

VLASHKI/ZHEYANSKI (ISTRO-ROMANIAN) IN THE 21ST CENTURY: LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION

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Abstract. This article describes and discusses my work on the documentation and revitalization of Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian), a severely endangered language spoken in Croatia and various places outside of it. This documentation work took place over a period of several years in the late 2000's and 2010's and has resulted in the production of an annotated language corpus containing audio and video recordings of the speech of over forty different fluent and active speakers from Croatia and a sociolinguistic study of language shift in the community, among others. The documentation, carried out in the scope of two major projects, was conducted following a method of community-oriented collaborative language documentation, and was combined with numerous activities geared toward language revitalization which are also enumerated and described in the paper. The paper ends with some thoughts regarding the problems encountered in the course of this work and suggestions for work with very small endangered language communities.

Keywords: endangered language, language shift, community-oriented documentation, language revitalization.

1. INTRODUCTION²

In this paper I report on and discuss my activities of community-oriented language documentation of the Vlashki/Zheyanski language, an endangered Daco-Romance variety spoken in the region of Istria, Croatia, as well as in different communities abroad. 'Vlashki' and 'Zheyanski' are the names that speakers use when they refer to their language. In linguistics, the language is better known as 'Istro-Romanian'. In the remainder of the paper, I will use all three terms in the following format: 'Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian)'.

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After a short introduction to the sociolinguistic situation in Istria, the region of Croatia where Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) is spoken, I discuss the sociolinguistic status of Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian)-speaking communities and their language in Section 2 of the paper. In Section 3, I elaborate on the goals, methods and processes as well as results and achievements of the documentation (3.3.) and preservation activities (3.4.). In Section 4, I share some insights about language documentation and revitalization work. Section 5 is a short conclusion.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Multilingualism and identity in Istria

Istria is a historic border region of Croatia, which, in spite of its modest size and population, has been characterized by (ethno)linguistic diversity brought about by successive population migrations during most of its history. The majority language in the region today is Croatian while Italian is an important and officially recognized minority language.

Both minority languages of autochthonous or territorial (ethno)linguistic minorities and minority languages of more recent migrants to the area (Pauwels 2016) are spoken in Istria: among the former are Istro-Venetian, Istriot, and Istro-Romanian while Albanian and Bosnian are among the latter. From the point of view of linguistic typology and language contact, the remarkable and distinctive feature of the region's multilingualism is the long coexistence of the Romance and Slavic languages as well as Western and Eastern Romance languages. Among the Western Romance languages are Istriot (or Istro-Romance, ISO639-3: *ist*), probably an autochthonous Romance language of the area, and Istro-Venetian (a variety of Venetian, ISO639-3: *vec*), the language brought to Istria by the Venetian colonizers during the Middle Ages and, today, the mother tongue of most ethnic Italians in the area. The Eastern Romance, or more properly the Daco-Romance, language spoken in the area since the beginning of the 16th century is Istro-Romanian (ISO639-3: *ruo*), the language that is the main focus of my work and this article. Finally, standard Italian, which started spreading in the area already in the 19th century, mainly through education and public and formal use, has become the dominant formal variety among the ethnic Italians after World War Two. The Slavic linguistic world is represented by South Slavic varieties, among which many different Croatian regional dialects dominate in the region. Croatian was brought into the area mainly in two historic migrations, which took place between the 6th and 8th centuries and then between the 14th and the 17th centuries. Modern migrations from other parts of Croatia and other areas of former Yugoslavia happened over several decades since World War II (WWII) as Istria became politically first part of Yugoslavia

those contacts in the community who helped open doors when I first started and then contributed in other ways, too (in alphabetical order): Josip Pepo Glavina, Mauro Edi Doričić, Mauro Doričić, Rado Doričić, Vilim Sanković, and Drago Taletović. I also wish to thank the audiences attending the Days of the Vlashki/Zheyanski Language (2009-2018), mentors and colleagues August Kovačec and John V. Singler, as well as Viviana Benussi, Ana Montan, Lidija Nikočević, and student assistants Sarah Cook, Antonija Samaržija, and Zachary Wellstood. My work is dedicated to my grandmother Marija Ljubičić lu Balâr. All mistakes and shortcomings related to this work are my own.

and then of independent Croatia. As is true of standard Italian, the role and spread of standard Croatian in the region has grown enormously since WWII. Finally, there has been a small enclave community in Istria speaking the Montenegrin dialect since the 17th century. In a portion of Croatian Istria close to the border with Slovenia, Slovenian dialects are also spoken.

