

### Voicing contrasts in Mòcheno and Cimbri

Communities speaking an endangered language are usually characterized by widespread bilingualism of the speakers and isolation from other communities speaking related languages. Given these two characteristics, we expect the sound system of endangered languages to exhibit (a) phenomena of contact (influence of the dominant language), (b) conservative features (with respect to related languages) (c) independent innovations.

The sound system of the German language islands in Northern Italy offers a good testing ground for these three expectations. Mòcheno (valle del Fersina) and Cimbrian (Lusern and Giazza), both with approximately 600 speakers, are in close contact with Northern Italian dialects and Standard Italian (virtually all speakers are bilingual), but are isolated geographically from the German varieties to which they are related and to which few contact exists. Standard German does not play any significant role inside the language islands.

Mòcheno (and, in a similar fashion, Cimbrian) displays an interesting distribution of obstruents. While stops contrast in voicing in almost all contexts, voiced and voiceless fricatives are in complementary distribution. We find voiced [v, z] word-initially, when preceding a vowel or sonorant, and word-medially, following a sonorant or a long vowel (a); voiceless [f, s] occur word-medially after a short vowel and word-finally (b) (cf. Rowley 1982, 1986, Alber, to appear):

a. voiced [v, z]:	word-initially:	zək, 'to say, 3.P.Sg.', vɾɛsn, 'to eat (of animals)'
	after long vowel or sonorant:	bervɛn, 'to throw'; ʃlo:vɛn, 'to sleep'
b. voiceless [f, s]:	after short vowel	ʃafl, 'little tub'; pɛsɐr, 'better'
	word-finally	bɪrf, 'to throw, imperative'; ʃlo:f, 'sleep, noun'

Following van Oostendorp (2003) and Alber (to appear), the distribution of voiced fricatives is analyzed as being due to a process of presonorant voicing, while word-final fricatives undergo the process of final devoicing, typical for German and its dialects. Word-medially, the distribution of fricatives can be explained as follows: in Mòcheno, as in many other German varieties, stressed syllables have to be long (Prokosch's Law). When a stressed syllable has a long vowel or is closed by a consonant, a following fricative can undergo presonorant voicing, just as it does word-initially. After a stressed short vowel, however, a following fricative has to be phonologically long, so as to close the preceding light syllable. Since voiced geminates are marked universally, the fricative surfaces as voiceless, in this context.

The distribution of voiced and voiceless fricatives in Mòcheno cannot be explained as a contact phenomenon. The surrounding Northern Italian varieties too display complementary distribution of the alveolar fricatives [z] and [s], but the distribution is not connected to vowel length and word-initial alveolar fricatives preceding a vowel are consistently voiceless. Furthermore, the labial fricatives [v] and [f] contrast in most positions, in these varieties. Neither can the complementary distribution of Mòcheno fricatives be explained as a conservative feature since previous stages of Middle High German still exhibited a contrast.

We conclude that the distribution of fricatives observed in the German language islands of Northern Italy has to be considered an independent innovation. However, this innovation builds on structural characteristics that Mòcheno shares with other West Germanic varieties. Like most West Germanic varieties, Mòcheno exhibits final devoicing and has developed a strategy to obey Prokosch's Law (stressed syllables must be heavy, hence fricative following a short vowel are long). The only true innovation of the Mòcheno system is the process of presonorant fricative voicing, which takes place also word-initially. Interestingly, Mòcheno shares this process with other varieties at the opposite edge of the West Germanic dialect continuum, as e.g. Roermond Dutch, which show the same complementary distribution for voiced and voiceless fricatives (van Oostendorp 2003).

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