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The new speakers of Lombard

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Abstract: Lombard is one of the 12–15 non-recognized regional languages spoken in Italy. This article focuses on the new speakers of Lombard, i.e. people who have learned or are learning Lombard as a second language. Through an open questionnaire the author has probed into various aspects concerning these new speakers’ competence and learning trajectories, situations and opportunities for using the language, motivations, aims, commitment, metalinguistic awareness and the difficulties encountered in acquiring the language. Issues of authenticity, legitimacy and especially of identity and political allegiances have also been looked at. After a brief outline of the Lombard language and the research on new speakers that has been carried out so far, the article presents the methodology employed, followed by an analysis of the answers provided, which show that new speakers are very different from native speakers in sociolinguistic terms. A discussion of the results and some conclusions close the article.

Keywords: ethnonationalism, language planning, language revitalization, Lombard language, new speakers

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to outline a profile of the new speakers of Lombard. Through an open questionnaire the author has probed into various aspects concerning these new speakers’ competence and learning trajectories, situations and opportunities for using the language, motivations, aims, commitment, metalinguistic awareness and the difficulties encountered in acquiring the language. Issues of authenticity, legitimacy and especially of identity and political allegiances have also been looked at. The article opens with a brief outline of the minority and regional languages in Italy and specifically of the Lombard language, and of the research on new speakers that has been carried out to date, followed by a description of the methodology employed and an analysis of the answers provided. The article closes with a discussion of the results and some conclusions, which highlight the special sociolinguistic status of new speakers and their importance for the survival and revitalization of minority and regional languages.

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2 Background information

Italy is a multiethnic and multilingual country. Various factors of an historical, social and geographical nature have favoured the development and maintenance until these days of a large number of languages. In fact, in addition to Italian in its standard, colloquial and regional varieties, over 40 language varieties are still spoken in Italy by nearly half of its population (Coluzzi 2009), even though most of them can be considered endangered to a lesser or greater extent. Of these, only 12 languages, those defined as minority languages, are officially protected by State Law 482/1999, while the rest have to fend for themselves, even though a few regional laws have been passed for the (limited) protection of some of them.

One of the main problems is that most of these languages, in spite of being varieties that developed independently from Latin with different substrata and in contact with different languages, are still considered “dialects” by Italian academia, institutions and the general population (see for example Coluzzi 2009), even though Italian linguists are normally quick to clarify that they are “primary dialects”, following Coseriu’s definition (Coseriu 1981). Referring to these languages as “dialects”, however, is both confusing and derogatory – confusing because the term is used in most countries to refer to social or geographical and mutually understandable varieties of the same language; derogatory because the term implies that the variety in question is closely associated and dependent on the state language, Italian (which is itself a development of the Florentine dialect of the XIV century). It also implies that their prestige is low and that they are spoken by people of low education and social status who use them mostly in low domains; in Chambers and Trudgill (1998: 3), “a dialect is a substandard, low status, often rustic form of language, generally associated with the peasantry, the working class, or other groups lacking in prestige”. It should be added here that many of them, particularly the northern varieties which, unlike Italian and other Central and Southern regional languages, belong to the Western Romance group, are structurally as different from standard Italian as the latter is different from Spanish or French, and many of them can boast large and interesting literatures.

Lombard, the object of this study, is one of these non-recognized languages, which more and more people, not least young linguists, are now calling “regional languages” following a trend that is spreading in other countries, feeling it is more precise and above all more neutral (see Wicherkiewicz 2001: 3; Coluzzi 2007: 24–25).

1 The percentage of people over 6 years of age speaking mainly the local ‘dialect’ added to those speaking both Italian and the local “dialect” within the family is 46.3% (ISTAT 2015), to which about 2 million minority language speakers should be added.
3 The Lombard language

Lombard is therefore one of Italy's regional languages, spoken by about 3.17 million people in the Lombardy region according to the latest 2015 ISTAT survey, i.e. 31.7% of the regional population. However, to this figure the speakers of related varieties in bordering areas such as Eastern Piedmont, Canton Ticino and the southern valleys of Chantun Grischun in Switzerland and most areas in Western Trentino should be added (see figure 1). In any case these 3.17 million speakers (and we don’t know how proficient in Lombard they may be) are

Figure 1: Map showing the area where Lombard is spoken (http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/dialetti-lombardi_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)/).

2 All the place names and the name of the varieties are in Italian. Lombardo occidentale: western Lombard; lombardo orientale: eastern Lombard; lombardo alpino: alpine Lombard; trentino occidentale (outside the administrative region): western Trentino; dialetti di crocevia: transitional dialects or peripheral varieties of the lower lands.
dwindling – even just by looking at the results of the ISTAT survey carried out only nine years before, a decrease of 4% points can be detected, from 35.7% in 2006 to 31.7% in 2015. According to EGIDS (Extended Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale), one of the most well-known scales for the assessment of language vitality, developed by Lewis and Simons (2010), Lombard, like many other Italian regional languages, may score, according to the areas, between 6b and 8a. 6b corresponds to “threatened”: “The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children”, whereas 8a corresponds to “moribund”: “The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation”. Only two more grades separate 8a from the final one on the scale, 10 “extinct”, and this is another clear sign of the degree of endangerment of Lombard. This means that if nothing is done, Lombard will disappear in a matter of a few generations. Luckily there are some signs of a resurgence in interest for Italian regional languages in general, one aspect of which is the small but growing number of people who are learning them as a second language, the topic of this article. Other signs are the increasing number of initiatives revolving around local languages, carried out by activists and associations,\(^3\) in addition to the regional laws that have been recently passed, including the one for the protection and promotion of Lombard (Regional Law no. 130/2016) approved in 2016.\(^4\)

While using the term “regional language” for these Romance varieties may be controversial in Italy as a whole, it is even more controversial to talk about there being a Lombard language, as die-hard purist and essentialist ideas of languages as uniform entities (clearly derived from the concept of standard language) are still very widespread, even among Italian linguists (see for example Coluzzi 2009). Languages are naturally diverse, and it is historical, social and geographical factors that may make them more or less uniform. The two main varieties of Sardinian (Logudorese and Campidanese), for example, are more divergent than most Lombard varieties, but still recognized as one language by the Sardinian Region and by State Law 482/1999.

