Balkan and South Slavic Enclaves in Italy:

Languages, Dialects and Identities

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INTRODUCTION

The contributions in this book originate from the conference “Balkan” enclaves in Italy. Languages, dialects, identities, held in Venice, Italy, from 26-28 November 2015. The conference was held on the occasion of the sixth annual meeting of the Commission for Balkan linguistics and affiliated with the International Committee of Slavists. Due to its high significance to society, the participants have set up their work so that it is not just linguistic, but also interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. By including researchers from multiple universities, the results of work from numerous research institutions have been integrated.

In Italy and in the Balkans, work with linguistic minorities has not been included in academic discussions for a long time. Italy is in a border situation that is located not just between political and administrative, but also between various historical realities. The turbulent geopolitics in the Balkans affects Italy and indirectly affects the minorities living in northeastern (Slovenes, Croats) and southern Italy (Albanians, Greeks, Molise Slavs). To date, the necessary political dialogues with the opposite side of the Adria have not yet taken place, and, due to economic crises and the revitalization of nationalistic tendencies, the concept is very difficult to promote.

However, despite these complex relationships, in Balkan linguistics, there has been a recent shift in focus towards (areal) dialectology. The significance of such studies stems from the very nature of dialects/ varieties as representing recent or current contact situations, bi- or multilingual. To a certain extent, they approximate those situations which led to the emergence of the particular effects of a linguistic area, observed in the modern standards languages of the region. It is well-known that linguistic contact in the Balkans existed mainly at the colloquial level, with the predominant type of bilingualism being a dialect of the language A + a dialect of the language B; a less frequent type, characteristic mainly of the 19th-century “debalkanization” period, consisted of standard language A + dialect of language B. The Venice
meeting highlighted a number of issues relevant to the theory of language areas and areal linguistics, such as types of Balkan convergences, types of structure transfers, borrowing of structural patterns, stages and directions of grammaticalization, etc.

In accordance with the discussions from our conference, after an introduction about Balkan dialectology and its significance for the field of linguistics, the present book is also divided into chapters that are dedicated to the individual minorities in Italy: Albanian (Arbëresh), Greek (Grico, Grecanico) and Slavic (Molise Slavic and Slovenian).

Albanian (Arbëresh) is spoken in numerous provinces in South Italy and, despite the geographical fragmentation, has at least 100,000 speakers today. The Albanians’ initial presence in Italy can be dated back to the late 13th century. There was a massive migration during the 15th century, due to the Turkish invasion of the region. The Albanian minority living in Italy mostly uses the Tosk dialect. Since 15 December 1999, Arbëresh has been protected in Europe through Law 482, the Law Governing the Protection of Historical Linguistic Minorities.

Calabrian and Apulian Greek (Grico, Grecanico) is spoken by about 12,000 people in certain communities in the provinces of Reggio Calabria and Lecce. The beginnings of the Greek settlement date back to antiquity, when the first Greek migrants settled in South Italy. The Greek language in the few remaining Greek communities in South Italy dates back to Medieval Greek. Today, spoken Greek is limited to usage within families.

In Italy, Slavic minority languages are represented by Molise Slavic/ Molise Croatian and Slovenian. Molise Slavic is spoken in the communities of San Felice del Molise, Montemitro and Acquaviva Collecroce in the province of Campobasso, and is spoken by around 2,400 people. The ancestors of the Molise Slavs, who migrated from the Dalmatian coast in order to flee the Turkish advance, settled in what is now the region of Molise between the 15th and 16th centuries. There, the archaic language is spoken in a very small area and is considered to be seriously endangered. In contrast, Slovenian is spoken by around 80,000 people in the provinces of Triest, Gorizia and Udine.

Although the papers on the Arbëresh, Grico/ Grecanico, Molise Slavic, and Slovene dialects, do not share linguistic
descriptions or language contacts, they do highlight important aspects of the linguistic situation in Southern and Central Italy. Some authors investigate the mutual influences between each of these “Balkan” varieties and the neighbouring Italian dialects in an attempt to pin down those areas of interference and variation, which operate in either direction; other papers study common tendencies which do not just pertain to local contacts, but have a wider significance for the history of linguistic and cultural contacts in Italy, between the above-mentioned varieties and the respective languages of the Balkan peninsula. Although the majority of the conference presentations relate to fields of areal linguistics, such as language contact and language variation, some papers published here deal with sociolinguistics and recent cultural issues.

The discussions at our conference brought forward useful comparisons which can contribute to a better understanding of the concrete dimensions of variation on the dialectal continuum inside and outside of the Balkans, as well as stimulate the search for finer points of contact between different types of languages/varieties. However, the languages of recent migrants from the Balkans – such those of as Romanians, who are, by far, the largest minority group in modern Italy, or those of Albanian refugees from the 1990’s – are not taken into account in this volume. However, they would be a very worthwhile field of research in the future.

_Thede Kahl, Iliana Krapova, Giuseppina Turano_