

## Piedmontese, an endangered language



According to research by IRES (an independent public research institute), Piedmontese – the language of Piedmont, a region in the northwestern area of Italy – is spoken or at least well understood by over two million people, while another million people can understand it at least a bit. As normal for a minority language, the people who read and write it are fewer. There isn't a precise number, but my guess is a figure of around 100,000 people. These are actually huge numbers, placing it in the first spots in regional languages in Italy per number of speakers. It has also to be noted that, depending on definitions, Italy has from 30 to 300 different languages spoken today.

The Piedmontese language derives obviously from Latin, as a western neo-Latin language, with later additions of words taken from French, Provençal and German. It has been used in written form at least from the twelfth century. The first evidence of the language we have is called *Sermon Subalpin*, today in the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria of Turin, and over the last four centuries Piedmontese has been written more or less in the same manner. This means that when a Piedmontese reads a text written 400 years ago, she or he can understand it without much difficulty.

It is important to point out that Piedmontese is a language and not a dialect for at least three reasons. First of all, the phonetics, morphology and lexicon are sufficiently differentiated with respect to the romance reference idioms. Second, it has a *koiné*, that is, a common language overarching the various dialects spoken in the region. Lastly, it possesses a huge literature of many genres – novels, theater, poetry, magazines and official documents.

The spelling of the language is quite similar to Italian, with small but meaningful differences. Here are a few revealing examples:

- The e can be closed or open (like in the English word *that*;

in this case it is usually marked with a grave accent, as in *tèila* – toil) or what is called *mesmuta* (literally "half mute," indicated with the dieresis, as in *ghèrsin* – breadstick). In the latter case, the sound, though it varies from region to region, is similar to the vowel in the English *the*;

- Next to the normal *o*, there is also the *eu* like in the English *girl* (example: *reusa* – rose);
- Next to the normal *u* (marked *o* for historical reasons), there is also the *u* (like in French, for example, *cun-a* – cradle);
- The faucal or velar *n-*, a consonant that doesn't exist in Italian. Example: *lun-a* – moon.

In general, Piedmontese is quite similar to French. This is because, as already mentioned, it is a western neo-Latin language, which makes it quite different from Italian, an eastern neo-Latin language.

An important point regarding the future of this language: it is quite commonly accepted in linguistics that of the roughly 6,000 languages existing in the world today, half or more of these will fall out of use – without sustained conservation efforts – by the end of the century. Clearly, Piedmontese is among these endangered languages despite the numbers of its casual users. So, what are governments, associations and common people doing regarding this matter?

On the legislative level, there is a new regional law (dated April 7, 2009) called *Tutela, valorizzazione e promozione del patrimonio linguistico del Piemonte* (Protection, enhancement and promotion of the linguistic heritage of Piedmont) that contributes to protect Piedmontese, giving up to 5,000 euros to each village that will put Piedmontese toponymy in the streets, for example. This is an important step for the recognition of Piedmontese on a general level. Also, many associations organize courses and events to enhance the beauties of this culture. The main one is the Ca dè Studi Piemontèis (Center for Piedmontese Studies, [www.studipiemontesi.it](http://www.studipiemontesi.it)).

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## Barba Tòni and real Piedmontese

In order to better understand the structures of Piedmontese, along with the philosophy of the only way to truly keep it and other languages like it alive, let's examine a piece of poetry. The author Barba Tòni (1921–1999) has written one of the best poems, difficult and easy at the same time, in our language. The poem is difficult because of the use of some quite refined nouns, some of them nonexistent in Piedmontese but borrowed from Latin, Provençal, French and who knows which other languages. Tòni was indeed a master at playing with words. The title itself, *Èl Pi-a-mont-tèis*, it is a pun between *Piemontèis* (Piedmontese) and *Pi a mont tèis* (more at tense mountain), with reference to the fact that *Piedmont* etymologically means "at the foot of the mountains." But this is also an easy poem for native speakers to comprehend because it can be read with the heart more than with the mind. It is a laud of love for a mother tongue or, better yet, we may say a "father tongue."

*Èl piemontèis a venta  
parlelo. Che meisin-a. Mej che la revalenta.*  
Piedmontese has to be  
spoken. What fine medicine. Better than a  
cure-all.

Here a very interesting feature of this language has to be noted. The personal pronoun (*a* in this case) indeed must come before the verb: *a venta* = you have to.