In terms of language policies, Istria is the sole Croatian administrative region (Cr. *županija*) which is multilingual not just in terms of the everyday language use of its inhabitants but also officially. Italian and Croatian have been co-official in the Istrian Region since the beginning of the 1990s. In everyday usage, and keeping in mind both horizontal and vertical multilingualism, individual bilingualism and trilingualism are very common, in particular in western Istria and among populations of ethnic Italian and mixed origin. Even quadrilingualism and pentalingualism would not be difficult to find. The sociolinguistic relationship between the main varieties, specifically, the standard Italian and Istro-Venetian and standard Croatian and Chakavian was defined as a case of double diglossia or as a combination of diglossia and dilalia (Jahn 2001).

Istrian political and cultural history as a border region and its ethnic and linguistic diversity have contributed to the development of conceptions of identity that diverge from the more typical nationalist identification characterizing many other areas in this part of the world. As discussed by a number of scholars, in this multilingual historic political borderland, multiple and fluid national allegiances are commonly expressed (Cocco 2010, Ballinger 2004, Valenta and Gregurović 2015, among others), so that, for example, different generations of the same family, and even members of the same generation, can claim different, as well as multiple, national allegiances. Large portions of the populations align with a strong and proud regional identity or “Istrianness.” While there is evidence that this type of identity was common as far back as the 19th century (Nikočević 2008), more recently it has been described and explained in different ways: as resistance regionalist identity developed in opposition to Croatian nationalism (Cocco 2010), as inclusive territorial and multicultural identity (Banovac 2004, Sujoldić 2008) and hybrid cultural identity of a historic borderland, that is mostly based on Croatian-Italian coexistence, and may not always be inclusive of new migrants and minorities (Ballinger 2004, Valenta and Gregurović 2015: 434). A significant number of inhabitants in the region identify regionally, i.e. as ‘Istrians’, also officially. The 2011 Croatian Census reported that ‘Istrians’ make approximately 12 percent of the population in the Istrian Region.

Studies of multilingual language practices in the region (defined by Italian and Croatian bilingualism) show that such practices are considered to be an important marker of Istrian regional identity (Jernej Pulić and Orlić 2016). It should be noted that Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian)-speaking communities largely share in these conceptions of identity (Vrzić and Singler 2016, Vrzić 2018a, 2021). Since the early 1990’s, the Istrian Region has not only promoted official bilingualism but fostered cultural and political regionalism, as mentioned in the Istrian Region Statute (<https://www.istra-istria.hr/hr/dokumenti/statut-istarske-zupanije/>). For example, Art. 20 of the Statute states that “the Istrian Region fosters Istrianness as the traditional expression of regional affiliation of the Istrian multi-ethnos” and Art. 18 addresses the protection of “autochthonous, ethnic and cultural features” of the region and mentions ‘Istro-Romanian’ among them, together with various Slavic and Romance languages and dialects spoken in the region.

2.2. A short profile of Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian)

As mentioned earlier, ‘Istro-Romanian’ is a linguistic name of a Romance variety that speakers usually call, in particular when they speak in their own language, ‘Vlashki’ or ‘Zheyanski’. The choice of the term depends on where they live and what dialect they speak. Other names have been in circulation, but they are exonyms (e.g. *ćiribirski*, *ciribiro*, *istrorumunski*, etc.) adopted for specific usages, such as when speaking to outsiders, and a matter of individual speakers’ preference.

The language is severely endangered (as measured, for example, by the criteria proposed in the Language Vitality and Endangerment Report 2003). Approximately 100 fluent and active speakers live today in six villages in northeast Istria and an estimated additional 400 might live elsewhere in Croatia. The total number of speakers may come to a thousand worldwide (with a few hundred residing in New York City and the wider area). A large majority of speakers are middle-aged and elderly, all speakers are bilingual and speak Croatian as either their second or first language. Intergenerational transmission of the language has been interrupted for several decades and there may be only a very small number of children and youth who understand the language and even fewer who speak it. The language has always been in oral use, it has not been used in formal education or religion (but some changes in domains and modes of use have happened more recently, as will be shown later in the article). Most community members identify as Croatian and/or Istrian in addition to valuing their village affiliation (Vrzić 2016, 2018a, 2021).

