

# Multilingual Map of Europe: identity and diversity

Group project: The relation between the Lombard dialect and the official Italian language in Northern Italy



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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to investigate the multilingual practices and linguistic hierarchy in the Northern part of Italy. The focus is on the use of the Lombard dialect by the native speakers of Italian in order to understand the role and social status of the minority language. Undoubtedly, the status of Italian dialects has been shifting over the years due to socio-political changes that occurred in Italy. In the past, numerous dialects were spoken across the whole country as it was socially accepted and considered a norm. Nowadays, Italian society is biased with regards to dialects. In large cities, like Rome or Milan, it is better to speak the standard Italian or even English rather than use any dialect in public. For these reasons, the goal of this study is to explore the tense relation between such languages as Italian, Lombard and English in this particular region in Italy.

In this section, some general information about the Lombard dialect will be provided. Lombard is a dialect spoken mostly in the Northern part of Italy, especially in Lombardy and in some neighbouring areas, as well as in Southern Switzerland. Figure 1 shows the Lombardy region and the distribution of the Italian dialects. According to the ISTAT 2015 survey, Lombard is spoken by more than 3 million people only in the Lombardy region (as quoted in Coluzzi 2018).

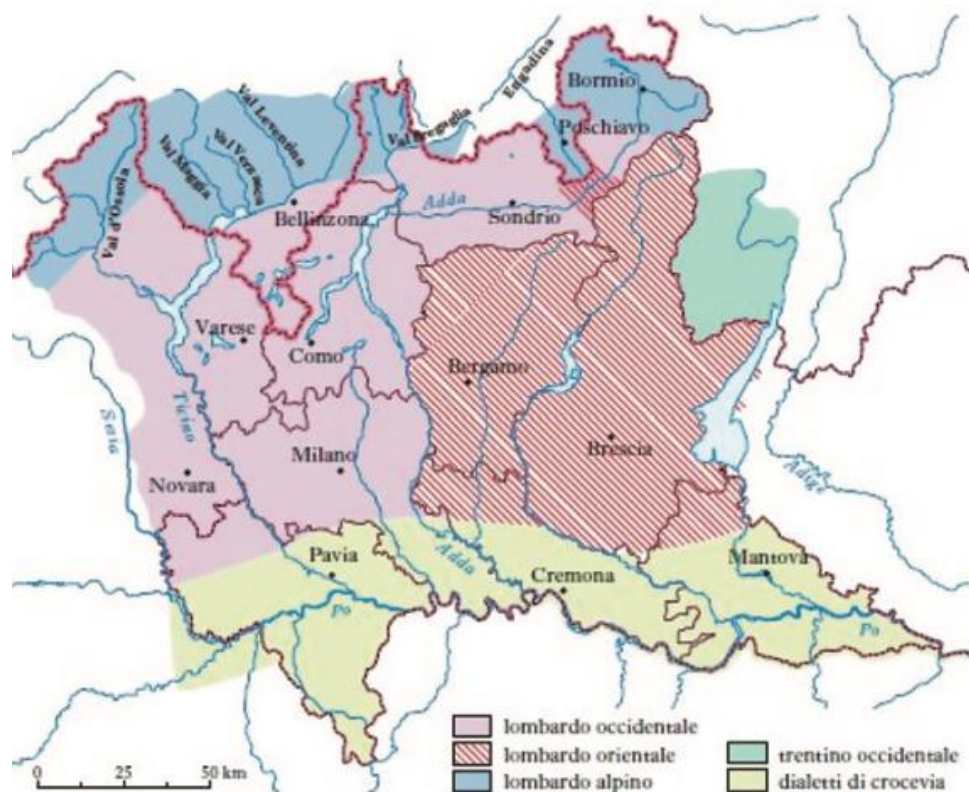


Figure 1. ([http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/dia/dialetti-lombardi\\_\(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/dia/dialetti-lombardi_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano))).<sup>2</sup>

Numerous varieties of the Lombard dialect can be distinguished depending on the region, but according to the traditional classification, there are the following varieties: Eastern, Western, Alpine and Southern Lombard. For instance, Western Lombard varieties are spoken in Sicily (Piazza Armerina, Nicosia), and in Swiss, it can be heard in the canton of Ticino. When it comes to the language family and origin, Lombard dialect belongs to the Indo-European family and the Gallo-Italic group.

