

Serena Grementieri

The Romagnolo dialect. A short study on its history, grammar and how it still survives.

In Italy, dialects have always played an important role. Since the Middle Ages, these languages, which were born from spoken Latin and then evolved during centuries, were used to communicate and they were part of daily life. At least until the unification of Italy, dialects were spoken by the majority of people, since Italian was used only in written forms and spoken by a limited group of rich and intellectual people. Then, after the World War II, Italian gradually became the real national language dimming the usage of dialects among people, who began to consider dialects as languages spoken only by the poor and the ignorant. However, dialects are still important to truly understand the deep-rooted culture and traditions of Italian regions and nowadays it is not acceptable to consider them as inferior languages.

Considering the fact that I am a native speaker of Italian and my experience with dialect, the subject of this essay will be the dialect of my region, Emilia Romagna. First of all, the history of the Emiliano-Romagnolo dialect will be presented. Consequently, linguistic features concerning grammar, morphology, phonology and the current situation of this dialect will be examined together with some mention of dialectal poetry and literature. Since in the region there are different varieties of a unique dialect, in this essay, in particular, the Romagnolo dialect will be taken into consideration. In the first part, however, there will be a presentation of the whole dialectal area.

According to the *Ethnologue*, in 2003 it was found that 2,000,000 people speak Emiliano-Romagnolo dialect. A first point that needs to be noticed is that the dialectal area is wider than the equivalent administrative district. As John Hajek explains in *The dialects of Italy*, Emilia-Romagna can be divided into three distinct geolinguistic strata. To the North, a low-lying river plain encompassing most of the province of Ferrara and the northernmost portions of Modena, Reggio Emilia, Parma and Piacenza. The central stratum is formed by a narrow swathe that follows the length of the Via Emilia, which on the one hand extends south to the lower apennine foothills of Emilia and on the other eventually opens up to cover much of Bologna and all of Romagna to the north and south of the Via. [...] The middle and upper Apennines of Emilia form the final, most southerly stratum.

Furthermore, the dialect is also spoken in the Republic of San Marino (*Ethnologue*), the trans-Apennine part of the province of Florence in the area of Marradi and in the Marche region to the path of Esino river, near the administrative boundary and near Ancona (Devoto & Giacomelli, 2002: 54). Dialects spoken in Emilia-Romagna belong to the Gallo-Italian group of Northern Italian dialects, whereas dialects spoken in the Apennines near Piacenza and Taro valley belong to the Ligurian group (Toso, 2006: I.8.1). The region, where there are different pronunciation and special inflections, is characterised by a traditional polycentrism that has blocked the development of a unitary koine (Toso, 2006: I.8.1). As a matter of fact, there is no perception of a supra-local unity which can help to form an identity with a regional connotation (Toso, 2006: I.8.1). The first deep cultural demarcation dates back to the Prehistory, when Terramare and agricultural-pastoral civilizations flourished in the west of the region between Modena and Bologna and in the east in Bologna and in Romagna (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 373). Etruscan productive centres drew Gallic tribes that occupied the territory. After that, in the early third century, the territory was invaded by Romans who assured

organizational compactness and a common linguistic system (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 373). Unfortunately, the unity was damaged by the administrative division between *Aemilia* and *Flaminia*, which existed until the Italian unification in 1861 (Foresti, 2010: 15). After the political and economic crisis and the following disintegration of the Roman Empire, in the fifth century, the regional linguistic physiognomy was well-established. In other words, everyone used idioms developed from the Vulgar Latin. Subsequently, between the seventh and the eighth centuries, nobody was able to understand written and spoken Latin since new idioms were completely formed (Foresti, 2010: 14). In the eighth century, the Byzantine domination in Northern Italy and in the region came to an end with the Lombard invasion. If on the one hand the Germanic domination had a strong influence on politics and institutions, on the other hand, it did not manage to impose their own languages on Romance varieties, which were in the making (Foresti, 2010: 16). However, it is in this period that dialects spoken in Emilia-Romagna received a number of borrowings regarding vocabulary from Germanic languages. For instance, *ghefla* “gomitolo”, *boga* “catena, fascia metallica”, *gudazzo* “padrino”, *scosso* “grembo” - from which derives the word *scossale* “grembiule” - *brodo*, *borrire* “sgridare, assalire” and so forth (Foresti, 2010: 17). A fragmentation inside the region was also attested during the periods of Commune and the Signoria in the XII and XV centuries (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 377). During this period, from rhetoric schools a new form of civil eloquence spread adopting the vulgar and making knowledge possible for non-specialist (Foresti, 2010: 24). When in 1500 the Florentine dialect was chosen as a model for a national language, in Emilia-Romagna people spoke and continued to use local languages which were different from each other (Foresti, 2010: 42). Together with these dialects, there was Italian that was spoken only by few people. In fact, everyone communicated using dialects (Foresti, 2010: 43) even though, little by little, the vulgar began to be used also in written contexts.

