


Symbolic ethnicity, cultural and linguistic landscape: remnants of ‘Little Europe’ in the Valcanale (Northeast Italy)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates ‘Little Europe’, the rural, mountainous Italian region of the quadrilingual Valcanale, bordering Austria and Slovenia. The combined analysis of cultural landscape, linguistic landscape (LL) and symbolic ethnicity provides a new concept to examine multilingual regions. In this once Austrian valley, where German was the official language before WWI, Italian now dominates over minority languages, as exemplified by official signs. However, elements of the area’s cultural and linguistic landscape reveal unexpected linguistic practices and visible, locatable artefacts of the Valcanale’s ethnolinguistic heritage, which we assume to play a key role in the preservation of symbolic ethnicity.

KEYWORDS

Ethnolinguistic minority; symbolic ethnicity; cultural landscape; linguistic landscape; ethnolinguistic visibility; Italy

Introduction and research focus

In the mountainous area of Friuli in northeastern Italy, bordering Austria and Slovenia, the Valcanale (*Kanaltal* in German, *Kanalska dolina* in Slovenian and *Valcjanâl* in Friulian)¹ is historically characterized by significant ethnocultural diversity. No fewer than four ethnic groups settled next to one another and intermingled in the Valcanale – which was annexed from Austria by Italy after WWI. Today, autochthonous Slovenian, German, Friulian and Italian-speaking communities can no longer be clearly distinguished. Concomitantly, Europe’s three most dominant language families meet (i.e. the Slavic, Romance and Germanic, jointly considered ‘Little Europe’. Steinicke, 1993). German and Slovenian are now in danger of disappearing, which we address in the sections on demographic trends. However, there are both persistent and dynamic spatial elements that distinguish the Valcanale and its inhabitants linguistically and culturally from neighboring valleys. This study positions the regional linguistic landscape (LL) and rural cultural landscape against a backdrop of the valley’s specific history. Though changes might occur at any moment, landscapes evolve over time. Accordingly, after delineating the study’s theoretical foundation and describing the area’s major historical developments via demographic aspects, we analyze the distribution of traditional elements in the cultural landscape. Furthermore, we discuss the language choice of

signage, public, private and economic inscriptions as well as house names. While most of these linguistic markers have been produced within the last few decades, some elements of the LL derive from a more distant past. We present individual examples in more detail and examine their significance. With reference to the demographic situation, we address the implications of both the current and past visualization of the ethnolinguistic minority, which today foster the maintenance of symbolic ethnicity (cf. Facets of ethnicity and cultural landscape).

Indeed, no prior ethnogeographical research has combined cultural landscape, LL and symbolic ethnicity. Moreover, academic studies about the Valcanale are rather scarce; nevertheless, some publications have addressed the region and its specific ethnolinguistic and geopolitical history. Among the earliest documents are ethnopolitical analyses by Veiter (1934, 1961) and Goitan (1934), Paschinger's regional geographical article (1937), Grafenauer's ethnographic study (1946) and Bonetti's settlement geography paper (1960). We consider Steinicke's 1984 dissertation as the beginning of academic interest in this border region. The author points to the Valcanale's complex ethnolinguistic situation, which makes quantification of its ethnic weighting almost impossible. Subsequent investigations that focus on this context and question Slovenian-German dualism in the Valcanale were largely undertaken by Slovenians (see studies by the Slovene Research Institute/Slovenski Raziskovalni Inštitut, including: Bogatec & Vidau, 2016; Komac, 2002; Lipovec, 2014; Šumi, 1998; Šumi & Venosi, 1995, 1996). The British anthropologist Minnich (1998, 2002) introduced further observations regarding the unclear ethnicity of the autochthonous Valcanale population. Vavti (2006b) and Steinicke and Vavti (2008) continued these studies and recognized that the distinction between Slovenians and Germans or, more precisely, the parallel that 'Slovenian-speaking equals Slovenian-minded' and 'German-speaking equals German-minded', is inappropriate in the Valcanale.

The current work can be regarded as an in-depth continuation of Steinicke et al.'s 2019 ethnogeographical study. Overviews of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia's ethnolinguistic minorities that cover the region by Valussi (1974), Steinicke (1991) and Jelen et al. (2018) are central contributions to the pool of literature about ethnolinguistic development.

By investigating the regional LL and the rural cultural landscape, we have adopted an approach that unites geographical study with sociolinguistic and ethnocultural disciplines. Building on the current state of research and regional inquiries our study argues that both the demographic development of the individual Valcanale localities and the use of the minority languages of German and Slovenian have changed significantly as compared with the past. Even though quadrilingualism may also be vanishing due to the late implementation of minority protection, the ethnolinguistic heritage is still discernible as a linguistic landscape in public spaces. Unique cultural landscape elements and the LL alike function as a reinforcement of symbolic ethnicity and tell the observer about regional identities.

In addition to analysis of the current research status, official statistical data and documents, the present study is based on field inquiries undertaken between October 2018 and March 2020. We visited all of the Valcanale's towns and villages, and investigated the local landscape based on specific criteria. For the cultural landscape, we focused on the relationship between the natural landscape, culture and time. From this perspective, we then located and analyzed traditional settlement patterns, construction styles and agricultural buildings. For the LL, we worked with quantitative spreadsheets and,

following the standard LL survey procedure (Gorter, 2018), photographed individual examples for further qualitative analyses on the ethnolinguistic visibility of German and Slovenian.

We confronted the results with responses gained in focus group discussions with members of all three regional ethnic organizations as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with their representatives. The interviews focused on the past and present situation of Slovenians/Germans and their varying language uses and competences. We deemed the combination of different methods suitable for the investigation of the ethnolinguistic minorities' visibility. As Rucks-Ahidiana and Bierbaum (2015) argue, integrating spatial data in qualitative inquiries can demonstrate the interrelatedness of social processes and spatial patterns and the resulting dynamics over time.

