

SOCIOLINGUISTIC DYNAMICS OF SLOVENIAN LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES IN FRIULI, ITALY: AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES AND LINGUISTIC ATTITUDES*

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Received August 2025; Accepted November 2025; Published online February 2026

This article analyzes the sociolinguistic dynamics of Slovenian-speaking communities across Natisone, Torre, Resia Valleys, and Val Canale in Friuli, northeastern Italy. Drawing on a comprehensive sociolinguistic survey, the study investigates key indicators of language vitality, including self-reported competence, domains of use, and intergenerational transmission. We explore speakers' attitudes and perceptions toward their local Slovenian varieties and Standard Slovenian, situated within a complex multilingual context that involves contact with Italian, Friulian, and German. The research highlights how differing historical trajectories, contact levels, and varying degrees of institutional support – particularly through formal education – have shaped the contemporary repertoire and maintenance challenges of these linguistic communities. The findings offer a nuanced understanding of the factors driving language shift and maintenance in minority language settings.

Keywords: Slovenian Minority in Italy, Sociolinguistics, Language Maintenance, Language Shift

1. Introduction

This article explores the sociolinguistic dynamics within Slovenian-speaking communities in Natisone Valleys, in Torre Valleys, in Resia Valley, and in Val Canale in Friuli, northeastern Italy. Drawing on data from a sociolinguistic survey, the study investigates self-reported language competence, domains of use, intergenerational transmission, and perceptions of

* This article is an output of the project “Contact-induced language change: perspectives from the minority languages in the Italian linguistic space”, funded by the Italian Department of Research and the European Union (PRIN2022 20224RFY93). We are very grateful to the participants to the survey as well as to following people, who contributed to the dissemination of the online questionnaire: Živa Gruden, Iole Namor, Marina Cernetig, Luisa Cher, Margherita Trusgnach, Luigia Negro, Virna Di Lenardo, Sara Grassi Sgarban, Alessandro Oman, Rudi Bartaloth, Luciano Lister, as well as to the editorial teams of the newspapers *Novi Matajur* and *Dom*. This article is the result of collaboration among the three authors, who share the research plan, analysis, and conclusions. However, for academic purposes, Francesco Costantini is responsible for sections 3, 4.6 and 4.7, Roberto Dapit for sections 2 and 4.1, Jelena Živojinović for section 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5.

both local varieties and Standard Slovenian. The perceived role of formal education in supporting language maintenance is also discussed.

This research is situated within a broader tradition of sociolinguistic inquiry into minority and regional languages, especially in contexts marked by historical multilingualism and language contact. Similar studies have highlighted the complex interplay between language vitality, speaker attitudes, institutional support, and socio-political frameworks. In this context, the Slovenian-speaking communities of Friuli offer a promising case study: they are shaped by diverging historical trajectories, varying degrees of contact with surrounding communities, and differing levels of exposure to other languages spoken in the area, such as Italian, Friulian, Standard Slovenian, and German.

It should be noted that the sociolinguistic research presented here is not the first to investigate the multilingual context of the communities under study. A previous sociolinguistic survey commissioned by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region (Susič, Janežič, Medeot 2010) examined the vitality and usage of all minority languages in the region (Friulian, Slovenian, and German), providing cumulative data for each community, so that data for *Slavia friulana* and Val Canale cannot be disaggregated from the overall regional Slovenian community. This means that the 2010 inquiry does not provide insights into the level of use of Slovenian varieties in these areas. Similarly, a more recent sociolinguistic survey commissioned by SLORI (*Slovenski raziskovalni inštitut / Istituto sloveno di ricerche*), based in Trieste, does not allow us to make specific deductions on the four realities examined in this work (Jagodic 2024).

Unlike these investigations, therefore, our aim was to analyze in detail the sociolinguistic reality of the four Slovene-speaking areas and correlate the history of communities with their communicative practices, attempting to demonstrate the causal relationship between them, as well as to illustrate how the communities' multilingual repertoire is evolving.

Thus, by comparing patterns across these four areas, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of language maintenance and shift in multilingual contexts and how minority language communities negotiate identity. At the same time, it also aims to provide insights and stimulate discussion on the effectiveness of language policy measures, particularly in educational settings, and the challenges of sustaining linguistic diversity.

2. Slovenian communities in the province of Udine: the context

This article addresses the topic of communicative habits involving Slovenian minority varieties in four Slovenian-speaking areas of the former province of Udine: Natisone Valleys (ca. 5,000 inhabitants), Torre Valleys (ca. 1,000 inhabitants in Slovenian-speaking municipalities), Resia Valley (about 900 inhabitants), and Val Canale (about 1,000 inhabitants in Slovenian-speaking municipalities)¹. These four areas are located in the Julian Alps and Pre-Alps and are contiguous to Slovenia.