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\(^3\) With regards to the initiatives that have been carried out for the promotion of Lombard and Sicilian, see Coluzzi et al. Forthcoming b.

In any case, the differences among Lombard varieties do not seem to prevent communication among their speakers and have even been recently unified under a single orthographic system that can be used to write all of them. In fact, so far different orthographies have been in use for each Lombard variety, some more phonetic/phonemic, some more historical and etymological; however, in 2011 a new orthography was devised by the linguist Lissander Brasca, which is currently used by a small number of activists. This system has been called “Scriver Lombard” and defined as a local-polynomic orthography; as mentioned above, it can be used to write all Lombard varieties (Brasca 2011). Obviously in order to do that, it is necessarily the least phonetic and most etymological among the writing systems used and/or proposed so far. This means that even though it may be difficult for new speakers in the initial stages, it has the great advantage of enabling all Lombard varieties to be read while simultaneously enhancing a sense of unity of the language. Learning the language, however, may be easier in the initial stages if more traditional orthographies are used, as they are more phonetic/phonemic.5

4 New speakers

So far issues of revitalization for minority and regional languages have mainly centred on the so-called native speakers and intergenerational transmission of the language, but there is a growing awareness that a language cannot really grow if it doesn’t acquire new speakers. As Hornsby (2015a: 108) has noted, new speakers “are central to language revitalization [...] and very often may represent the only viable form of future transmission of an endangered language”. The label “new speakers”, which is gaining increasing acceptance among academics and in many cases among minority language speakers themselves, refers to people normally having a majority language as their first language who at some point decide to learn and use the local minority/regional language as a second language. O’Rourke et al. (2015) define them as “individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalisation projects or as adult language learners” (p. 1). As cited in Hornsby (2015b: 2–3), the New Speaker Network,6 on the other hand, defines them more succinctly as “multilingual individuals and groups who adopt and use a language variety different from

5 More details on these orthographies can be found in Coluzzi et al. Forthcoming a, Forthcoming b.
6 http://www.nspk.org.uk/
their native language”. Obviously not all new speakers share the same profile, and my own research has identified three main types of new speakers: those I have defined as “traditional” new speakers (who in a way fall somewhere between native and new speakers), “partial” new speakers and “full” new speakers. What distinguishes them will be explained in the following section.

In any case, “new” and “old” speakers are quite different sociolinguistic groups, with different motivations and different aims. As Jaffe has proposed (2015: 25), old and new speakers may be distinguished as follows: 1) age of acquisition of the minority/regional language, 2) sequence and manner of acquisition, 3) type and level of linguistic and metalinguistic competence, 4) frequency and type of use, 5) self-identification, 6) social attribution. This means that, as the “labels” above explain, “new” speakers learn the minority or regional language as a second language later in life (point 1), normally outside the home in more formal contexts (point 2). They may not always be fluent, but they are fully literate, they are often multilingual and have a good general knowledge about the language they are learning, which includes an awareness of its endangered status; they also tend to show a more purist orientation towards the language (point 3). However, they don’t normally have a chance to use the minority/regional language as frequently as they use their first language, and they tend to use it in specific contexts only, e.g. among other new speakers or on the Internet (point 4). Finally, they often identify strongly with the language, including in political terms (ethnonationalism), and in some cases may have even come from outside the community (point 5); in addition, they tend to belong to the middle class and be highly educated (point 6). As we will see, all these points apply to the sample of “new Lombard speakers” who participated in this research.

Even though research on new speakers is relatively recent, with the first articles dealing with the topic having appeared at the beginning of the last decade and the first article using the term “new speakers” in its title having been published as recently as 2009 (Robert 2009), a number of articles have been published to date focusing on new speakers, and many more make reference to them. These articles, however, have so far focused mainly on new speakers in Europe: speakers of Gaelic, Irish, Manx, Catalan, Basque, Galician, Corsican, Occitan, Francoprovençal, Breton, Yiddish and Lemko (see O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011, 2013, 2015; O’Rourke and Walsh 2015; O’Rourke et al. 2015; Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015; Ortega et al. 2015; Jaffe 2015; Ó Hláfnáin 2015; Costa 2015; Kasstan 2018; Hornsby 2015a, 2015b; McLeod et al. 2014; among others). Apart from Yiddish and Lemko, these are all minority languages spoken

7 It is likely that other articles referring to new speakers have appeared in other languages. For example I’m aware of an article and a book in Spanish on new speakers of Euskera (Ortega et al.
in the British Isles, France and Spain, most of them enjoying state recognition as minority or regional languages and a fair degree of development through language planning strategies, particularly acquisition planning (education). The new speakers of the many other minority and regional languages present in Europe and indeed outside Europe have not yet been investigated, even though some publications have touched on new speakers as well (see for example Hinton 2013). This is the first article to focus on the new speakers of one of the minority and regional languages spoken in Italy, which is so far the only one among the languages targeted by research on new speakers that has not been officially recognized and is still termed a “dialect” by public institutions, as explained in sections one and two.

