Topics in Linguistics (2026), 27(1), pp. 75–102
10.17846/topling-2026-0004

The sociolinguistics of Venetan: Examining dialect vitality, identity, and language use in a bilingual community

Elena Pagliarini[1*], Anna Lorenzoni[2], Eduardo Naverrete[2]
[1]Centre de Lingüística Teòrica, Departament de Filologia Catalana, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
[2]Dipartimento di Psicologia dello Sviluppo e della Socializzazione, Università di Padova, Italy

Key words

Venetan
Italian
bilingualism
dialect
identity
language vitality
language documentation
minority languages

Abstract

This study investigates the vitality of Venetan, an Italo-Romance dialect spoken in the Veneto region of northeastern Italy, within the broader context of dialect shift and language maintenance. Using a questionnaire-based methodology adapted from bilingualism research, we collected data from 477 adult participants and, for a subset of 85, data on their children's language use. For each participant, a Relative Use Index was calculated to quantify the proportion of Venetan use relative to Italian. Our findings show that older individuals use Venetan more than younger ones, and that women exhibit a greater shift toward Italian than men. A strong sense of local pride and community membership is positively associated with dialect use. Crucially, children's use of Venetan is almost negligible, and parental (but not grandparental) language input significantly predicts children's dialect use, suggesting that intergenerational transmission is already severely compromised. These findings contribute to understanding the sociolinguistic processes driving language shift in Veneto and have implications for cognitive research on bidialectalism, where Venetan has recently attracted growing scholarly interest.

1. Introduction

Italy offers a remarkably rich and diverse linguistic landscape, comparable to few other areas in Europe (Maiden, Martin & Parry, 2006). Its unique history and cultural variety have

* Corresponding author

Cite this paper: Pagliarini, E, Lorenzoni, A., & Navarrete, E. (2026). The sociolinguistics of Venetan: Examining dialect vitality, identity, and language use in a bilingual community. *Topics in Linguistics, 27*(1), 75–102. https://doi.org/10.17846/topling-2026-0004

fostered an extraordinary abundance of languages and dialects.[1] In Italy, besides the official language which is Italian, sometimes referred to as "standard Italian", several Italo-Romance dialects and "regional Italians"[2] are spoken, each with several local sub-varieties (Berruto, 2018). In fact, standard Italian is not typically spoken by the general populace but is instead used primarily in the media and press.

All Italo-Romance dialects are "primary dialects" as per Coșeriu's (1980) use of terminology, i.e., linguistic systems originating directly from spoken Latin in the early Middle Ages; therefore, they can be considered as "sisters" to the standard Italian (Berruto, 2018; Coșeriu, 1980; Loporcaro, 2013). While this common origin might suggest a degree of linguistic unity, it is crucial to recognize that Italian and Italo-Romance dialects are distinct languages, not merely regional varieties of a single language. Apart from Friulan and Sardinian which are recognized under Law 482/99 as *minority languages*, the other Italo-Romance varieties spoken in the Italian territory are not officially acknowledged by the Italian government.[3]

When the term *dialect* is used, it generally refers to a non-official linguistic variety. Nevertheless, from a linguistic perspective, dialects are fully developed linguistic systems. In fact, the difference between an official language and a dialect is not linguistic but simply sociocultural, the reason why standard Italian and regional dialects can be all considered linguistic varieties.

The Italian linguistic situation has been described with the term *dilalia* (Berruto, 1987, 1989): as in the case of (classic) *diglossia*, two distinct varieties of a language – where one is considered the high variety (standard language) and the other the low variety (dialect) – are used within a community, but unlike diglossia which describes a situation in which the high variety is used in formal or official contexts while the low variety is used in informal or everyday speech, in the case of *dilalia* there is a functional overlap in spoken domains, with both low variety and high variety used in everyday conversation and primary socialization.

One region where dialect is allegedly very diffused is Veneto. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon. Historically, Veneto's prominence during the Republic of Venice era surely played a significant role. The Republic of Venice was a major cultural and economic hub, fostering an environment where the Venetan dialect flourished, especially with the advent of

[1] In the present paper we apply a narrower definition of "dialect" in the Italian context, referring to distinct Italo-Romance varieties that developed independently from Latin, while often the term "dialect" is used more broadly to describe any variety of a language, including regional, social, and ethnic variations.

[2] For "regional Italians" we mean varieties of Italian where some prosodic and lexical patterns of the local dialect are present.

[3] Article 2 of Law 482/99 states that the Italian Republic protects the language and culture of Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian and Croatian communities, as well as those speaking French, Franco-Provençal, Friulan, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian (Law 482/99, "Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche").

the Venetan printing press. The prestige associated with the Republic of Venice further elevated the status of the Venetan dialect, contributing to its vitality over time. In cognitive science, Venetan has recently been a subject of interest in the context of the effect of bidialectalism, whereby bidialectalism refers to the practice of speaking a dialect alongside a standard language (Lorenzoni et al., 2022; Miozzo et al., 2020; Scaltritti et al., 2017). However, as reported by the census of the ISTAT, which is the Italian National Institute of Statistics responsible for collecting, analysing, and disseminating statistical information about various aspects of the country, the use of dialects in Italy – and in Veneto as well – has been decreasing dramatically in the last decades (ISTAT, 2007, 2014, 2017). This fact is scientifically documented by recent research on language acquisition reporting that none of the children tested in that project were fluent in Venetan (Sanfelici & Roch, 2021). This evidence suggests that Venetan may be declining and thus warrants consideration as an endangered language. This research aims at giving a picture of the current sociolinguistic situation in Veneto, by taking into account demographic, sociolinguistic and sociopolitical variables. In order to assess the vitality of Venetan, we collected data by means of a questionnaire from adult participants and – for those participants who declared themselves to have a child aged between 3 and 18 years – we collected data about the children. We measured the usage of Venetan by calculating the proportion of Venetan to Italian used by each participant (and child, where relevant), drawing from prior studies on bilingualism (Cunnings, 2012).

1.1 The Venetan dialect

One of the regions where dialect seems to still be vital is Veneto, a region situated in the north-east of Italy; according to the 2017 ISTAT survey, the percentage of dialect used in the family context is 30.6% in Veneto. Venetan, as the other Italian dialects, is an Italo-Romance variety. Besides Veneto, Venetan is spoken in other Italian regions such Trentino and Friuli Venezia Giulia as well as in Slovenia, Croatia, Mexico and Brazil; the estimated number of speakers in the world is 9-10 million[4] (UNESCO). Linguistically, Venetan includes four groups: the Venetian group (Venezia, both lagoon and mainland); the central group (Padova, Vicenza, Polesine); the Western Venetan (Verona); and the North Venetan group (also referred to as Trevigiano-Feltrino-Bellunese) (Cortelazzo, 1981; Loporcaro, 2013; Zamboni, 1974, 1979). Venetan is neither recognized nor protected by the Italian government. However, at the regional level, Venetan is officially recognized as the "Venetan language" (Law 8/2007). Inspired by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, this regional law supports the protection and the enhancement of the Venetan linguistic heritage. It promotes initiatives to study the Venetan language, its history, and culture at all educational levels, it

[4] In the mountainous areas of the Veneto region, non-Venetan dialects are spoken, such as Cimbrian, Ladin and a variety of Tyrolean Bavarian (called Sappadino in Italian).

supports scientific research on Venetan linguistic heritage, and it establishes an official date – March 25th, day of the foundation of Venice – to celebrate the "Festa del Popolo Veneto" (the Venetan People's Day), for the purpose of promoting awareness of the Venetan culture. Furthermore, Venetan is a language internationally recognized by UNESCO, whose international identification code is ISO 639-3 "VEC".