In 2007, the language was given recognition and provided with a level of protection in Croatia, when it was placed on the List of protected intangible cultural heritage of the Croatian Ministry of Culture. Also, since 2010, the language has been protected by the Part II (Article 7) of the European Charter of the Regional and Minority Languages (but see Vrzić 2021 for a discussion of the impediments to the full implementation of this protection).

In terms of its linguistic origin, Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) is one of the four branches of Daco-Romance. The other three branches of this language family are Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian and Daco-Romanian, of which modern Romanian is a part. It has been suggested that Istro-Romanian split from the rest of Daco-Romance some time between the second half of the 1st millennium and the 11th century (Mallinson 1987: 303, Sârbu and Frăţilă 1998: 13-17, Niculescu 1990: 67). In Istria, the language has been spoken since the beginning of the 16th century, originally, over a larger area than today. It was brought to Istria by Balkan Vlachs who migrated there from the Dalmatian hinterland, probably as part of the numerous migrations of Croatian populations to Istria in the same period of history.

3. DOCUMENTATION AND REVITALIZATION OF VLASHKI/ZHEYANSKI (ISTRO-ROMANIAN)

3.1. Projects

My work on the linguistic documentation of Istro-Romanian was spread over more than ten years and was carried out in the scope of three different projects. Between 2012

and 2018, I worked on the project called *Documentation of the Vlashki/Zheyanski Language* (DVZL) funded by the US National Science Foundation (award #1160696).⁴ This project partially overlapped with the *Očuvanje vlašskog i žejanskog jezika/Preservation of the Vlaški and Žejanski Language* (OVŽJ) project, which was funded by the Croatian Ministry of Culture, regional governments of the Istrian Region and Primorsko-Goranska Region and the Counties of Matulji and Kršan and ran between 2007 and 2017. My first experience with this type work took place in the scope of the short pilot project entitled *Text Collection and Digital Archiving of Istro-Romanian*, for which I received support from the Endangered Language Fund. In the following sections, I discuss the the two long-term projects.

The projects had both documentation and revitalization among their goals, but the American-based project was more narrowly documentary while the Croatian-based project had revitalization of the language as one of its explicit goals, too. I discuss my approach to documentation in the next section and, then, in section 3.3. below, its principal results. In section 3.4., I say more about the revitalization activities.

3.2. Motivation and approach

My projects were focused on the goal of documenting the severely endangered language at the beginning of the 21st century, at the moment in its history when it was still spoken by, possibly, the last generations of its fluent and active speakers. In addition, at the time when I planned and began this work, no digital and annotated spoken language corpus of the language existed in spite of previous documentation (cf. Pușcariu 1926, Morariu 1928, Cantemir 1959, Frățilă and Sârbu 1998, among others, which bring written texts from different periods but no translations or other annotations and no recordings). Additionally, most of the existing descriptions and data were also difficult to access. Finally, my motivation was also personal as I have family connections to the community.⁵

I was looking to create a spoken language corpus using the methodology of documentary linguistics (see Himmelmann 1998, Gippert, Himmelmann and Mosel 2006, among others) and following a community-oriented, collaborative documentation method in line with the empowerment model of language research (see Cameron et al. 1993, Rice 2006, Yamada 2007, 2010, 2011, among others). Among the goals was also making the data and other information about the language more widely available, both to community members and researchers.

3.3. Documentation of Vlashki/Zheyanski: methods and results

According to Himmelmann, in documentary linguistics, a field he helped found and define as a linguistic discipline in the 1990s, documenting a language encompasses “compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of

⁴ I worked on this project together with John V. Singler.

⁵ For a discussion of my ‘positionality’ as a researcher and experiences in the field, see Vrzić (forthcoming).

its varieties” (1998:1). This involves creating a language corpus which, ideally, includes different language genres and is archived and accessible online (in a digital language archive), annotated (i.e. minimally, transcribed and translated into a language of wide(r) circulation) and can be useful to different types of scholars, and not just linguists.