¹ For a short discussion on the demographic evolution of the areas affected by this project, see Živojinović, Dapit, Costantini (2025, 241).

From a dialectological viewpoint, the four areas are part of the Slovenian dialect continuum (Logar, Rigler 1983; Škofic, Kumin Horvat, Kenda-Jež 2023). The variety of Val Canale, *Ziljsko* or *Zegliano*, is part of the Carinthian Slovenian dialect group and is spoken, in addition to Val Canale, in the nearby Gailtal. Resian (*rozajanski langäč*, in Slovenian *rezijansko narečje*) belongs to the Littoral dialect group, although it is characterized by some concordances with Carinthian Slovenian dialects (Steenwijk 1993; 1994). The variety of Torre Valleys (*Tersko*) and that of Natisone Valleys (*Nadiško*) are also part of the Littoral dialect group.

Historically, the four areas followed different paths. Natisone Valleys, Torre Valleys, and Val Resia shared the historical trajectory of Friuli; during the Middle Ages, they were part of the Patriarchate of Friuli and from 1420 of the Republic of Venice. For this reason, the territory including the three areas was designated as *Slavia Veneta* or *Slavia Friulana* (Slovenian: *Benečija*). These areas looked to the Friulian region as their administrative, commercial, and cultural reference point for centuries, which facilitated the spread of Friulian, Venetian, and Italian.

The Val Canale area, by contrast, historically belonged to the Duchy of Carinthia and the Habsburg domains, and for centuries was oriented toward the German-speaking world administratively, economically, and culturally. Its strategic position, close to the border with the Republic of Venice, meant that during the modern era, Germanic influence intensified, starting from the main centers of the area. As a result, the local Slovenian variety was maintained only in rural areas (Oman 2011). Finally, in 1919, Val Canale was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy, and only in the last century have Italian and Friulian appeared in the area linguistic repertoire.

These historical events were also reflected in the linguistic history within the school system². In *Slavia friulana* school education was traditionally offered in Italian, although Slovenian varieties played a significant role for liturgical and catechetical purposes (Gruden 2000). In Val Canale, during the Habsburg period, the teaching of the Slovenian language was included in the educational system, albeit in various forms depending on the historical period (Gliha Komac 2015); the situation changed radically with the annexation to the Kingdom of Italy, when linguistic assimilation policies were implemented. Such assimilation policies were applied even more rigorously during the Fascist period in all four areas under investigation. During this time Slovenian was banned from education as well as from public use, and Slovenian teachers were replaced by Italian-speaking teachers.

In the years following World War II, the legislative foundations for subsequent measures to protect the Slovenian language in Italy were laid, although the implementation of the legislation and its practical effects would unfold in the following decades³. Article 6 of the Italian Constitution establishes the fundamental principle of protecting historical linguistic minorities, although this principle was only given legislative form through Law No.

² For further details on the teaching of Slovenian in Friuli Venezia Giulia, see (Šekli 2024).

³ For an overview on national and regional regulations on the protection of Slovenian in Italy, see (Dapit 2013) and (Valentinčič 2015).

482/1999 and Law No. 38/2001, which recognize the linguistic rights of Italian citizens belonging to the Slovenian community in the provinces of Trieste, Gorizia, and Udine.

A gradual recovery of the community linguistic rights began in the first decades after the promulgation of the republican constitution. In 1950 the publication of *Matajur* (in 1974 renamed *Novi Matajur*), a weekly multilingual newspaper, began⁴; a second multilingual magazine, the bi-weekly information publication *Dom*, would be published in 1955. In the same years the *Kulturno Društvo / Circolo culturale 'Ivan Trinko'* was founded in Cividale. Several other cultural associations were later established. Among these, to cite just a few examples from the areas discussed in this article, are the *Inštitut za slovensko kulturo / Istituto di cultura slovena* in San Pietro al Natisone, the *Center za kulturne raziskave / Centro di ricerche culturali* in Lusevera and Micottis, the *Rozajanski kulturni čirkolo 'Rozajanski Dum'* in Resia, the *Slovensko kulturno središče Planika Kanalska dolina / Centro culturale sloveno Stella Alpina* in Ugovizza, and the *Združenje / Associazione 'Don Mario Cernet'* in Valbruna, and the *Združenje/Associazione Don Eugenio Blanchini* in Cividale. Over twenty of these are nowadays recognized by the Region as organizations of the Slovenian linguistic minority (Art. 5, Regional Law No. 26/2007). These associations continue to play a vital role in preserving local varieties and promoting the culture of minority communities.