In order to analyse the linguistic landscape, it is crucial to define what a dialect is and how it is different from a standard, official language. According to Chambers and Trudgill (1998:3 as quoted in Coluzzi 2018), “a dialect is a substandard, low status, often rustic form of language, generally associated with the peasantry, the working class, or other groups lacking in prestige”. Whereas a standard variety of a language is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as “a variety of language that is used by governments, in the media, in schools and for international communication (...)”. A standard language is usually more prestigious and dominant as it is used for public communication, which is the opposite of a dialect. Referring to languages as “dialects” can also be considered derogatory and imply their lower prestige. Dialects are thought to be spoken by people of low education, social status, and elderly people. Recently, Lombard has been also referred to as a non-recognised and regional language, as it does not have the function of an official language but remains a mother tongue only of those who live in Lombardy.

## **2. Methodology**

The data collected during this study was both quantitative and qualitative. Firstly, a questionnaire including 29 questions, prepared solely by the authors of this study, was sent to 9 native speakers of Lombard who were born and raised in the region of Lombardy. The questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions regarding such linguistic phenomena as multilingualism, bilingualism, native languages second language competence, the level of proficiency in each language, the frequency of usage along with the place and the degree of formality, the question of superiority and dominance of particular languages over the others, the influence of the environment on the language choice, and lastly, code-switching awareness. The complete list of questions can be observed in the appendix. The questionnaires were then distributed through e-mail, which made it possible to contact the respondents for further

evaluation. Among the 9 respondents, only 4 agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted via Skype and were semi-structured with the questionnaires used as a base. Each meeting lasted for approximately 1 hour. During that time, the interviewees were asked some further questions regarding their knowledge about the Lombard dialect and its usage on a daily basis, as well as its social status in their region. The interviews constituted a vital part of this study as the participants have provided detailed descriptions of the dialect and its interference with the standard Italian. Both the results of the questionnaires and the additional information gathered during the online meetings were used during the in-depth analysis of the case study in order to answer the research questions.

As the aim of this study is to explore the multilingual practices in Northern Italy and the prominence of the Lombard dialect, the following research questions will be answered in the third chapter:

- 1) What are the multilingual practices of the native speakers of Lombard?
- 2) What is the language hierarchy in northern Italy?
- 3) Do people who speak Lombard dialect and standard Italian consider themselves bilinguals or multilinguals?