The first reference to idioms spoken in the region can be founded in Dante's work *De vulgari eloquentia*, where the poet made a distinction between west-central, *Lombardo*, and east-central dialects, *Romagnolo* (Foresti, 2010: 47). In 1800, a number of dialectal dictionaries were published with the aim of teaching Italian through the research of Tuscan words which could have substituted the dialectal ones (Foresti, 2010: 54). However, these dictionaries contained only words belonging to the middle-class urban dialectal variety. It was in 1856 that Bernardino Biondelli published *Saggio sui dialetti gallo-italici*, an extensive research on the Emiliano-Romagnolo parlance and its varieties (Foresti, 2010: 56-57). After that, over the years, dialects lost importance whereas Italian became the national language. Even though dialects were not recognised as real languages, they have their own grammatical, morphological and phonological features.

Taking into consideration Romagnolo, the dialect of the area where I was born and where I live, some main features characterise this language since the passage from Vulgar Latin to dialects.

Friedrich Schürr, an Austrian linguist who studied Romagnolo dialect, affirmed that the crucial historical event which can explain the distinctive features of this dialect is the long political isolation of Romagna during the period of Esercito in Ravenna. The following examples of phonetic features are taken from the book *Romagna e civiltà* written by Bellosi and Quondamatteo. As regards vocalism, the main characteristics are:

- the passage from *a* tonic (in free syllable or followed by *r, l* + consonant) to *e*.
 - e.g. *legh* < lacu, *cer* < claru
- the almost constant fall of atonic final vowels, except for *a*
 - e.g. *câ, cãn* < cane, *gat* < gattu

- the fall of post-tonic vowels of internal syllables
 - e.g. *sambêdgh* < *selvaticu*, *lettra* < *littera*, *sédla* < *saetula*
- the fall of pro-tonic vowels of internal syllables
 - e.g. *stmana* < *septimana*
- metaphony; e.g. sing. *fjór*, plur. *fjur*
- Nasalisation of tonic vowels. It can be complete, partial or incomplete nasality. The first one involves the disappearance of nasal consonant in front of *n*, *m*, which has become final consonant, or it is followed by an unvoiced consonant. The second type of nasality applies in front of intervocalic *n*, *m*. The incomplete nasality applies in front of geminate *n*, *m*, *gn* or *n*, *m* + voiced consonant.

As far as consonantism is concerned, it is important to notice the phenomenon of degemination, which Romagnolo has in common with all Northern dialects. According to Friedrich Schürr, the degemination is due to the dynamic, intensive or expiratory accent which gives prominence to voiced vowels to the detriment of unvoiced vowels. In addition to this, Romagnolo dialect is also characterised by the sonorization of inter-vowel unvoiced (e.g. *fredel* < *fratellu*), the resolution of *c* + *i*, *e* in *z* (e.g. *zarvel* < *cerebellu*) and the resolution of *cl*, *gl* in *c* and *g* (e.g. *cer* < *claru*, *gera* < *glarea*).