The limited revitalization strategies that have been carried out for Lombard by activists and private associations have so far mainly addressed native speakers. For example, the few courses that have been organized for the various Lombard varieties have mostly targeted people who could already speak the language (Coluzzi et al. Forthcoming b). New speakers have basically had to fend for themselves and to try to be accepted as “native” speakers as soon as they reached the required standard. However, this has started to change particularly since the last decade, and there are now a small but growing number of new speakers, many of whom are also very active in the “defence” of the language and in the present initiatives of revitalization.

5 Methodology

For this research a questionnaire including 34 questions in Italian was sent to 33 new speakers of Lombard whose e-mails had been provided by Simona Scuri, an activist for the Lombard language and leading member of CSPL (“Comitato per la Salvaguardia dei Patrimoni Linguistici”, Committee for the Protection of Linguistic Heritage). She sent me the e-mail addresses of all the people she

2014, 2016) and two more articles in French on new speakers of Francoprovençal (Dunoyer 2010a, 2010b).

8 I am deeply grateful to Simona Scuri for her invaluable work for the protection and promotion of Italian regional languages, and specifically Lombard, and for helping me in this research. It goes without saying that without the contacts she provided, which include most of the Lombard new speakers she is in touch with, the entire study wouldn’t have been possible. Obviously there may be more new speakers in the region, but it would prove very difficult to identify them as long as they fail to assume an active role or start participating in events related to the regional language.
had met at the numerous events focusing on Lombard organized by CSPL and other organizations, whom she knew as new speakers. No more than 33 names could be provided as “new speakerness” is a very new phenomenon in Italy, and only the new speakers who attend the aforementioned events could be identified. The questionnaire format was opted for for two main reasons: writing down the answers would probably give the respondents more time and scope to reflect on them, and it would make it easier to compare the answers given to the same question by different respondents. The questionnaires were distributed through e-mail, making it easy for respondents to contact me about any questions and doubts they might have had. Most of the questions were open-ended, which means that this research is mostly qualitative, even though there were a few closed-ended questions and some inferences were made to obtain some quantitative data as well. The questions focused on nine main issues: active use of the language, problems that may have arisen in the process of learning the language, aims and reasons for learning the language, the difference between new and native speakers, authenticity, legitimacy, attitudes towards the language, identity and political stance, and language planning. Of the 33 people who were sent the questionnaire, 12 did not reply, and of the remaining 21, 7 turned out to have learned their Lombard variety as a first language within the family and therefore could not be considered “new speakers”.\footnote{Simona Scuri was evidently not aware of their status as traditional speakers.} This left 14 valid completed questionnaires, which were analysed thoroughly and whose results are presented and discussed in this article. Thirteen of the respondents were male and one was female. In the analysis, for reasons of confidentiality each respondent is identified by a number (R1–R14).

6 Analysis of the data: personal profile of the respondents

The first nine items on the questionnaire asked about the respondents’ background, which allowed me to trace a general typology as follows:

Age: The age range spanned between 24 and 55, the majority being in their 20s and in their 40s.

Education: 9 respondents had a university degree whereas 3 were still at university. The “lowest” level was secondary school diploma or Baccalaureate (corresponding roughly to UK “A” levels, 2 respondents).
Job: Apart from 1 unemployed participant and 3 university students, all the respondents have reasonably well-paid jobs as office workers, engineers, managers, free-lance professionals, professional consultants and so on.

Spoken languages: All respondents were multilingual. Four declared they spoke three languages (Italian, Lombard plus English), while the other 10 said they could speak at least four languages, some even more (Italian, Lombard, English and one or more other foreign languages, in most cases Spanish and/or French).

This basic profile of the Lombard respondents does not differ much from that provided by other pieces of research on new speakers of regional/minority languages. For example, in McLeod, O’Rourke and Dunmore’s research on new speakers for Gaelic (2014), “the participants were very highly educated. Only one of the 35 participants did not have a university degree”. In addition “most of the participants came from the upper socio-economic strata”. As far as knowledge of foreign languages were concerned, “ten of the 23 interviewees reported advanced competence in a language other than English or Gaelic” (pp. 5 and 6). Similar socio-economic characteristics were found among Irish and Galician new speakers by O’Rourke and Ramallo (2011: 149, 151, 153, 154) and among Francoprovençal new speakers by Kasstan (2018: 4).

Fourteen questions solicited information about the respondents in relation to the Lombard variety they speak. From the answers provided we can see that the varieties spoken (or being learned) are: Bresciano (from Brescia), Bergamasco (from Bergamo, 3 respondents), Cremasco (from Crema), Milanese (4 respondents), Brianzolo (from the area north of Milan, 3 respondents), Western Lombard (the respondent did not specify what particular variety) and Valtellinese (from Valtellina, a large valley in northern Lombardy). The first three are normally considered as Eastern Lombard varieties, the following three Western Lombard varieties while the last one is considered Alpine Lombard. No speakers of the so-called peripheral varieties of the lower lands (spoken in the provinces of Pavia, Lodi, Southern Cremona and Mantua) answered the questionnaire. As for the respondents’ proficiency in their Lombard variety, 6 of them affirmed their knowledge of Lombard to be “high” and 5 “almost at native speakers’ level”, whereas 2 declared an intermediate level and 1 did not answer the question. As for the age when they started learning Lombard, this varied widely: from the time of primary school until the age of 40, with the majority declaring they started during secondary school or university.