Theoretical concepts and their application

Autochthonous ethnolinguistic minorities

Due to the extraordinary historical developments that have taken place in the Valcanale over the past hundred years, the area is one of the most diverse regions of Western Europe in terms of its ethnolinguistic features. The concurrence of Slovenians, Germans, Friulians and Italians has made the Valcanale a melting pot ('Little Europe'). Former strongholds of Slovenian and German have become centers of minority languages due to the in-migration of Romance language speakers and other demographic change.

Since no supranational consent exists on the definition of the terms ethnicity, ethnic or ethnolinguistic minority and autochthonous minority, we hereby present our interpretation for this study. Adhering to recent literature, we understand minorities to be defined by differences that distinguish them from the numerical majority living in any given region. These differences are frequently of a cultural nature and often accompanied by sociopolitical inequality (Prochazka, 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, in accordance with the Central European understanding, we recognize ethnic minorities as ethnolinguistic communities that are autochthonous and locally present for at least three generations or about 90 years (Veiter, 1984). Instead of applying the term 'ethnic' in the sense of 'immigrated from a non-European country', the authors explicitly refer to the autochthonous Valcanale population, which evolved into a minority.

Although the use of minority languages does not count as the sole criterion for group identity (i.e. a sense of belonging), language use is nevertheless part of individual identity. If the use of a minority language in public spaces is officially promoted by appropriate measures, the language gains in frequency of use, prestige, number of speakers and, subsequently, social equality (Prochazka, 2018, pp. 5–6).

Legal foundations and an appropriate infrastructure are necessary to preserve ethnolinguistic diversity and counter assimilation into the majority. South Tyrol, for example, enforced autonomy regulations comparatively early in 1972 to protect its German and Ladin-speaking minority in Italy. The right to education in their mother tongue was attributed to South Tyrol's pupils immediately after WWII, paving the way for well-established German and Ladin schools. However, the Valcanale, where numerous people used to communicate by shifting between four languages, was not covered by such regulations after WWII (Steinicke et al., 2019, p. 6; Voltmer, 2011, p. 177) and schools have remained

Italian. It was not until 1999 that Italy passed a law for all autochthonous linguistic minorities (*Minoranze linguistiche storiche*) and recognized twelve historical language minorities (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1999). Between 2007 and 2009, the Italian region Friuli Venezia Giulia expanded this regulation by three important regional laws. They guarantee the protection of the Slovene national minority (2007), the Friulian minority (2007) and the German-speaking minority (2009) (Vidau, 2013, p. 28, 38–39). The laws do not constitute recognition as an official language. However, they are intended to promote equality for all ethnolinguistic minorities in the region through the bi- or multilingual operation of public administration and the visualization of multilingualism (Vidau, 2013, pp. 38–42). Nevertheless, the protection of the Valcanale's distinct ethnolinguistic diversity by these regulations has presumably been realized too late.

Linguistic landscape (LL) and ethnolinguistic visibility

Not only the public use of minority languages but also the visual representation of ethnolinguistic minorities is highly relevant. Eröss and Tátrai (2010, p. 51) reason that groups that occupy a territory aim at 'seizing it in symbolic meaning as well'. They discern that the visibility of groups through their symbolic appropriation of space is central to demonstrating ownership. Monnet (2011, par. 28) also supports the importance of the symbolic, arguing that it 'enables the establishment of ties and makes it possible to give a meaning to the environment and to appropriate reality and render it intelligible'. Linguistic signs are visual, symbolic presentations of a group which provide a valuable starting point for LL research, as proposed by the field's founders, Landry and Bourhis. They define LL research objects as follows: 'The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration' (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). Although often applied to linguistic research, the LL also offers itself as a conceptual foundation for human geographical studies, focusing on spatial distributions and patterns. When investigating the presence of German and Slovenian minority languages in the rural Valcanale, we decided to focus on the area's tangible linguistic inscriptions and signs.

The public visibility of languages in multilingual settings is of special interest, as it might be induced by the dominant linguistic group. Landry and Bourhis also argue that 'the LL may serve important informational and symbolic functions as a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting the territory' (1997, p. 23). One might assume that the prevalence of a language in the LL indicates its frequency in use. Instead, Van Mensel et al. (2016, p. 430) delineate that 'language use in the public sphere reflects the outcome of a complicated interplay between various factors of ethnic, political, ideological, commercial, or economic nature in a particular societal context'. Consequently, LL research reveals the visibility rather than the actual use of different languages and evidence of a specific LL can serve as the basis for a variety of new research questions.

Having considered the large corpus of literature on linguistic or language visibility (Du Plessis, 2013; Kotze & Du Plessis, 2010; Vandenbroucke, 2015), ethnic visibility (Grimson, 2005; Lai, 2017; Tan & Liu, 2014) and ethnolinguistic vitality (Ehala, 2010; Landry &

Bourhis, 1997), we have consciously chosen to incorporate ethnolinguistic visibility. As opposed to the solely linguistic analysis Landry and Bourhis conducted, we explicitly focus on a spatial dimension by connecting the visible LL with the cultural landscape and symbolic ethnicity.

Facets of ethnicity and cultural landscape

Beside linguistic manifestations, other elements exist in the cultural landscape that contrast with those in neighboring valleys and reflect the autochthonous minorities' presence. We argue that identity, ethnicity and culture are interrelated and visualized in the landscape. Within this context, ethnicity, as defined by Heller (2004) and Sallanz (2007), is central to our study. They reason that ethnicity is both determined by objective factors such as descent or culture, and constructed subjectively. In this sense, 'culture' can be seen as a manifold container, which comprises diverse aspects such as language, names, customs or the settlement structure, all contributing to the cultural landscape. Concerning the subjective dimension, Heller and Sallanz affirm that self-attributions (i.e. identity) and external attributions emphasize contrasts between groups and, thereby, also act as ethnic demarcation. After the Valcanale had been annexed to Italy post-WWI, the formerly autochthonous majority became an ethnolinguistic minority, which was reinforced by the 'Option' (i.e. relocation; cf. 'The' ethnolinguistic minority: historical developments) and the 'nationalization' of language and culture due to the arrival of Romance language speakers. Italian now dominates the region, so that 'feeling ethnic' can be an occasional impulse in everyday life. Nevertheless, external definitions have repeatedly been assigned to the autochthonous population, assuming that they clearly associate with 'their' ethnolinguistic group.