With regard to morphosyntactic features, articles, nouns, pronouns and verbs are worthy of attention. For this purpose, *Profilo linguistico dell'Emilia-Romagna* (2010: 126-9) written by Fabio Foresti gives an exhaustive explanation. For articles, in Romagna the form *é* and *l* are used (*é bus* “il buco”, *l alber* “l'albero”) with masculine singular nouns whereas masculine plural nouns take the article *i* (*i dént* “i denti”). The feminine singular nouns take *la* and *l* (*la man* “la mano”, *l èlba* “l'alba”) whereas the feminine plural nouns, *al* and *ali* (*al tail* “le tele”, *ali óng* “unghie”). Besides, compared to their Latin origins, nouns keep the feminine of nouns regarding types of trees (e.g. *piopa* “pioppo”) or neutral nouns turn into feminine (e.g. *bughèda* “bucato”). The morphological opposition between singular and plural depends on the vowel dispersion at the end of the word, which usually assigns the zero desinence to singular and plural nouns. The plural of feminine nouns is determined by the dispersion of *-a* of singular (e.g. *la scra:na* “la sedia”, *al scran* “le sedie”). Furthermore, there are many ways to form the superlative: the addition of *-ént* to the adjective or the repetition of adjective itself (e.g. *nóv nuvànt* or *nóv nóv* “nuovissimo”). (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 381). The system of personal pronoun presents the common characteristic of using the objective pronoun (*mé*, *té*, *ló*) in subject function in voiced forms (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 381) or the recourse to deictic words together with personal pronouns and demonstrative pronouns and adjectives (e.g. *cla döna ca là* “quella donna”). (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 382). With regard to verbs, in Romagnolo there are four conjugations: *-êr* (*andêr*, “andare”), *-ér* (*piasér* “piacere”), *-ar* (*piövar* “piovere”) and *-ìr* (*fiurìr*, “fiorire”) and each verbal form is preceded by unvoiced personal pronouns (*mé a rid*, *ti at rid*, *lu al rid*, *lór i rid*) as Adelmo Masotti explains in his Romagnolo dictionary (1996). Certainly, the features presented above are just a little part of the considerable linguistic system but they can give a first idea of how the dialect is structured.

Nevertheless, the current situation of the dialect is another aspect that needs to be mentioned. As a matter of fact, the usage of dialects has decreased due to the importance gained by Italian year after year. During the fascism, in the whole country the dialect was banned in schools and elsewhere, since it was seen as a rude language. After the II World War, through education people had the possibility to become wealthy and be part of the economic boom. Therefore, even in the family speaking dialect was forbidden. As Luigi Antonio Mazzoni writes in his article ‘Il dialetto romagnolo oggi’ (The Romagnolo dialect nowadays), when the rural life

and hand-crafted workshops together with the close life of parish churches were abandoned, a great amount of dialectal vocabulary disappeared. The new vocabulary, related to technology and modernity, was included with difficulty in the dialect, which adapted words like television – *televisione* in Italian and *televisiō* in dialect – and mobile phone – *telefonino* in Italian and *telefuni* in dialect. Moreover, when Italian and the dialect were equally important, people who knew only dialect translated words considering only the sense and the meaning. For instance, the word “forbici” - in dialect “tusur” - was translated as “tisure”, ragazzo – in dialect “bastërd” - as “bastardo”. For this reason, dialect was considered in a negative way. As far as I am concerned, I cannot speak dialect even though I was brought up in a family where everyone can speak both Italian and dialect but I can clearly understand it though. The reason why I have never started to speak my dialect is linked to the fact that I do not need to use it and at school its usage was discouraged. However, I understand its importance. Actually, in my area, people are re-evaluating the dialect and their tie to the territory but, unfortunately, this is not enough. Everywhere, there is someone who cannot speak dialect – maybe because it is a foreigner – and therefore Italian is the only language which is necessary to speak, even though also Italian is experiencing the problem of being threatened by what is now becoming the global language, English. Besides, young people do not speak dialect because they think of it as something related to aged people and old times. As I had the opportunity to ask to some experts of dialects - like Gilberto Casadio who wrote *Vocabolario Etimologico Romagnolo* - and in the light of my own experience, I have verified that with friends, youngsters speak a colloquial Italian that seems closed to dialect because of some words typical of the area but, instead, it is a sort of Italianised dialect. For instance, expressions like “me la sgavagno” and “ingambarellarsi” that can be translated as “I am carrying it off” and “to stumble” respectively, are used because they are recurring and therefore they are absorbed and reused as simple quotation in Italian (Cortelazzo et al., 2002: 390).

