

# Language planning and media

The case of Occitan in Italy

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the current status of Occitan in Italy, focussing in particular on the development of this language and on its language planning and the use of contemporary media as a way of maintenance. I provide an overview of Occitan and its origin, then I evaluate the state of language planning to understand if something is being done by the institutional authorities to promote the language and to revitalize it. Then, newspapers, music, radio and other cultural and educational activities in Occitan are analyzed. Concluding, it can be stated that despite the limited area where the language is used, the desire of the speakers to promote their culture and their traditions is still strong.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the current status of one of the minority languages active on the Italian territory, Occitan. This language has its origin in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and its cultural and social importance are largely recognized not only in Italy but also in France and in Spain. However, despite the historical and cultural relevance of Occitan, there are only a few studies (Micali, 2016; Giordano, 2015; Benedetto Mas and Giordano, 2015) investigating its status in Italy.

In order to correctly frame Occitan as a minority language in Italy, we have to consider the fact that this language is strictly connected to the culture and traditions of its speakers as a representation of their identity. To understand the current status of Occitan in Italy, I consider it relevant to provide a general overview of the language history, its origins and its status today first. Based on this, I developed my research questions, which are the following: What is the present status of language planning for Occitan in Italy? How do media contribute to the maintenance and the development of the Occitan language?

The purpose of this study is to identify the operations that are currently active on the Italian territory and to understand how these can contribute in keeping the language alive. I will do this with an online study of the activities and media available in Occitan language. This analysis will demonstrate that the use Occitan is stimulated in different ways, for example by cultural activities, music, education programs and by different institutions.

### 1.1 THE ORIGINS OF OCCITAN

The Occitan is a Romance language and is also known as *lingua d'oc*, a name that was given by the Italian writer Dante Alighieri. The culture and the language have ancient

origins that go back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it was diffused by the troubadours, composers who were performing in courts of the South of France and later in Italy and Spain, the area which was then called Occitania. In its history, the Occitan culture was influenced by Christians, Hebrews and Catari and it was characterized by a cultural, political and, more importantly, linguistic diversity. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, Occitan was mainly spoken in the northern valleys, by the Valdese. These communities used to be trilingual, speaking French, Occitan, also called *patois*, and Piemontese<sup>1</sup>. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a religious persecution took place against the Valdese. This event forced most of them to move to France, to Switzerland or to other regions of Italy. Only in 1848, the right of the Valdese to freely profess their religion was recognized.

Finally, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the diffusion of Romanticism, the awareness of Occitan as a language increased. The *Manifesto o Carta di Chivasso* [Manifest or Charter of Chivasso] was the first real written example during the Second World War. With this manifest, Occitan started to be seen as a reflection of the identities of the communities living in the Valdese valleys. The acknowledgement continued in Italy in the 1960s with the foundation of the association *Escolo dóu Po* (1961). Their aim was to develop the Occitan culture and language, mainly by proposing a unified spelling for the Italian dialects of Occitan, and by maintaining the relationship between Piedmont and the south of France, regions that shared the Occitan and Franco-Provençal languages. Starting from the 1960s, and even more in the 1970s, new journals in Occitan began to publish content with a more political inclination. However, all were driven by the need to restore the Occitan culture as an expression of the identity of these communities.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 OCCITAN TODAY IN ITALY

Nowadays, Occitan is spoken in the region of Piedmont, in the municipality of the cities of Cuneo and Turin, and in the southern municipality of Guardia Piemontese. With the law 482 of 1999, the Italian State officially recognized it as a historical minority language. This term, minority language, means that Occitan has its own independent system and that it is part of the Romance language group, but it is not strong or used enough to be adopted as national standard language (Berruto, 2015). Despite being recognized by the national law, many linguists still consider it at risk. The main reason is that Occitan is mostly spoken by adults and there are few schools in this region that provide classes in Occitan. It is, according to Regis (2015), difficult to exactly estimate the number of speakers of Occitan in Italy, and different authors provide distinct data. The latest number listed is from the estimates of Regis (2012), which indicates that there are around 20.000 active speakers of Occitan in Piedmont.<sup>3</sup>

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1 As Naoko Sano states "Il *patois* era la lingua popolare, ... il francese era la lingua della chiesa e la lingua dello Stato, i Savoia parlavano francese, (...) l'italiano è arrivato soltanto dopo" [The *patois* was the popular language, ...the French it was the church language and the state language, the Savoy they spoke French (...) the Italian arrived only after] (Naoko Sano, *Un lingua in cammino*, ed. Chabrambra d'Oc, Saluzzo, 2008, p.48.)

2 Some examples are *Ousitanio Vivo*, *Lou Soulestrelh*, *Novel Temp* and *Valados Usitanos* (1977)

3 This number is based on estimates made by Regis (2012) using data collected by the ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics for Italy); these data refer to the application of the percentage of the use of dialect in each family on the total residence in the area of interest.