Past and present on-site research activities suggest that these attributions are highly problematic because they do not correspond to the real ethnic identity of the autochthonous Valcanale population (Vavti, 2006a). Steinicke (1991, pp. 178–185) describes the often unclear, situation-dependent understanding of identity in the valley as *diffuse ethnicity*, especially when objective factors of ethnicity (e.g. language) deviate from self-perception. He interprets this development in relation to the region's political history (i.e. the rigid approach to speakers of other languages during Italian Fascism) and recent socio-economically driven social mobility and shifting language use. When the Valcanale is abandoned in favor of promising jobs elsewhere, familial linguistic socialization loses its importance. Inter-marriage and the everyday use of Italian also increasingly disguise the ethnicity of local people (Vavti, 2006a). Open communication about ethnic self-awareness is still avoided today – yet another potential reason why politicians have neglected the region's minority protection for so long.

However, according to *symbolic ethnicity*, even though many people no longer speak their autochthonous language, they do try to maintain their ethnic identity in other ways. As Gans suggests, ethnic identity can be expressed in action and/or feeling, which can take new, limitless and symbolic forms (Gans, 1979, pp. 7–9), e.g. maintaining customs and traditions. The usage of images, symbols, and cultural practices is a principle of self-description: People embed their self-images in a cultural field of distinctions and patterns. The result is cultural symbolization and coding of ethnic identity – 'symbolic ethnicity'. Furthermore, as a product of communication and discourse, expressions of ethnic

identity are not fixed and static, but actively established, changed and recreated (Liebsch, 2016, pp. 88, 90).

The *cultural landscape*, when seen in relation to identity and ethnicity, becomes highly meaningful. Regions as places of definable belonging are closely interwoven with collective history, tradition and culture, and are therefore crucial in determining the self (Tieskens et al., 2017, p. 30; Weichhart, 1999, p. 11). Thus, cultural landscape is not only constituted by social interaction but also serves as an important projection surface for ethnic self-attribution (Marxhausen, 2010, p. 53, 60; Sauer, 2007; see Figure 1). Figure 1 illustrates Sauer’s definition of an anthropogenically altered natural landscape, which we apply to our concept, too. Specific material elements or their sociocognitive correspondences are charged with values, meaning and social references, which may be the result of past actions that remain persistent when innovative processes are largely absent (Giddens, 1997). Moreover, Ramos et al. argue that the cultural landscape shows ‘tradition that is still alive today can be recognized in building styles, [...] language and symbols’ (2016, pp. 38–39). Considering this, we assume that the Valcanale’s sociocultural and socioeconomic history, its collective memories and traditions, are more than mere mental pictures. We see them as physical manifestations – persistent ‘symbols of ethnicity’ observed within the Valcanale’s rural cultural landscape – and acknowledge their importance as reminders of Carinthian and Carniolan culture.

From ethnolinguistic visibility towards symbolic ethnicity: twofold landscape research

So far, we have discussed theories on LL and cultural landscape separately. And yet, though inherent differences undoubtedly exist between linguistic and the cultural landscapes, they are also interconnected, as exemplified by language and culture. According to the aforementioned ‘container concept’, language is both a central component and a fundamental expression of culture. Regarding cultural landscape, Sauer explains that:

There is a strictly geographic way of thinking of culture; namely, as the impress of works of man upon the area. We may think of people as associated within and with an area, as we may think of them as groups associated in descent or tradition. (2007, p. 303)

By connecting Sauer’s understanding of cultural landscape and groups with the linguistic dimension, we can focus on the spatial manifestations of language and culture as visible

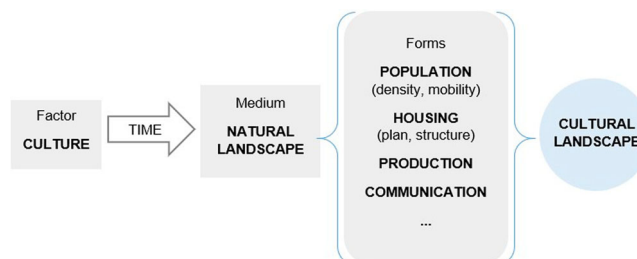


Figure 1. Key determinants of cultural landscape (Sauer, 2007, p. 310, Figure 17.2; modified).

expressions of or for German and Slovenian-speaking minorities. We argue that maintaining older ethnolinguistic and traditional cultural elements within the landscape reflects symbolic ethnicity, whereas relatively new elements can both display symbolic ethnicity and refer to the present ethnolinguistic situation.

'The' ethnolinguistic minority: historical developments

An evaluation of the present situation requires investigation of how political interests in the Valcanale have historically altered its ethnodemographic composition. Sociopolitical and demoeconomic developments have determined the number of speakers of German and Slovenian dialects, Italian and Friulian. Not only did locals speak different languages depending on their origins, but they also employed distinctive approaches, for example, when building a house or farming. Nevertheless, the most significant changes appear to have affected a local sense of belonging, which has certainly been impacted by migration, and sociopolitical and economic contexts.

The Valcanale's complex ethnolinguistic composition began when people settled there after the Migration Period. The first inhabitants were Slavic pastoral people who arrived in the early Middle Ages (Bonetti, 1960). Over the course of centuries, San Leopoldo Laglesie, Ugovizza and Camporosso became Slavic centers.

When the German Diocese of Bamberg took over in 1007 AD, more settlements were readily established in other Valcanale areas, excluding the far eastern zone. The typical Bambergian parceling of settlements planned and structured along roadside strips is still discernable today in the valley's mid and western parts. Conversely, a pattern of dispersed settlements prevails beyond the former Bambergian territory east of Tarvisio, in keeping with neighboring Carinthian and Carniolan mountain areas (Paschinger, 1937, p. 262).

The further immigration of Germans, Friulians (from neighboring southern valleys) and Italians led to Slovenians becoming a minority (Steinicke, 1984, p. 28). Various employment opportunities attracted different people: Mostly Germans worked in the Cave del Predil lead mines, Malborghetto was predominantly inhabited by Italians/Friulians working in the iron industry, and agrarian Ugovizza remained Slavic.