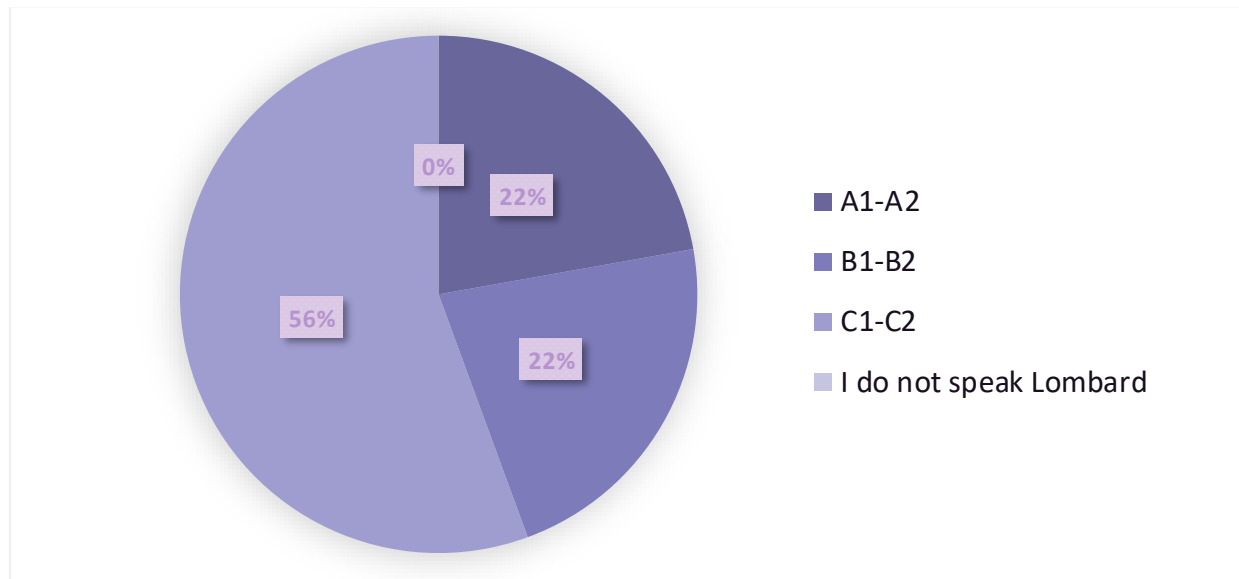
### **3. Results**

This chapter is divided into three parts, where each of them aims at answering a particular research question on the basis of the data collected through questionnaires as well as the interviews conducted with the native speakers. Section 3.1. shows the multilingual practices of the native speakers of Lombard. Section 3.2. analyses the language hierarchy in northern Italy, and finally, section 3.3. investigates the concepts along with the participants' attitude towards multilingualism and bilingualism. The last section 3.4. explains the issue of "Swiss language".

#### **3.1. Multilingual practices of the native speakers of Lombard**

The questionnaire has been completed by 9 participants in total, out of which 4 were males, and 5 were females. The age range was 20-24, and all participants declared to be attending university, either during undergraduate studies or postgraduate studies. All of them were native speakers of Italian, however, not all of them assessed their Lombard language skills as proficient as it might have been expected. Figure 2 shows the level of proficiency in Lombard.

Figure 2. Level of proficiency in Lombard.

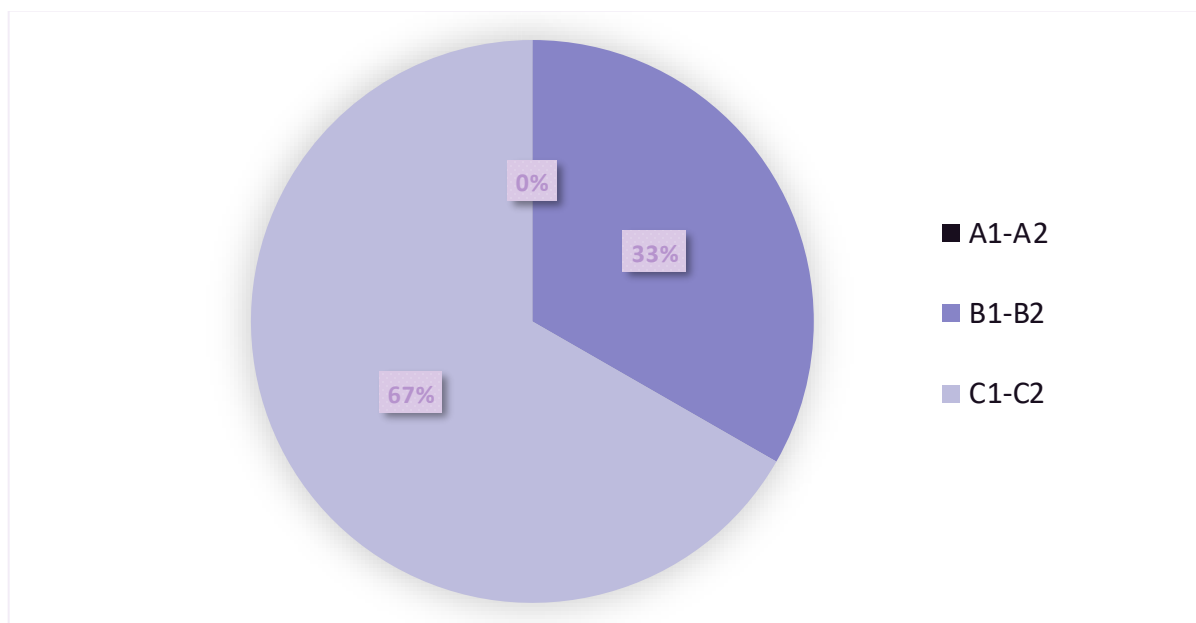


As explained by the interviewees, their language acquaintance and communicative skills in Lombard are not as good as in Italian since the dialect is only used occasionally and in informal situations. Additionally, the only possible way to acquire Lombard is through parents and grandparents who provide their kids and grandchildren with some words or phrases in an informal setting. All participants replied that they were taught Lombard at home, thanks to their family members who were using it daily. Lombard is not taught in schools, and there are few books designed for self-education. As it was emphasised during interviews, Lombard can hardly be heard in public. It is almost absent from the public sphere, and speaking it in the street can often be negatively perceived by other Italians. The issue of exclusion and language hierarchy will be discussed in the next section. 6 participants answered that they use Lombard every day or almost every day, whereas 3 persons stated that they don't use it that often. The reason behind it might be a lack of Lombard-speaking friends or relatives or the dialect being disregarded within certain communities.

