

The landscape-language relationship in the Raetho-Romanic Alps. A production and development factor of the territory

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Abstract

This paper analyses the analogical relationships between linguistic and landscape structures typical of some Alpine areas inhabited by Rhaeto-Romanic language minorities using an interdisciplinary approach. Four relationship strategies are examined: to propose, nominate, delimit and geo-refer. The aim is to focus on the image of the territory imprinted in the local language as a factor of landscape production, and the interaction created between its inner and outer representations as a factor capable of influencing its development. The results: to provide another tool for interpreting the features of landscape diversity in Alpine spaces and to implement the Declaration on Population and Culture of the Alpine Convention.

Keywords: Alpine space, Alpine languages, Alpine landscapes

1 Introduction

Contemporary landscape studies call for new and original interpretations allowing a direct and profound approach to perception and building practices of a specific space. Therefore there could be no better analytical tool than the local language. The impression that space has on a social group is imparted in its language structures. Languages vary greatly in relation to the need to diffuse spatial information, which is particularly rich and precise in mountain communities. In fact, in the case of a 'rugged' space such as a mountain valley, grammatical categories have to use particularly subtle strategies for each structure in order to be expressive.

There is also a close connection between mental representation of living space and personal representation. The identity of an area is supplied by the dominion of personal living space using practices whose efficiency is confirmed by experience. This fact is very clear in areas frequented by traditionally oral cultures: language and space exist and acquire meaning only when practiced. To speak the language of the place initiates a process of spatial representation, increased by personal projection on the area. This virtuous circle between spatial and personal representation is a true production process of the area. The valleys in the Dolomites provide an excellent case study in this context. In fact we find a language with a predominantly oral tradition here, the expression of a very strong material culture which is not isolated but, on the contrary, identified with a territory and a population totally immersed in the contemporary world.

However there are two levels of representation: the use of language very closely adheres to the basic spatial structure, while self projection corresponds to a kind of superficial polishing which restores and changes its final aspect. Nevertheless the two levels cannot be separated: personal representation in the area is like a tailor-made suit: it does not adapt to every situation but only fits the structure for which it was made. In the same way spatial structure without culture creates a mute territory.

Anthropological and cultural studies, especially of a certain trend in linguistics and glottology dealing with the perception of space in language (Cardona 1985a, 1985b), move towards an exposure of strong structures of perception and spatial representation. Nevertheless their scientific results, often very interesting to anyone involved in territory, have a distribution limited to the areas of their own discipline and concern. With that in mind, the question that this paper seeks to answer is: How much a linguistic approach can be useful to better understanding the complex structure of the landscape of the Alpine valleys?

2 'Topological' languages

Whoever speaks an Alpine language carefully chooses the adverbs of place and direction according to the morphological structure of his/her particular valley. The use of these adverbs is systematic and happens within a three-dimensional space marked by three axes: the direction of the valley; an axis which runs from the valley bottom to the mountain tops and a cross axis which sections the valley diagonally and is used only when moving from one side to the other. This fact is recorded both in languages of Romance origin and of Alemannic-Bajuvarian origin (Ebnetter 1984; Hinderling 1978; Rowley 1979; Stadelmann 1975).

Nevertheless these axes, perpendicular to each other, are not enough to express the complexity of the valleys and the presence of sharp gradients of reference planes. Thus the Ladin language often uses a combination of vertical and horizontal references in order to 'reproduce' a sloping surface, closer to the valley structure. These combinations schematise the profiles of the slopes but also clarify them according to Cartesian abstraction.

In the case of Ladin, the main directional adverbs which define the orientational axes are (in badiot): *sö* 'towards the mountain tops', *jö* 'towards the valley bottom', *föra* 'towards the valley mouth', *ite* 'towards the middle of the valley'. The adverb *ia* 'over there' is used to describe crossing, both for changing sides or to surmount a crest or a pass, it is also used where the departure or arrival points are more or less at the same altitude. Thus a person who speaks Ladin must combine adverbs to describe the movement in space from one place to another with maximum economy and expressive efficiency. To give the direction according to the valley formation and the altitude on the side of the slope he needs to describe the path to take along the valley contour in detail (Figure 1).