This apparently homogeneous group of respondents in reality could be subdivided into three smaller categories: there were 3 “traditional” new speakers, 5 “partial” new speakers and 6 “full” new speakers. I define as “traditional” new speakers those whose parents and other family members spoke a variety of
Lombard within the family but only spoke Italian to the respondents, who later on, normally starting from the time they went to school, managed to pick up the local language informally, just by using it with their peers[^10]; “partial” new speakers are similar to the “traditional” new speakers in that they heard their parents or grandparents speaking Lombard at home but never spoke it, not even at school, as Italian was already the first language of most children at that time, and had to learn it later on through conscious efforts; finally “full” new speakers are those whose parents spoke Italian at home and never really had a chance of getting even a passive knowledge of it, if not by hearing it occasionally in the street, until they decided to learn it.[^11] As can be seen, most respondents seem to belong to this latter category. More specifically, 3 respondents declared they learned Lombard by studying it on their own (with books, recordings, etc.), 2 by following one of the few formal courses available and 1 in both ways, which leaves us with 8 respondents who managed to learn it in a natural way (some of whom did make use of books and/or recordings as well), being mostly “traditional” and “partial” new speakers. In any case only 2 respondents had zero passive knowledge of the local language. To the question on the opportunities to use Lombard, 2 replied that they seldom use it, 5 that they use it sometimes and only half of them, 7 respondents, declared that they use it often. More specifically, 8 of them said they have many opportunities to speak Lombard to native speakers, but only 4 of them speak it more often to native speakers, whereas 7 use it mostly with other new speakers (3 with both). The majority, however (11 respondents), do speak Lombard with new speakers as well.

As for reading and writing Lombard, all the respondents replied they were able to do so, even though one admitted he would sometimes need to use a dictionary to write it. However, for 6 of them, the opportunities to read in Lombard are few (only for 2 were there many opportunities, while the rest did not specify). As far as writing is concerned, only 6 of the respondents use Lombard often, while 5 write in Lombard sometimes or seldom, in most cases on social networks with other new speakers (7 specifically mentioned Facebook). As far as the respondents’ identity as speakers is concerned, 8 said they see themselves as speakers of Lombard, 4 of a more localized variety (e.g. Milanese, Bresciano, etc.) and 2 said they would prefer to think themselves as speakers of both Lombard and a local variety (the latter being part of the former).

[^10]: Even though no much research on this has been carried out in Italy, it seems to me that a rather large percentage of the young/middle aged people who are fluent speakers of the local regional language learned it in this mode.

[^11]: Kasstan (2018: 5) subsumes the first two groups under the term “late speakers”, and the last one he simply calls “new speakers”.
6.1 Active use

This section is an in-depth analysis on what has been already mentioned in the previous section. First of all, it can be seen that about half of the respondents use Lombard mainly with other new speakers, many of whom are friends with whom they share a strong interest in Lombard, of which they are also active promoters. What particularly characterizes new speakers, however, is the fact that they all read and write in Lombard using different orthographies, even though for most of them the opportunities are limited. As far as reading is concerned, they affirmed they mostly read authors from the past (such as Porta or Maggi), materials on the Internet (Facebook, Wikipedia, etc.), poems, short stories and articles in the few specialized magazines available (such as the fortnightly Ol Giopi, the mouthpiece of the cultural association Ducato di Piazza Pontida in Bergamo), lyrics of songs, the few translations available from other languages, and reference books, such as grammars, dictionaries, etc. When they want to write, they mostly do so on social media and text messaging services, but some also write poems, short stories or songs, translate from Italian and other languages or prepare clips to upload on YouTube. Clearly, reading material in Lombard is scarce, and to practise reading and writing the respondents have to resort to all the possibilities they have at hand, particularly on the Internet. Another interesting issue is the orthography used by the respondents. As we explained above, various writing systems are available to write the different Lombard varieties (see for example Coluzzi et al. Forthcoming b), none of them having official status as the recent regional law on the promotion of Lombard language does not take a position about the issue. Among the respondents, 5 use the classic Milanese orthography, 2 the modern Milanese orthography, another 2 the Ducato di Piazza Pontida’s Bergamasco orthography, 2 write in an idiosyncratic way while as many as 7 use the local-polynomic orthography “Scriver Lombard” (one didn’t answer). In the classic Milanese orthography the front rounded vowels are written in a similar way as to French, whereas in the modern Milanese orthography (used in Switzerland as well) and in the orthography of Ducato di piazza Pontida, they are written as in German. In any case it is interesting to notice that at least 6 of the respondents who are now using Scriver Lombard, even in a modified version, can also use the classic or the modern orthographies which they learned first. One obvious reason for this is the fact that Scriver Lombard did not emerge publicly until 2011, but I would suggest that new speakers may find a more phonetic/

12 /ø/ = oe, /y/ = u.
13 /ø/ = ö, /y/ = ü.
phonemic orthography easier in the initial stages, while learning a polynomic orthography (which native speakers should find relatively easy) may become much easier once a good foundation is laid.

6.2 Difficulties encountered in learning Lombard

Even though Lombard is a Romance variety, it is different enough from Italian to make its acquisition challenging, partly due to the lack and inadequacy of learning materials and in many cases of speakers to listen and talk to. Three main difficulties were mentioned by the respondents: 1) Finding people, particularly native speakers, and opportunities to speak Lombard; 2) The existence of different orthographies; 3) Correct pronunciation.

As for the first reason, R7 for example affirmed that the main problem was:

Finding people with whom speaking it would seem normal and natural. My working life and current friends outside my own province make it more difficult to find opportunities, and I therefore feel intimidated or I think it is not appropriate to use it.14

R13 explained further:

The greatest difficulty is finding contexts in which to use Lombard 1) so as to be understood 2) without causing hostile reactions. Therefore the problem is basically overcoming prejudices.