In the last decade, many revitalization initiatives promoting and reviving the Venetan language have emerged. These efforts have coincided with the goals of some political parties advocating for greater autonomy or self-determination for Veneto within the Italian state (Cavallin, 2010). These parties seek to increase regional sovereignty and decision-making power, reflecting a desire for more localized governance. For Venetan people, Venetan is a factor of identity and a symbol of membership of a particular community and – as is the case for many other Italian dialects – it is not always perceived as a low variety by its speakers. However, despite the regional language revitalization initiatives, the positive attitude towards Venetan and the recent interest of the scientific community (see the Discussion), the comparison among the ISTAT data on the usage of dialect in Veneto from 2000 to 2015 (ISTAT, 2007, 2017)[5] displays a decreasing trend, as reported in Table 1. A recent study on the acquisition of Venetan[6] showed that none of the preschool children tested were able to fully produce a story in dialect (Sanfelici & Roch, 2021). The task involved narrative elicitation in Italian and dialect in both telling and retelling modes, followed by comprehension questions. In the storytelling mode, the child was instructed to pick a picture story from an envelope, to examine the images, and to narrate a story without displaying the pictures to the experimenter. Following the story production, the experimenter posed questions to evaluate the child's comprehension of the narrative. In the retelling mode, after selecting an envelope, the child and the experimenter viewed the pictures together. Initially, the experimenter conveyed the model story to the child. Then, the child was asked to retell the story. Subsequently, comprehension questions were posed to the child. The children tested showed some comprehension of dialect, but their production was close to zero. The UNESCO, by applying nine main factors[7] for estimating language vitality and calculating an

[5] The data about the year 2000 are available in the document by the ISTAT (2007). The ISTAT census of 2012 (ISTAT 2014) reports data divided by geographical areas, but not by administrative regions; therefore they are not informative for our purposes.

[6] The study focused on Vicentino, a dialect of the central group spoken in Vicenza.

[7] The nine factors are: Factor 1. Intergenerational Language Transmission; Factor 2. Absolute Number of Speakers; Factor 3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population; Factor 4. Shifts in Domains of Language Use; Factor 5. Response to New Domains and Media; Factor 6. Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy; Factor 7. Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use; Factor 8. Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language; Factor 9. Type and Quality of Documentation (scale) recognized as a vulnerable and endangered language.

Endangerment Index (Brenzinger et al., 2003),[8] established Venetan as a "vulnerable" language, which according to the *Atlas of the world's languages in danger* (Moseley, 2010) means that "Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)". However, when Sanfelici and Roch's results are considered, Venetan should be classified as "definitely endangered" meaning that "Children no longer learn the language as the mother tongue in the home" or even as "severely endangered" meaning that "The language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves" (Moseley, 2010).

Table 1. Use of Venetan in different communicative contexts, calculated on population aged 6 years or older, in three different time points (ISTAT, 2007, 2017)

USAGE OF VENETAN ACROSS YEARS			
		Census 2000	
	Within the family	**With friends**	**With strangers**
Only or mainly Italian	22.6	23.7	52.4
Only or mainly dialect	42.6	38.2	14.2
Both Italian and dialect	29.8	34.4	32
Another language	3.9	2.7	0.2
		Census 2006	
	Within the family	**With friends**	**With strangers**
Only or mainly Italian	23.6	24.2	53.7
Only or mainly dialect	38.9	37.3	15.7
Both Italian and dialect	31	33.3	28.7
Another language	6	4.3	1.3
		Census 2015	
	Within the family	**With friends**	**With strangers**
Only or mainly Italian	28.5	30.6	65.6
Only or mainly dialect	30.6	28.7	8.7
Both Italian and dialect	31.4	33.6	23.1
Another language	9	6.2	2.1

[8] More recently, the Language Endangerment Index (LEI) has been developed within the Endangered Languages Project (ELP, endangeredlanguages.com). It takes into account four factors (intergenerational transmission, absolute number of speakers, speaker number trends – whether increasing or decreasing, and domains of use) and it can be applied even when limited information is available (Lee & Van Way, 2016). However, the Endangered Languages Project (ELP, endangeredlanguages.com) does not report the level of endangerment of Venetan.

1.2 Aims of the present study

The present study aimed at investigating the vitality of Venetan based on data collected by means of questionnaires administered online to people born and living in Veneto. We quantified the use of Venetan by estimating for each participant (and child, where it applies) the relative use of Venetan in relation to Italian, following previous research on bilingualism. The novelties of our study compared to the data present in the literature are:

1) Calculation of the degree of bilingualism considering the use of Italian and Venetan. Drawing from scientific and applied fields such as psychology, linguistic and education in which questionnaires are employed to identify the bilingualism profiles of participants or to estimate their degree of bilingualism (Cunnings, 2012), we designed a questionnaire aiming at capturing participants' percentage usage of Venetan and of standard Italian in different social contexts and their perceived proficiency in Venetan (Lorenzoni et al., 2022; Scaltritti et al. 2017). Therefore, for each participant (and child, where it applies) the relative use of Venetan in relation to Italian was calculated. This relative use of language is the dependent variable of the main analysis reported in this work.
2) The estimation of sociopolitical and sociolinguistic variables. We test whether these variables predict the use of Venetan.
3) The study of the relation between parents' input and their children. For those participants having at least a child ranging for 3 to 18 years, we tested whether the use of dialect of parents and grandparents could predict the use of dialect of their children.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Seven hundred and seventy-nine participants filled in the questionnaire. All participants lived in Veneto at the time of the study and lived in Veneto during their childhood. All participants gave their written informed consent to fill in the questionnaire. However, when asked at the end of the questionnaire for their consent for their results to be used, a few participants (N = 11) denied their consent; by consequence their questionnaires were removed from the analyses. Other exclusion criteria were: questionnaires not completed (N = 224); participants did the questionnaire more than once (N = 6); participants took more than 30 minutes to complete the questionnaires, as it might suggest a lack of attention (N = 5); participants who replied that when they were a child either they did not live in Veneto or they replied with more than one province (N = 39); participants who replied that they are currently not living in Veneto (N = 17). So, 477 questionnaires were included in the analyses. Table 2 reports the demographic information of the participants whose data collected through the questionnaires

were included in the analyses. Of these 477 participants, 85 replied affirmatively to the question "do you have a child/children aged between 3 and 18 years?" and were accordingly asked to fill in the part of the questionnaires regarding the use of dialect of one of their children.