Along with the Italian language, all the examined persons said that they know English on a communicative, intermediate level, which can be observed in figure 3, at the same time, none of the participants considered their English skills as basic or weak. Only two participants speak English rarely, whereas, the rest speaks it on a daily basis. This shows that English functions as the second language in Italy as people use it at work, at school or universities as well as during daily interactions with either Italian people or foreigners. Davide, who was one

of the interviewees, emphasised the importance of the English language as he works with Erasmus students who come to Bergamo for an exchange. Bergamo is a popular destination for UE students who are willing to study abroad, thus there is a great demand for English speakers in the region of Lombardy. Nevertheless, as claimed by the other participants, learning English is not a trend in Italy as it is in other countries. In Italy, most content is translated into Italian straightaway, and it is difficult to find people speaking English casually in the street.

Figure 3. Level of proficiency in English.



Some other foreign languages mentioned by the participants were the following: Russian, Polish, French, Spanish, Arabic, German, Chinese, Dutch, Greek. Taking into consideration the fact that there was a relatively small amount of participants in this study, they were all selected at random, they all come from different backgrounds and study distinct subjects, the number of foreign languages that appeared in the survey was admirable. It shows how linguistically diverse Italy is and that there is a general interest among the younger generations in learning foreign languages, besides English and their mother tongue.

Moving on to the analysis of the relation between a dialect and a standard language based on the multilingual practices, Lombard strongly relies on the Italian language in terms of pronunciation and oral skills since the two are very similar. Nevertheless, Italians are not very likely to speak it in public regularly. Andrea, one of the participants, mentioned that the only situation when people would use the dialect to communicate would be in the case of some

elderly people, who do not know Italian well, and who prefer to use their dialect. Otherwise, speaking a dialect is a sign of poor education. That is why it is not practised by young people, except for speaking to their elderly relatives or close friends who also know the dialect. Hence, the choice of language can be defined as place-dependant. Dialect is neither spoken on the television nor the radio stations since the country aims at unifying the society linguistically instead of encouraging people to speak and preserve many dialects. The existence of this phenomenon was also proved by the questionnaire when the participants were asked to describe where and with whom they use the dialect. The answers showed that their first language choice is always Italian. Dialect is used solely at home and in communication with elderly people in an informal setting. Several answers consisted of such verbs as *I can't, I shouldn't, I don't* while explaining the use of a dialect by the participants. It also exposes a negative attitude towards the dialect and how it is perceived by society.

One of the multilingual practices by the speaker of more than one language is code-switching. Despite the dialect being disregarded, as discussed by the interviewees, it is a very common practice to switch between Lombard and Italian while speaking. It can be motivated by the fact that the dialect is very similar to Italian, and some words in Lombard are shortenings of the Italian words. That is why people tend to use the shorter ones in vernacular language. They switch from one language to another both consciously and unconsciously depending on the degree of formality of the situation they found themselves in. It is also possible for them to switch between Italian and English in a single conversation, but it does not happen between Lombard and English. Certainly, code-switching occurs, but many Italian speakers are not aware of it or do it subconsciously while speaking. As the country concentrates on the Italian language only, they replace English borrowings with the Italian equivalents, thus switching between Italian and English is less frequent than switching between Italian and Lombard. Some of the participants claimed that their language choice and code-switching are influenced by emotions or by the interlocutor. For instance, when they are angry they tend to switch to Lombard since it is easier for them to quickly pronounce short words instead of using the Italian grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, there is this tendency to normalise and standardise certain Lombard words in Italian, as they are commonly used and understood by many.

### **3.2. The analysis of the language hierarchy in the Northern Italy**

The language hierarchy in the northern Italy is a complex issue as it touches upon significant differences in terms of approaches towards the Lombard dialect and the standard Italian