This has also been noticed in other studies on new speakers: “These difficulties [of being or becoming a speaker] had diverse sources. One was the sociolinguistic context and the lack of ‘immersion’ opportunities it offered to beginners and novices” (Jaffe 2015: 35). With regard to Breton, Hornsby wrote:

Finding a niche for new speakers, a space where they can feel they can operate with confidence, appears to be a major challenge for the continued (or, perhaps, transformed) use of Breton and other minority languages in the twenty-first century. (Hornsby 2015b: 59)

To overcome this, many new speakers from the areas where Basque is spoken less, for example, went:

...to great efforts to create opportunities to use Basque organizing themselves to develop “communities of practice” [...] in order to speak the language. Strategies include finding shops where the assistants are Basque speakers, participating in certain types of events in

14 All the translations of the respondents’ answers have been translated into English by the author.
Basque (such as drama plays, concerts or cinema), blogs, and participating in berbalagun (an initiative where volunteer Basque speakers get together with new speakers or learners so that they can practise). (Ortega et al. 2015: 92)

The second point is explained succinctly by R5, who points to “the graphic variability among the variants and the authors over time and space”.

As far as the third reason is concerned, R9 explained:

Correct pronunciation, similar to the elderly, is complicated, because if you speak Italian you tend to transfer Italian pronunciation, but I think it is all part of the evolution of the language.

Even though in Brittany the problem seems to be much more pronounced, Hornsby (2015a: 110) has noted that: “One of the most obvious differences that is often remarked upon between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ speakers of MLs is that the latter tend to have non-native-like accents when speaking the language”.

The most difficult thing for one of the respondents was having an appropriate and “specialized” vocabulary (R4), whereas another found it hard to speak for a long time without “contamination” from Italian (R8). This latter stance also shows some purist attitudes that are quite common among new speakers, which is discernible in other comments as well, like R14’s remark that it is “almost impossible to find a mother tongue speaker who only speaks Western Lombard without any Italianisms”.

### 6.3 Aims and reasons for learning the language

The main reason that led the respondents to decide to learn Lombard, mentioned by 6 of them, was preserving and passing down the language, so that it would not die out. R3 worded this as follows:

I want to improve the level of my language in order to pass it down to my descendants and to the younger members in my family, and to communicate both at an informal level and, hopefully one day, in the specialized language of my profession in my field of studies to those who may be interested in communicating in this language.

Five respondents mentioned the question of territorial and cultural identity related to the language.

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15 Some of these initiatives are also common among Lombard new speakers, but not to the same extent as for Basque, as such initiatives in Lombardy are much more limited (see for example Coluzzi et al. Forthcoming b).
Another reason provided by 3 respondents was to learn to speak Lombard like “a mother tongue”. In R13’s words:

I intend to improve it so that I can learn more nuances and idiomatic expressions peculiar to this language. My aim is to adopt as many of the mother tongues’ peculiarities as possible.

Two respondents had more nationalistic and independence-oriented aims in mind. There were also 2 respondents in McLeod et al.’s (2014: 13) who cited their support for independence as a reason for learning the language, but they were just 2 out of 23. In this context, R14, for example, would like to:

use the Insularic language [Western Lombard] as a basis to create/invent an Insularic nation. [...] My only and final aim is using a language to create the premises for the undoing of Italy. Whether in the end it is an independent Insularia or Lombardy, it is of little relevance.

In contrast to this rather “inward-looking” view, is R7’s reason for taking up Lombard:

Fear that globalization will lead to cultural homogenization and levelling, with the loss of one’s own roots. I love a diverse world and I suffer for the loss of any intangible heritage, such as languages, not only Lombard, but also any other Italian or world regional language.

Ethnonationalism or micronationalism in relation to the Lombard language will be discussed in more detail in the section on identity and political stance.

In any case, the answers provided show that, independently from their different aims and reasons, all respondents are willing to improve their Lombard as much as they can.

6.4 Differences between new speakers and native speakers

Three main answers emerged when respondents were asked for their opinion on differences between how and when they speak Lombard and how and when native speakers speak it: 1) Native speakers speak Lombard in a natural way in everyday contexts, new speakers only use it in specific contexts; 2) Each group has different awareness; 3) Native speakers speak a better and richer language.

As for the first point, R4 for example affirmed:

Mother tongues users speak it on a daily basis in everyday contexts with life-long friends. I speak it occasionally with people who live outside Milan and with “ideological” aims.
With regards to point 2, R6 explained very eloquently:

The only real difference is awareness; I know that a Lombard language independent of Italian does exist, and I personally deem it worthy of more protection vis-à-vis Italian. Native speakers are convinced that it is a dialect of Italian, and therefore they speak only it because it comes naturally to them.

Finally, as far as point 3 is concerned, R13 wrote:

The mother tongue has a spontaneity which is difficult to recreate. Besides, they possess lexical, grammatical and idiomatic expressions which do not come automatically to those who have learned it. These expressions are often those that don’t have a direct equivalent in Italian. Sometimes I have to use some roundabout expressions or insert some terms in Italian in order to complete a sentence.