Table 2. Demographic information of the participants included in the analyses. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

All participants (N = 477)			**Participants with a child (between age 3 and 18** (N = 85)		
Mean Age	Age range	Gender	Mean Age	Age range	Gender
42.14 (15)	18 - 81	241 female 236 male	43.52 (7.18)	30 - 66	58 female 27 male

2.2 Materials

The questionnaire consisted of seven parts, though f) and g) were accessed only by participants who replied having a child between the age of 3 and 18 years: a) *general information* including demographic information such as age, gender, place of birth, current city of residence, city of residence during childhood; b) *perceived proficiency* in comprehension and production of the dialect used in the province of residence during childhood rated using a 1-10 scale (1 = "none"; 10 = "perfect"); c) *language use*, in which the participant quantified the % of use of Italian and dialect in various daily activities, such as interactions with family, at work, etc.; d) *socio-linguistic information* regarding the attitude towards the dialect and its impact on the acquisition of Italian; e) *sociopolitical information* concerning the pride and the feeling of membership of the local community rated using a 1-7 scale (1 = "little"; 7 = "a lot").

A Relative Use Index was calculated for each participant applying the following formula to the daily activities answered in part c of the questionnaire (*language use*): (mean value in Italian language use – mean value in Venetan language use) / (mean value in Italian language use + mean value in Venetan language use). The score corresponds to the Relative Use Index for a particular individual. This ratio will score from -1 to 1. The value of 0 indicates a perfectly balanced bidialectal speaker, that is, with a similar amount of use of Italian and dialect. Positive values indicate an inclination towards the use of Italian whereas negative values indicate the inclination towards the use of dialect (see Cunnings, 2012; Lorenzoni et al., 2021; 2022).

Participants who replied having a child between the age of 3 and 18 years completed also parts *f)* and *g)*: *f) language use by the child*, in which the participant quantified the use of Italian and dialect in various daily activities by one of their children; and, *g) input* regarding the language used by the parent and the grandparents to interact with their child/grandchild in various contexts, such as school, family, etc. The same calculation as for the Relative Use Index was applied with these participants to establish the Child Relative Use Index of the

children, based on part f of the questionnaire (language use by the child). Finally, we calculated the Relative Input Index by applying the following formula to the responses given to the questions of part g) of the questionnaire (*input* regarding the language used by the parent and the grandparents to interact with their child/grandchild in various context*)*: (mean value of Italian input – mean value of Venetan input) / (mean value of Italian input + mean value of Venetan input). It was calculated separately for the parent and for the grandparents. Positive values indicate a preference for using Italian in communicative exchanges with children whereas negative values indicate a preference towards the use of dialect.

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online, through the Qualtrics platform (Qualtrics, 2019). Participants were invited to access the test by clicking on a link or by scanning a QR code. The link was disseminated in journals and local magazines published in Veneto, reaching both urban and rural areas and targeting a broad audience.

The procedure was approved by the local Research Ethics Committees of the University of Padova (Protocol number: 4288; Title: *Quantifying bilingual experience in children and adults in dialectal context: can adult proficiency predict child proficiency*). The questionnaire, data and scripts for analysis can be downloaded from the OSF platform at the following link: https://osf.io/ufh3b/.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive analyses

Table 3 reports participants' descriptive variables. It shows that participants perceive their proficiency in the comprehension of dialect higher than their proficiency in production, but in both cases the perception of proficiency is very high. Furthermore, most of the participants had an early exposure to dialect. Participants are very proud to belong to Veneto and have a strong feeling of membership to the local community.

Table 3. Mean participants descriptive variables (Standard deviations are reported in parentheses).

	All participants (N = 477)	**Participants with a child between age 3 and 18 (N = 85)**
Mean proficiency in production	8.36 (2.12)	8.71 (2.12)
Mean proficiency in comprehension	9.15 (1.26)	9.38 (1.22)
% of participants exposed to dialect before the age of 10	77.56 (at home), 88.25 (by grandparents)	76.47 (at home), 88.23 (by grandparents)
Mean pride	5.84 (1.56)	5.76 (1.66)
Mean feeling of membership	6.02 (1.35)	6.02 (1.41)

The mean Relative Use Index is 0.33, ranging from -1 (dialect) and 1 (Italian). The histogram shows the frequency distribution of the Relative Use Index; see Figure 1. For 121 participants, the Relative Use Index was below zero, so these participants tend to use more dialect; for 344 participants, the Relative Use Index was above zero, showing a tendency to use more Italian. Twelve participants were perfectly balanced bilinguals. So Italian is largely used, but dialect is also fairly used. The mean Relative Use Index of participants with a child between age 3 and 18 is 0.37, ranging from -0.8 and 1. Linear models were performed with the Relative Use Index as dependent variables; the demographic, sociopolitical and sociolinguistics variables were added as fixed factors.

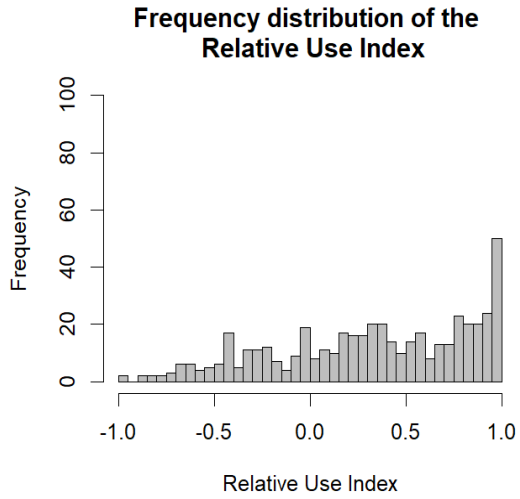

Figure 1. Histogram of the distribution of the Relative Use Index. The histogram shows the distribution of the 477 participants included in the final analysis. A Relative Use Index of zero indicates a perfectly balanced bidialectal speaker. A positive Relative Use Index value indicates more use of Italian; a negative Relative Use Index value indicates more use of dialect.

3.2 Linear Model Results: Effect of Demographic Variables

When Age was introduced as a fixed effect, it turned out to be significant (Estimate = -0.007, SE = 0.0015, t = - 4.48, $p < 0.001$). The results show that the use of Venetan increases in function with age; see Figure 2 panel A. Gender also turned out to be significant when introduced as a fixed effect (Estimate = - 0.15, SE = 0.05, t = -3.2, $p < 0.01$). Female participants tend to speak more Italian than male participants; see Figure 2 panel B. No difference in age was found between men and women ($p = 0.51$).

3.3 Sociopolitical variables

The feeling of membership and pride in being part of the local community were analysed separately in two linear models due to collinearity ($r(475) = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$). The pride in being part of the local community predicts the Relative Use Index (Estimate = -0.07, SE =

0.014, t = -4.99, $p < 0.001$) as well as membership (Estimate = -0.10, SE = 0.02, t = -6.11, $p < 0.001$); see Figure 3. The results show that the use of Venetan increases in function with the feeling of membership and the pride in being part of the local community.