Therefore anyone who wishes to speak Ladin has to contend with the morphology of the land. This is an operation which requires an excellent knowledge of the sites and also how to personally interpret the information given.

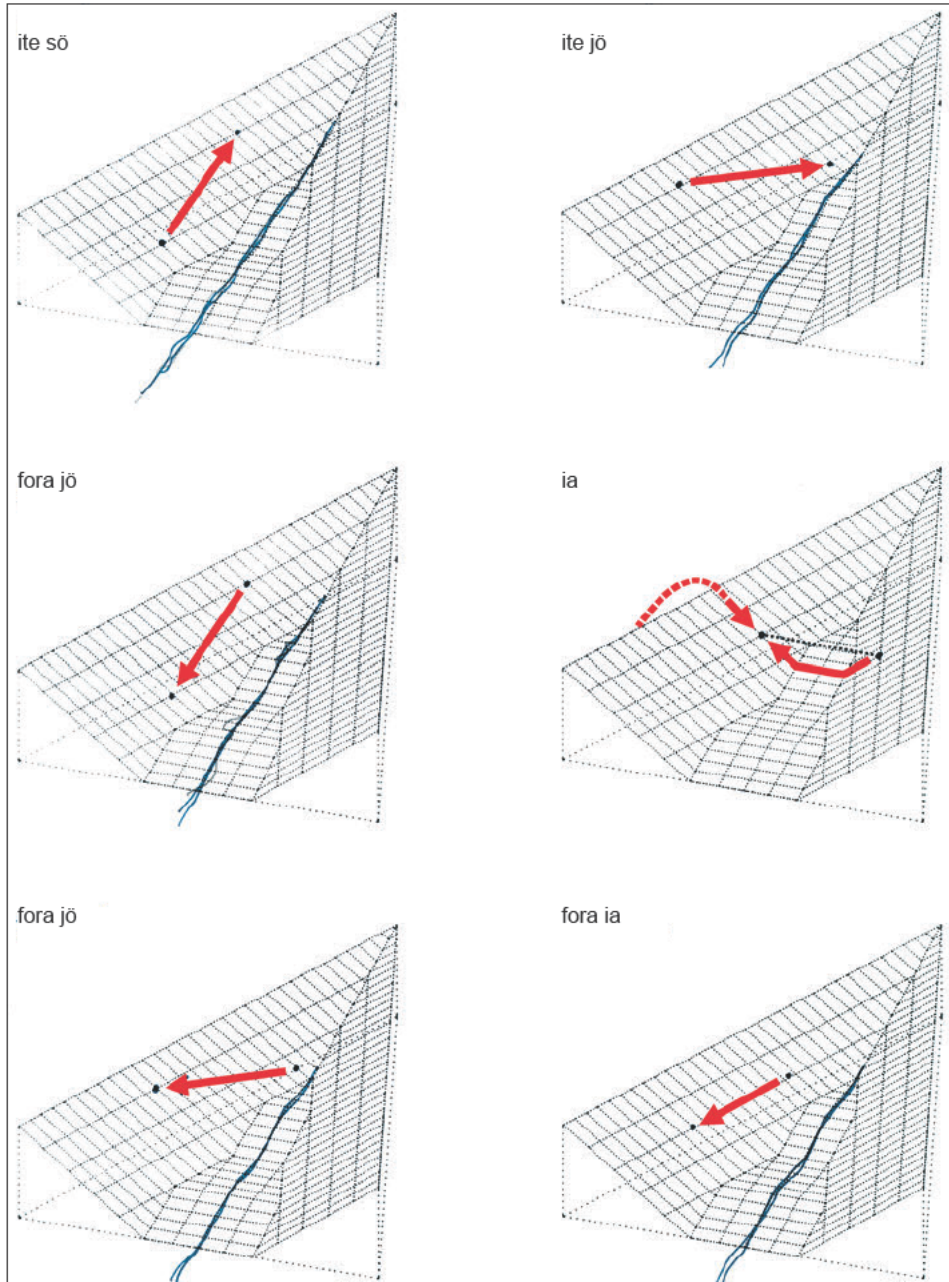


Figure 1: To express the movement, the Ladin language uses a mental three-dimensional representation of a valley, delineated by a network of orthogonal references. The diagrams show the six ways you can express the displacement between a point and the other in the valley. Examples: *ite sō* 'towards the middle of the valley and towards the mountain top'; *ite jō* 'towards the middle of the valley and towards the mountain top'; *fora sō* 'towards the valley mouth and towards the mountain top'; *fora jō* 'towards the valley mouth and towards the valley bottom'.

This is the orientation used in the valley and therefore constitutes an objective perspective. Nevertheless, even the point of view of the speaker, who uses the house where he was born (if he comes from the valley) or where he lives in the valley (if he comes from elsewhere) as implicit references, plays its part in spatial indications. This is the subjective perspective. In other words: a person who speaks Ladin always carries the overall, three-dimensional image of his territory with him, but he reconstructs his own image of the area by mentally running through it while speaking.

This introduces alterations in the method of the use of adverbs: grammar can be 'interpreted' or defined in a less simple way. If this constitutes a weakness in comparison with other more codified languages, it is a formidable strategy in relation with space, an exceptional daily exercise of interpretation and simplification of the fundamental features of the environment from a completely different point of view.

3 Relationship strategies

Speaking a local language in a multi-lingual cultural context, one 'crosses' many territories together rather than just one. These are interwoven and supported by a complex network of relationships but the nature of the relationships implemented by the language is the same as the relations developed by the settlement culture.

It is possible to identify four similar types of 'behaviour' between language and settlement structures. To propose, nominate, delimit and geo-refer are the four spatial relationship strategies implemented by the logical structures in speech and by the organisational structures for inhabiting the landscape. The first two strategies – 'to propose' and 'to nominate' – are focused on the direct relationships between the structure of the Ladin (grammar and vocabulary) and the very complex structure of the landscape of some Dolomite valleys. The last two – 'to (de)limit' and 'to