language and its use during everyday life. Our participants responded to that question in several different ways, as their approaches also differed unquestionably. Furthermore, we have also surveyed in a form of a questionnaire, which also included the language hierarchy in northern Italy. One of our interviewed participants, Davide, claimed that dialect is less influential than the official language in northern Italy. The use of Lombard in the present-day limited and is spoken in a restrained manner. He gave an interesting use of the dialect – it comes in handy in situations like playing cards with a group of friends, as the opponents will not understand a word. In terms of the dominating language, there's no competition at all between them. In fact, during contact with the family, there are only several words used – the rest is the standard language. The Lombard dialect is often heard far from the city centre, for example in Bergamo there are places in the mountains, where the dialect is spoken today. In the case of Bergamo, the dialect is often heard in the public, there are bars and restaurants, which still do speak the dialect. Our next participant – Ilaria gave us another view of the hierarchy of language hierarchy in Italy. The dialect is sometimes spoken at work but is more comfortable to use it among friends and in smaller groups of people. Ilaria mentioned that both the dialect and the standard Italian are the same when it comes to the level of their influence. None of them is more influential than another, as both of them are used in different situations and contexts comparably often. During everyday life in a big city – standard Italian, but in small cities, it is still Lombard and in fact, it's not common to hear standard Italian, as they barely speak it, even though the dialect is disappearing. The prestige of the dialect is very low. If you hear a young boy speaking Lombard, he will be automatically considered as a poor, uneducated person, maybe having a farmer origin. The Lombard dialect has significantly lower social status and you would not meet a person speaking standard Italian and Lombard dialect at the same time as it is considered worse. During more formal situations as visiting departments or the police station, using the Lombard dialect would cause some misunderstandings and could lead to the impossibility of solving our issues; in these cases, the correct choice would be the standard Italian. At schools, where a great number of students consist of people from the EU countries people barely know and speak Italian, so using Lombard would be completely insensible. Instead, Lombard dialect would be used in exciting moments, as a way to clearly express the emotions. Worth mentioning is that women speaking the dialect even worse than men, which is a fascinating case.

The next person in our interview was Andrea, who also shared the view that using the Lombard dialect during meeting somebody for the 1st time could suggest that the person is uneducated or poor. Lombard dialect is often used by elderly people, as they grew up with this dialect without going to school. Young people do not speak the dialect all the time, maybe

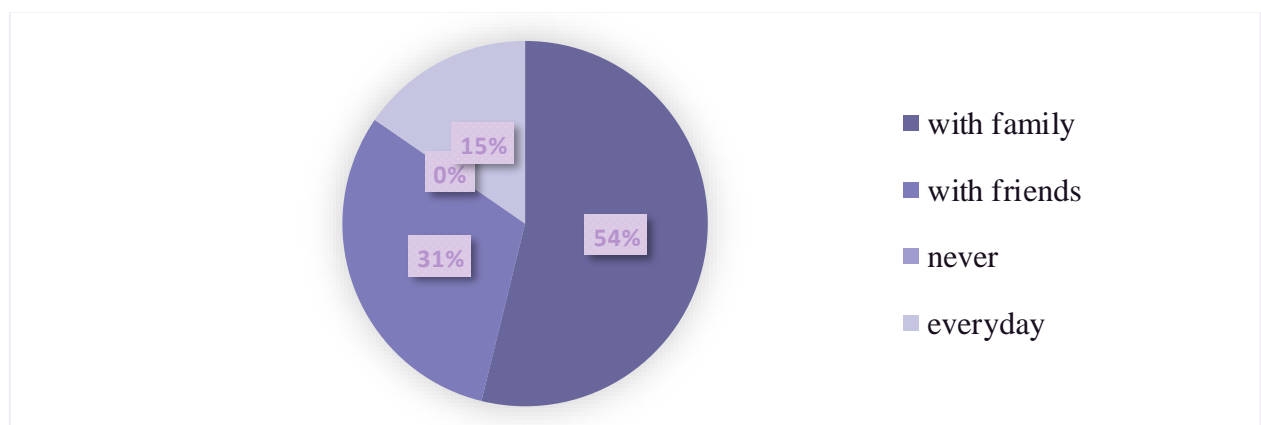


because their parents did not teach them. In formal situations, the only language used in Italian, as not every person knows Lombard. The reason may be the unification of Italy, as before 1861 only 2% spoke the proper Italian language. The media also does not use the Lombard dialect. In fact, nor TV, nor local media do this. There are some theatrical comedies played and organised by the Church, where the dialect is being used. Apart from that, there are no many uses of the Lombard dialect. There are only a few fairy tales written in the Lombard dialect, but it is not taught at school; in fact, it is rather stigmatised, so the smaller prestige is visible again. However, the dialect is not stigmatised in the South, as it was the place, where only one dialect was present, so it also automatically puts the South as a place, where the dialect may be preserved.