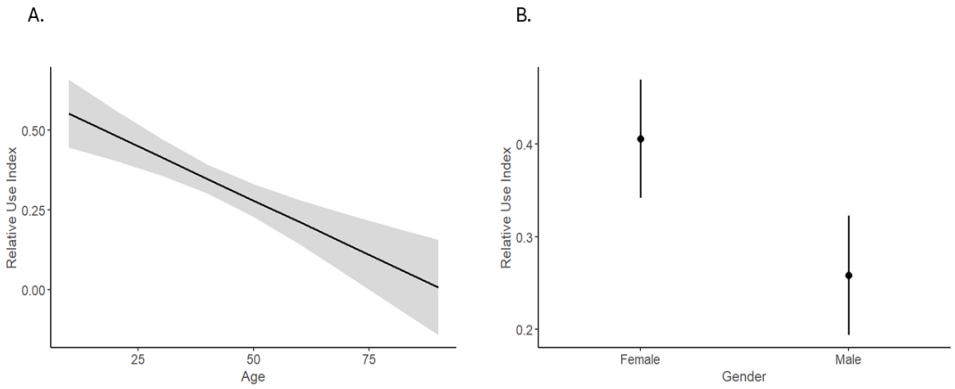

Figure 2. Panel A. Effect of age. The Relative Use Index was lower for older individuals, indicating they use more dialect than younger individuals. Panel B. Effect of gender. The Relative Use Index was higher for females, indicating that females use more Italian than males, who in turn use more dialect than women.

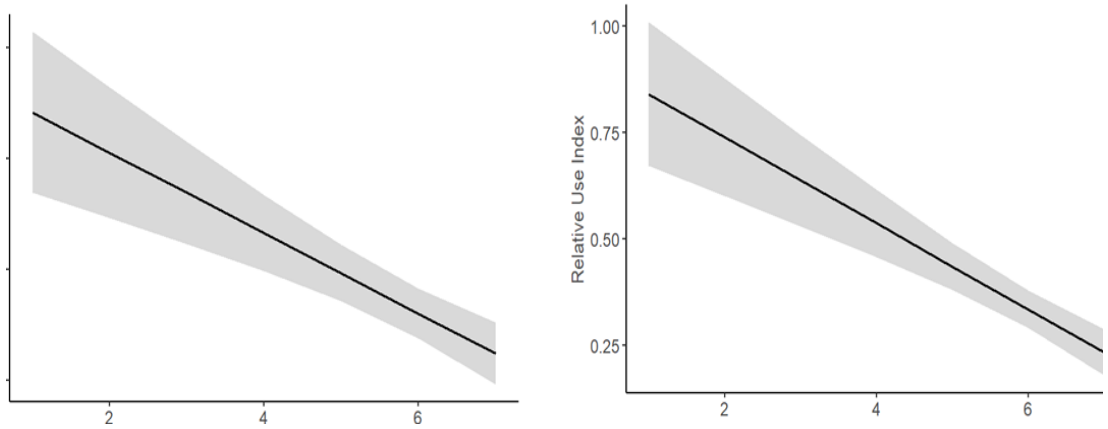

Figure 3. Panel A. Effect of pride in being part of the local community. The Relative Use Index is lower for those participants who feel a high level of pride in being part of the local community indicating they use more dialect. Panel B. Effect of Membership. The Relative Use Index is lower for those participants who feel a strong membership of the local community, indicating they use more dialect.

3.4 Sociolinguistics variables

The percentage of participants who consider the dialect to have the same status as a "standard" language is 79.87, and 93.71 percent of the participants consider dialects to be part of a linguistic heritage to be protected since they represent the history and the identity of a community. When opinion about the dialect as a language was considered as a predictor for the Relative Use Index, it turned out to be significant (Estimate = -0.37, SE = 0.05, t = -6.74, $p < 0.001$), indicating that participants who consider the dialect as having the status

of a language tend to use more dialect. Participants who consider dialects to be part of linguistic heritage also tend to significantly use more dialect than Italian (Estimate = -0.36, SE = 0.09, t = -3.82, $p < 0.001$). Then, we consider whether participants perceive learning the dialect and foreign languages as a threat to the acquisition of Italian. Three hundred and eighty-seven participants consider neither the learning of dialect nor of foreign languages as a menace to the acquisition of Italian. Seventy-five participants considered the learning of dialect as a threat to the acquisition of Italian, but not the learning of foreign languages. We explore whether the different opinions concerning Venetan as a threat to the acquisition of Italian determines language/dialect use. The results indicate that individuals who perceive the learning of the dialect as a threat to the learning of Italian tend to speak less Venetan than those individuals that do not perceive it as a threat (Estimate = 0.27, SE = 0.06, t = 4.5, $p < 0.001$); see Figure 4. In addition, few participants (N = 8) display the opposite attitude, where the learning of foreign languages is seen as a danger to the acquisition of Italian but not dialect; and another few participants (N = 9) consider both the learning of dialect and the learning of foreign languages as a menace to the acquisition of Italian. No further analysis was performed in these two groups.

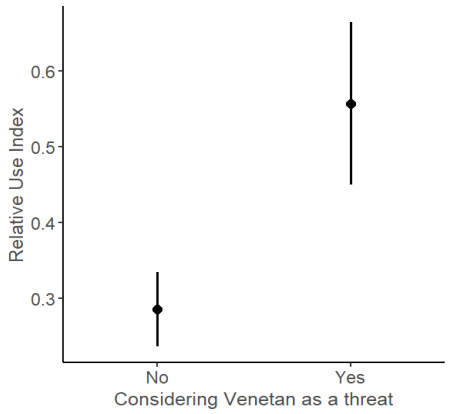

Figure 4. Relation between the Relative Use Index and the consideration of Venetan as a threat to the acquisition of Italian. The Relative Use Index was higher for those participants who perceive Venetan as a threat to the acquisition of Italian, indicating that they use more Italian than dialect.

3.5 Analysis on responses about children and teenagers

We now turn to consider the data on children and teenagers, collected through the questions answered by their parents (a subset of 85 questionnaires). The mean Child Relative Use Index is 0.87, indicating that children use more Italian than dialect in their daily activities and social communications and dialect is scarcely used (Figure 5). The range of the Child Relative Use Index is - 0.4 and 1. For one child, the Child Relative Use Index was below zero, meaning that they use more dialect; for 82 children, the Child Relative Use Index was above zero, implicating a major use of Italian. Two were reported to be perfectly balanced bilinguals. So,

in the young population, Italian is almost exclusively used at the expense of dialect; see Figure 5.

