% are monolingual Italians¹⁵.

How strongly *Na-našo* is maintained in each village is proportional to the number of non-Slavic people in the village and the degree of functional interrelations between its inhabitants and the wider society. With increasing Italian speaking population in Filić, Italian grows in dominance so that *Na-našo* shrinks exclusively to the family domain and among older speakers only. Mundimitar on the other hand is the most conservative in language maintenance, with predominance of Slavic bilinguals in all age groups as fluent *Na-našo* speakers, while Živa Voda Kruč occupies an intermediate position between the two with an increasing number of semi-speakers in younger groups¹⁶.

In view of the future of the Molise Croatian idiom, speakers' attitudes are probably of paramount importance. According to Grenoble and Whaley¹⁷ a pervasive predictor of the use or the loss of a language is the prestige attached to it, while the reasons that give prestige to a language, include government support, large number of speakers, association with rich literary tradition, use in local or national media of communication, use in economically advanced commercial exchanges and use in a widely practiced religion. The informal use of *Na-našo*, however, does not fit any of these characteristics believed to derive prestige for a language,

but, as shown by a sociolinguistic study carried out a few years ago in Acquaviva the majority of speakers (70%) nevertheless have positive or normal attitude toward the use of idiom, including also younger speakers.¹⁰ The language still has a relatively high prestige as a symbol of solidarity and collective identity. However, a more in depth study into the linguistic attitudes of this group would certainly be called for and would probably reveal pragmatic and economic issues as decisive in utility and frequency of use of *Na-našo* for communication.

Preservation Efforts and Standardization Problems

What had a powerful impact on community efforts to revive the language was a national law (No. 482) for the protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural historic minorities that was passed in December 1999. Although the work of implementing this legislation into practical projects is still under way, some actions have been undertaken strengthening positive attitudes toward language preservation and stimulating general revitalization of traditional culture (like weaving). Croatian community leaders, and linguistically trained activists, took immediate advantage of the favorable national and international situation after the legislation was passed and by establishing a documentation research center, and organizing Standard Croatian language courses. The initial steps have been also made toward the codification of the language by the publication of two dictionaries of the idioms spoken in Mundimitar and Kruč.

In any attempt to codify a language the problem of standardization arises as the result of any codification must be accepted by the group members, otherwise it will not be used by them. In an overview of the main scholarly positions on the relationship between endangered lan-

guages and literacy, Grenoble and Whaley¹⁷ warn that although literacy is essential to nationalism and to language survival in the modern world, in some cases it facilitates language loss. They maintain that literacy has a strong effect at the macro-level, the larger and external context of linguistic endangerment, but that its effect on language vitality is primarily a result of micro-variables, which are specific characteristics of each community with an endangered language. Consequently, in interventions of revitalization any attempt to isolate the language, its uses and registers from its context and sociopolitical and economic factors is bound to be inadequate^{18–20}.

Along with the institutional support provided by the Italian government and Croatian institutions based on bilateral agreements between the two states, the Slavic communities also received a new label for their language and a new ethnic identity – Croatian and there have been increasing tendencies to standardize the spoken idiom on the basis of Standard Croatian. It should be stressed, however, that although they regarded their different language as a source of prestige and self-appreciation, these communities have always considered themselves to be Italians who in addition have Slavic origins and at best accept to be called Italo-Slavi, while the term »Molise Croatian« emerged recently as a general term in scientific and popular literature to describe the Croatian-speaking population living in the Molise. As Giles and Johnson²¹ acknowledge ethnic group membership is not the only salient category in people's lives and may not be of explanatory value in all social interactions. According to modern theories of identity as a dynamic social construct use of Croatian vernacular by the communities in question may qualify them in terms of linguistic categories as Croatians, but their collective identity has been formed on locally founded

processes of social and cultural reproduction within specific historical and socio-political circumstances that contributed to its consolidation.