The main method of data collection in the case of my projects was akin to oral history and consisted of semi-structured interviews with several question modules eliciting personal narratives or life stories. In the majority of cases, the interviewees were fluent speakers (whether Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) was their first or second language) and, typically, community members familiar to the interviewees. This choice of data collection seems to have a number of advantages: it is very similar to the sociolinguistic interview (cf. Tagliamonte 2006), so data can be used in sociolinguistic research, also because basic demographic information about speakers was collected (e.g. age, education, profession, place of residence, dialect spoken, etc.) and all interviews were approximately an hour long or longer. A range of age groups among the speakers were included although, because of language shift, there was a strong bias toward the elderly speakers, who were both fluent and still active speakers. The method yielded rich ethnographic and microhistorical information that can be used by different types of scholars. It seemed spontaneous and easy for the speakers, in that it resembled conversations that could take place on similar topics in everyday life. It was appreciative of the speakers in that it centered on and valued speakers’ experiences and knowledge, which, considering that some expressed their insecurities about sharing them, was particularly important. It often triggered speakers’ memories for other traditional oral language forms (e.g. traditional stories or jokes) that would be difficult to obtain in a more direct and explicit way. It was awareness- and language-status-raising by being affirmative of the local culture. Finally, it complemented the contemporary interest in local cultural heritage, traditions and authenticity in Istria as a whole.

In addition to recordings of oral histories or life stories, which exemplify linguistic genres of narrative and description (and are either audio or video recordings), skill demonstrations, exemplifying the genre of instructional language were collected (as video recordings). The documentation also included collection of functional language in the form of several hundred everyday words and phrases (see section 3.4. below) and basic vocabulary (in the form of the Leipzig-Jakarta wordlist). Some syntactic elicitation related to infinitival constructions also took place and a few conversations were recorded.

The bulk of this material, mostly that which was collected in Croatia, was processed and then deposited with the Endangered Language Archive, deposit #0543, in 2018 (Vrzić 2018b). This *Documentation of the Vlashki/Zheyanski Language* (‘*ruo*’) collection contains around 55 hours of audio/video recordings representing the speech of 44 different speakers. Speakers of the two dialects of the language are about equally represented. The roughly half-a-million-word language corpus is orthographically transcribed⁶ and translated into Croatian and, around a third of it also into English. The corpus also includes more than 20 edited video clips with skill demonstrations and personal narratives with subtitles in either Croatian or English. In addition, there is a Field Works Language Explorer (FLEX) file, which contains a trilingual corpus-based dictionary with a reverse index. The basis of the dictionary is a digitized Istro-Romanian-Croatian dictionary published by Kovačec (1998)

⁶ For this purpose, I used my own orthographic representation (discussed in Vrzić 2009a and compared to other orthographic systems in use on the language website, Vrzić 2010).

to which English translations and new lexical items occurring in the texts contained in my language corpus, but lacking in the dictionary, were added. The interview transcripts were also added to the Field Works Language Explorer (FLEX) file and interlinear translations in Croatian and English and morphosyntactic annotations were inserted.⁷ Finally, the deposited collection also contains digital copies of all community-oriented publications (see their description in 3.4.) as well copies of some of my academic publications, including those that discuss the results of the sociolinguistic study of language shift and maintenance in the communities, which were also conducted in the scope of the DVZL project.

3.4. Revitalization of Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian)

Another significant component of the above-mentioned projects, especially the Croatian-based OVŽJ project, was community-oriented and community-based work on language revitalization.

In line with the empowerment model of linguistic research and the idea of collaborative language documentation, my community-oriented goals were guided by the idea of community empowerment and giving back to it. I aimed to be transparent about my goals as a researcher and my work in the community and to coordinate my ideas with the goals of the interested community members (for this purpose, I held various presentations and meetings); to raise awareness about the endangered status and cultural and social value of the language; to create products and activities that raise the social status of the language; to involve community members in as many actions and activities as possible; and to transfer knowledge to them and work on ensuring sustainability.

My more specific goals in the area of language revitalization were the prompt dissemination of the products of documentation in a format that is accessible and attractive to community members, the initiation of and support for language teaching to children, development of language learning materials, and promotion of the language and culture.