Meanwhile, Slovenian language instruction was implemented in the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, initially only in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste⁵: the National Law no. 1012/1961 and its subsequent amendments in 1973 (Law no. 932) warranted the right to education in the Slovenian language in schools in the two provinces. Regional legislation affected the province of Udine only later. A private bilingual primary school was established in San Pietro al Natisone (Špeter) only in 1984–1985. The school obtained recognition of equivalence in 1997 and became a state school in 2001, following the promulgation of the National Law 482/1999 (Gruden 2005).

As previously mentioned, in 2001 the National Law 38 was enacted, whose main provisions include specific rules regarding education. For kindergarten, it allows for the teaching of topics related to “local traditions, language, and culture, also to be conducted in the Slovenian language” (Art. 12, par. 1). The law also mandates “the teaching of the Slovenian language, local history, and cultural and linguistic traditions” within the curriculum of compulsory schooling (Art. 12, par. 2) and further recognizes the right to public use of Slovenian in local and regional administrations, including bilingual documentation and the right to receive official responses in one’s own language. Additionally, Regional Law No. 26/2007 further strengthens linguistic rights, guaranteeing the use of Slovenian in interactions with public institutions, in place names, and in radio and television broadcasts. This provided the legislative infrastructure for the expansion of the bilingual school to two school cycles, primary as well as a lower secondary.

⁴ The newspaper includes articles in Italian, in Standard Slovenian, and in local Slovenian varieties.

⁵ See the following Friuli Venezia Giulia Regional School Department for a short overview on the education in Slovenian in the region: <https://usrfvg.gov.it/sl/home/menu/uffici/ufficio-scuole-slovene/presentazione/storia#> (last accessed December 3, 2025).

Moreover, in Val Canale, Slovenian was introduced into the curriculum of the ‘Ingeborg Bachmann’ comprehensive institute in the 1990s; since 2017, it has been part of a multilingual program (Mezgec 2021; Gliha Komac 2021; Airoldi 2022), which was officially approved by the Ministry of Education in 2022.

Despite existing legislative protection and the initiatives enabled by this legislation, the linguistic situation in Torre Valleys, Val Resia, and Val Canale presents ongoing challenges, mainly related to the limited use of local varieties and Standard Slovenian in the school context. This study seeks to clarify and describe that situation in greater detail.

3. Methodology

In order to assess the vitality of the Slovenian varieties spoken in the former province of Udine and the communication habits and linguistic attitudes within the Slovenian-speaking minority communities, a sociolinguistic survey was conducted.

The methodology adopted for our survey is based on a sociolinguistic questionnaire prepared according to models provided by Giacalone Ramat (1978) and Francescato, Solari Francescato (2012 [1993]). This approach has recently been used for other minority communities in the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia (see [Costantini 2021; 2022], for Sauris/Zahre and Timau/Tischlbong, [Sidraschi 2024] for Sappada/Plodn, [Madaro 2024] again for Timau/Tischlbong)⁶.

The questionnaire, which was formulated in Italian, consists of six main sections:

- i. Personal data;
- ii. Self-assessed linguistic competence;
- iii. Contexts of use of the local variety;
- iv. Knowledge of other varieties, including Standard Slovenian;
- v. Linguistic attitudes and awareness of promotional initiatives.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed in 2024 through the two Slovenian newspapers, *Novi Matajur* and *Dom*, in both their print (a QR code was published, which could be converted to a standard URL for a website) and online versions, as well as through the social media pages of the two magazines. Slovenian cultural associations based in the different areas involved in the survey, as well as local cultural operators, played a significant role in disseminating the questionnaire, including through their respective social media pages or by word of mouth.

All data were collected anonymously. The resulting sample comprises 349 participants distributed across the following areas:

- Natisone Valleys: 191 speakers;
- Torre Valleys: 31 speakers;
- Resia Valley: 64 speakers;
- Val Canale: 63 speakers.

⁶ The data obtained from these works may provide a useful comparative framework for interpreting the results of the current survey, however this will be addressed in future research.

The distribution of respondents by area and age group is illustrated in Table 1.

Tab. 1 - *Distribution of respondents by area and age group*

	<i>Natisone</i>	<i>Torre</i>	<i>Resia</i>	<i>Val Canale</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	19	4	10	9	42
30–39	21	2	5	14	42
40–49	32	2	10	9	53
50–59	44	3	14	12	73
60–69	55	10	17	15	97
> 70	20	10	8	4	42
Total	191	31	64	63	349

The mean age of respondents was 45–50 years for Natisone Valleys, 60–65 for Torre Valleys, 50–55 for Resia Valley, and 45–49 for Val Canale.

