

Vanished Linguistic Enclaves in the European Alps. an Opportunity for Tourism?



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Introduction

In the southern Alps, outside the contiguous Slovenian and German-speaking regions, there are linguistic enclaves in some Italian valleys that arose as a result of medieval colonization, voluntary migration, or later border demarcations. While the Slovenian settlements in Italy represent the remnants of a once-larger expansion to the west—and where a large portion of the residents still speak Slovenian today—the medieval German dialect has survived only in peripheral areas of the Western and Eastern Alps; however, most of these linguistic enclaves have disappeared.

Previous research by the two authors show that even if linguistic superimposition has been completed and migration, resettlement or ethnic cleansing has taken place, reminiscences of varying intensity remain, recalling vanished language groups. Following Herbert Gans (1979), we refer to this phenomenon as “symbolic ethnicity.” For example, even today, outside the Romance-speaking areas up to the Danube in Germany, relics have been preserved in settlement geography, place names, especially in toponymy, in customs, traditional costumes, cuisine, and other relevant areas, which date back to Roman antiquity.

The objective of this contribution is thus to highlight relics and remnants that refer to the disappeared German language islands in the Italian Eastern Alps. It assumes that symbolic ethnicity manifests itself spatially as a reminiscence of ethnolinguistic groups that no longer exist. This article assumes that these artifacts, linguistic landscapes, material symbols, and ethnocultural patterns associated with the former connection to

the German-speaking heartlands can be showcased for tourism purposes. However, for this to happen, on the one hand, the legal framework for cultural funding must be in place, and on the other hand, certain cultural initiatives can only be explained by actor-centered perspectives: in order to preserve the memories and reminiscences of vanished minorities, committed individuals are needed who are pioneers in dealing with traditions and persistence and who are engaged in cultural history [1].

In Italy, the legal framework for this was established by State Law No. 482 to protect minoranze linguistiche storiche (historical linguistic minorities), which came into force at the end of 1999. The lucrative financial grants associated with this led to municipalities, even those where linguistic minorities had disappeared, declaring themselves as minority territories in the years and decades that followed.

This applies more than anywhere else to two areas where, until World War II, a significant number of German-speaking residents still lived: the so-called Cambrians of the Seven Municipalities on the Asiago Plateau north of the city of Vicenza, as well as the Cambrian community of Consiglio, south of Belluno. Both took advantage of the opportunities offered by the aforementioned state law and, consequently, also received financial support from the EU [2].

Anyone travelling through the Seven Municipalities and the Forest of Consiglio will be surprised at first glance by how vibrant the Cambrian linguistic landscape is there. As soon as you enter these areas, you cannot fail to notice the bilingual place

name signs and welcome greetings (Italian/Cambrian), which are clearly of recent origin. In all municipalities, there are signs that draw the attention of locals and tourists alike to the names of districts, streets, buildings and fields in the Cambrian dialect. The Cambrian linguistic landscape is so striking that visitors, and especially researchers, inevitably ask themselves why the inhabitants do not speak Cambrian, given that they clearly have their own culture with a uniform linguistic codification.

There, stakeholders have not only succeeded in motivating a considerable part of the local population to take an interest in Cambrian culture, but also in promoting it for tourism. Only then can the current momentum be understood, which has led to the rich museum presentation of the Cambrians and the publication of numerous publications and documentaries. This is reflected in dictionaries and grammars. In addition, with the help of funding, has impressively promoted the linguistic landscape (bilingual place names, etc.) and staged it especially for those interested in cultural tourism. Information boards in the Cambrian language about cultural features, especially the names of fields, roads, houses, bodies of water and mountains provide opportunities to engage with Cambrian culture. With the increase in tourism, it can be observed here – as in other German-speaking enclaves in Italy – that traditional dishes that were consumed daily in the agricultural past have now achieved the status of gastronomic specialties.

In the forest of Consiglio this staging could well be described as “ethnotourism”, even though it only refers to artefacts

there. Several circular trails through the forest area showcase the Cambrian origins, economic practices and woodworking traditions, as well as the village architecture, with numerous information boards and reconstructed wooden huts which are currently used as holiday homes.

The two case studies mentioned demonstrate that symbolic ethnicity can certainly be viewed as a path to economic development and can thus be presented, in the broadest sense, as ethnotourism –as is successfully the case, for example, in the nearly extinct German-speaking enclave of Pozuzo in South America (Perú). There, the community has succeeded in capitalizing on its distinctive architectural styles and materials, as well as its unique cuisine—a blend of Tyrolean and Peruvian specialties—for tourism, so that Pozuzo is widely known in Perú as a tourist destination.

In the extinct German (Walser) language enclaves of the Italian Western Alps, such as Rima or Ornavasso, there are also efforts to expose tourists to cultural remnants, but these activities cannot be compared to those in the aforementioned Consiglio. In contrast, there are the former German-speaking enclaves in the Julian Alps of Slovenia, where symbolic ethnicity plays hardly any role in tourism. This applies to an even greater extent to the Walser people, who disappeared centuries ago, in the municipality of Vallorcine in the French Alps. However, capitalizing on cultural heritage for tourism represents an economic opportunity that should not be overlooked, especially since it helps counteract depopulation in mountainous regions Figure 1.

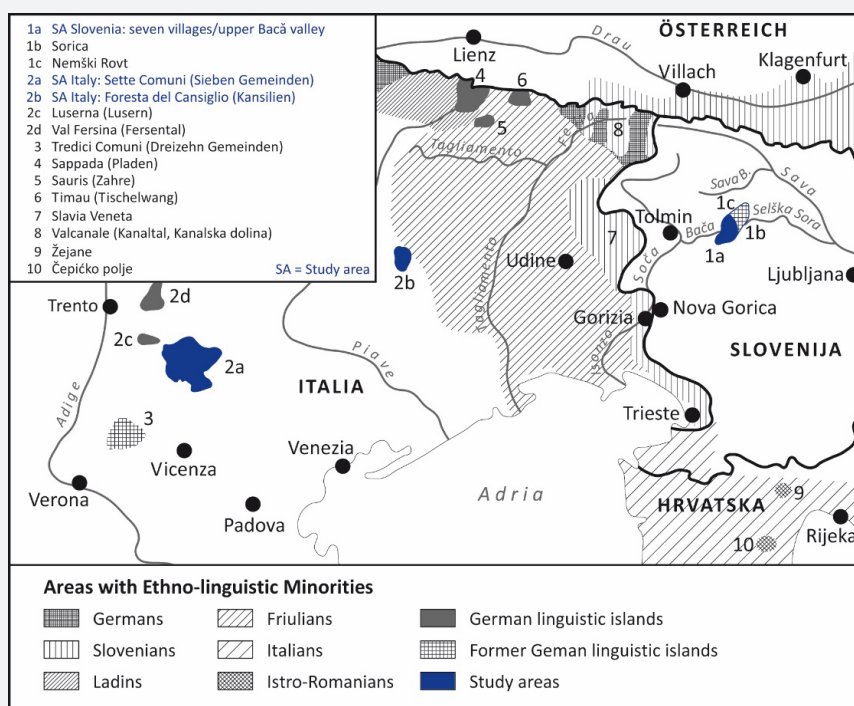


Figure 1: Existing and disappeared ethnolinguistic minorities in the core area of the Alps-Adriatic region.

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