It is also important to note that Occitan is not only spoken in the valleys near Turin, but also in Calabria by a small community in the Italian municipality of Guardia Piemontese. This variety of Occitan has to be considered carefully. In fact, as expected, it has received the influence of standard Italian and Calabrese, the dialect of the region where the municipality is located. This small speaking community is the descendant of an ancient settlement of the Valdesi, who moved there during the persecutions of 17<sup>th</sup> century (Micali, 2016).

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

According to the preliminary research, studies on Occitan and its language planning are relatively limited. In order to correctly present and create an efficient plan, it is important to have an updated overview of the current status of the language. Following this reflection, two research questions were developed: (i) What is the present status of language planning for Occitan in Italy? (ii) How do media contribute to the maintenance and the development of the Occitan language?

I will first focus on the status of language planning in Italy, and proceed with a quantitative analysis of the media in Occitan nowadays. I will mainly look at websites, newspapers, journals, radio and social media published in Occitan. With the preliminary research and the review of the literature, it was found that Occitan is significantly used in the Italian media. I believe that a more accurate analysis, regarding the status of the language planning, will confirm the impact that Occitan has in the society, in the culture, and in the everyday life of the population of the regions in the north of Italy.

## 3. ANALYSIS

### 3.1 LANGUAGE PLANNING

In the field of sociolinguistics, language planning refers to the active role of the official Institutions or of the individual communities, and the functions they adopt in order to prevent the languages at risk from disappearing. Following the definition of language planning of Cooper (1989: 45), we can say that it is the “deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes”.

Many models and theories have been developed in the context of language planning. In general, a well-constructed language planning can revitalize weaker languages by means of three operations: corpus planning, acquisition planning, status planning. The first one focuses on the codification of a writing and orthographic system. The second concentrates on the acquisition of the language at family and education level, and the third on the promotion of the use of the language by institutions and official organizations. In this analysis and in the remaining part of the study, I will examine the current status of Occitan in Italy, considering the definition of language planning and of these three operations.

#### 3.1.1 *Corpus planning*

First of all, I will focus on corpus planning, which aims at a normalization of the language. Overall, I have noticed during my research that there are different dictionaries, many of

which also available online, but there is a lack of grammars. Most of these dictionaries focus on the dialects of specific northern valleys of Italy. An example is the Dictionary from Pey de Lizan (1983) or the one written by Pons and Genre (1997), that also describes the morphology of the Occitan dialect in the Germanasca valley. A more recent work is the one from Zörner (2008), where he focuses on the dialects of the Po valley, located in the municipality of the city of Cuneo. Another important text is *Dizionario Occitano Robilante-Rocavione* (Artusio et al. 2005).

In 2008, the International Committee for the linguistic normalization of Alpine Occitan<sup>4</sup> constituted a bilingual dictionary of a standard Alpine Occitan. This text aimed at describing this language and its general rules, phonetic transcriptions, orthography, and lexical entries<sup>5</sup>, rather than focusing on the rules of local dialects of Occitan.

### 3.1.2 Acquisition planning

Along with Occitan normalization, education is another crucial element for the maintenance of the minority languages. Acquisition planning aims at influencing the institutions, such as schools or private institutes, in order to offer the minority language as part of the school curricula. Often, the decision regarding the public education receive political influences, as most of the times prestigious languages are chosen first (Cooper, 1989). If the children will not learn Occitan, either because there are no courses available in public schools or because the parents do not speak it at home anymore, the maintenance of this language is at high risk.

There are very few primary schools offering classes in Occitan or bilinguals schools in Italy and most of them only organize cultural projects rather than grammar classes. Despite this, it is possible to find online courses available for free, for example in the websites of the *Chambra d'Òc*<sup>6</sup> and *Espaci Occitan*<sup>7</sup>. Regis (2015), also listed an available source for education an Occitan handbook written by Anghilante and Bianco (2002, 2006). The latest edition includes grammar, exercises and literature, mainly conceived for children at their first year of primary school. Other examples are the grammars from Previato and Calliero, made of two volumes, the first in 2009 and the second in 2012, both written for courses organized by the Institute Gouthier in Perosa Argentina.