Some limitations of this work should be noted. Firstly, the low number of questionnaires completed in Torre Valleys certainly limits the conclusions that can be drawn for this area. In the discussion on the data presented in the following section, it should always be kept in mind that the percentages by age group related to Torre Valley (but in some cases also in the other points of investigation) refer to a small number of individuals. However, for the sake of consistency and for comparative purposes, we opted to structure the data presentation similarly across all four survey areas. Other limitations relate to the methodology itself (Schleef 2014): the questionnaires were completed voluntarily and therefore may be subject to sampling bias⁷. It should also be noted that, as in any self-report survey, respondents may not accurately report their actual language use due to social desirability bias or lack of awareness. In this sense, responses reflect what participants believe they do, rather than their actual behavior.

4. Results

The data collected provides insights into active linguistic competence, generational language preferences, perceptions of comprehensive linguistic ability, composition of the community repertoires (including other local varieties and Standard Slovenian), frequency of use of different codes in various social contexts, attitudes towards youth language use, and opinions on school-based language instruction.

4.1 Self-declared competence in the local varieties

In Natisone Valleys area, 51.3% of respondents reported being able to speak the local variety, 17.8% reported not being able to speak it, and 30.9% reported having some compe-

⁷ See in particular the low representativeness of the population over 70, which in any case is expected to have high proficiency and frequent use of local codes.

tence in the local variety. Competence generally increases with age, with 80% of respondents aged over 70 reporting full competence, compared to 26.3% in the 18–29 age group.

Tab. 2 - *Self-declared active competence in Natisone Valleys (percentage)*

	<i>Full competence</i>	<i>Partial competence</i>	<i>No competence</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	26.3	57.9	15.8	100.0
30–39	42.9	28.6	28.6	100.0
40–49	34.4	43.8	21.9	100.0
50–59	54.5	29.5	15.9	100.0
60–69	60.0	23.6	16.4	100.0
> 70	80.0	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	51.3	30.9	17.8	100.0

It is interesting to note that the 18–29 and 30–39 age groups show an unexpected trend compared to the other age groups (over 70, 60–69, 50–59, and 40–49). In these older age groups, a progressive decrease in the number of speakers reporting full competence in the local variety is observed, while at the same time there is a moderate increase in the number declaring no competence and a more substantial increase in those declaring partial competence. This is in line with what is known about linguistic regression processes. Among speakers in the 30–39 group, the percentage reporting full competence is higher than in the 40–49 group, a result that runs counter to the trend generally observed in shift processes. Meanwhile, the number of speakers declaring zero competence continues to increase in the 30–39 age group compared to the 40–49 age group. As for the 18–29 age group, although self-declared full competence is significantly lower than in the 30–39 age group, the number reporting no competence is also lower, while the number reporting partial competence is significantly higher than in the 30–39 age group.

These data suggest that the regression of local varieties has slowed down, although this does not indicate a full recovery of active competence. One possible hypothesis is that this trend reflects the establishment of the bilingual school in San Pietro al Natisone in the 1980s, which may have helped support partial maintenance of the local variety. This maintenance trend is visible in higher rates of active competence in the 30–39 age group compared to the 40–49 age group, in higher rates of partial competence among the 18–29 age group than in any other age group, and in a decrease in the number of speakers who declare zero competence in the 18–29 age group compared to the 30–39 age group.

Further support for this hypothesis comes from comparing regression patterns in other varieties, which overall align more closely with typical patterns of decay processes described in the sociolinguistic literature on comparable communities (Giacalone Ramat 1978; Francescato, Solari Francescato 2012 [1993]; Jones 1998).

The data from Torre valleys show a significantly lower overall rate of reported full competence in the local variety (38.7%), with 41.9% reporting zero competence. Notably, only one out of eight respondents below the average age reported full active competence, indicating a severe language shift among younger generations.

Tab. 3 - *Self-declared active competence in Torre Valleys (percentage)*

	<i>Full competence</i>	<i>Partial competence</i>	<i>No competence</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0
30–39	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0
40–49	50.0	0.0	50.0	100.0
50–59	0.0	33.3	66.7	100.0
60–69	60.0	10.0	30.0	100.0
> 70	50.0	40.0	10.0	100.0
Total	38.7	19.4	41.9	100.0

However, the situation among older generations already appears to be severely compromised. It should also be noted that the number of responses received in this area is relatively small, and drawing broader conclusions would require a more robust database.

Resia Valley shows the highest level of active competence, with 68.8% reporting active competence and only 15.6% no competence. Even among the younger age groups, more than 50% declared full active competence.