The Habsburg's annexation of the Valcanale in the mid-eighteenth century further affected the region's ethnolinguistic balance. The Slovenian population, which assimilated the new regime, became less distinct and diminished in this period when compared with the German-speaking population (Valussi, 1974, p. 101; Von Czoernig, 1857, p. 27). The Romance population also diminished: The 1910 Austrian census counted only ten Italians in the Valcanale (Veiter, 1934, p. 228). Figure 2 shows the Valcanale's linguistic majority before WWI.

Despite its low number of Italian residents, the Valcanale was annexed to Italy in the post-WWI peace treaties of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1919) and Rapallo (1920). Having previously been under German or Habsburgian rule, this annexation was a momentous act. In the interwar period, immigration was state-subsidized and so the number of Italian-speaking inhabitants rose to 1207 in 1921 (Veiter, 1934). Tarvisio, Pontebba and San Leopoldo Laglesie became Italian and Friulian language hubs. The onset of Italianization (i.e. the restriction of autochthonous language use) put German and Slovenian-speaking people under increasing pressure, enforcing assimilation or emigration. After eras of political

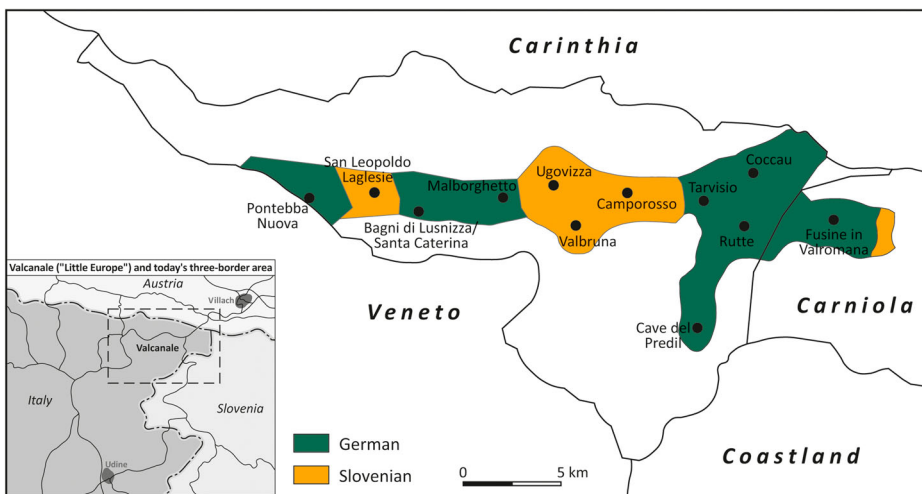


Figure 2. Prevalence of German and Slovenian speakers in the Valcanale before WWI (Steinicke et al., 2019, p. 11).

unrest, war and ethnic hostilities, residents wanted to overcome and prevent further open conflicts:

During Fascism, old people were forbidden to speak German. And afterwards, because of Italianization, they were ashamed to speak German. (Quote first translated into standard German, then into English; Int. 2, 2020)

The development towards a national minority was further aggravated by the so-called 'Option'. When autochthons had to opt between Imperial German and Italian citizenship in 1939, the majority (84.6%) chose the German Empire (Steinicke, 1984, p. 40) and were obliged to relocate. Whereas the ownership of small-scale properties simplified the emigration process, large-scale property owners or farmers, who were often Slovenian-speaking, delayed their emigration and ultimately remained as a minority (Steinicke, 1984, pp. 34–44). Although about 2500 German and Slovenian and 3300 Italian speakers stayed, 5700 mainly German speakers left the Valcanale and have never returned. Rather than this leading to a sudden population decrease, simultaneous in-migration from both neighboring Friuli and distant Italian regions led to a population increase. As a result, the ethnolinguistic composition drastically changed from a ratio of 88% Slovenians/Germans to 12% Romance speakers before WWII to 26% Slovenians/Germans compared with 74% Romance speakers in 1951 (Steinicke, 1984, pp. 44–52). By the 1990s, mostly elderly autochthonous descendants living in once predominantly Slovenian villages (Ugovizza, Camporosso and partly Valbruna) upheld the region's remaining quadrilingual heritage from the inter-war period (Vavti & Steinicke, 2006).

While the *Montagna Friulana* (Friulian mountains) was massively affected by high emigration rates post-WWII, the Valcanale's overall resident population remained relatively stable until the 1990s. The region especially attracted young Friulians and other Italians, who found jobs in border trade, tourism and industry. However, this demographic situation was interrupted by the closure of key enterprises and the opening of borders to Austria (EU accession in 1995) and Slovenia (2004). Eventually, this led to the Valcanale

becoming a depopulated region: No other Friulian valley has suffered greater relative and absolute population losses since 1995 than the Valcanale. A deficit of birth over death rates has taken effect due to an unfavorable population age structure. This significant population imbalance, which shapes the area's demographic trend, is ongoing today and has contributed to the autochthonous ethnolinguistic minority 'dying out' (Steinicke & Vavti, 2008; Steinicke et al., 2019, pp. 12–13).

Recent ethnodemographic trends

This section presents results gained in interviews, complemented by a body of literature that is central to our study. In comparison with South Tyrol, minority protection was established very late in the Valcanale, and the region's attempts to preserve autochthonous languages have largely failed. Since annexation, public communication, the region's administration and its educational system have exclusively been conducted in Italian, relegating Slovenian, German and their dialectal variations to the private domain. The suppression of autochthonous language use in the public domain (e.g. job, administration and media) and inadequate autochthonous language education can result in insufficient language development. Furthermore, when this coincides with intra-familial multilingualism caused by intermarriage, Italian replaces autochthonous languages as a communication tool (Vavti, 2006a, p. 8). Some families consciously consider linguistic socialization, however, knowing that a language dies when it is no longer spoken by children. Linguistic socialization is therefore decisive to whether ethnolinguistic identity can be preserved or the pressure to assimilate is finally unbearable.