6.5 Authenticity

The issue of authenticity has, together with that of legitimacy, been central in the literature on new speakers that has come out so far. It was addressed in this research mainly through the following question: “In your opinion, which is the most ‘authentic’ Lombard? What characterizes it? In your view, who speaks it better?” Half of the respondents wrote they do not believe there is one variety which is more authentic than others. Others, however, provided a more precise answer, specifying a local variety which they consider better spoken (Alpine and Eastern Lombard, for being used more and having received less influence from Italian) (R1, R6, R8, R11, R12), or identifying “authentic” Lombard as the one spoken by older people of a lower class and education living in small centres or peripheral areas (R3, R4, R6, R9, R10). As Ó hlfearnáin has explained:

Authentic speakers are constructed as belonging to particular places, producing locally orientated language that is in and of that location. In cases of European minority languages, authenticity has been tied tightly to the speech of rural peasants from isolated communities as these are speakers who have been seen as untainted by social contact with other cultures, particularly the dominant ethnolinguistic culture that triumphed in the dynamics of language shift. (Ó hlfearnáin 2015: 50)

Just 2 respondents added that the Lombard spoken by new speakers could also be considered authentic. R4, for instance, affirmed that the most authentic Lombard is any variety spoken fluently and genuinely, particularly by people over 60 living in the province. However, also the one spoken by “‘motivated’ and aware Lombard speakers of any age” should be seen as authentic.
On the other hand, even if he does not think there is such a thing as a more authentic Lombard, interestingly R7 added that he also appreciates “new speakers who know [more Lombard varieties than the one spoken in their area and] therefore sometimes have a richer lexicon than those who have only spoken [Lombard] within the family.”

6.6 Legitimacy

Legitimacy, i.e. claiming “authority over what form of language and way of speaking is considered ‘correct’ or ‘appropriate’” (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011: 140), has been another common and frequent theme in the literature on new speakers.

While legitimacy has been and remains a big issue among other minorities, sometimes creating tensions between new and old speakers (see for example Hornsby 2015a, 2015b; Kasstan 2018), on the whole and irrespective of the level achieved, the respondents for this research feel legitimate speakers of Lombard to all intents and purposes. This may be partly due to the lack of a standard variety of Lombard or because of the small number of new speakers. In fact, to the question whether they should be included among Lombard speakers, all respondents answered affirmatively, being able to understand and speak it being reasons enough.

To the question about native speakers’ attitudes towards the respondents’ way of speaking Lombard, most of them wrote that they did not receive any particular feedback; in other cases the few criticisms and compliments received were evened out. Sometimes native speakers are surprised to find there are young people who speak Lombard without feeling ashamed (R4), and feel appreciated and happy when they are asked by younger people to speak Lombard to help them improve it (R10). One respondent (R6) explained that his parents, who are native speakers, criticize some of the older words and expressions he tries to use that have now been replaced by newer Italianized forms; other respondents were criticized for their pronunciation (R11 and R13). It is very interesting that some respondents commented that when they sometimes spoke Lombard with native speakers, they were replied to in Italian. This is also very common in other language minority contexts; for example “several second-language speakers [in Wales] reported that even after years of hearing them speak Welsh fluently, some of their Welsh friends seemed incapable of ceasing to speak to them in English” (Trosset 1986: 173, in Hornsby 2015a: 116). On a sad but very telling note, R14 wrote that his grandmother:

felt ashamed and was very sorry for the fact that her grandson, who was an engineer, spoke the countrymen’s language after all the efforts that her generations had gone
through to get rid of it and learn Italian. [She] cried a lot but in the end she got used to it. Her distinction between Italian (to speak well) and “dialect” (to speak badly) was interesting.

Regarding other new speakers’ opinion on the respondents’ level of Lombard, it usually goes uncommented on, even though some compliments are occasionally offered, or at least the respondents feel that they are being appreciated for their Lombard. However, some of the respondents are quite critical about other new speakers’ Lombard: some said their Lombard is slow and not so fluent, and they make mistakes; one even wrote that sometimes the Lombard they speak sounds fake (R2), or that they reveal a purist tendency especially when they write Lombard, avoiding even common Italianisms (R4), while another thought that some speak a Lombard which is a bit affected and lacks passion (R9). However, most of the comments were positive, some saying that it is normal to make mistakes at the beginning, and what is important is to persist. One (R6) even wrote, showing his own puristic tendency, that other new speakers speak Lombard:

quite well. It is a better Lombard than many mother tongues because [these new speakers] never code switch with Italian.

6.7 Attitudes towards the Lombard language

It is quite clear that all respondents had very positive attitudes towards Lombard, particularly considering all the efforts they have made to learn it and the difficulties they have had to go through. However, five questions in the questionnaire delve a little deeper. The first one asked the respondents whether they speak Lombard to their children or if they would speak Lombard to them if they had children. All respondents, both those who have children and those who do not, replied affirmatively. These results are similar to McLeod, O’Rourke and Dunmore, where 6 out of the 7 respondents who had children consistently spoke Gaelic to them (2014: 15). The second question related to activism, what they are doing to maintain and revitalize the language. Ten of the respondents are quite active, one of them (R4) even claiming that he is:

part of the educated minority that have for the first time posed the question of the Lombard language with a modern outlook. With all our (huge) limits, we are among the points of reference on the issue.

The main area new speakers are active in is the media, both traditional and new. They have published books and CDs and produced video clips for YouTube and
Facebook pages. One (R10) has also organized events, participated in local radio and TV programmes and taken part in literary competitions, while another one (R11) has even established a small bilingual publishing house which promotes and popularizes books in Lombard.

Another question asked the respondents what legal status Lombard should enjoy. As many as 11 respondents thought that the recent regional law (see footnote 3) is not enough (even though it has been an important step forward) and Lombard should be better protected. Two wrote that Lombard should be recognized at the state level, 7 that it should be co-official with Italian and 2 even stated that Lombard should be the first language in Lombardy.

When asked to rank Italian, Lombard and English in order of importance, Lombard came first in 7 cases, and second in 4 cases. Italian came first in only 2 cases, second in another 2 cases and third in 3 cases. Finally, English was never ranked first, but it came second in 2 cases and third in another 2 cases. Three respondents did not reply.

