

IN ALTRE LINGUE

Pomatteritsch (northern Piedmont, Italy)

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Pomatteritsch (lit.: the German of Pomatt/Formazza) is a variety of Walser German (a subgroup of Alemannic dialects) spoken in an Alpine valley of northern Piedmont since the end of the 13th century when skilled farmers and shepherds were recruited from western Switzerland to settle and cultivate high, inhospitable lands on the southern side of the Alps.

A handful of Walser German varieties (among which Pomatteritsch) are still spoken in the Italian regions of Piedmont and Aosta Valley as highly endangered minority languages in which intergenerational language transmission ceased to be a common practice as an effect of the more general social and economic transformations in the second half of the 20th century (see Dal Negro 2004).

From the linguistic point of view, Walser dialects exhibit an array of archaic and idiosyncratic features that set them apart from the rest of today's Alemannic dialects. Yet at the same time, a long lasting and intense contact with Romance varieties (Italo- and Galloromance dialects, as well as Standard Italian and, marginally, French) has been the source of a lot of language change phenomena on all levels of the system, as well as on language use (in the form of code-mixing practices).

The two texts reported here belong to a collection of memories (short narrative texts, lullabies, proverbs, mottos, etc.) written by a local elderly woman and edited by myself (Zertanna 2015). They represent a rare attempt to elaborate a written everyday language in this otherwise oral variety¹.

The first text ("Jesus and Saint Peter") belongs to a small series of moral-religious texts in which the figures of Jesus and of the Apostles move in a familiar context and are bothered with everyday worries. The use and form of some of the words appearing here (for instance *Isä Hergott*) point quite clearly to a Swiss origin of the text, that was then orally told within the community, as usually happened with prayers and songs.

The second text ("The nasty Guenza") portrays the archetypical figure of a local aggressive man coming from the neighboring village and thus also belonging to a different speech and cultural community (i.e. Piedmontese). He is the main character of several oral narrations, such as the one reported here in which the popular tradition tries to make sense of what appears to local peasants as an illegitimate act (the property of a pasture). In fact both texts deal with the topic of land and its belonging: a key issue in a traditional society based on farming.

(1) Jesus and Saint Peter

- 1 Isä Hergott un San Petär sën ufum wäg kangä
- 2 un hen äs grosäs lan fordra khäbä.

¹ Another such attempt is the artistic production of a local poet (Anna Maria Bacher), fairly well known and appreciated in Switzerland. These examples (both artistic, as in the case of Bacher, and documentaristic, as in the case of Zertanna) fall well beyond the simple graphization of an oral language. As for the elaboration of an orthographic system that unifies all Walser German varieties, see Antonietti (2010).

- 3 San Petär frägt Isum Hergott weltsch das lan sigé.
 4 “Hit eisch un morä tsch andrä”, seit Isä Hergott.

Translation

Jesus and Saint Peter were going along a road and they saw a large plot of land in front of them. Saint Peter then asked Jesus whom that land belonged and Jesus answered: Today it belongs someone and tomorrow another one.

Interlinear glosses

- 1 is-ä her-gott² un san petär sén uf=um wäg kangä
 our-M.SG lord-god and saint peter are on=the:DAT.SG.M way gone
- 2 un hen äs gros-äs lan fordra khäbä
 and have a:N big-N.SG land ahead had
- 3 san petär fräg-t³ is-um her-gott wel-tsch⁴ das lan sigé
 saint peter ask-3SG our-DAT.SG.M lord-god who-GEN.SG.N that:N land is:SBJV:3SG
- 4 hit ei-sch un morä t-sch andrä sei-t is-ä her-gott
 today one-GEN.SG.N and tomorrow the- GEN.SG.N other say-3SG our- M.SG lord-god

(2) The nasty Guenza

- 1 Wéstär warum éscht t Läbändünär alpa dä Blatneru?
 2 Z besch Guenzjé het Blatnär härt én t schöö ta
 3 un éscht én Läbändü ga schwerä äs shtennä uf schim härt.

Translation

Do you know why the Vannino pasture belongs to [the neighbouring village of] Premia [and not to Formazza/Pomatt]? The nasty Guenza has put some earth from Premia in his shoes, then he has gone up to Vannino and there he has sworn that he was standing on his own land.

Interlinear glosses

- 1 wés-t=är warum éscht t läbändün-är alpa d-ä blatn-er-u
 know-2PL=you:PL why is the:F:SG vannino-ADJ pasture the-DAT:PL premia-ADJ-DAT:PL

² The word used for Jesus Christ is *Isä Hergott* (lit. ‘Our Lord God’): the possessive *isä* (*isum* in the dative, line 3) is clearly non local (the usual form in Pomattertitsch would be *indschä*) and signals the coexistence of several dialect varieties in the traditional linguistic repertoire in relation to different text types and registers. See also *San Petär*, in which Italian (*San*) and German (*Peter*) coexist.

³ In Pomattertitsch the verb *frägä* ‘to ask’ requires an indirect object (as in Italian) and not a direct one (as in German).

⁴ Walser German has maintained genitive markings (as well as other case markings) more extensively than other German dialects and spoken varieties. See here *weltsch* ‘whose’, *eisch* ‘one’s’ and the definite article for masculine and neuter singular *tsch*.

- 2 z besch guenz-jé⁵ het blatn-är härt⁶ én t schöö ta
the:N nasty guenza-DIM has premia-ADJ earth in the:PL shoes done
- 3 un éscht én Läbändü ga schwerääs schtennä⁷ uf schi-m⁸ härt
and is in vannino go swear it stand:SUBJ on his-DAT:M earth

Literature

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⁵ In the text the main character (*Guenza*) is given a diminutive nickname (*Guenzjé*), probably as a way of lessening his vicious power. On the linguistic level this implies the systematic use of neuter forms in agreement with the diminutive, which is formally a neuter: *z* 'the' (line 2), *äs* 'it' (line 3).

⁶ The masculine noun *härt* 'earth' is used here with the more physical meaning of 'soil'; Pomatteritsch also has the word *härt* (feminine) used with the meaning of 'earth, world': both continue the Old High German *herd* 'earth', 'ground' but also 'fireplace', which now continues in today's Standard German *Herd* 'stove, hearth'.

⁷ Cf. the present subjunctive verb form *schtennä* functioning as a marker of subordination since no other signal (such as the subordinating conjunction *das*) is present.

⁸ As one can see, the typically German contrast between accusative and dative to mark the difference between directional and non-directional locatives is preserved in Pomatteritsch: *uf schim härt* 'on his earth' (stative = dative), *én t schöö (tö)* 'to put (earth) in the shoes' (directional movement = accusative).