There is no doubt that the revitalization of the local language in its current condition and demographic context requires standardization of the written language and the inclusion of this language in Croatian schools²². But the codification should take into account identity feelings of these communities and their reluctance either to change their language or to learn a new one as Standard Croatian for them is with major differences in pronunciation and vocabulary. Recognizing Standard Croatian therefore as a standardized language of *Na-našo* is not necessarily what is needed to preserve this variety and may only hasten the demise of *Na-našo* as the spoken idiom by putting it under pressure from a better established and more prestigious language to lose its claim to linguistic independence in spite of its substantial differences from that language. Introducing literacy to the vernacular language through the medium of another cultural or politically dominant language always seems to be socially, culturally and ideologically charged. This has been recently illustrated by the attempt to introduce Standard Albanian into an Arbresh speaking minority in Sicily which might only contribute to the further decline of the spoken idiom²³, as the adult Arbresh speakers do not identify themselves with Albania and refuse Standard Albanian, stressing the relevance of the introduction of Arbresh against Standard Albanian, while the youngest speakers, mostly monolingual in Italian, identify themselves neither with Arbresh people, nor with Albanians. It is clear that other options should be considered as well in standardization of such idioms.

The other possibility is to elaborate the current mixture of Croatian and Ital-

ian in a way that will create a new functioning language from a decaying one. Such options are perhaps more difficult to realize but would perhaps better satisfy the communicative needs of these communities, as shown by the example of Croats in Burgenland, Austria. The Croat spoken there has its origin in the dialects of central Croatia and Bosnia which have developed since the 18th century within a German and Hungarian language environment without contact with the country of origin. As all the Croats of Burgenland also speak German, the spoken language displays many interference phenomena with German. The written language is based upon the Croat dialects of Burgenland and reveals grammatical changes in relation to standard Croat, the tendency to preserve archaic forms, as well as innovations based upon the language contact model, German and Hungarian. The linguistic differences between standard Croat and the Croat of Burgenland, especially by reference to the written form, are marked, but this idiom is accepted by its speakers as a medium of education in schools which has considerably contributed to its preservation.

Conclusion

We have seen that *Na-našo* idiom is based on one grammar with inherent variation allowing them to express both Slavic/Croatian and Italian aspects of culture. This omnipresent variation can be analyzed in two ways: as competition between multiple grammars or as one grammar with inherent variation (allowing both Molise Croat-like and Italian-like forms). This latter option would allow the expression of a unique identity, that of a bilingual and bicultural person, rather than suggesting that the speaker is continually (sometimes within a sentence or even a word) switching from one identity to another. At present *Na-našo*

as such seems to reflect this bilingual and bicultural identity and it is this acceptance of code switching that produces group identity. Regardless of the linguistic facts presented, on the whole, the speakers of *Na-našo* perceive their variant as being different from both Croatian and Italian. Their deepest identities are enacted in their language use and as argued by Shopen and Williams²⁴: »every dialect is a treasury of sounds and words and grammatical forms that allows its speakers to identify themselves and their values. But every dialect is also a treasury of sounds and forms from which other dialects borrow to strengthen their

own linguistic resources... to disparage any distinctive feature of a dialect – social or geographical – is to disparage and thereby reject the values and accomplishments of the speakers who use those forms«. This received wisdom in the field of endangered languages warns that any revitalization attempt should take into account the dynamics of the existing close relationship between language and identity as manifested by the lives of common speakers giving their feelings and attitudes a decisive role in any future planning programs.

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VITALNOST I EROZIJA MOLIŠKOHRVATSKOG IDIOMA

SAŽETAK

U radu se daje sažeti prikaz stanja moliškohrvatskog idioma kojim govori malo-brojna zajednica hrvatskih doseljenika u pokrajinu Molise u vrijeme turskih osvajanja Balkanskog poluotoka, čiji je opstanak ozbiljno ugrožen u inojezičnom okruženju iako je do danas sačuvan u potpunoj izolaciji od drugih slavenskih jezika. Pregled promjena nastalih u ovom idiomu u kontaktu s okolnim talijanskim dijalektima i standardnim talijanskim ukazuje na pojavu relativno stabilnog miješanog jezika s visokim stupnjem međusobnih jezičnih utjecaja na svim strukturalnim razinama. Razmatraju se nastojanja za očuvanjem i revitalizacijom ovog idioma s obzirom na njegovu standardizaciju te mogući pristupi tom problemu u okviru sagledavanja bliske veze između jezika i kolektivnog kulturnog identiteta.