The revitalization activities, publications, and other materials are briefly described below⁸:

Language website: The very first non-academic project product, explicitly intended for community members and a wider general audience, was a language website entitled *Očuvaj vlaška ši žejanska limba/Očuvanje vlaškog i žejanskog jezika* or, in English, *Preservation of the Vlashki and Žejanski Language*, to be found at <https://www.vlaski-zejanski.com/hr/> (Vrzić 2010). The website was launched and presented to the communities in the summer of 2010 and was the first of its kind in Croatia. The main purpose of the website was to display documentation results, but also to raise awareness of the language's status, to spread knowledge about the language and the community speaking it, to promote the language and culture of the community, to virtually connect dispersed communities speaking the language living around the world, and, finally, to spread news about the

⁷ The work on the expansion of the dictionary and full morphosyntactic annotation of the texts is currently still in progress. When this work is completed, the FLEX file will be a rich and unique searchable language corpus of the language.

⁸ While as a project leader, I initiated, conceived and/or led many of these activities and participated in the development of the products described in this section, this work was done in close collaboration and/or co-authorship with Viviana Brkarić, Robert Doričić, and Adrijana Gabriš.

communities and project activities. Up until that point, Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) was largely an oral language (and still remains so), so the creation of the website also required a creation of a writing system. It seemed critical that written Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) be immediately transparent and accessible to all types of speakers and even non-speakers (such as young people and children), without explicit instruction. For this reason, and because all speakers are bilingual and literate in Croatian, I created a writing system modeled on Croatian orthography with only a few special characters for phonemes that are not known in Croatian (cf. also note 6).

Language classes for children: We initiated language classes for children in both Šušnjeвица and Žejane. The ‘language playroom’ in Šušnjeвица, called *Puljići*, started running in 2011 and has been thought by Viviana Brkarić (with the help of Marina Mikuluš) ever since. It is now run in the scope of the activities of the local Spod Učke Association and the Vlaški Puti eco-museum, which opened in 2019. The ‘language playroom’ in Žejane, called *Žejančići*, started running in 2014 and was taught by Adrijana Gabriš for several years. Both language workshops in Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) were attended by a mix of preschool and school-age children on a weekly basis for around 20-30 weeks in a year. Their teachers ran them largely independently and developed a wealth of creative language learning materials from scratch (such as work sheets, posters, flash cards, and other teaching tools), as well as songs, videos, and theater skits. The classes combined teaching of the basics of the language to children, who had no or very little prior knowledge of or exposure to the language, with the arts and crafts and performance to make learning fun and relevant to them. The children also went on field trips to learn about the local culture and traditions in direct contact with older community members and speakers. They also visited local culture festivals and other schools and made guest appearances on Croatian TV and radio and had a chance to represent for the first time their community’s language and culture outside of their own villages.

Annual language festival: Another significant activity I initiated in collaboration with my community collaborators and other community members was the annual language festival, usually held on consecutive days in Žejane and in Šušnjeвица at the beginning of August. The festival featured different programs in different years. In the very first year in 2009, it was a two-day academic conference where several different researchers from Croatia, Macedonia and Romania presented their work on Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) and Aromanian. This was the first time that presentations related to their language were given to community members in their villages. In the following years, between 2010 and 2018, the program of the festival differed each year and was filled with language-related workshops for adults or children, talks on various topics of local interest (e.g. on the results of the language shift and maintenance study, the local toponyms, etc.), given by various speakers, including community members and myself, presentations of new publications in the language, and, finally, with performances by the children attending the language playrooms.

Exhibition and exhibition catalogue: In 2012, an exhibition of old photographs entitled *Neka nu me uci... Da me ne zaboraviš... So you don’t forget me...* was organized and the exhibition catalogue published (Vrzić, Brkarić and Doričić 2012). The exhibition showcased older photographs from private collections owned by our oral history interviewees and storytellers but also other historic photographs of the people and area located in other sources. By means of these photographs, the exhibition told the story of life

in the Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian)-speaking villages in the first six or so decades of the 20th century and traced events, places, and traditions of local significance. The photographs were thematically organized by location – Šušnjeвица and the surroundings and Žejane – and then according to their subject – Our villages in the past, Everyday jobs, Celebrations, In school, and In the world. The captions provided further details about the places and people they represented and were usually based on the information told to us by our interviewees and other community members. The catalogue of the exhibition contains all 100 photographs that were part of the exhibition. The exhibition opened in Šušnjeвица and Žejane in the summer of 2012 and was then hosted in other locations in the area. The motivation for the exhibition was to display the results of the language documentation work conducted in the communities in a way that goes beyond language work alone but significantly contributes to the validation of the language and the local culture, lifestyle and history of its speakers and their descendants in a way that community members most appreciated.