Tab. 4 - *Self-declared active competence in Resia Valley (percentage)*

	<i>Full competence</i>	<i>Partial competence</i>	<i>No competence</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	50.0	10.0	40.0	100.0
30–39	60.0	40.0	0.0	100.0
40–49	40.0	30.0	30.0	100.0
50–59	85.7	0.0	14.3	100.0
60–69	76.5	23.5	0.0	100.0
> 70	87.5	0.0	12.5	100.0
Total	68.8	15.6	15.6	100.0

Finally, Val Canale shows the lowest overall active competence, with only 20.6% reporting being able to speak *Ziljsko* and 55.6% reporting zero competence. Among respondents belonging to younger age groups (18–29, 30–39, 40–49), only one out of 32 declared full competence in the local variety.

Tab. 5 - *Self-declared active competence in Val Canale (percentage)*

	<i>Full competence</i>	<i>Partial competence</i>	<i>No competence</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	0.0	33.3	66.7	100.0
30–39	7.1	35.7	57.1	100.0
40–49	0.0	22.2	77.8	100.0
50–59	25.0	8.3	66.7	100.0
60–69	53.3	26.7	20.0	100.0
> 70	25.0	0.0	75.0	100.0
Total	20.6	23.8	55.6	100.0

As in Torre Valleys, the vitality of the local variety appears already compromised among older age groups, with 53.3% of respondents in the 60–69 age group and 25% of respondents in the 50–59 age group declaring full competence. In this last age group, moreover, two-thirds of the respondents declare not having any competence in the local variety.

4.2 Perception of degree of competence as compared to usage domain

In addition to the competence self-assessment, participants who declared a full or partial competence in the local code were asked to assess their ability to use local variety with respect to the topic being discussed. Thus, they were asked to respond to the question, “Do you consider yourself capable of speaking about any topic in *Nadiško/Tersko/Resian/Ziljsko*?”

In Natisone Valley 43.3% overall answered “Yes” and 56.7% “No”. The percentage of respondents answering “Yes” increases progressively with age (72.2% for >70 vs. 18.8% for 18–29), indicating that the speakers are aware of a progressive loss of competence in the local variety according to contexts of use and age group.

Tab. 6 - “Do you consider yourself capable of speaking about any topic in *Nadiško*?” (percentage)

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	18.8	81.3	100.0
30–39	20.0	80.0	100.0
40–49	32.0	68.0	100.0
50–59	40.5	59.5	100.0
60–69	56.5	43.5	100.0
> 70	72.2	27.8	100.0
Total	43.3	56.7	100.0

Comparable data, despite the more limited sample size, emerge from the survey in the Torre Valleys and Val Canale. In Torre Valley, 44.4% overall answered “Yes” to the question, but it should be noted that this figure derives primarily from respondents over 60.

Tab. 7 - “Do you consider yourself capable of speaking about any topic in *Tersko*?” (percentage)

Torre	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29			
30–39			
40–49		100.0	100.0
50–59		100.0	100.0
60–69	57.1	42.9	100.0
> 70	44.4	55.6	100.0
Total	44.4	55.6	100.0

In Val Canale, 42.9% overall answered “Yes”, but once again, there is a significant age-related difference, with the percentage of “Yes” responses concentrated among older age groups in the sample.

Tab. 8 - “Do you consider yourself capable of speaking about any topic in Ziljsko?” (percentage)

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	0.0	100.0	100.0
30–39	16.7	83.3	100.0
40–49	0.0	100.0	100.0
50–59	50.0	50.0	100.0
60–69	66.7	33.3	100.0
> 70	100.0	0.0	100.0
Total	42.9	57.1	100.0

The data from Val Resia appear slightly different from those observed in the other three areas, in line with the trends discussed in the previous paragraph. Respondents in Val Resia show the highest confidence, with 70.4% overall responding “Yes” to the question “Do you consider yourself capable of speaking about any topic in Resian?”. In all age groups, including the youngest, the positive response to this question exceeds 50%, except for the 40–49 group, which nevertheless shows a high degree of perceived competence.

Tab. 9 - “Do you consider yourself capable of speaking about any topic in Resian?” (percentage)

Resia	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
18–29	50.0	50.0	100.0
30–39	60.0	40.0	100.0
40–49	42.9	57.1	100.0
50–59	91.7	8.3	100.0
60–69	70.6	29.4	100.0
> 70	85.7	14.3	100.0
Total	70.4	29.6	100.0

In conclusion, a comparison of the data in Tables 1–4 and 5–8 shows a correlation between declared proficiency and perceived competence, confirming that among the four areas considered, Resia Valley appears to have the highest degree of vitality as a function of speakers’ age, both in terms of proficiency of the local code itself and the level of proficiency in the local code.

4.3 Frequency of use of the local variety and degree of familiarity with the interlocutor

The frequency of local variety use generally correlates with closer family ties.