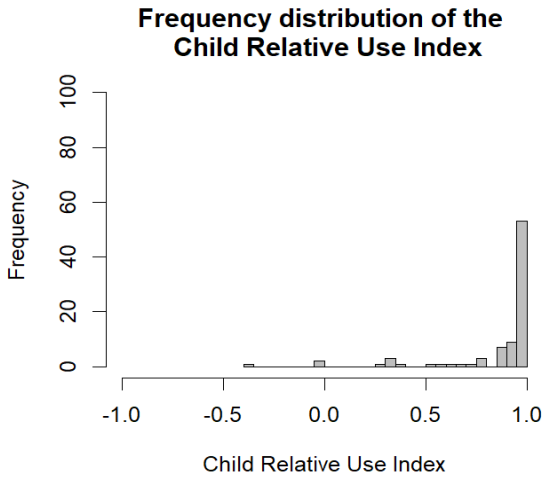

Figure 5. Histogram of the distribution of the Child Relative Use Index. The distribution of the Child Relative Use Index of the 85 child participants' data included in the final analysis is reported. A Child Relative Use Index of zero indicates a perfectly balanced bidialectal speaker. A positive Child Relative Use Index value indicates more use of Italian; a negative Child Relative Use Index value indicates more use of dialect.

The mean Parents Relative Input Index is 0.62, indicating that children's parents use more Italian than dialect in their daily activities and social communications and that dialect is scarcely used. The range of the Parents Relative Input Index is - 1 and 1. For 6 parents, the Parents Relative Input Index was below zero, meaning that they use more dialect; for 72 parents, the Parents Relative Input Index was above zero, implicating a major use of Italian. Five were reported to be perfectly balanced bilinguals. The mean Grandparents Relative Input Index is 0.15, indicating that children's grandparents use more Italian than dialect in their daily activities and social communications and dialect is scarcely used; see Figure 6. The range of the Grandparents Relative Input Index is - 1 and 1. For 28 grandparents, the Grandparents Relative Input Index was below zero, meaning that they use more dialect; for 49 grandparents, the Grandparents Relative Input Index was above zero, implicating a major use of Italian. Six were reported to be perfectly balanced bilinguals; see Figure 6. The Relative Input Index of the parents and the one of the grandparents were introduced as fixed effects in a linear model with Child Relative Use Index as dependent variable. The Parent Relative Input Index significantly predicts the Child Relative Use (Estimate = 0.37, SE = 0.05, t = 7.871, $p < 0.001$) whereas the Grandparents Relative Input Index was not significant (Estimate = 0.30, SE = 0.03, t = 0.88, $p = 0.38$). Specifically, the input of the parent predicts the language used by the children whereby the more the parents use Italian in their exchanges with their children the more the children use Italian.

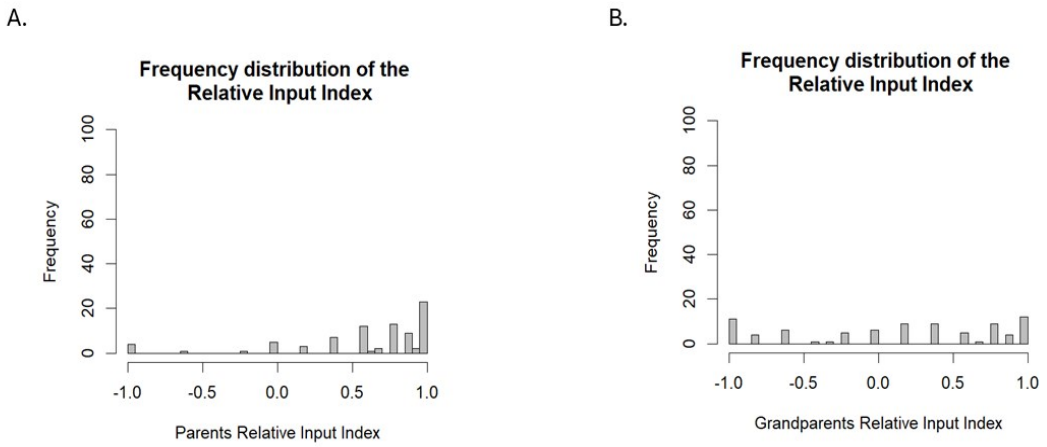

Figure 6. Panel A. Histogram of the distribution of the Parents Relative Input Index. Panel B. Histogram of the distribution of the Grandparents Relative Input Index. The data plotted referred to the 85 child participants included in the final analysis. A Parent/Grandparent Relative Input Index of zero indicates a perfectly balanced bidialectal speaker. A positive Parent/Grandparent Relative Input value indicates more use of Italian; a negative Parent/Grandparent Relative Input value indicates more use of dialect.

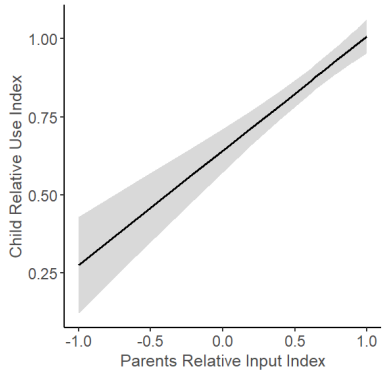

Figure 7. Child Relative Use Index and Parents Relative Use Index. The input of the parents predicts the language used by the children.

In addition, we explore whether the sociopolitical and sociolinguistic opinions of the parents modulate the Relative Input Index. There was a positive correlation between sociopolitical variables and the Relative Input Index of the parents, the higher the pride in being part of the local community (Estimate = -0.067, SE = 0.033, t= -2.01, p = 0.05) and the feeling of membership (Estimate = -0.09, SE = 0.04, t = -2.02, p = 0.03), the more use of Venetan with their children; see Figure 8. None of the sociolinguistics variables, i.e., status and threat of the dialects in relation to standard languages, were significant predictors of the language used by the parent, i.e., Relative Input Index, in their communicative exchanges with their child (p > 0.083).

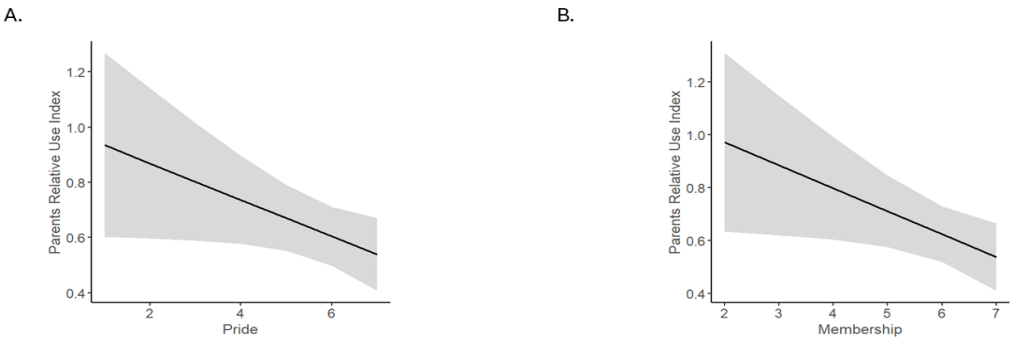

Figure 8. Panel A. Effect of pride in being part of the local community. The higher the pride in being part of the local community, the more Venetan is used by parents with their children. Panel B. Effect of Membership. The higher the feeling of membership of the local community, the more Venetan is used by parents with their children.