The last participant summed up the previous ones, adding the fact that books are written in dialect only to preserve them. There is a perception that using the dialect will make the speaker appear as a poor, uneducated people, so people do not use it very often. The reason why the dialect is fading away could be summed up in one quote ‘Italy has formed, now we can make Italians’. The participant mentioned that there is no need of using the Lombard recently – Italian and English are fairly enough.

The questionnaires have proved that the standard Italian is more influential than Lombard. The dialect was known by most of the participants, as it was learned by them at home, during growing up. They use in contact with their relatives, friends mainly. None of them has proved to use in during meeting new people or in formal situations. The results discussed in this section are presented in figure 4.

Figure 4. The use of Lombard.



### 3.3. The issue of multilingualism and bilingualism

One of the questions that were asked to the Italian speakers through the questionnaires, was whether they consider themselves bilinguals or maybe multilinguals. The answers we received were a little unexpected, based on the fact that we knew that all of the participants were native in Italian and also native or just very familiar with the Lombard dialect. Moreover, based on their answers to other questions such as their level in Italian, Lombard, and English or the other languages they know beside them did not explain their beliefs about the bilingualism/multilingualism fact. Of the nine people who filled the questionnaire, all have at least an A1-A2 in Italian, but also Lombard and English which categorize them already as bilinguals/multilinguals (100% -C1-C2 Italian, 66,7%- C1-C2 English, 33,3%- B1-B2 English, 55,6%-C1-C2 Lombard, 22,2%-B1-B2 Lombard, 22,2%-A1-A2 Lombard). Regarding the languages the Italian speakers know, all of them know at least two languages (one person knows one language, one knows two, four people know four, two know five, and one knows six), with only one considering Lombard as one of them.

In the question about considering themselves as bilinguals/multilingual just three of the nine participants replied positively. Two of them confused bilingualism/multilingualism as code-switching (“sometimes I say a word in a language although I am speaking another one”, “I find myself constantly switching between languages throughout my everyday life”) and the other one as a way to communicate using more than one language (“I can communicate in different languages”).

The other six replied negatively. Some of them told us that it was due to the level of their proficiency in each language (“No, because my level of proficiency in these languages is not so high to consider myself bilingual or multilingual”, “I do not consider myself bilingual, but fluent in English and Spanish”). Another one, that he does not consider Lombard as a language but as a dialect (“No, I do not speak my local dialect very well, and it is not considered a language”) and others made it clear that they do not know exactly what bilingualism/multilingualism is [“No, I do not. I do not speak many languages since I was born, I have learned them at school, “No, as a child I have just learned Italian (and Lombard dialect)”].

As reported by Ilaria, one of the four interviewers, she does not think of herself as a multilingual speaker although she knows four languages without the Lombard dialect. As an explanation, she told us that she cannot speak the other languages (except Italian and the dialect) well since they are not her mother tongues.

On the other side, according to Lorenzo (one of the people who knew what the terms mean) who knows six languages in total and knew the meaning of multilingualism, he said that he does consider himself as a bilingual/multilingual speaker as he is exposed to multiple languages every day and he also speaks most of them every day.

### **3.4. The “Swiss language”**

It is important to mention that the questionnaires also consisted of some questions regarding the Swiss language, however, all of the nine participants responded negatively with only one writing further [“I cannot speak Swiss. But you should specify if you are referring to Swiss Italian (a variety of Italian) or Ticinese dialect (a variant of Western Lombard)”].

We asked someone in the interviews to explain why Swiss is not a language. As stated by Lorenzo, Switzerland does not have a language for Swiss. Most people speak either German (which is the most common language there, French (which is the second most common), or Italian, not Swiss Italian, standard Italian. Officially talking Switzerland has also a fourth language called Romansh, a language that came from Latin, and, it is a sort for Lombard, (not exactly like Lombard) spoken by just a few people. What is more, about Lombard in Switzerland, it is like here on Sondrio. People speak Lombard as a sort of language/dialect that is the same as it is in the Italian part. The richest part in Switzerland is the German part and they usually learn French as a second language except for English of course but in my valley, because it is very close to Switzerland they taught us in middle school German.