Language learning materials and other community-oriented publications: The language programs *Limba de saka zi/Svakodnevni jezik* and *Limba de saka zi/Everyday Language* were published in 2009 (with a second edition in 2014) and 2011 respectively (Vrzić 2009b, 2011). These language learning programs, intended for self-study, are audio phrasebooks that contain more than 500 everyday phrases and vocabulary items divided into 19 thematic sections, relating to the needs of everyday communicative situations (e.g. Greetings, Numbers, Introductions, Getting Around, Telling Time, Needs and Feelings, etc.). The audio CD features the phrases and words with the pauses for repetitions followed by Croatian or English translations. The enclosed booklet is a transcript of all the phrases and words featured on the CD with their translations. This language program is a good example of how the goals and needs of language revitalization can be integrated with those of language documentation. Most of the basic words and phrases featured in it would not be likely to be documented through the collection of personal narratives or by means of wordlists.

En, den, dire, viro ku mire: Vlaški za djecu i roditelje/Vlashki for children and parents is a music CD intended to teach the language to preschool and younger school children (Vrzić and Brkarić 2013). It contains original songs, rhymes, poetry, and spoken language directed to young children. All the songs were written and composed by Viviana Brkarić. The program includes a booklet with lyrics and their Croatian and English translations as well as a small glossary for parents, whose current generation may not be fluent in the language. In this way, we intended for the program to be used by the children and parents together. Children who participated in the language playroom recorded the songs and their drawings were used to illustrate the program.

In 2016, another language learning product for young children was published. *Šćorica de lisica ši de lupu* [The story of the fox and the wolf], like the publications described above, is the first publication of its kind in the language (Vrzić 2016). It is a children's picture book based on a traditional story told in the course of an oral history interview. The recorded story was shortened, divided into scenes and adapted for use in a richly illustrated picture book, which also features vocabulary highlights for additional learning. In the back of the book, there is the Croatian translation of the text, serving as a guide for older children and parents. This publication provides another example of how language revitalization and language documentation goals and needs can dovetail each other.

Illustrated maps of the villages with descriptions of sites of local importance as well as those worthy of a visit by a tourist were published in 2014 for both Šušnjeveca and surrounding villages and Žejane (the second edition of the map of Žejane was published in 2017) (Vrzić and Brkarić 2014, Vrzić and Doričić 2014). All the sites featured on the map are described on its back in Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) as well as in Croatian and English. In this manner, the maps and their descriptions document local toponyms and provide information about local and regional history. They also suggest attractive walks and hikes through the villages or surrounding areas. Both maps are now also featured on large information panels placed in central locations in the villages to guide visitors. Their relevance for revitalization is also notable in that they are the first public signs written in the Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian) language to stand in the villages.

A final product to be mentioned here is *Pipa* [The pipe], a DVD containing a music video conceived by the teacher leading the language playroom in Žejane, Adrijana Gabriš. The production of the music video was part of the activities of the *Žejančići* language playroom. It tells a story based on a popular poem by the Croatian dialectal poet Drago Gervais, which was translated into Zheyanski by Adrijana Gabriš and then turned into a song performed by the children attending the language playroom. It is another example of the creativity with which the language playrooms have been conducted.

Many products of the documentation and revitalization described in the previous sections are available online and accessible to both community members and the wider public on various online platforms (which are still active albeit less regularly updated at the moment of writing):

Language website: <http://www.vlaski-zejanski.com/>

Language YouTube Channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUXcxhc5XAXgRjlabKg9DjQ>

Language Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/O%C4%8Duvanje-vla%C5%A1kog-i-%C5%BEejanskog-jezika-142026815855985/>

Community organizations: In the scope of revitalization activities of the OVŽJ project, the founding of local community organizations was conceived and initiated as well. The Spod Učke Association was founded in Šušnjeveca in 2011 and it is still active today. The Žejane Association was founded in 2014 in Žejane. After acting independently for several years, it has since become part of the older and well-established Žejanski Zvončari Association, also located in Žejane. The purpose of these organization was to involve local community members in a more extensive and independent manner in the documentation and, in particular, language revitalization activities, and to give them a more clear voice in this matter and in all sort of issues related to their language. The organizations were also necessary so that the funding for such activities can be secured by the communities.