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to cast a fresh light on the contemporary status of Venetan. In particular, we aimed at quantifying the percentage usage of Venetan and of standard Italian by different segments of the population in Veneto, in order to establish the vitality of the use of dialect. Furthermore, we aimed at investigating which demographic, sociopolitical and sociolinguistic variables modulate the use of dialect. To this end, we asked people born and living in Veneto to fill in a questionnaire about their use of dialect and Italian in different social contexts, and – for those respondents who had a child aged between 3 and 18 years – we asked about the use of dialect and Italian of their children in different social contexts. Following previous research on bilingualism (Cunnings, 2012), we estimated for each participant (and child, where it applies) an index indicating the relative use of Venetan in relation to Italian which was used as our dependent variables in our analyses.

4.1 Findings on the adult Venetan population

Our data show that Italian is predominantly used among the Venetan population ranging in age from 18 to 81 years. However, dialect use remains robust, particularly among older speakers, in line with Vietti and Dal Negro (2012) who reported that the population born since the 1950s is more oriented towards the exclusive use of Italian. When controlling for gender, our data showed that women significantly use more Italian than dialect as compared to men. The limited use of dialect by women emerges also at the Italian national level in the ISTAT censes (ISTAT, 2007, 2014, 2017) and more generally in the literature (Beaulieu & Cichocki, 2002; Holmquist, 1985; Lippi-Green, 1989). This phenomenon is known as Labov's gender paradox (Labov, 1990), due to women preferring to use a prestigious linguistic code like that of the standard language (Goeman & Jongenburger, 2009; Trudgill, 1972), yet men are often associated with the use of more prestigious speech. Our findings contradict those of

Vietti & Dal Negro, 2012, who found gender to be a non-significant variable. Gender differences in employing non-standard dialects have been documented among children and adolescents (Barbu et al., 2014; Cremona & Bates, 1977; Habib, 2014), indicating potential gender disparities in the preservation and utilization of regional vernaculars, wherein boys seem more influenced by their social environment in adopting local linguistic features compared to girls.

The pride and the feeling of membership to the local community are rated very high and they significantly predict the use of dialect, in line with previous research showing a relation between ethnic identity and linguistic preferences (Karyolemou, 2002; Kraemer & Birenbaum, 1993; Laoire, 2007; McGroarty, 1996; Papapavlou & Pavlou, 2007; Papapavlou & Satraki, 2014; Tabouret-Keller, 1997). Likewise, participants who consider the dialect having the status of a language and who believe that dialects are linguistic heritage that must be protected, lean towards a higher use of dialect with respect to Italian. The positive attitude towards the dialect is even more evident when its learning is compared to the learning of foreign languages: most of the participants do not perceive their learning as a menace for the acquisition of standard Italian. Nevertheless, the participants who think that learning a dialect can jeopardize the acquisition of Italian speak significantly more Italian than dialect.

While the direction of these effects is expected, their magnitude and the context in which they occur merit closer examination. The estimated effect of membership on the Relative Use Index (Estimate = -0.10 per scale point) indicates that a shift from the lowest to the highest possible score on the 7-point membership scale would correspond to a predicted shift of approximately 0.60 units on the Relative Use Index, which spans the full range from -1 (exclusive dialect use) to +1 (exclusive Italian use). Considering that the mean Relative Use Index for the sample is 0.33, that is already substantially tilted toward Italian, this effect size is meaningful: it accounts for a sizable portion of the index's practical range. The effect of pride (Estimate = -0.07) is somewhat smaller but in the same direction. Importantly, the two variables are highly collinear ($r = 0.76$), and they were accordingly entered in separate models; their overlapping variance means that the individual estimates are likely conservative, and that the shared attitudinal construct they reflect is a stronger predictor of dialect use than either coefficient taken in isolation would suggest.

What is perhaps the most striking feature of the present data is not the existence of the attitude–behaviour relationship, but rather the high absolute level of pride and feeling of membership observed alongside continued language shift. The sample mean for pride is 5.84 out of 7, and for membership 6.02 out of 7 – both approaching ceiling. Yet the mean Relative Use Index remains positive (0.33), indicating that even among a population with exceptionally strong local identity, Italian predominates in everyday communication. This dissociation between declared affective attachment to Venetan identity and actual dialect use echoes a broader pattern documented across Europe in communities whose regional languages are in

decline. A comparable tension has been observed for Irish (Laoire, 2007) and for Sardinian (Garraffa et al., 2017), where community members consistently express pride in the minority variety while Italian remains the dominant choice in practice. The Venetan data appear to fit this broader typology of "positive-attitude, low-use" communities, suggesting that for Venetan – as for these other varieties – attitudinal change may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for halting language shift. The effect of identity on use, while genuine and statistically robust, appears bounded: strong identity seems to slow the shift rather than reverse it.

A further point of interest concerns the sociolinguistic attitude variables. The finding that 79.87% of participants consider Venetan to have the status of a standard language, and that 93.71% consider it a heritage to be protected, are remarkably high figures. These percentages exceed those typically reported in surveys of comparable regional varieties. For Sardinian, Garraffa et al. (2017) found strong protective attitudes toward the dialect in their sample, but the proportion of speakers actively endorsing its status as a distinct language rather than a corrupt form of Italian was considerably more contested. The near-unanimous positive framing in the Venetan data may partly reflect the long-standing institutional support for the variety through regional Law 8/2007 and the influence of autonomist political movements, which have actively promoted a prestige narrative around Venetan. It may, however, also partially reflect the social desirability pressure acknowledged in the limitations: respondents recruited through regional media may over-represent those already engaged with Venetan identity.

4.2 Findings on the young Venetan population

Our results revealed that children aged between 3 and 18 years predominantly use Italian to the detriment of the dialect. This finding is particularly important because the national censes by ISTAT do not include children aged 3-6 years in the sample (ISTAT, 2007, 2014, 2017).

Parents primarily use Italian when interacting with their children and the parent input variable significantly predicts the predominant use of Italian by children. These results resemble those reported by Sanfelici and Roch (2021). They collected the quantity of input the child was exposed to and the quantity of output (of both dialect and of Italian) by means of a Questionnaire for Parents of Bilingual Children filled out by the parents. Of the 44 children they tested in their study on the acquisition of Vicentino, 13 children were reported to exclusively receive input in Italian, 7 children were reported to almost exclusively receive Italian input, 20 children were reported to receive mainly Italian input, and only 4 children were reported to receive mainly dialect input. Similarly to our findings, these authors also reported that the quantity of input predicted the quantity of output reported in the questionnaire.

The fact that in our study the input of the grandparents was not a significant predictor of the language use by children might be due to another variable we did not consider and might affect this dimension, which is the time spent by grandparents as caregivers.

Finally, our results showed that the more positive the attitude towards the local community is, the higher the use of dialect by parents when interacting with their children, whereas the attitude towards the dialect as a language is not a significant predictor for the language adopted by parents with their children.