The question on the future of Lombard may be seen simply as an assessment of the vitality of Lombard on the part of the respondents. However, considering the clearly dire situation it is facing at the moment, optimistic answers may also be seen as a sign of positive attitudes towards the language. Eight of the respondents were rather pessimistic (or perhaps simply realistic) about the chances Lombard has to survive, 4 were optimistic (to different degrees), whereas 2 were optimistic in some ways and pessimistic in others. Even though Gaelic in Scotland is much better off from the institutional point of view than Lombard, McLeod et al. (2014: 48–50) also found both positive and negative opinions among the respondents about the future of Gaelic.

6.8 Identity and political stance

Political ideologies and their connection with local languages have only been touched upon so far in the literature on new speakers (see for example Ortega et al. 2015; McLeod, O’Rourke and Dunmore 2014; O’Rourke and Ramallo 2013, 2015; O’Rourke et al. 2015).\(^\text{16}\) However, as far as Lombard is concerned, the issue

\(^{16}\) As far as new speakers are concerned, Spanish regions where a minority language is present and Scotland seem to be the two European regions where the relationship between ethnonationalism and local language is strongest. As will be shown in this section, Lombardy and Northern Italy more in general is another area where this relationship is very strong. The main difference is that in Spain and Scotland ethnonationalism can take on different political stances, even though mostly left-wing, whereas in Italy it is mainly right-wing.
of political beliefs is central, and greater space has been devoted to it in this article. In fact, the issue of the maintenance and revitalization of local languages has been monopolized by right-wing ethnonationalism ever since the birth of the smaller parties in the mid-80s that came together as the Lega Nord (Northern League) in 1989. Most other parties in Italy, both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum, have always been quite centralist, and have never had local languages or federalist issues on their agendas. In spite of this, it was elements from centrist and left-wing parties who had pushed for legislation for the protection and promotion of minority languages in Italy, whose final result was the passing of State Law 482/1999 for the protection and promotion of minority languages.  

In contrast, until the recent regional laws in Veneto and Lombardy on the promotion of the local regional languages, the Northern League’s efforts to promote local languages had been mainly symbolic. One problem deriving from such a situation, though, is that for a large part of the public, particularly in Northern Italy, defending local languages has become synonymous with sharing the Northern League’s political ideas, and this has distanced many left-wing and moderate voters from taking an interest and being active in the revitalization of the local regional languages. The fact that in Spain, for example, an interest in the protection and promotion of local languages is shared by both Left and Right (and in some regions more by the Left than the Right) has greatly helped the high status that all these varieties enjoy in that country (see Coluzzi 2007).

Closely connected with the issue of political affiliation, is the issue of identity. When asked if they felt more Lombard, Italian or both equally, half of the respondents declared they felt more Lombard, even in more local terms, and only 2 more Italian. As for the rest, only 1 felt equally Lombard and Italian, whereas 3 declared that they felt both Lombard and European and another one listed the following identities: Lombard, Padanian (Northern Italian), Italian and “citizen of the world”. Interestingly, there is a clear correlation between those who declared themselves to be ethnonationalist/indipendentist/federalist and/or right wing and those who feel more Lombard than Italian; on the other hand, those who feel both Lombard and Italian or a little more Italian declared to have a left-wing leaning.

When asked about their political affiliations, as many as 8 respondents wrote they are ethnonationalist/separatist/federalist, 1 right wing, 3 left wing

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17 Law 482/99 protects 12 minority languages: French, Provençal, Franco-Provençal, German, Ladin, Slovene, Catalan, Albanian, Greek, Croatian, Friulian and Sardinian. No regional languages were included, apart from the last two, which were in a way “promoted” to the status of minority languages because of the strong identity and activism of many Friulians and Sardinians.
and 1 an environmentalist (one respondent only replied that she does not follow politics and considers herself “moderate”). To the question whether their political stance had something to do with their interest for Lombard, as many as 11 respondents replied it had. Among other research on new speakers, only the one carried out by McLeod, O’Rourke and Dunmore explicitly stated that many of the Gaelic new speakers interviewed were actually separatist (2015: 52), whereas in the Galician case, O’Rourke and Ramallo mentioned that new speakers are often seen as related to Galician nationalism (2011: 152, 2013: 291, 299, 2015: 153, 158).

What was very interesting in the Lombard case, however, were the answers provided for the question asking which political tendency in the respondents’ view was genuinely more in favour of the revitalization of Lombard varieties and if that was all right for them. Nine respondents clearly mentioned the Northern League or separatism more in general as the forces more interested in revitalizing and maintaining Lombard and other regional languages, whereas 3 said there were no political parties genuinely and seriously committed to the maintenance and revitalization of Lombard. However, as many as 6 respondents affirmed that they did not like the Lega being the only political group showing an interest in local languages.

To the second part of the question, R3, for example, affirmed that: “I don’t like this, because any language is all Lombards’ heritage”.

According to R6:

Today the Northern League has become an extreme right wing xenophobic nationalist party. I can no longer see the political space for a serious activity of protection. I’m afraid it is more a legacy from the past than a real interest.

R7 added:

The fact that many have related the language to a party is counterproductive. The official or visible and clear absence of all the other political formations in supporting the language is demoralizing.

R9 also wondered:

Why should the dialect be a prerogative of uncouth people who hang out in pubs? But it is the others who are to be blamed, who feel ashamed or think they may be pointed at as vulgar, reactionary, etc.

