

Interpretations of the identity of the Vlaski/Zejski-speaking community in Istria

The paper discusses the multiple identities negotiated and embraced by a small bilingual linguistic minority speaking the endangered Vlaski/Zejski (Istro-Romanian) language in the multiethnic and multilingual border region of Istria, in Croatia. It contrasts these identity choices with the more simplistic interpretations of the group's identity by outsiders.

While the community speaks a language historically related to Romanian, it has been separated from this language and ethnic group by geography and history for more than a thousand years, as well as mostly unaware of it until rather recently. Apart from their Vlaski/Zejski language, now severely endangered, the community has long been culturally assimilated with their monolingual Croatian neighbors. No general ethnonym is in current use; instead, the community members use the names of the villages they come from when referring to their separate language-related identity. In addition to this, as has been common for other ethnic groups in this ethnically mixed area, which was part of four different states in the last one hundred years, the individuals' claimed national identity has been changing from generation to generation, even within the same family, with the change of governments and educational systems and standard languages they grew up with (e.g., from Italian to Croatian). In contrast to, and likely because of, this, the regional Istrian identity, being uncontroversial, has been embraced in this community, as among other ethnic groups in the area, often in preference to or at the exclusion of any national identity.

On the other hand, most outsiders, from local neighboring populations to researchers and local and foreign governments, strived to subsume the group's identity under an unequivocal ethnic or national label, failing to acknowledge the complexity of its existence. For example: Many Romanian linguists have been appropriating the group, treating it as a disjoint part of the Romanian nation, in spite of the lack of support for it in the community or in history. Romanian politicians and government have taken a similarly nationalizing stance toward the group. Departing from a contrasting, but also simplistic nationalist point of reference, many Croatian linguists have been either quick to point out matter-of-factly the actual cultural assimilation and common Croatian self-identification of the group, with little acknowledgment of and interest in their separate local identity and importance of the regional identity. For all, the "mismatch" between the local language and evident cultural, ethnic or national distinctiveness of this community has been perceived as a point in need of "rectifying" reinterpretations.

Ballinger (2004), Authentic hybrids in the Balkan borderlands
Sujoldzic (2008), Istrian identities and languages in contact