geo-refer' – are focused instead on the types of spatial relationships that this language helps to produce and keep alive. There is in fact a close analogy between these relationship 'experiences', but the catalyst that causes them to interact is the strong symbolic meaning – individual and collective – that is continuously projected onto the landscape. The Rhaeto-Romanic settlement culture is thus imprinted on its language and its landscape in the same way.

3.1 To propose

In 'language structure' prepositions are the linguistic forms which express relationships best. They structure space giving order to internal relationships and, in favouring new ones, prepare, 'dispose' and precede the positions: in fact they are pre-positions.

In the Ladin language, particularly precise in directions and positions in reference to the complex structure of mountain space, the remarkable number of prepositions and adverbs defining place is significantly expanded by a high number of combinatory possibilities which improve the precision of the indications and define them case by case. In this way, combining the fifty or so basic spatial elements (such as above, below, near, towards, between etc.) with 'geographical' prepositions (up,

down, over there, inside, outside) the possible indications become about two hundred, with which to clarify further the position of an object in relation to the slope or in relation to the valley direction (of the river) and the passing or otherwise of the boundary of the surroundings.

This wealth of prepositions corresponds to the variety of spatial relationships. The space is 'rugged': dominated by a sloping surface which is also fractured, irregular and discontinuous. The Ladin valleys, some in particular, are very steep and subject to landslides; there are hardly no flat areas or they are so rare and small that they become very valuable.

Spatial structure is also the reason for the need to clarify the relationship of distance as well as vicinity and proximity in relation to the land. In fact it is necessary to distinguish both a higher and lower point in relation to a central one even in very restricted spaces. The same applies to the opposites inside/outside often seen in relation to the nature of the space of a particular 'fold' in the land. In fact, even in tiny parcels of open space, it is possible to distinguish a part which tends to be found in a more internal area (where the fold 'closes') compared to one in a more external, open area (where the fold is 'smoothed out'). Thus it is possible to further distinguish the 'here' in 'here outside', from a 'here inside', as far as defining a 'here outside inside' which indicates an open space in an 'internal' position in relation to the fold in which it is situated.