4.3 The sociolinguistic perspective

The findings we report here are relevant from a sociolinguistic perspective as well as from a cognitive one. From a sociolinguistic perspective, our main question driving the interest in this project was the assessment of the vitality of Venetan. It is undeniable that the fate of regional dialects hinges significantly on the competency and conduct of young individuals. When focusing on the data on the child population, Venetan can be considered "severely endangered" which means that "The language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves" (Moseley, 2010). In fact, children do not use the dialect and parents mainly provide Italian input to their children. Therefore, the exposure to the language, which is the main ingredient necessary for language acquisition to take place, is lacking (De Houwer, 2011; Unsworth, 2013). Importantly, parents' linguistic choice contrasts with the positive attitude towards the local community and towards the dialect as a language to be learned and to be protected. Why do dialectal speakers whose inclination towards the dialect is far more than positive not create a young generation of dialect speakers? One possibility is that participants give deviant answers that do not match their feeling in order to comply with the social expectation (Henerson et al., 1987). In other words, the positive attitude that emerges from our questionnaires might reflect the vision that participants think they should have according to social conventions, but not what they really perceive. Yet, the fact that the young population is losing the dialect – which translates into the endangered status of the dialect – remains valid (Sanfelici & Roch, 2021). Future works should address the motivations at the basis of parents' choice to not use the dialect with their children more directly.

A further consideration that merits explicit attention concerns the metalinguistic dimension of the data, specifically what respondents themselves understand as "dialect" versus "Italian" when filling in the questionnaire. The present study, in line with much of the established bilingualism literature it draws on, operates within a classical dichotomy between standard Italian and Venetan dialect. This framing is theoretically grounded and methodologically tractable, but the actual linguistic landscape in Veneto is considerably more layered. As Pellegrini (1977) already observed, the varieties spoken in the region do not resolve neatly into two discrete poles; rather, they form a continuum shaped by centuries of contact between

Latin-derived dialect systems and the evolving standard. This continuum has been further complicated by two parallel processes documented in the more recent literature: the "Italianization" of dialects, whereby traditional dialect features are progressively replaced by Italian equivalents, and – crucially – the "dialectalization" of Italian, whereby features rooted in the regional substrate infiltrate speakers' varieties of Italian itself. The result is a set of regionally marked Italian varieties – varieties of Venetan regional Italian (*Italiano regionale Veneto*) – that incorporate phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical features of dialectal origin yet are perceived by their speakers not as dialect, but as legitimate, socially unmarked Italian (Cerruti, 2016, 2024; Cerruti et al., 2017).

This has direct implications for interpreting the Relative Use Index. When participants were asked to estimate their percentage use of "Italian" versus "dialect", they did so against the backdrop of their own metalinguistic representations of these categories – representations that may not align uniformly across respondents, or with the categories as defined by linguists. A speaker who habitually uses regional Italian (what would be defined as *Italiano regionale Veneto*), with its characteristic prosody, vocabulary and morphosyntactic patterns, may report using Italian exclusively while in practice deploying a variety that is substantially shaped by the dialect substrate. Conversely, a speaker who retains only sporadic dialectal features may nonetheless self-identify as a dialect user out of affective identification with Venetan. In both cases, the reported percentages that feed into the Relative Use Index reflect speakers' categorizations of their own speech rather than an objective linguistic measure, and these categorizations may diverge from each other and from etic classifications.

This interpretive caveat cuts in two directions. On one hand, if some participants are reporting their regionally inflected Italian as "Italian", the degree of dialect maintenance in the community may be somewhat higher than the Relative Use Index suggests, at least in the sense that dialect-derived features remain active in everyday speech even where dialect as a named code has been abandoned. On the other hand, the finding that children's use is near-exclusively Italian (mean Child Relative Use Index = 0.87) may reflect not only a genuine decline in the use of recognizably Venetan forms, but also a generational shift in metalinguistic boundaries: younger speakers may apply a more restrictive definition of "dialect" than their parents or grandparents, classifying regionally marked speech simply as Italian. This would be consistent with the documented pattern whereby Regional Italian has progressively shed its substandard connotations and come to be perceived as the normal, educated variety in many northern Italian regions (Cerruti, 2016, 2024; Cerruti et al., 2017). Future research incorporating tasks that assess metalinguistic awareness directly, for instance, by presenting speakers with recordings of regionally marked Italian and asking them to classify and evaluate them, would help disentangle these possibilities and provide a richer picture of how linguistic repertoires in Veneto are conceptualized across generations.

4.4 The cognitive perspective

From a cognitive perspective, bidialectalism is receiving increasing interest in several fields of cognitive science, such as psycholinguistics (Melinger, 2018, 2021), executive functions (Antoniou et al., 2016; Garraffa et al., 2017; Lauchlan et al., 2013) or decision making (Kurinec & Weaver III, 2019). Venetan, and the study of Italian-Venetan bidialectal individuals, are also playing a critical role in these fields. For instance, Miozzo et al. (2020) have shown that Italian-Venetan bidialectal individuals behave like bilingual individuals in moral dilemma decisions, i.e., situations in which a person is faced with a choice between two or more conflicting moral principles, values, or courses of action; these dilemmas typically involve difficult decisions where each option has its own ethical implications and consequences. For instance, in the footbridge dilemma (Thomson, 1984) participants are faced with a situation in which they have to decide whether to sacrifice a stranger by pushing him/her off a bridge in order to block a train that is out of control and would otherwise kill five people. Research indicates that people tend to systemically make more utilitarian responses (i.e., pushing the stranger) when the dilemma is presented in a foreign language than in the participant's native language. In the recent study by Miozzo and colleagues (2020) a similar pattern was observed, and participants became more utilitarian when faced with the problem in dialect Venetan than in Italian. In addition, Lorenzoni and colleagues (2022) recently showed that Venetan promotes social categorization of individuals (using face stimuli) in the same way as "standard" languages like Spanish, Basque, or Italian. That is, like any standard language, the Venetan dialect boosts social categorization. Social categorization is an automatic cognitive process and refers to the tendency to classify individuals in terms of the categories they belong or do not belong to. While most of the past research has focused on physical aspects of individuals, such as age or gender (Pietraszewski and Schwartz 2014; Rhodes and Anastasi 2012), more recent research suggests that accent or the language that our interlocutor speaks can be also used as a cue for social categorization (Baus et al., 2021; Pietraszewski & Schwartz, 2014). Finally, it is also relevant to remark that Venetan has been exploited to test the bilingual cognitive advantage hypothesis, that is, the notion that bilinguals overcome monolinguals in executive control function. In their study, Scaltritti and colleagues (2017) tested this hypothesis in the context of Italian-Venetan bidialectal individuals. The results of this study failed to show a cognitive advantage in executive functions (i.e., flanker task) per bidialectal individuals compared to monolingual individuals (see Garraffa et al., 2017) or related discussion in the context of another Italian dialect (Sardinian).

These studies demonstrate that dialects like Venetan offer insights into the mechanisms of various cognitive processes. However, cognitive scientists studying Italian-Venetan bidialectal individuals should consider sociolinguistic research, such as the current study, which unveils

a complex scenario, particularly noting that younger populations may not possess proficiency in the dialect.