Current quantitative data confirm that both the resident population and the number of Valcanale autochthonous speakers are in decline (see Figure 3). The population in all three municipalities and, thus, the Valcanale as a region has been decreasing for decades. Company closures, sectoral changes, social advancement and the opening of national borders have led to negative net migration. Overall, demographic decline, including an aging population and birth deficits, poses a threat to autochthonous minorities.

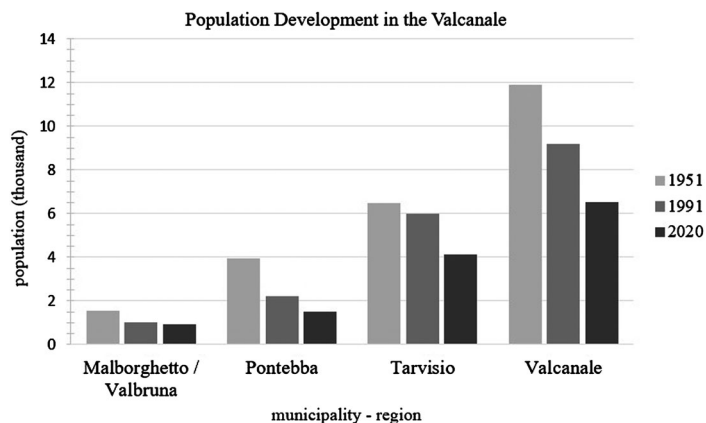


Figure 3. Population development in the Valcanale (1951–2020) (ISTAT, 1955, 1993; local municipal offices, 2020).

Nevertheless, the Valcanale is still characterized by exceptional ethnolinguistic diversity. In addition to ‘their own’ languages and their dialectal variations used in private, autochthonous people also speak Italian and, in part, Friulian. This quadrilingualism leads to situational and topic-dependent language changes (code switching) or mixing (code mixing). Our research has shown that language choice depends on the addressee. This communication strategy is an essential feature of ethnolinguistic minorities and is regarded as an identity marker that ‘demonstrate[s] belonging to a certain social group’ (Ladig, 2019, p. 7). Recent on-site interviews illustrate situation-dependent language choices:

I work at [...] and when Austrians and Germans come, they ask me why I speak Carinthian [German]. When Slovenians come, they ask me why I speak Slovenian. I speak all the languages but none correctly (laughs). What am I? [...] This always depends on the situation. I speak Slovenian with the family. It would be strange for me to speak Italian with them. That just wouldn’t work. [...] In Slovenia, I am Slovenian, [...] and in Udine [the province’s capital city on the Italian side, N/A] I have to be Italian – I am an Italian citizen. (Quote first translated into standard German, then into English; Int. 3.1, 2020)

Accordingly, we agree with Steinicke et al. (2011, p. 91; 2019, pp. 8–9) that the Valcanale population evades a clearly demarcated ethnicity. Referring to the inhabitants as ‘Wir Kanaltaler’/‘po našem’ (‘We people from the Valcanale’) seems more appropriate.

Despite emigration and assimilation tendencies, it still made sense in the 1990s to divide the autochthonous populations into German-speaking and Slovenian-speaking contingents. Although there have never been clear spatial language boundaries, the distributional trend of the pre-Italian era remained (see Figure 4). Camporosso, Ugovizza, Valbruna and San Leopoldo Laglesie have long been centers of Slovenian-speaking autochthons. Together with the German-speaking population, they comprised around 900 people, 30% of the resident Valcanale population at the time.

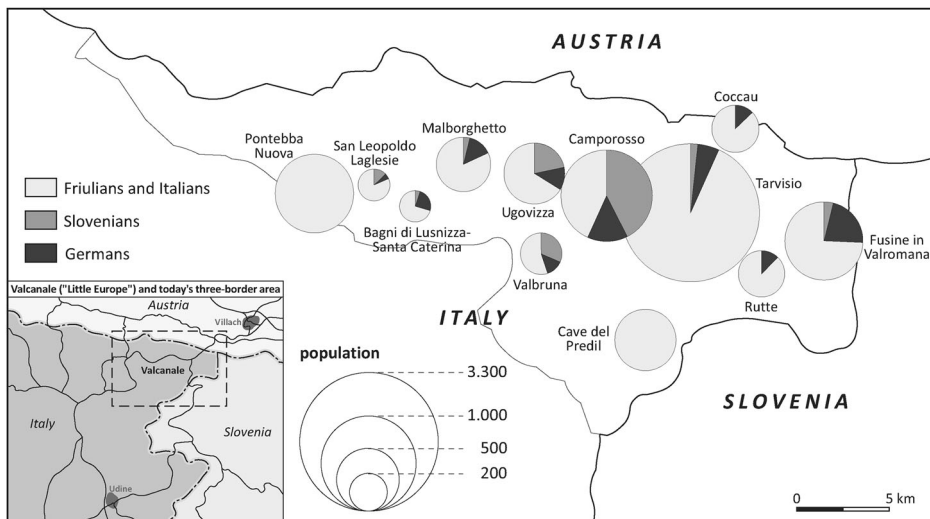


Figure 4. Weighting of Italian and autochthonous Valcanale populations in the 1990s (Steinicke, 1998; modified).

This weighting of Italian and autochthonous Valcanale inhabitants changed significantly in the following decades, however (see [Figure 5](#)). It is no longer appropriate to subdivide the autochthons into distinct ethnolinguistic groups for two reasons: Firstly, it is difficult to distinguish between German and Slovenian speakers due to linguistic intermixing; and secondly, the overall number of speakers has decreased significantly. Steinicke et al. (2019) ascertained that the Slovenian and German linguistic minority currently living in the Valcanale is limited to just over 400 people. All localities, albeit to a lesser extent Ugovizza, are affected by declining autochthonous populations. San Leopoldo Laglesie and Bagni di Lusnizza-Santa Caterina will be completely Romance-speaking in the foreseeable future. Ugovizza occupies a special position in the entire Valcanale (see [Figure 5](#)). The number of autochthons is still comparatively high there, and Slovenian in particular is being kept alive by the population’s increasing commitment. The ability to ‘produce’ language plays a major role in this regard, since active language usage, in contrast to mere understanding, has subsided.