In other words: the relationship between objects (houses, trees, boulders, etc.) or spaces (fields, pastures, meadows, enclosures, etc.) have no intrinsic value, but only in relation to the structure of the space they occupy.

In this way, relationships in mountain areas apply to open space particularly and tend to give less importance to objects placed there. Placing objects is conditioned by the nature of the land and their positions come later.

3.2 To nominate

Even words make relationships. To form words or attribute 'names' does not disclose or reveal things. To try to establish a relationship with them is sometimes only allusive, because it has to stop before contact.

The slow process of appropriation of the natural environment comes through the setting-up of a classification system, mental rather than linguistic, to project onto the surrounding world. Every language has developed its own vocabulary, modelled on specific cognitive requirements. For this reason the vocabulary of a local language is a valuable means of classification and simultaneous conceptual revision, beginning with sensations, perceptions and the particular needs of a specific environment (Cardona 1985b).

In the vocabulary of the Ladin language, for example, the oldest lexical elements naturally relate to the physical environment and form the foundation corresponding to the pre-Indo-European languages of the populations who inhabited the Alps before the Roman invasion. Geomorphic words such as: *crep* 'rocky peak', *piž* (pits) 'summit, peak, tip', *toèl* (*toál, ton, tof, tuél*) 'mountain gorge without vegetation, created by a landslide or an avalanche, used to lower timber to the valley', *bòa* (*bova, bouda*)

'landslide', *ròa* (*róia*) 'stony slope where a stream cascades', *trù* (*trutg*, *truoi*, *tróy*, *truoch*) 'path' belong to this group of 'Alpine words' (Heilmann 1985).

Amongst the words of German origin are for example *grünt* 'land, soil', *vèja* 'meadow', *vàra* 'fallow land', *grüzna* 'small farm', *bàita* 'large stretch of land', *flèax* 'thin layer of soil'. These terms (whether pre-Latin, German or Celtic), alongside the lexical base of Latin origin, permit the distinction of a remarkable variety of natural land formations, since every word describes a specific peculiarity, conveying its essential quality rather than a place as such.

Thus a steep slope can be distinguished – according to its gradient, altitude and fertility – as *plà* 'steep, scarcely fertile slope', *tèmpla* 'sloping land', *tlèa* 'mountain slope', *vòsta* 'hilltop', *riva* 'sloping hillside above a field', *frünt* 'sloping face' or *rèncena* 'steep, scarcely fertile field'.

Similarly a generic 'field' does not exist, nor does a 'pasture' but a *tróo* 'grassy field', a *vèja* 'meadow', a *pìncia* 'flat field near the house' or a *münt* 'alpine pasture', a *pastiira* 'breeding pasture', a *tlisiira* 'enclosed pasture' and so on, without counting the remarkable variety of terms to distinguish the types of cultivated land.

In this way the vocabulary isolates the 'landscape typologies' which supply the key to distinguish and understand the orographic complexity, the nature of the land and also the various situations which characterise open space. In other words, the vocabulary of language is also the 'vocabulary of the territory'.

3.3 To (de)limit

To delimit, in the sense of setting limits, calls in fact for careful attention to the nature of the space. The passage from one space to another is the action which the Alpine language approaches with the greatest caution. This is done with a very sophisticated use of the many adverbs of place which do not describe places as such, delimited and measurable, but rather the nature of their connections with space and – crucially – their 'limits': the relationships of vicinity, proximity, distance, closeness or accrual (Serres 1993).

Similarly, the Alpine landscape (even at a very small scale) is constantly crossed by limits, even though almost invisible. They are the properties limits.

In the mountains, open space is rarely public. It can be the property of an individual, as in the case of the small fields for mowing or sowing, or communal, as woodlands and most of the high altitude pastures. In both cases their limits are precisely determined and to violate them means transgressing the rules of community living (Gri 1998).