Those on the left of the political spectrum and even some of those who declared themselves independence-minded or right wing seem to feel uneasy with the Northern League’s monopoly on local languages on the one hand, and annoyed at the absence of commitment from other parties, those on the Left included, on
the other. Three of these were critical towards the Northern League, while another two self-declared separatists believed that at present there are no political forces that have a genuine concern for the local languages. This may mean that some of the present not-deeply-convinced supporters of the Lega might one day switch their allegiance to a more progressive party should it show a genuine interest towards local cultures and languages.

6.9 Language planning

Most of the respondents seem to be relatively well versed in issues of language planning. A large number of strategies of revitalization were mentioned, including: radio, television and on-line programmes in the various Lombard varieties (6 respondents), an official polynomic orthography (4 respondents), the teaching of Lombard at school at all levels (4 respondents), and road signs and place names in Lombard (2 respondents).

In R6’s opinion:

At present, the situation is so bad that in order to improve it just one thing would suffice: that the Italian State and Academy stopped saying that the Lombard language does not exist.

Finally, related to this is what R7 added at the end of the questionnaire (“Is there anything else you would like to add with respect to your interest for Lombard?”):

A serious international academic community should give Italian politics a hand to get rid of certain stereotypes and prejudices against the Lombard language.

7 Discussion

As can be seen, even though the new speakers who answered my questionnaire are quite diverse, their general profile corresponds to Jaffe’s description quoted above (2015: 25): 1) As new speakers they learned Lombard when they went to primary school at the earliest. 2) They learned Lombard as a second language: even though most of them declared they learned it in a natural way, by listening to and trying to speak with native speakers, 6 of them acquired it through books and courses. 3) Whereas most respondents declared high levels of competence, 2 of them still think their level is intermediate. Most importantly, though, all of them said they can read and write the language, even though they find the presence of many different orthographies problematic. In addition, they are all
multilingual and well aware of the linguistic classification of Lombard varieties; in fact, most of them are aware the variety they speak belongs to a larger language called Lombard; they also seem to know a lot about revitalization strategies. 4) Only half of the respondents have a chance of using Lombard often, in most cases for having a Lombard-speaking family or living in areas where the local language is still commonly used, the rest use it sometimes or seldom. In addition, 7 respondents, i.e. half of them, normally use Lombard with other new speakers, often through the social media. In fact, in general most new speakers find it difficult to find opportunities to speak Lombard, particularly to native speakers, who are the ones most suitable to help them improve their Lombard, particularly pronunciation. 5) They are all highly educated, most with a university degree, and belong to middle and upper middle classes, with good well-paid jobs in most cases. 6) Most of the respondents see themselves as (new) speakers of Lombard, the local toponym of the variety they speak (Milanese, Bergamasco, etc.) coming in most cases second.

On the other hand, the profile of most traditional native speakers would be quite different. In fact, in spite of having learned the variety they speak as a first language and having high competence in it, while they may be able to read it, they normally cannot and even wouldn’t want to write the language. In addition, most of them would be simply bilingual with their own variety and Italian, as English or French are not so widespread in Italy, and even less among middle aged and elderly people with lower levels of education (secondary school at the most) and belonging largely to the working class, which corresponds to the profile of most Lombard first language speakers nowadays. They would also normally use Lombard with other native speakers, but only orally. Furthermore, most of them would be unaware they speak a variety of Lombard, and they would probably refer to the language they speak using a local toponym, calling it a “dialect”.

In addition to this, new speakers of Lombard have also shown the following characteristics:

1) Unlike native speakers who unconsciously learn the local language simply for communication purposes and are unaware or not fully aware of the extent of its endangered status, the main purpose for many new speakers of Lombard is to master the language (which is for some a strong sign of identity) and to preserve and pass it down to the next generations, so that it will not die out. In fact, all respondents affirmed that they do speak Lombard with their children or they would if they had any. Mastering the language also means to keep it “pure” and avoid the code switching which is so common among native speakers. All this is a sign of positive attitudes towards Lombard that many traditional speakers cannot match, as a large part of them have ceased to use the language with their own children.
2) Most new speakers are very active in the promotion of Lombard, either through the Internet or in other ways, which gives them also further opportunities to use and practice it. They all think Lombard, which in most cases they rank first or second as the most important language for them, should enjoy a higher status and should be better promoted.

3) Most new speakers have ethnonationalist/separatist/federalist political leanings, some declaredly gravitating towards the Northern League. However, by the criticism raised about the Northern League’s “monopoly” on the revitalization of local languages, it may be deduced that even those who are at present on this party’s side, may switch their political allegiances if another more progressive political group started showing a serious interest towards the local language, which is what all new speakers are deeply concerned about.

8 Conclusions

This article has attempted to show how new speakers of Lombard differ from traditional speakers, and how they articulate these differences.

The number of new speakers of Lombard is still very limited. It is a small number that is hopefully destined to grow as intergenerational transmission cannot by itself guarantee the reversal of language shift in the Lombardy region. As has been stated again and again, new speakers are now the only hope for most endangered languages, of which Lombard is one. As O’Rourke and Ramallo have remarked:

In minority language contexts the generation of non-native speakers who can become “new speakers” of these languages can play an important role in the process of language revitalization. Such new speakers can re-initiate the process of intergenerational transmission in the home and community and thus have the potential to create new generations of native speakers. (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011: 154)

Obviously, in order to widen this pool of new speakers much more learning material and institutional support is needed, without which the chances for the language to survive and grow are slim. Otherwise, probably small pools of new speakers will always exist, but all they will be able to do is use – occasionally and only among themselves – a moribund or dead language that more far-sightedness would have allowed to thrive and grow alongside Italian and English, with all the positive aspects that this entails in social and cultural terms.
References