Protective regulations, various civil initiatives (e.g. associations), clerical measures and the introduction of language classes could lead to a renaissance of autochthonous language use in future, while enabling symbolic ethnicity to live on today. Although this comes too late for several generations of autochthons, such measures might result in greater ethnolinguistic equality. Additionally, the presence of autochthonous language and cultural landscape elements seemingly plays an important role in the understanding of ethnic belonging.

The ethnolinguistic visibility of the autochthonous minorities

Unlike spoken language, the LL visually manifests linguistic identity, a sense of ethnolinguistic belonging or, more specifically, symbolic ethnicity. Therefore, analyzing a region’s LL can affectively provide manifold readings of language choices and message transfer.

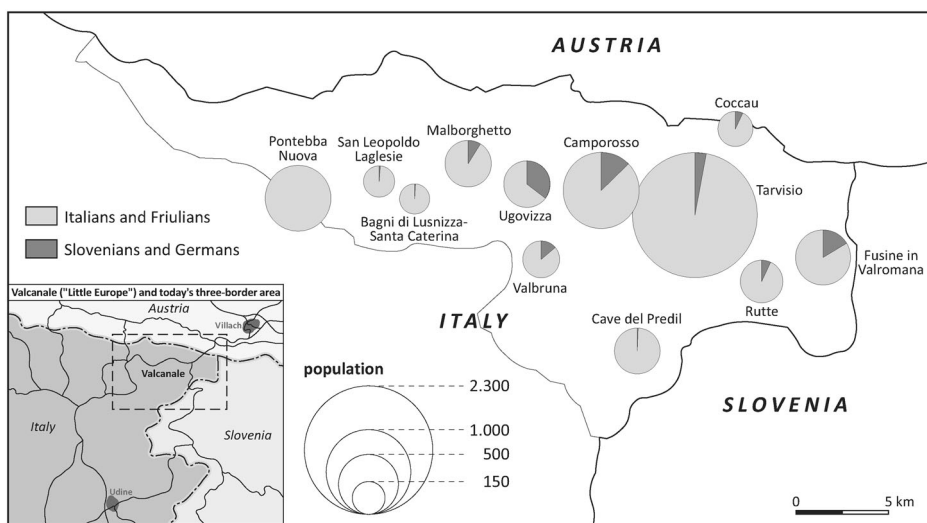


Figure 5. Current weighting of Italian and autochthonous Valcanale populations (Steinicke et al., 2019; own survey, 2020).

The selected subcategories in [Table 1](#) itemize visible signage in the Valcanale’s linguistic landscape. Due to the area’s rural setting, it would have been senseless to include advertising screens as a subcategory, which have been analyzed in other studies. Instead, buildings such as fire stations provide expressive language choices. [Table 1](#) displays the prevalence of different linguistic manifestations. The following discussion demonstrates the relevance of individual examples. As the national language, Italian is clearly dominant: monolingual signs are almost entirely in Italian. On multilingual ones, Italian is usually present and sometimes even highlighted. Place name signs are highly relevant LL elements, as was demonstrated in the Austrian county of Carinthia when public riots began over whether public inscriptions should only be in German or also in Slovenian in the 1970s. Place names might, to varying degrees, be connected to local and individual identity. As with any label, a place name represents a larger concept with various associations. In the Valcanale, people who mention place names in conversation use minority languages, but place signs are exclusively in Italian, which highlights a lack of linguistic equality. The interviews show that local cultural associations are not satisfied with this situation and would like to see their languages represented on official inscriptions. ‘Welcome’ signs are quadrilingual (with Italian in larger letters, see [Figure 6](#)), but they might aim at addressing tourists. Consequently, the quadrilingual heritage only finds limited public representation.

We found further official multilingual signs, for example on Tarvisio’s city hall, which read ‘Municipio, Rathaus, Županstvo, Municipi’, with the Italian word in larger letters. Once more, minority languages are considered but are visually subordinate. Kindergartens and schools are of utmost importance for the transfer of ethnolinguistic heritage to the next generation, and yet we found neither German nor Slovenian evident in the surroundings of these facilities. It is conspicuous that German (in combination with Italian and Slovenian) is used on most fire department buildings. An outstanding example was observed in Camporosso ([Figure 7](#)).

Table 1. The Valcanale’s linguistic landscape (own survey, 2020).

Type	Subcategory	German	Slovenian	Italian and German	Italian, German and Slovenian	Italian, German, Slovenian and Friulian
Infrastructure signs	‘Welcome’					WWWCCCEEEE
Inscriptions	Panoramic map		C			
	Cemetery	WWWCCEEE	CCEE			
Public labels	Church	WWCCCE	WCC			C
	Memorial	E		E		
	Administration			C		E
Private labels	Fire department	C		WC	C	
	Information board	C		W		
Private labels	Service company	CCE		WCE	WE	
	House	CCE		C	C	
House names	Agricultural storage	WE	E			
		CC	CCC			
	Western Valcanale		Central Valcanale		Eastern Valcanale	
	W Pontebba Nuova		C Malborghetto		E Fusine in Valromana	
	W San Leopoldo Laglesie		C Ugovizza		E Cave del Predil	
	W Bagni die Lusnizza		C Valbruna		E Tarvisio	
	W Santa Caterina		C Camporosso		E Coccau	



Figure 6. Quadrilingual 'welcome' sign in the Valcanale (own photo, 2020).

There, we also found bilingual information/administrative signs. As in other towns, we additionally noticed German written on service company buildings, especially gastro-nomic ones. In some cases, the language choice might be oriented to tourists but not



Figure 7. German sign on the fire department building in Camporosso (own photo, 2020).

in all instances: For example, 'Tante Mitzi Caffé' (Aunt Mitzi's Café) is frequented by locals. The retention of its Austrian name shows at least some esteem for the town's linguistic past. In addition, some gastronomic buildings combine Italian, Slovenian and German signage.