To violate the sanctity of boundaries is the same as breaking the first rule on which the community is based: the respect for property. This is not only and not usually private property (in the sense of the individual) but most of all communal, whose use by individuals is regulated by internal agreements, aimed to discourage individualism and uncooperative behaviour between families.

For this reason in the Alpine landscape the properties limits are marked with the same caution (and expressive sophistication) with which the language expresses the passage from a space to another. The boundaries dividing the Alpine landscape are

places of particular tension which are signed rather than constructed. These are almost never evident delimitations such as boundary walls or fences, but are 'light' ephemeral signs: fruit trees, where the climate permits, or hazels and raspberry bushes. Fencing is limited to protecting vegetable gardens from wild animals or marking the side of the road to avoid animals escaping from grazing land or 'human' incursions into fields for mowing. Often different properties are not even distinguishable to an untrained eye. An arable field can be divided into various parts just by a few boundary markers made from simple wooden stakes driven into the ground (*tèrmoi* from *TERMEN* < *τέρμα* < sans. *tarati-tarman*).

Otherwise fields can be separated by a strip of uncultivated land which can be used as a right of way or a strip of grass can be left uncut in the case of fields for mowing. This strip must be as thin as a silken thread which gives it its name: *sèda*, the 'thread of grass which marks the edge of the field' (Kramer 1988–1998).

One of the more curious features of the settlements is the creation of small indefinite spaces, neither public nor private, following the individual orientation of the buildings and the fact that they are frequently set back from the roadside. These gaps (*trèbe* from *TRIVIUM*, 'crossroads'), often shielded by gutters, are known as 'clear spaces between the houses where nothing grows because people continually pass through' (Kramer 1988–1998). They are in fact meeting places for social exchange, minimal refuges for a chat out of the rain. Other indefinite spaces within the Alpine settlement are interstices between buildings and barns (*keiusél*), which, unlike the *trèbe* have a more regular geometry and are wide and airy enough to cultivate something.

The semiotics of the definition of these little gaps between buildings refers to their tendency to be cultivated. This explains how the space between things is interpreted and 'seen' at the highest altitudes. This is not conceived as an 'urban' space, but simply as an extension of the open area between houses. Therefore there is not a clear boundary separating the inhabited nucleus from its surrounding space. Houses and fields tend not to be seen as distinct and separate but merely occupying different spaces

3.4 To geo-refer

In the mountains directions are not taken from the stars but a position 'relative' to the nature of the land is chosen, keeping a constant reference to the three-dimensional space of the valley. Rather than orientation, geo-reference is used. This concept of 'relative position' is so deeply interiorised in the Raetho-Romanic culture as to be expressed in the grammar of the language.

There is in fact a relationship that has a crucial linguistic significance: between the person who speaks and the one who listens. This connection is clearly expressed in a Ladin sentence (imperative), using four particles (*ma/mo/pö/pa*), which have the

precise function of emphasising if the content of the sentence is focused on the locutor or the interlocutor (Poletto & Zanuttini 2003)¹.

In other words, Ladin has a precise grammatical form to express the sense of position of two people who are speaking to each other. In this language therefore, my point of view (that is my position) is not absolute but is established by mutual agreement with whoever is listening to me. One could say that 'geo-referring' regarding territory, also corresponds to 'socio-referring' regarding the settlement community.

Let us consider the component standard features of high altitude alpine settlements. The orientation of buildings is closely conditioned by land formation. Even exposure to the sun depends on the spatial structure of the valley and in fact varies according to the prevailing orientation, width, twists and turns in the modulation of the slopes and even the types of rock forming the mountains.

The buildings do not try to compete in prestige with each other: they look for the best position in terms of exposure to the sun, shelter from prevailing winds and the proximity of a constantly flowing stream. Naturally this does not mean that the idea of monumentality does not exist in the Alps. On the contrary, there are many monuments. They are parish churches, watch-towers, fortified houses and also other types of memorials such as isolated trees planted on the birth of a child.