According to a survey carried out by ISTAT in 2006, in Emilia-Romagna the majority of people (84%) speak with strangers in Italian whereas in the family, Italian is spoken by 56% of people while dialect is used by 14.6% and this datum shows a significant increase since 2000. Nevertheless, today dialect is regaining prominence since people have much more awareness of culture and traditions of their region. In Romagna, there is also a long tradition of dialectal theatre and literature which is considered as a cultural opportunity and not something to be ashamed of. As a dialectal language, Romagnolo is still alive. A large number of folk stories were and are written with the aim of describing the rural and simple life in the region in the past. In addition, there are a number of poets, born in this area, which help the dialect to survive. For instance, renowned authors are Tonino Guerra – famous also for having collaborated with the famous Italian director Federico Fellini – Raffaello Baldini, Gianni Fucci and Tolmino Baldassari. According to the journalist Matteo Fantuzzi and his article ‘La poesia romagnola’, despite a general decline of poetry, in Emilia-Romagna, through poems, people have the opportunity to escape from current problems and understanding themselves and their origins and the daily language that they should speak. This is actually possible thanks to a sincere and straightforward lifestyle that is characteristic of Romagna and of its inhabitants. For this reason, although today the dialect is threatened and it risks extinction, people in Romagna would never accept the loss of their cultural identity. Romagnolo is and it always will be a part of them and it cannot be lost.

Bibliography

- Bandini, Enrico (2011) 'Dizionario online di dialetto romagnolo. Seguirà il modello partecipato di Wikipedia', *Il fatto quotidiano*, In <<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2011/12/03/dizionario-online-dialetto-romagnolo-seguira-modello-partecipato-wikipedia/175161/>>, accessed 12 January 2012
- Bellosi, Giuseppe & Quondamatteo, Gianni (1977) *Romagna e civiltà*, Imola: Grafiche Galeati
- Benincà, Paola (2004) 'Dialetti d'Italia e dialetti d'Europa', *Quaderno d'Italia*, No. 8/9, pp. 11-26 <<http://ddd.uab.cat/pub/qdi/11359730n8-9p11.pdf>>, accessed in 7 January 2012
- Casadio, Gilberto (2008) *Vocabolario etimologico romagnolo*, Imola: Editrice La Mandragora
- Cortelazzo, Manlio et al. (2002) *I dialetti italiani: storia, struttura ed uso*, Torino: UTET
- Devoto, Giacomo & Giacomelli Gabriella (2002) *I dialetti delle regioni d'Italia*, Bompiani
- Fantuzzi, Matteo, *La poesia romagnola, eccellenza nella letteratura italiana*. In <http://argaza.racine.ra.it/main/index.php?id_pag=40>, accessed 4 January 2012
- Foresti, Fabio (2010) *Profilo linguistico dell'Emilia Romagna*, Bari: Laterza
- Maiden, Martin & Mair, Parry (1997) *The dialects of Italy*, London/New York: Routledge
- Masotti, Adelmo (1996) *Vocabolario Romagnolo Italiano*, Bologna: Zanichelli
- Mazzone, Luigi Antonio (2007) 'Il dialetto romagnolo oggi', In <http://www.smembar.it/luneri_di_smembar/il-dialetto-romagnolo-oggi/>, accessed in 3 January 2012
- Toso, Fiorenzo (2006) *Lingue d'Europa*, Baldini Castaldi Dalai Editore

Webpage references

- <http://argaza.racine.ra.it/>
- <http://www.smembar.it/>
- <http://www.ethnologue.com/>

Indagine ISTAT (2006)

- La lingua italiana, i dialetti e le lingue straniere (2007), In <http://portal-lem.com/images/it/Italie/Lingue_e_dialetti_e_lingue_straniere_in_Italia.pdf>, accessed 2 January 2012