A cyclist club's German name provides another distinctive example. On its bulletin board, the 'Kanaltaler Radfahrer' (Valcanale cyclists) also convey information in Italian. Consequently, the club both identifies itself with German and acknowledges itself as Italian-speaking too. This is an especially interesting expression of symbolic ethnicity: While Italian is the dominant, everyday language, the club has decided to make its ethno-linguistic specificity visible.

We found a remarkable amount of German and Slovenian usage in the churchyard, which, however, does not get the broad public attention given to place names or signs on school buildings. Additionally, some of the non-Italian gravestones date back to the eighteenth century. Thus, these linguistic manifestations do not display a contemporary presence of Slovenian or German. Nevertheless, the language choice for gravestones of loved ones is a deeply personal decision and, therefore, should not be underestimated. Furthermore, older inscriptions are significant because they visualize ethno-linguistic heritage. Besides gravestone inscriptions, we also found inscriptions on church walls and the catholic stations of the cross (and chant books) in autochthonous languages.

One cultural association especially upholds religious traditions and the use of Slovenian during mass. As Gans states, people might wish 'to return to [...] [their] imagined pasts' (1979, p. 9). While such a return is unlikely, the desire to create a symbolic tradition is sometimes placed on institutions such as churches or schools. At the same time, people's 'familial, occupational, religious and political lives are pragmatic responses to the imperatives of their roles and positions in local and national hierarchical social structures' (Gans, 1979, p. 9). The use of signage on private buildings that incorporates specific languages is a meaningful, individual statement. Multilingual signs that warn of roof avalanches constitute the largest proportion of LL on private houses (Figure 8). These signs are predominantly bilingual in Italian and German and often trilingual with Slovenian.

Moreover, we found German welcome signs and the German term 'Post' ('mail') on mailboxes. House names inscribed on facades are another particularity of the valley's LL. Depending on their location, the used language varies: In Camporosso, house names are mainly inscribed in German and Slovenian. In Ugovizza and Valbruna are some Slovenian examples and in Malborghetto German ones.

Compared to larger towns, clearly less visible language is evident in small localities with a limited number of buildings. However, on a regional scale, the middle-sized villages of Ugovizza and Camporosso reveal a comparatively large amount of German and/or Slovenian language traces in public spaces. This corroborates that the LL varies from village to village and is dependent not only on the number of inhabitants but also on other factors such as the number of autochthonous inhabitants and their expression of symbolic ethnicity.

In the next section, we discuss how Pontafel/Pontebba Nuova merged with Pontebba, which was already part of Italy before the post-WWI peace treaties. Any remnant German signage on traditional buildings in this area would have been badly damaged in the earthquakes of 1976: We only detected five German or multilingual signs, three of which might have been produced to address Austrian visitors rather than local inhabitants. Another



Figure 8. Multilingual sign warning of roof avalanches (own photo, 2020).

place that diverges considerably in its appearance is Cave del Predil, where multi-story housing was once built for local miners. Here, German can mainly be found on memorials.

In sum, we found that especially gravestone inscriptions prove the long-term presence of Slovenian and German in the LL. However, the language choice in the Valcanale is imbalanced and, therefore, the LL substantiates the minority status of German and Slovenian. Multilingualism does not appear to be supported politically as minority languages are even absent on educational facilities. The dominance of Italian in public areas is a concern for the future development of linguistic diversity. Nevertheless, the upkeep of traditional ethnolinguistic elements (e.g. house names, German quotes on the fire brigade building, restaurant names and Slovenian in church) suggest the maintenance of symbolic ethnicity.

Symbolic ethnicity as reflected in the cultural landscape

Alongside detectable linguistic traces, physical cultural elements in the landscape can also depict memories, traditions and history. The cultural landscape is therefore a geographically locatable representation of human behavior over time and holds important information about the historical, economic and sociodemographic developments of an area. In the Valcanale, the cultural landscape enables autochthons to symbolically express and maintain their individual and collective ethnic identity without disturbing their daily lives or their role as Italian citizens. In accordance with Gans (1979, 2017), Sauer (2007), Marxhausen (2010) and Ramos et al. (2016), we elaborate on the cultural landscape's historical development and examine persistent artefacts symbolizing the region's Carinthian and Carniolan past.

Before the area's annexation to Italy, impressive cultural and architectural differences were evident between Pontafel (today's Pontebba Nuova) and Pontebba. Although only separated by the bridged Pontafel creek (Torrente Pontebbana) (Domenig & Jelen, 2020), Pontafel's Austrian mentality, culture and construction style visibly contrasted with Pontebba's Italian influence. Whereas multi-story stone and brick buildings with biforium (i.e. double-arched) windows dominated on the Italian side, typical Carinthian construction styles had been evident in Pontafel, as in the rest of the Valcanale (Marinelli, 1894; Paschinger, 1937, p. 262).

Hardly any remnants of these old, traditional buildings still exist today: The devastating earthquakes of 1976 and subsequent Italian reconstruction led to visible changes in the cultural landscape. Although Romance-style elements have influenced the valley for a century, symbolic references to the autochthonous population and their shared history can still be detected in both aged and contemporary cultural landscape elements. As a result, the Valcanale's cultural landscape significantly differs from other Friulian cultural landscapes.

In mid and western parts of the valley – former Bambergian territory – concentrated remnants of medieval settlement patterns still show signs of distinctly planned, long street lines. These parcels favored the 'Einhaus', a single-roof farmyard combining the construction of residential and agricultural space in one building. Conversely, a pattern of dispersed settlements dominates the east of Tarvisio, corresponding to Carinthian and Carniolan mountain areas. Due to the prevailing impartible inheritance law that prioritizes a single heir, these properties are larger: Commonly, farmsteads with cultivated land comprise two or more grouped buildings ('Paarhof' and 'Haufenhof'). These farms are characterized by separate spaces for residential and agricultural use (Figure 9).

