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Code-switching as an Indicator of Language Shift. A case study of the Romagnolo dialect of Gatteo a Mare, Italy.

According to Sasse's (1992) stages of language disappearance, the Romagnolo dialect in North East Italy is in its final life stage. As is true for other Italian dialects – such as the Marchigiano dialect (Parry 2002) – the last few generations of speakers have neglected to pass on the dialect as a native tongue to the next generation. As a result, Italian has progressively come to assume the function of primary language of socialisation.

The main goal of the present research consists of approaching the issue of language shift from a new perspective, namely investigating the actual bilingual behaviour of the participants and zooms in on the spreading and use of the final remnants of Romagnolo, a dying barely described dialect. More specifically, “differences in code-switching patterns across generations are to be expected” (Alfonzetti 2005:94), but what are the specific differences among the code-switching behaviour between older and younger generations? Focusing first on the older speakers, what are the specific code-switching patterns among this group of participants? What kind of pragmatic-functional roles does their code-switching fulfil? What are the most frequent functions and the most uncommon ones? On the other side, in what consists of the bilingual behaviour of younger speakers, if they have one? Which linguistic functions are expressed in Romagnolo instead of Italian and why?

To achieve this purpose we analyse more thoroughly the current linguistic situation in the village of Gatteo a Mare, in the region Emilia-Romagna, on the basis of empirical data collected on fieldwork. More specifically, the present investigation is based on the analysis of the bilingual speech production of 39 participants, all members of the community of Gatteo a Mare. The corpus is made of a series of spontaneous conversations within familiar and informal contexts.

As one could expect, remarkable differences emerged in the speech behaviour across different generations of speakers and the most influencing factors appear to be age and thus proficiency in Romagnolo. At the same time some interesting patterns came to surface. For instance, one of the most striking findings among older speakers is represented by the recurrent switch of code when referring to members of the family. On the other side, studying the bilingual behavior of younger speakers we notice a contracted production of linguistic elements in Romagnolo, namely restricted only to jokes and interjections. In line with Alfonzetti (2005:106) “What the young Italian-oriented generations are ready to accept and even positively evaluate is just a reduced, controlled, symbolic use of dialect, whose expressive connotations are exploited in a code-switching style which is shown to be an intentional communicative strategy”. Finally, observing the great adoption of interjections, used widely by all our participants, we could state that certain lexical remnants of this dialect seem to have been granted a new lease of life in a specific discourse context.

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