In Natisone Valleys, the local variety is more often used in communication within the family, especially with older family members (parents and grandparents), and is less fre-

quently used with partners and younger members. The modal values are ‘often’ and ‘sometimes’, rather than ‘always’, for use with friends and community members. Finally, *Nadiško* is used minimally with colleagues.

Tab. 10 - *Natisone Valleys: Frequency of use of local code (number of answers)*

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
Partner	38	26	24	15	17
Children	26	25	31	17	15
Parents	15	13	36	24	53
Grandparents	12	15	26	20	54
Friends	10	27	43	50	19
Community members	8	21	58	44	21
Colleagues	38	30	25	20	17

In Torre Valleys, the local variety use is also highest with grandparents and parents. *Tersko* tends to be less used with partners and children, although older community members report using it in conversations with spouses, younger family members, and less with interlocutors outside the household.

Tab. 11 - *Torre Valleys: Frequency of use of local code (number of answers)*

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
Partner	3	0	4	1	4
Children	3	1	3	2	3
Parents	1	0	1	2	5
Grandparents	2	0	0	1	6
Friends	2	1	4	4	1
Community members	2	1	5	4	3
Colleagues	6	0	3	0	1

A similar pattern is observed in Resia Valley, where the local variety is used most frequently with parents and grandparents, and less frequently with partners, children, interlocutors outside the household and colleagues.

Tab. 12 - *Resia Valley: Frequency of use of local code (number of answers)*

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
Partner	8	6	4	1	18
Children	4	1	13	9	7
Parents	1	2	8	10	27
Grandparents	4	2	3	7	27
Friends	0	3	14	17	15

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
Community members	1	3	13	18	13
Colleagues	13	9	7	4	8

Finally, similar results emerge in Val Canale, where the use of the local variety is strongest with parents and grandparents, limited with friends and other community members, and very limited with spouses, children and colleagues.

Tab. 13 - Resia Valley: Frequency of use of local code (number of answers)

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
Partner	14	2	1	2	1
Children	7	0	4	6	2
Parents	6	1	4	3	13
Grandparents	4	0	8	2	13
Friends	7	3	6	6	2
Community members	3	2	13	5	3
Colleagues	17	0	5	2	0

In conclusion, local varieties are still predominantly used within the family, especially with older relatives.

4.4 Community repertoire: presence of other local varieties

The study areas are characterized by the coexistence of a Slovenian variety and other local varieties due to the above-mentioned historical contact with neighboring Romance and Germanic communities, as well as with neighboring Slovenia, resulting in composite linguistic repertoires. The survey, therefore, sought to explore whether and to what extent other minority varieties are present in the community repertoire. Friulian appears to be fairly widespread in at least three of the study areas.

In Natisone Valleys, 44.0% of respondents reported proficiency in Friulian, with peaks in the over-70 age group and a minimum among the 18–9 age group. Note also the presence of Veneto, which historically played the role of a high variety in Friuli (Francescato 1966, 8; Frau 2015, 84ff.).

Tab. 14 - Natisone Valley: Self-assessed knowledge of other local codes

	<i>Friulian</i>	<i>Veneto</i>	<i>Other Slovenian dialects</i>
18–29	26.3	5.3	0.0
30–39	47.6	0.0	0.0
40–49	37.5	3.1	3.1
50–59	45.5	6.8	4.5
60–69	41.8	3.6	0.0

	<i>Friulian</i>	<i>Veneto</i>	<i>Other Slovenian dialects</i>
> 70	55.0	5.0	0.0
Total	42.4	4.2	1.6

In Torre Valleys, Friulian is known by 61.3% overall, mostly among the elderly.

Tab. 15 - Torre Valley: Self-assessed knowledge of other local codes

	<i>Friulian</i>	<i>Veneto</i>	<i>Other Slovenian dialects</i>
18–29	50.0	0.0	0.0
30–39	0.0	0.0	0.0
40–49	50.0	0.0	50.0
50–59	66.7	0.0	0.0
60–69	70.0	10.0	0.0
> 70	70.0	10.0	0.0
Total	61.3	6.5	3.2

In Resia Valley, Friulian is also known by 65.6% overall, and Veneto by 9.4%.

Tab. 16 - Resia Valley: Self-assessed knowledge of other local codes

	<i>Friulian</i>	<i>Veneto</i>
18–29	60.0	0.0
30–39	100.0	20.0
40–49	60.0	0.0
50–59	57.1	7.1
60–69	76.5	17.6
> 70	50.0	12.5
Total	65.6	9.4

Finally, Val Canale appears to be the linguistically most diverse area, as Friulian and Carinthian German are both known to some extent, in addition to *Ziljsko*.