4.5 Limitations of the present study

Our study is drawn upon empirical data gathered through an online self-evaluation questionnaire. While self-reports serve as a valuable means of data collection and they are often used in psychology and sociolinguistics as in many other fields, it is important to recognize the inherent limitations of this method. An issue that can be envisaged in the present study is the gap between respondents' self-reported language usage and their actual behaviour, as already mentioned for the sociopolitical and sociolinguistic variables collected. Firstly, respondents may not always have full awareness of their linguistic habits. Furthermore, individuals who harbour negative attitudes towards the dialect might be hesitant to disclose this to researchers. Additionally, respondents may deliberately exaggerate or minimize their use of a particular language or dialect in an effort to provide what they perceive as the "correct" response desired by the researcher (Garrett, 2010; Iannàccaro, 2001, 2002; Schilling, 2013). However, we posit that thoughtful analysis of quantitative linguistic data can reveal interesting patterns of sociolinguistic change (Iannàccaro, 2011) and the potential biases of self-evaluative data elicited through questionnaire can be mitigated by the ability to gather a large volume of data by this means. Moreover, our study underscores the significance of questionnaires capable of quantifying dialect usage, thereby enabling the measurement of bilingualism indices in dialectal settings.

Another limit of the present study is that it does not take into account data directly collected in the young population nor linguistic exchanges in social media, a communicative context where adolescents and young people frequently switch to written dialects in their on-line interactions (Alfonzetti, 2018; see also Masullo et al., 2021). This is relevant since some adolescents learn the dialect once they enter the school, and therefore it can be considered as a second language for them (Moretti, 2014; Paternostro, 2006). However, it is worth mentioning that the mixing of Italian and dialect in social networks might reflect the so-called *evanescent speaker*, that is an individual who has a fleeting dialect (Labov, 2006; Moretti, 1998). Furthermore, research on language acquisition has shown that achieving full proficiency after puberty becomes challenging. If the dialect is acquired as a second language later in life within peer groups, this raises questions about the type of dialect that *evanescent speakers* will be capable of using and passing on to future generations.

4.6 Future research directions: towards converging methodological approaches

The findings reported in the present study rest on self-reported data from adult respondents. Crucially, they also rely on parent-reported data for the children and teenagers in the sample. While this methodology offers well-documented advantages in terms of breadth of coverage and ecological validity, it also carries specific limitations already mentioned in section 4.5

that future research would do well to address directly, rather than treat merely as caveats. We wish to outline here several complementary methodological approaches that could converge with, and ultimately strengthen, the picture that emerges from questionnaire-based studies such as the current one.

A first and perhaps most pressing direction concerns the direct observation of actual language use. The gap between reported and actual behaviour is a known challenge in sociolinguistic research, and the present study is no exception. Future work could complement questionnaire data with observational methods: naturalistic recordings of family interactions, ethnographic fieldwork, or structured conversation tasks carried out in the home or community environment. These approaches would provide behavioural evidence of dialect use that is independent of participants' metalinguistic awareness and social desirability biases. Diary methods or experience-sampling procedures, in which participants log their language choices in real time across the day, represent a less intrusive but similarly ecologically valid alternative.

A second important direction concerns the child and adolescent population. In the present study, data on children aged 3–18 were collected exclusively through the parents who participated in the survey. This introduces a specific layer of indirection that may be especially consequential for teenagers. Research in developmental sociolinguistics has consistently shown that adolescence is a period in which peer influence on language use grows substantially, potentially at the expense of parental input (Barbu et al., 2014; Labov, 1990). Parents may therefore be poorly placed to assess the actual dialect use of their teenage children, who may employ Venetan, or conversely, may distance themselves from it in peer contexts that parents have limited access to. Future studies should collect data directly from children and adolescents, using age-appropriate instruments. For younger children, production and comprehension tasks along the lines of those employed by Sanfelici and Roch (2021) would yield direct measures of dialectal competence that do not rely on adult proxies. For adolescents, self-report questionnaires administered directly to the participants, combined with language samples collected from peer interaction contexts, would be more ecologically and developmentally appropriate.

A third promising avenue is the use of corpus-based and digital methods to triangulate the picture of dialect vitality from an angle that self-reports cannot reach. As noted above, adolescents and young adults increasingly use dialect in written form in digital communication contexts such as WhatsApp, Instagram, or TikTok comments. Corpus analysis of such data (where ethically and legally feasible) could provide valuable insights into whether the shift away from dialect in face-to-face interaction is mirrored online, or whether, conversely, digital spaces are becoming new sites of informal dialect preservation and innovation. This is particularly relevant for assessing the vitality of Venetan among cohorts

who may not use it in conversation with parents, but who might nonetheless be active participants in a digitally mediated dialect community.

Finally, longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable. A cross-sectional study such as the present one captures a snapshot of language use at a single moment in time, and the age effects we report with older speakers showing greater Venetan use could in principle reflect cohort differences rather than (or in addition to) individual-level change across a lifespan. A panel study following the same participants over time, and in particular tracking how children's dialect exposure and use evolves as they enter schooling, adolescence, and early adulthood, would allow more definitive conclusions about the direction and pace of language shift. Such a study would also make it possible to examine whether revitalization initiatives, parental attitudes, or exposure to dialect in peer or digital contexts have measurable effects on the trajectory of Venetan use in the younger generation, thereby providing a more robust account of ongoing language shift.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we aimed to investigate the present state of vitality of the Venetan language, traditionally considered very vital. Our findings reveal that Venetan usage is primarily among the elderly, and that children are hardly directly exposed to it by their parents, which in turn means that only a small number of children are learning Venetan as their first language. These observations all together could suggest a decline in the vitality of Venetan.

There are many reasons to preserve dialects such as Venetan: they safeguard cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. We believe there is another critical reason: cognitive science research can benefit from the study of bidialectalism. Finally, by exploring understudied dialects, we not only amplify the voices of linguistic minorities but also deepen our understanding of human language, fostering more inclusive approaches to language research.

Acknowledgments and Funding details

We gratefully acknowledge Teresa Vigolo, Albino Salmaso, Paolo Cagnan, and the team at *Il Mattino di Padova*, as well as Costantino Meo and *La Rana News*, for their invaluable support in data collection from both journals. We are particularly grateful to Laura Vanelli for her constant support and insightful feedback on previous versions of this manuscript. We also thank the editor and the anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments.

E.P. acknowledges the financial support of Grant RYC2021-033969-I (Ramón y Cajal), funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by European Union Next-GenerationEU/PRTR and of Grant PID2022-138413NB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039 /501100011033 and by the European Union.

Author contributions

E.P. designed the project; E.P., A.L. and E.N. designed the experiment and discussed the results; E.P. administered the experiment; E.N. analyzed the data; E.P. wrote the paper; A.L. and E.N. revised the paper; E.P. led the study. All authors approved the last version of the paper.

Data availability statement

The questionnaire, data and scripts for analysis can be downloaded from the OSF platform at the following link: https://osf.io/ufh3b/.

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