## **4. Conclusion**

From this research, it has become clear that, over the years, the socio-political events in Italy have changed Italians’ attitude towards their language and their dialects. Despite the multilingual practices across the whole country, the citizens of Italy prefer to speak the standard Italian or even English in public rather than to use any of the dialects. This investigation has shown that the social status of the Lombard dialect is currently lower in comparison to the standard Italian language. The Lombard dialect neither does hold first place in the linguistic hierarchy in the Northern part of Italy nor the whole country, as the standardized Italian shows its superiority throughout the country, especially in big cities. Thanks to the questionnaires, it has also been established that the Lombard dialect is mainly used by its speakers at home or within a circle of close friends and families.

The majority of the participants were inclined to say that the standard Italian language is dominant in Italy as it is widely used for public, governmental, entertaining, and international purposes. Lombard dialect is suggested to be used at home or within a circle of close friends solely. The participants also confirmed that the Lombard dialect is mainly used as the day-to-day language by those citizens of Italy who reside in Lombardy.

In addition, the data, which was collected from the filled-in questionnaires suggested that the participants do not tend to consider themselves as bilinguals or multilinguals. They assess their level of proficiency in each language to be unequal when one language is superior over the other regardless of the frequency of usage of both languages. Moreover, during the interviews with the participants, it was established that the participants themselves tend to code-switch between Italian and the Lombard dialect both consciously and unconsciously.

In conclusion, regardless of the tense relationship between the standard Italian and its dialects in the Northern part of Italy and the whole country, speaking any of the dialects in public is considered a sign of poor education and low social status. Apart from people who reside in Lombardy (who use the Lombard dialect freely on the daily basis), the vast majority of Italians nowadays mostly tend to use the dialects at home and within a circle of close people instead of using them publicly.

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## APPENDIX

1. Address e-mail \*

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2. What is your name? \*

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3. Where do you live? (Country, region, city) \*

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4. Do you agree to be filmed during an online interview and be featured in our video?  
(optional) \*

- Yes
- No
- I'd like to meet you online but I prefer not to be recorded.

5. What is your gender? \*

- Male
- Female
- Other

6. How old are you? \*

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7. What is your educational level? What school do you attend? Do you go to university? \*

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8. How many languages do you know? Can you list them? \*

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9. Do you consider yourself bilingual or multilingual? Why? How? \*

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10. What language is your mother tongue? (the one you speak from birth. Can be more than one.) \*

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11. What is your level of proficiency in English? A1 - beginner, C2 - native \*

A1-A2

B1-B2

C1-C2

12. What is your level of proficiency in Lombard? A1 - beginner, C2 - native \*

A1-A2

B1-B2

C1-C2

I don't speak Lombard.

13. What is your level of proficiency in Italian? A1 - beginner, C2 - native \*

A1-A2

B1-B2

C1-C2

I don't speak Italian.

14. Do you speak Swiss too? If so, what is your level of proficiency? A1 - beginner, C2 - native \*

A1-A2

B1-B2

C1-C2

I don't speak Swiss.

15. On a scale from 1 to 5 mark, how often do you speak English? (1 - I don't use it, 5 - I use it every day) \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. On a scale from 1 to 5 mark, how often do you speak Lombard? (1 - I don't use it, 5 - I use it every day) \*



1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. On a scale from 1 to 5 mark, how often do you speak Italian? (1 - I don't use it, 5 - I use it every day) \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. On a scale from 1 to 5 mark, how often do you speak Swiss? (1 - I don't use it, 5 - I use it every day) \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. How did you learn Lombard? When? Where? \*

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20. Where and when do you use Lombard? With what people, in what places? \*

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21. How did you learn Swiss? When? Where? (optional)

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22. Where and when do you use Swiss? With what people, in what places? (optional)

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23. Where and when do you use Italian? With what people, in what places? \*

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24. What language do you think is more dominant on a daily basis? Italian or Lombard? \*

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25. Is your choice of language place-dependent? Does your surrounding determine your language choice? \*

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26. Do you accidentally code-switch between certain languages? If so, what are the languages? Are you aware of it? (Code-switching occurs when a speaker consciously or subconsciously switches between two languages in a single conversation) \*

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27. How does Lombard interfere with your Italian or the opposite? Do you feel like in certain situations you should speak Lombard and in others you should speak Italian? \*

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28. Do you think one language is more influential than the other? If so, do you think this is connected to the fact that one is a dialect and the other is a standard, official language? \*

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29. What is the status of the Swiss language? Do people use it as frequently as Italian? Is it considered a co-official language? Please write your opinion on Swiss in Northern Italy. \*

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