Wood, the preferred building material, and traditional Carinthian hipped roofs (jerkin-head roofs) are still significant elements in the construction of private houses. This typical building style can be found in all Valcanale towns and villages but especially in the former



Figure 9. Typical 'Paarhof' in Rutte grande: Residential and agricultural buildings separated and grouped (own photo, 2020).

autochthonous population strongholds (Figure 10). In many cases, newly built public infrastructure ties in with this Carinthian construction style too: In Valbruna, Tarvisio and Malborghetto, for example, we found tourist facilities and holiday accommodation as speculative objects built with traditional flair, intended to attract private investors and visitors. The fact that the architecture of new buildings is consciously attached to the Valcanale's past can undoubtedly be interpreted as an appreciation of collective history or even as symbolic ethnicity. The buildings symbolically convey ethnic identity and turn the public spotlight on collective memories, emotions and traditions of the valley and its autochthonous inhabitants.

Remnants of traditional agricultural facilities can also be found in the cultural landscape. Since these are mostly no longer used for farming, a different kind of motivation must be behind their preservation. Indeed, these objects carry symbolic value and visibly refer to autochthonous identity. 'Kösen' (wooden constructions once used to dry hay) and hay barns in meadows are reminders of an agricultural past. In some places, they are entrusted with other functions (Figure 11). We even discovered several old hay barns that have been repurposed into simple but comfortable private holiday huts. Most of these still utilized objects can be traced in the previously agricultural centers of Ugovizza, Valbruna and Fusine in Valromana.

In addition to above-mentioned constructions, traditional economic and behavioral patterns have been preserved as further symbols of ethnicity. The flattened, high mountain areas of the Carnic Alps have long been used for alpine livestock farming. Twenty-four alpine pastures, which included a school and a chapel in addition to agricultural and residential buildings, can literally be described as alpine villages. They were used in a transhumance-like manner during the summer and enabled farmers to meet people from the neighboring Carinthian (Austrian) Gail Valley (Steinicke, 1984). Despite socioeconomic change, some Ugovizza, Valbruna and Camporosso residents still spend their summers



Figure 10. Old and contemporary Camporosso houses built in traditional Carinthian style (own photo, 2020).



Figure 11. 'Köse', an agricultural construction for drying hay; now repurposed as a shelter for firewood (own photo, 2020).

on these pastures. This traditional, periodic migration is of significant emotional importance, especially for the elderly population.

Former Bambergian servitude rights, which in the past would have supplemented a modest agricultural income, still permit Tarvisio National Forest property-related entitlements. For example, an annual wood allocation, which still supports the viability of remotely located residential areas in the valley, is evident in the large amount of autochthonous households with traditional wood-burning stoves. As these allocations can be financially lucrative in wood-scarce Italy, servitude rights are perceived positively by the Romance population too. More than 700 servitude entitlements and the use of wood as a construction material can be considered as a particularity of Friuli and constitute evidence of ethnicity.

Conclusion

Due to its historical developments and extraordinary ethnolinguistic diversity, the Valcanale offers itself as a study area for processes of 'longue durée' (Braudel, 1987). Slavic and Germanic origins trace back to the first settlement activities. Over time, the ethnolinguistic composition was not only determined by locally varying employment opportunities but also Valcanale's changing political affiliation, most notably the Habsburg's annexation in the mid-eighteenth century and Italy's annexation in the post-WWI peace treaties. Physical elements in the cultural landscape alongside linguistic representations of autochthonous languages and traditions provide information about the area's ethnodemographic and ethnocultural situation, implying a transformation into symbolic ethnicity

in recent decades. Protective regulations that were implemented between 1990 and 2010 came too late for a large part of the Slovenian and German minorities. The displacement of autochthonous languages into the private domain, the lack of linguistic socialization and decades of social inequality have enforced linguistic assimilation, which in turn has had a lasting impact on ethnic ascription.

We discovered that, besides the general decline of the Valcanale population (2020: 6518), the number of speakers of autochthonous languages has significantly diminished: approximately 400 speakers remain. Distinguishing the two minorities has become problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, linguistic intermixing hampers differentiation. On the other hand, the deficiency of ethnolinguistic self-ascription is partly responsible for the fact that autochthons can no longer be clearly described as Slovenian or German speakers in national terms. The phrase 'We people from the Valcanale' offers itself as a more suitable description. It reflects diffuse ethnicity, which has emerged from decades of mixed Romance, Slavic and Germanic influences and shaped the inhabitants' ethnic identity.

In contrast to the autochthonous population's decline, we observed careful attempts to reactivate languages and traditions. Although not part of the current study, they offer potential for further research. A revival of symbolic autochthonous identity in the research area significantly enhances the visualization of traditions, collective history and ethnicity. These symbols can be interpreted as a means of protecting and preserving one's ethnic self from being forgotten, without competing with one's everyday life as an Italian citizen. This general trend is likely transferable to other minorities of the Alpine arch despite incomparable histories and varying forms of symbolic ethnicity. However, this avenue of investigation would require further comparative research, too.

We have proven that, notwithstanding the exceptional occurrence of quadrilingualism, Italian is more visible than minority languages. German and Slovenian, however, are displayed on private houses and community centers, which can be interpreted as symbolic ethnicity. Clearly, places comprising of only a few houses do not display a large quantity of linguistic signs. Yet, in the former Slovenian-German centers of Camporosso, Ugovizza and Valbruna, where multilingualism is still practiced today, many multilinguistic signs were identified.

Physical manifestations of the Valcanale's history and culture are also visible in today's cultural landscape. In particular, the typical Carinthian construction style seems to be especially relevant, as it is not only implemented in private residential buildings but also in contemporary public infrastructure projects. Also, the maintenance of traditional economic and behavioral patterns (e.g. servitude rights and alpine pastures) is emotionally and symbolically significant for autochthons.

Despite a decrease in quadrilingualism, our findings highlight that the region's autochthonous heritage and ethnolinguistic specificity are publicly discernible in the linguistic and cultural landscape. Visible elements in the cultural landscape and the LL alike suggest symbolic ethnicity, which does not interfere with being an Italian citizen. The revival of Carinthian and Carniolan traditions and languages is reflected in the maintenance of rural cultural landscape, use of old building styles, and the existence of historical servitude rights and alpine pastures.

Note

1. Valcanale toponyms have several language variants. As a general rule, a Slovenian or German name, often in the local or regional dialect, exists alongside the official name. In the following article, however, only official Italian place names are used to avoid overly exerting the text.

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