### 3.1.3 Status planning

The last important point in language planning is the effort that the institutions make in order to revitalize the languages and keep them alive. Status planning refers to the language social and political importance and status if compared with other languages

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4 Pellerino, R. *Dizionario Italiano-Occitano Occitano-Italiano*, Cuneo, +Eventi, 2008. Retrieved from [https://issuu.com/paolome/docs/dizionario\\_occitano\\_lr4](https://issuu.com/paolome/docs/dizionario_occitano_lr4)

5 With this tem we refer to the Occitan variety spoken in Piedmont, and all its variant in the region.

6 Salerno, B. *Impara l'occitano: corso di insegnamento dell'occitano on-line sul Portal d'Occitània della Chambra d'Òc*. In *Chambra d'Òc*. Retrieved from <http://www.chambradoc.it/introduzione-PLEoc/Corso-di-insegnamento-delloccitano-on-line.page>.

7 *Corso frontale di cultura e lingua occitana I livello*. In *Espaci Occitan*. Retrieved from <http://www.espaci-occitan.org/index.php/attivita/corsi-di-lingua/?lang=it>.

(Cooper, 1989). First of all, I would like to refer again to the Italian law of 1999, that is the most important example of an official recognition of Occitan as a minority language in the Italian territory from the government. Together with this, Occitan, as a language and cultural minority heritage of Piedmont, is also protected by the Regional law (LR) n. 58/1978<sup>8</sup>. One of the most important cultural institutions is the *Chambra d'Òc*; which continues to work actively in the Italian territory in association with the region of Piedmont and with the municipalities of the different valleys. The actions taken by this institution cover different sectors: the first is the linguistic-cultural one, whose main aim is to promote bilingual and cultural education, to produce teaching materials, realize pedagogic activities, to train teachers, and so on. In the international sector the association is committed to become part of events also outside Italy. The last one is the production sector, that aims at promoting local craft and gastronomic products that are made in the Occitan valleys.

Other projects are offered by the cultural association *CESDOMEO*<sup>9</sup>, in the municipality of Turin. This association's main purpose is the preservation of the language, and for this it makes information about the minority languages available to everyone, in particular Occitan and Franco-Provençal.

### 3.2 MEDIA IN OCCITAN IN ITALY

From what we have seen so far, associations and institutions are trying in many ways to keep Occitan alive, but there is still much more to accomplish. This means that methods and plans will have to improve, to stop a decline in the use of the language. The importance of new media for minority languages has been recognized by many researchers, Jones (2012) for example. The new media, like television, radio, music or online newspapers, can play an important role by reaching parts of population that other cultural and linguistic activities can not.

I would like to proceed with the analysis of the main newspapers, radio, music bands active in the territory and available online. The purpose is to try to understand if the media are influencing the status of Occitan and how this can be connected to language planning.

Table 1 gives an overview of the media available in Italian and in Occitan in the region of Piedmont, specifically in the municipalities of Cuneo and Turin. The data were taken from previous papers on the topic (Giordano, 2015), and from the website of CORECOM<sup>10</sup>. This source was mainly used to find a complete list, updated at the year 2018, of all the broadcasting and publishing companies, divided per municipality, whose address was officially registered in the region of Piedmont.

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8 The last regional law (RL) was issued in 2009, but right after it was also judged to be against the Italian Constitution. For this reason, for the moment the region has issued the law LR n. 58/1978 to ensure the protection of the minorities languages in the region. (Regis, 2015)

9 CE.S.DO.ME.O. Centro Studi Documentazione Memoria Orale [Study and documentation center of oral memory] Retrieved from <http://www.cesdomeo.it/cesdomeo.asp>

10 Corecom - Comitato Regionale per le Comunicazioni del Piemonte [Corecom – Regional committee of communication of Piedmont] Retrieved from <http://www.cr.piemonte.it/web/per-il-cittadino/corecom>. Last viewed 02/04/2018

Table 1

*Overview of the media in Italian and in Occitan*

Media in Italy	Italian	Occitan
Radio programs	25 radio stations	4 programs, 1 radio station
Music	245	50
Journals and periodical	45	4

As I mentioned in the beginning, Occitan is also spoken in the municipality of Guardia Piemontese. However, registered in this area, there are not enough information or materials available online to carry out a proper comparison with the Italian media, as I did for Piedmont. Despite the lack of resources, I would like to illustrate an interesting project that was realized in cooperation with the University of Calabria, the broadcast “Arberia TV Occitana”, to promote minority languages in the region, Occitan and Albanian.

In Piedmont, a total of 25 radio stations were found. Just one among these is exclusively in Occitan language: Radio Planeta Occitània. Only 4 radio companies provide in their schedules programs in Occitan and aim at promoting the culture and tradition, covering also the most current issues. Some examples of programs are *Occitania*, in collaboration with Radio Tre Rai, *Rabadan*<sup>11</sup> (from 2006 until 2010) and *SLENGadOC* (from 2012) in the schedule of Radio Beckwith Evangelica, and two programs in the regional radio: Radio Dora and Radio Frejus.

