

Keeping it local: age, gender, proficiency, and regional loyalty in the maintenance of Francoprovençal in Valle d'Aosta, Italy

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Francoprovençal is the mother tongue of about 50,000 people in the French-Italian border region of Valle d'Aosta (VDA), Italy. According to previous surveys, however, its domains of use are shrinking (Fondation Emile Chanoux 2003, Josserand 2004) due to shift to Italian (see also Nagy 2011 and Kasstan 2015 on other endangered varieties of Francoprovençal). In this paper, we provide evidence that Francoprovençal in VDA is used more extensively than previously thought in private and public domains, and that its use is concurrent with the national language, Italian, and the historical standard language of the region, French.

Eighty-eight participants, born and raised in VDA, were interviewed in Italian by a native speaker conducting fieldwork in the region in 2011-2013. Thirty-four male and fifty-four female participants were asked to provide sociolinguistic background information, indicate their proficiency and attitudes towards VDA's three languages, and report on their mono-, bi- or multilingual language use in twenty domains of language use (adopted from previous surveys). The participants were divided into four age groups according to their access, or the lack of thereof, to compulsory elementary education in French and/or Francoprovençal. Using quantitative techniques developed to track diffuse patterns of variation in participant responses (see e.g. Boyd et al. 2015) we performed a principal components analysis on all responses targeting types of language use in all domains. Retaining as our dependent variable the first principal component that accounted the best for the use of Francoprovençal alone and with another language in private vs. public domains, we ran an exploratory analysis of variance with age, L1, proficiency, regional loyalty (following Pooley 2004), network structure, and attitudes towards Italian and Francoprovençal (rated on five-point Likert scales) as dependent variables.

Results show that Francoprovençal is widely used not only in local kinship and transactional domains (family, church, shops) but also in more extended public domains: all but three people reported using only Francoprovençal with their mothers and about a third of the respondents indicated reading books in at least two languages, including the minority language. Analyses of variance revealed significant main effects for age ($F(1,74)=12.2927, p<0.01$), L1 ($F(1,74)=6.57, p<0.01$), proficiency ($F(1,74)=14.7179, p<0.01$), and regional loyalty ($F(1,74)=5.09, p=0.03$). Although gender did not

obtain statistical significance in the data, female participants across all age groups tended to rate their spoken Francoprovençal more highly than male participants. Younger participants who reported using Francoprovençal more often in bilingual than monolingual settings were also more confident in their abilities and rated their proficiency higher than their elders. We take this to mean that, contrary to previous findings, Francoprovençal revitalization has been successful in inserting the minority language into the extended multilingual repertoire of younger speakers in VDA. Although these speakers might not use only Francoprovençal as often as their elders do, they take special pride in their abilities to do so in multiple domains.

References

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