Tab. 17 - Val Canale: Self-assessed knowledge of other local codes

	<i>Friulano</i>	<i>Veneto</i>	<i>Other Slovenian dialects</i>	<i>Carinthian German</i>
18–29	55.6	0.0	0.0	22.2
30–39	42.9	0.0	0.0	42.9
40–49	44.4	0.0	0.0	22.2
50–59	50.0	0.0	0.0	66.7
60–69	20.0	6.7	6.7	40.0
> 70	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0

	<i>Friulano</i>	<i>Veneto</i>	<i>Other Slovenian dialects</i>	<i>Carinthian German</i>
Total	38.1	1.6	1.6	39.7

4.5 Self-assessed competence in Standard Slovenian

In Natisone Valleys, just under a quarter of respondents (24.6%) reported being able to speak literary Slovenian, while a significantly higher percentage (40.3%) answered negatively. However, among respondents aged 18–29, competence is much higher, reaching 73.7%. This result is likely due to exposure to the Slovenian language through the bilingual school in San Pietro al Natisone and possibly also to the increase in relations with Slovenia on various levels, including university study in Slovenia and Slovenian language workshops promoted by local cultural associations. In Torre Valleys, knowledge of Standard Slovenian is very limited: only 6.5% of respondents reported having competence, while a substantial 77.4% reported having no competence in the language. A similar situation is found in Resia Valley, where only 6.3% of respondents claimed to know Standard Slovenian, and the vast majority (85.9%) answered negatively. Finally, in Val Canale, the situation appears more nuanced: 25.4% of respondents reported being able to speak Standard Slovenian. In this case, however, competence tends to increase with age, reaching 50% among those over 70 – contrasting with the pattern observed in Natisone Valley.

4.6 Preferred code and age of the interlocutor

As regards the choice of code based on the age group of the interlocutor, local variety use generally correlates with older generations, whereas the use of Italian correlates with younger generations. It should also be emphasized that in all communities a significant portion of speakers reported using multiple codes with interlocutors of all age groups.

In Natisone Valleys the local variety is predominantly used with elderly interlocutors (42.7%), while Italian is the preferred code with younger (59.9%) and adult (35.7%) interlocutors. About a third of respondents reported using more than one code (including Standard Slovenian) in conversations with young people, adults, and older people, presumably depending on the code preferences of the interlocutor. Based on the available data it is not possible to define the degree of use of different codes depending on the age group of the interlocutor.

Tab. 18 - *Natisone Valleys: Preferred code based on the age of the interlocutor (percentage)*

	<i>Youth</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Elderly</i>
<i>Nadiško</i>	2.5	17.8	42.7
Italian	59.9	35.7	21.0
Friulian	0.0	0.0	0.0
More codes	37.6	46.5	36.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Similar patterns are observed also in the other surveyed areas. In Torre Valleys, *Tersko* is used by 50% with the elderly but drops significantly for adults (27.8%) and youth (11.1%). Italian is dominant with youth (66.7%) and adults (38.9%).

Tab. 19 - Torre Valleys: Preferred code based on the age of the interlocutor (percentage)

	<i>Youth</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Elderly</i>
<i>Tersko</i>	11.1	27.8	50.0
Italian	66.7	38.9	22.2
Friulian	5.6	5.6	0.0
More codes	16.7	27.8	27.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

In Resia Valley, the local variety is used by 59.3% with the elderly. Its usage remains robust with adults as compared to Natisone and Torre Valleys, but it drops to 16.7% with youth, still a larger rate than in the previous two areas. Italian is preferred with youth (48.1%), although to a lesser extent than in Natisone and Torre Valleys.

Tab. 20 - Resia Valley: Preferred code based on the age of the interlocutor (percentage)

	<i>Youth</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Elderly</i>
Resian	16.7	40.7	59.3
Italian	48.1	24.1	18.5
Friulian	0.0	0.0	1.9
More codes	35.2	35.2	20.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Finally in Val Canale, the local variety is almost exclusively used with the elderly (50%); only 10.7% reported using *Ziljsko* with adults and 0% with youth. Italian is the primary language for youth (64.3%) and adults (39.3%), although half of the respondents reported using multiple codes in conversations with adults.

Tab. 21 - Val Canale: Preferred code based on the age of the interlocutor (percentage)

	<i>Youth</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Elderly</i>
<i>Ziljsko</i>	0.0	10.7	50.0
Italian	64.3	39.3	14.3
Friulian	0.0	0.0	0.0
More codes	35.7	50.0	35.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Finally, it is worth noting that Friulian is used only by a minority for communication within the community in Resia Valley and Torre Valleys, possibly due to marriages with Friulian-speaking partners or because they work in a Friulian-speaking context.