As for the music, I only considered groups active at the time of the research in the Italian territory (Benedetto Mas & Giordano, 2015). The authors Benedetto Mas and Giordano estimated 50 active groups in the Italian territory who use Occitan as the main language, compared to the 245 groups in total that are active in the Region. In this context, beside the bands and singers working in Italy on traditional music, I also found more recent re-interpretations in folk rock, reggae or pop groups or even metal, of Silvio Peron. Nowadays two of the most famous singers in this diverse music scene are Lou Dalfin and Lou Seriol. They reinterpreted traditional and popular melodies and dances, adapting them for a younger audience. This analysis shows the importance of the music scene, in a context where a language like Occitan is threatened by the use of other dialects, like Piedmonts, or by the Italian standard itself. Music is not only significant on a linguistic perspective but also on a cultural one. It helps the youngest generations to feel closer to their past tradition and it encourages them to make use of their traditional language more often. It is even more important, and makes us understand the validity of this medium, that some bands or singers in the valleys of Piedmont, for example Lou Dalfin, learned Occitan as a second language. This demonstrates how language is connected to identity and shows the bond that these singers have with their territory and their culture.

<sup>11</sup> This program was not included in the number presented in Table 1. It was in fact not anymore available at the website of the Radio Beckwith Evangelica; however, I believed it was important to mention it.

The latest data, reporting the number of active singers in Italy, was not available online<sup>12</sup>, despite the fact that most of the information I collected are updated when this paper was written (April, 2018).

Another issue I would like to consider in this section is the use of periodicals and journals. The tradition of press in Occitan, goes back to the 60s, when the first journals were published. I found, through the website CORECOM, that the total of journals and periodicals, whose main offices are found in the municipalities of Cuneo and Turin, is 45. Among these periodicals there are 4 published in Occitan or in bilinguals Occitan-Italians. The first I would like to present is Ousitanio Vivo, a monthly review in French, Italian and Occitan (20-30%) dealing mainly with political issues.

Soulestrelh is a four-monthly journal, which includes some texts in Occitan. The publication of both Ousitanio Vivo and Soulestrelh were collected online from the association Lou Soulestrei, born in 2014<sup>13</sup>, whose aim is to promote this language and culture.

Moreover, there is also R Nid'Aiigura, a semestral six-monthly journal which includes 10-20% of texts in Occitan, and Valados Usitanos, a quadrimestral cultural review including 20-30 % of Occitan. In the municipality of Turin, the online newspaper L'Eco Mese is published mainly in Italian but with sections in Occitan and information about the language and culture.

As a last remark, I would like to consider blog and social media that were used to promote the culture and the language use. Most of the blogs were already found by Regis (2015), but, as he also commented, it is difficult to understand if the speakers joining the conversations were actually from Italy or France<sup>14</sup>. After an analysis of social media, especially on Facebook, I found pages and groups dedicated to Occitan. Some examples are the pages *Museo Occitano—Espaci Occitan*<sup>15</sup>, *Percorsi Occitani*<sup>16</sup>. Another group that Regis (2015) referred to is *Nord-occitans e arpitans*<sup>17</sup>, where most of the speakers were Italians.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Occitan is a minority language that is not fully vital and active, compared to other minorities languages in Europe, as illustrated by other studies (Berruto, 2015, Giordano 2015). Despite this, both the analysis of media and the evaluation of the state of language planning

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12 The last paper that I found that evaluated the Occitan music in Italy was Benedetto Mas and Giordano (2015).

13 The latest number of the journals and more information about the association can be found at the following link: (<https://lousoulestrei.com/edizioni/>).

14 'Occitania Forum'. Retrieved from <http://occitania.forumactif.com/>  
'Projet Babel: Forum Langue d'oc'. Retrieved from <http://projetbabel.org/forum/viewforum.php?f=24;>  
'Le blog de l'occitan'. Retrieved from <http://france3-regions.blog.francetvinfo.fr/le-blog-de-viure-al-pais-france3/2014/09/11/a-voste-siti-novel-dinformacionoccitan-en-linha.html>

15 Retrieved from [https://www.facebook.com/museooccitano/?ref=br\\_rs](https://www.facebook.com/museooccitano/?ref=br_rs)

16 Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/percorsioccitani/>

17 Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/690151511007883/>



demonstrate that the language it is not going to disappear anytime soon. In fact, media has a significant impact on the maintenance of Occitan, more than was expected during the preliminary study.

Therefore, to answer the first research question, regarding the state of the language planning, there are already many operations and interesting cultural events that are being carried on by the associations active on the territory. To answer the second question, it seems that media actively contribute to the maintenance of the language and of its traditions, reaching also the youngest generations with music and social media. Despite this, I believe that more could be done and should be done in order to keep this language alive by transmitting it to the next generations. Every language, even if it is spoken only by a minor part of the population, has an important role in the cultural and social development of the country. ■

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