*'Dcò parole 'n pioranda, sangiutenda  
(da ràir),  
con l'ès-ciandor ancreusa dij sant, lus ëd  
j'euji ciàir*  
Even speaking it crying, hiccupping  
(sometimes),  
with the profound splendor of the saints,  
light in bright eyes.

*An giuganda a 'l paròle*  
Playing with words

Here the masculine gender of the noun *paròle* (words) has to be noted. In standard

Piedmontese, this would have been a feminine noun (*le paròle*), but as happens most of all in the Piedmontese spoken in vast regions of Piedmont, the feminine plural article is not used, substituted by the masculine one (*ël*, contracted in *'l* when the previous word ends with a vowel).

As previously mentioned, Tòni was a master of his craft. We can find an example in the following line:

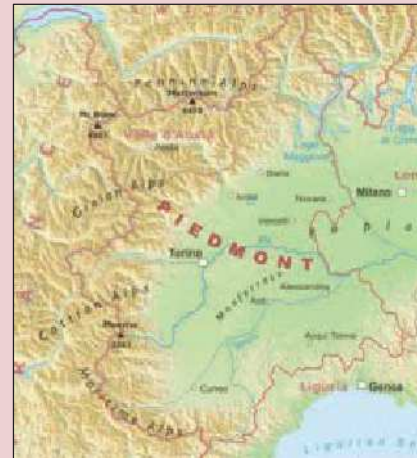
*Vòle 'd giòle, sgajòle dë 'l viòle a baticòle*  
where the exact significance of the words  
("Flocks of pilot lights, shouts of joy piggy-  
backing grannies") is not so important, the  
importance being the assonances and the  
rhythm of words.

*Për mostrejlo a coj-li ch'a l'han ël gran' maleur  
ëd pa savilo, ahi Dé, argalejne 'l boneur.*  
To teach it to the unfortunates who sadly  
do not know it, oh God, a gift of good luck.

*A venta scrivlo, òh giò, e pi da-bin ch'as peul,  
a scòla d'arsigneul, un reul d'an pare an fieul,  
dissionari a la man, sacrelo con la rima,  
sima dla gòj, la prima.*  
It has to be written, oh yes, as best you can,  
learning from the nightingale, an aura of  
father to son,  
holding a dictionary, consecrating it with  
rhyme,  
a peak of joy, the first.

*A venta bisodiello:  
j'orassion ant la lenga dj'èstrachin, dij  
crasà,  
a valo tant ëd pi, an modelo, arnovelo,  
dë-dsà për ël dë-dlà.*  
It has to be whispered:  
prayers in the tongue of the poor, the  
oppressed,  
are worth much more, they model us,  
renewing us  
here for the beyond.

*A venta leslo, e tant, dai paco ai dissionari*  
It has to be read, a lot, from country folk to  
dictionaries



Piedmont lies "at the foot of the mountains" of northwestern Italy.

Here is a crucial concept to be pointed out: the idea that to understand a language and a culture fully you have to read all kind of documents, from the bus ticket to a letter of condolence, from children's schoolwork to the most epic poems.

*A venta 'dcò subiello: ti canta e mi i subij,  
d'äutri an compagneran, ciulucrie e ciusij.*  
It also has to be whistled: you sing and I  
whistle,  
others will accompany us, birdsong and  
whispers.

Another good idea: if you believe in something, begin today to do something about it. Then if your idea is sound, other people will naturally join you.

*A venta 'dcò balelo, tërlelo: tërle e bala  
chè l'angel at argala l'ala, al cel at trambala.*  
It has to be danced, skipping with joy:  
skip and dance  
until the angel offers you a wing that takes  
you to heaven.

It doesn't matter which language you speak. The important thing is to speak it the best you can and as often as you can in order to let it prosper and survive.

But the real responsibility is with the people. The Piedmontese language will survive only if Piedmontese people speak to their children – and, as a matter of fact, to their neighbors – in their natural language, every time this is possible. What is indeed, in extreme essence, a language? A language is a bridge, a means to include people who want to be in on the joke or the conversation or the information sharing. It is not supposed to exclude all others who are different.

The natural complement to inclusion is music. Piedmont has a large number of groups playing folk music and a long tradition of songs, the main one being *La bela bergera* (*The Beautiful Shepherdess*). A good performance can be found at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFwV3SsU9Bg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFwV3SsU9Bg). No other ways to survive and prosper are possible. The only alternative, of course, is that this language will become a mere intellectual pursuit, an esoteric game in the minds of too few people. **M**