4.7 Opinions on the role of young people and schools in language maintenance

The survey examined public attitudes toward whether young people should be familiar with and use the local variety. In Natisone Valleys, support is strong, with over 90% of respondents across all age groups in agreement, resulting in an overall approval rate of 92.1%. Torre Valleys show even greater consensus, with 96.8% of respondents overall expressing agreement, and several age groups, including older ones, reaching full unanimity at 100%. In Resia Valley, the response was unanimous across all age groups, with every participant affirming the importance of youth engaging with the local variety. Similarly, in Val Canale, 92.1% of respondents overall supported the idea, with consistently high levels of agreement observed across most age groups. These results reflect a widespread and deeply held belief in the importance of preserving local linguistic traditions among younger generations.

Respondents were also asked whether they believe that teaching the local variety in schools would be beneficial for its preservation. In Natisone Valleys, 75.9% of participants overall support the idea. In Torre Valleys, the response is more favorable, with 90.3% overall agreement and strong consensus across most age groups. Resia Valley shows even stronger support, with 93.8% of respondents in favor, including unanimous agreement among both the youngest and oldest participants, highlighting a particularly robust endorsement. In contrast, Val Canale showed more mixed views. While 68.3% overall agreed with the idea, support dropped significantly among older respondents – only 41.7% in the 50–59 age group and just 25% among those over 70 – suggesting a greater degree of skepticism among older residents regarding the role of schools in preserving the local variety, which possibly reflects a past attitude that led speakers to stigmatize the local variety.

Finally, respondents were asked whether they believed that teaching Standard Slovenian in schools could contribute to the preservation of local varieties. In Natisone Valleys, only 22% of participants responded negatively, indicating support for the effectiveness of this approach. Torre Valley shows a slightly smaller level of doubt, with 19.4% answering “No.” Val Canale exhibited the least resistance to this notion, with only 6.3% responding negatively, suggesting a broad belief in the potential benefits of teaching Standard Slovenian for supporting the preservation of local varieties. In Resia, however, a significant rate of respondents, 76.6%, disagree that Standard Slovenian could help maintain Resian⁸.

⁸ An anonymous reviewer suggests that this may correlate with a possible perception of Resian being distant from Standard Slovenian. However, even in the other investigated communities the perception of Standard Slovenian as an *Abstandsprache* (in the sense of [Kloss 1967]) is not uncommon. Since this issue would take us far from the scope of this paper, we will only refer to Dapit (2001; 2005) and Valentinčič (2015) for the issue of Resian self-perception.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this sociolinguistic study highlight a clear pattern of ‘language shift’ in the Slovenian-speaking communities of Friuli, largely commencing from the 1960s. This shift is strongly correlated with the erosion and loss of various domains of language use, as evidenced by the decreasing active competence and usage of local varieties with younger generations and in broader social contexts such as work.

Local varieties are increasingly correlated with older populations and closer family relationships (e.g., family members like parents and grandparents). The shift towards Italian as the primary language, especially with younger interlocutors and in formal settings, is evident across all regions except for some pockets of strong intergenerational transmission.

Resia Valley stands out for its significantly higher maintenance of its local variety, i.e. Resian. This greater vitality might be attributed to the unique role of self-definition within the community (Dapit 2001).

Val Canale shows unique dynamics within the four areas analyzed. There is some increased presence of other Romance varieties, such as Friulian and Venetan. The presence of German/Carinthian as well as local Romance varieties indicates a complex multilingual environment, distinct from the other Slovenian-speaking areas here discussed. While there is a general positive attitude toward youth having competence of the local variety and a relatively high agreement on teaching Standard Slovenian for maintenance of the local variety, the actual active competence in the local variety among younger generations is very low, pointing to significant endangerment.

Despite the observed language shift, there is a widespread positive attitude among respondents concerning the recovery of local varieties. This sentiment extends to a favorable opinion regarding the role of schools in language maintenance. Interestingly, across most areas (except Resia Valley), there is a preference for teaching Standard Slovenian in schools as a means to support the local variety, rather than focusing solely on the local variety itself. This suggests a belief that a stronger foundation in the standardized language could indirectly benefit the local variants, perhaps by providing a more formal learning pathway.

In conclusion, the study confirms that while the Slovenian varieties in Friuli face significant challenges due to language shift, especially among younger generations and in modern communicative domains, there remains a strong community desire for their preservation. The differing levels of vitality and attitudes across Natisone Valleys, Torre Valleys, Resia Valley, and Val Canale emphasize the diverse sociolinguistic landscapes within this minority linguistic space in Italy, highlighting the need for specific strategies for language maintenance and revitalization.

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