The idea of monumentality is not given by the construction itself, whatever it might be, but by the position it occupies in the context and by its capacity to 'direct it'. For this reason the architectural styles are not as important as their positions. The most symbolic buildings are always placed on prominent sites: they truly give direction to the landscape.

Thus it is not surprising that outcrops in the landscape are often 'marked' by purely symbolic sacred emblems. These are not only churches, hermitages or monasteries but also tiny, detailed features such as small niches and shrines scattered through the area to mark crossroads, intersections or even changes in direction, all the tension points where man has to metaphorically choose his destiny.

Some holy places have always been so. Pre-Christian ruins are often found under the foundations of mediaeval churches, constructed in turn on pagan places of worship. A sacred site keeps its spiritual energy unchanged through the ages, even if the religions and confessions differ. Some of these places are not even marked by buildings and, perhaps for this very reason, have a special sanctity. They are woods, clearings, peaks and are the holy sites of the community.

Spatial mountain imagery is thus dominated by open space rather than buildings: it is the structure of the agricultural and natural land that provides the most important dimension of Alpine settlement.

The valley is in fact conceived as a functional whole in which there is no independence between the villages on the valley floor and the scattered mountain settle-

¹ The particle *ma* is used to express that the order is given to the benefit of the interlocutor: *Mängel ma, che spo crësceste!* (Eat it, and you will grow up!) The particle *mo* indicates a command given according to the benefit of the speaker: *Arjigneme mo cà le bagn!* (Get my bath ready!) The particle *pö* is used to indicate the content of an order given to the benefit of the interlocutor in cases where, from his point of view, this contradicts his presupposition: *Va pö tres adërta fora!* (Go straight ahead! Understood: Although you wanted to turn) The particle *pa* indicates that attention is focused on the entire sentence and that the order is determined: *Fajé-I pa desigiü!* (Just do it!) (Poletto & Zanuttini 2003)

ments. There is a constant dialogue between these two types of settlement and a correspondence among their architectural themes, which are interspersed with fields, pastures, woods and clearings which form the backbone of the settlement. The structure of these spaces gives direction and orientation to the sparse buildings, the formation of the valley determines the course of the main roads on which the villages on the valley floor are situated and the network of small roads and footpaths between farmhouses holds everything together.

There are no compromises in experiencing this discontinuous landscape.

Its unity can only be perceived by exploring it or by climbing to the highest summit and from there 'opening out' this rugged universe.

4 Conclusions

Applying the principles of systemics, this study uses an experimental method based on the interaction between analytical instruments usually held to be very different from each other: the analyses of language and landscape.

Assuming that language and landscape are both relationship strategies used by man to interact with his own living environment, the study involves the mechanisms of these relational strategies and argues some research themes:

- that in some mountainous regions (in this case the Raetho-Romanic Alps) exist clear correspondences between the structure of the local language and the specific characteristics of the landscape;
- that as a result of these similarities it is possible to experiment the use of the analytical instruments belonging to one value (language) to interpret elements of the other (landscape) that would otherwise be incomprehensible;
- that the dynamics of these similarities can be interpreted as the existence of a continuous interchange between these two values in a sort of osmosis which helps to consolidate and evolve the distinctive features of both (thus using production processes of territory and language).

These results can therefore supply another instrument to interpret production mechanisms of landscape diversity in Alpine space as a product of cultural diversity.

Amongst its possible applications: to support the definition of possible interpretations of the Alpine territory beginning with the consideration of the structural characteristics of the mountain space as profound elaborations of the local language that is spoken there (that is consistent with the specific image of the places)².

² This research was conducted with the collaboration of the linguists of Lia Rumantscha in Swiss Alps and of the Ladin Cultural Institutes of Trentino and Südtirol in Italian Alps. Similarly important were the studies of Plangg (1998), Kraas (1992) and Belardi (2003). The terms in Ladin language are taken from Kramer (1988–1998), Servisc de Pianificazion y Elaborazion dl Lingaz Ladin (2002), the Grammar rules from Servisc de Pianificazion y Elaborazion dl Lingaz Ladin (2001).

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