Together, revitalization activities enumerated and described above were part of a process in which there were many ‘firsts’ and which made some important headway in the following directions: On the one hand, they raised the communities’ awareness regarding the endangered status of their language. They also raised their sense of the value and importance of their language to them not the least by making them also more aware of its value to the wider community in Istria and in Croatia. They gave further positive

prominence to the communities, as numerous media pieces showcased the projects described here but also took interest in and assigned value to the communities and their language. On the other hand, the activities opened new domains of language use, most importantly, the domain of written language, including that of the new media. They also introduced new genres of language use, such as in theatre, poetry or original songs, and in public speeches and written signs. Finally, I believe it is not a minor point that, by professionally producing the learning materials and other community-oriented publications, the language was also given ‘a modern look’ that equals that which is taken for granted for non-endangered or majority languages.

4. SOME THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION AND REVITALIZATION WORK

Community-oriented and collaborative documentation is an important ethical approach to work with small endangered language communities. My experience was that such projects are, however, very complex and demanding both professionally and personally. They require a linguist to wear many different hats (a researcher with a multidisciplinary outlook, a community activist, etc.) and possess skills that largely surpass those that academic linguists are trained for. Therefore, this work requires additional preparation, flexibility and, notably, time. For this reason, it can greatly benefit from the sharing of first-hand field experiences, something that is now more available than it was at the time I started my projects.

Fieldwork and community work can also be invasive and minoritized communities are particularly sensitive to forays into their midst as the sources of their minoritization are multiple and complex and make them vulnerable. When the minoritized community, such as the one I worked with, is also very small and, further, speakers are a small minority within it, the researcher can put a strain on it. Long-term commitment to the work in the community is necessary to establish trust based on reciprocity and mutual respect (cf. Rice 2006 and the critique of the methods of the so-called ‘helicopter linguists’ who lack such long-term commitment and may perceive speakers as ‘data generators’ in Yamada 2007, citing Lutter 2007).

Corpus-building and fair data sharing and greater collaboration among researchers is the future of science and a way that has become emphasized in linguistics too in the past several decades. While this is not what is always viable (as my own example demonstrates) or what descriptive linguists are necessarily used to doing, data sharing, corpus building, and creation of collaborative teams of researchers seem to be the best way to approach the work with very small languages and communities.

Finally, it seems of fundamental importance to respect speakers’ choices about their language use and their identities regardless of our professional or personal views or plans and preferences. This includes their choice to lack determination to keep using the language or teaching it to their children. Whatever professional linguists passionate about preventing language loss might think, speakers have good reasons for what they chose to do with their language. Researchers can, however, work on sharing knowledge about the value of the language and the possibilities for its maintenance and thereby provide individuals and

communities with more choices to make on their own. When promoting language maintenance or revitalization, it seems best to do so by showing appreciation for the minority language and community and by promoting bi/multilingualism and multiculturalism, not nationalism. This view often approximates better minority communities' lived experience and it is their experiences that matter most. I found it unfortunate that the societies and different social actors I came in touch with during my work were not always so inclined (cf. Vrzić 2021, Vrzić forthcoming).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have described the goals, methods, and results of two different linguistic projects designed to document the Vlashki/Zheyanski (Istro-Romanian). One of the main results of the documentation work is a multigenre annotated digital corpus of audio and video recordings in the language, containing around half a million words, deposited online at the Endangered Language Archive. It showcases the speech of more than forty different speakers speaking two different local dialects. Parallel to language documentation, which also included a sociolinguistic study of language shift in the community, one of the projects included many revitalization activities and actions (e.g. language classes for children) and the production of language learning materials and other community-oriented publications (e.g. audio phrasebook, children's picture book, etc.). Many of these activities demonstrated how naturally language documentation and revitalization can go together and, with some creativity (but also considerable additional effort, time and finances), complement each other's purpose. I have also shared some experiences and thoughts related to conducting complex community-oriented collaborative language documentation projects.

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