

Introduction

I stood at the blackboard, sweating through my shirt, chalk in hand, sounding out vowel sounds under my breath, trying to hear the difference: “**Có-mò. Có-mò? Có-mò.**” The small room, full to overflowing with local art and knick-knacks, felt close and stuffy; traffic noises outside punctuated the buzz of the fluorescent lights. Behind me, the rest of the class chimed encouragement and aid in Italian: “*forza, Americanina!*” (go on, little American!), “*Dai, lo saprai già!*” (Come on, you know this one!). The teacher, who we called Maestro, told me that it was open (the sound of the ‘o’ in the word I was stuck on), which helped, a little. I plunged ahead, writing down the words in Bergamasco, the local language in this northern Italian town, that Maestro had dictated earlier. I got through two, long sentences, receiving lots of hints and corrections as I went along from both Maestro and the rest of the class. It seemed to take forever, but at the end Maestro said, “*va bé!*” – it was fine, especially since I didn’t really understand what I was writing. Everyone laughed, leaving me completely flustered by the time I sat down. The tall middle-aged woman who sat to my left stood up and took the chalk from me, ready to continue the dictation at the board. She was faster and much better than I was, hardly making any mistakes or needing assistance, sounding out the words with confidence as she wrote. The young man who sat next to her, an ardent supporter of the regional separatist movement, the Northern League, followed her to the board and had nearly as many problems as I had. The young woman on the other side of him – with whom he frequently argued politics – did slightly better, though she queried Maestro on a number of points as she wrote. She, like the woman next to me, was a *ripetente* – an Italian colloquialism for “flunker” (literally, “repeater”), although they had taken the course repeatedly because they wanted

to, not because they had to – and so was more familiar with the myriad rules governing how to write their local language. As the rest of the class went up to the board to write, comments and encouragement in Italian and Bergamasco filled the air, demonstrating that just because you knew how to speak Bergamasco did not necessarily mean you knew how to write it. One older Bergamasco man in particular, who spoke Bergamasco nearly exclusively and had taken the course several times, made numerous mistakes, in spite of Maestro’s repeated corrections. His good-natured Bergamasco curses made the rest of the class laugh; our suggestions joined the Maestro’s to create a chorus of shared effort.

Why make these efforts? Why dedicate an hour and a half every Friday night from October to May, sometimes year after year, to the task of learning how to read and write this – their own – language? The dozen participants that year cited various reasons: because they were aspiring Bergamasco poets, because they wanted to be able to speak it better, because they wanted a good reason to get out of the house and their regular routine once a week, or simply because, **“l’è gran bèl, ol bergamàschi”** (it’s very beautiful, Bergamasco). They agreed that Italian, which they all spoke, was necessary and ubiquitous during these modern times. But Bergamasco, the language of their ancestors, was the sound that meant “home” to them, and doubly precious as many people perceived it as slipping irrevocably into the past. They saw it also as a direct link to that past, and to many of the cultural practices and values they explicitly valued: hard work, social closeness, honesty, straightforwardness, humor.

Within living memory, Bergamo has been transformed from one of Italy’s poorest provinces into one of Europe’s most prosperous. These changes have in turn altered nearly everything about how Bergamaschi live, eat, work, and play, as well as how they speak. For most people these are not existential issues, but practical ones, which play out in multiple arenas of their everyday lives, from classrooms to dining room tables. They face such transformations as they grapple with how to live in a modern, global world – to look toward the future, meaningfully inhabit the present, but not leave the past behind entirely. People’s everyday lives, the activities they undertake, the places they choose to live, and the ways in which they choose to speak connect them to specific local histories. At the same time, Bergamaschi and Italians from other small communities think of

themselves as Italians and Europeans, working in modern jobs that may involve extensive interaction with colleagues across the nation, continent and world; spending euros on their everyday expenses; reading local and national newspapers in order to discuss politics over lunch. Balancing local, national, and international orientations and activities, as well as the influences of tradition and modernity, are concerns that Bergamaschi share with people around the globe. Language, as an everyday practice and symbolic resource, is an essential site for trying to achieve and express this balance.

A Local Place in the Heart of the Periphery

The town of Bergamo, divided between the *Città Alta* (Upper City) and the *Città Bassa* (Lower City), had a population of roughly 117,000 in 2006; the province added approximately 800,000 more.¹

The province is distributed across three geographical areas: the mountains in the north, the plains in the south, and a hilly zone in between. The town of Bergamo, where I focused my research, lies

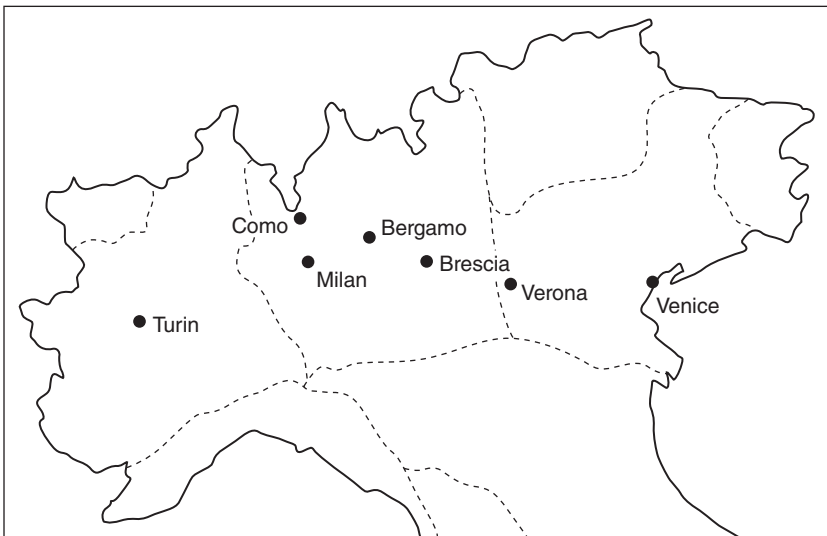


Figure 1.1 Map of northern Italy.

right in the middle, and is the commercial, administrative, and social center of the province, as well as its largest urban area. Multiple suburbs, most of which were once small towns in their own right, surround the town, swallowed up by the urban sprawl that characterizes so much of central northern Italy.

I was drawn to Bergamo by its linguistically, culturally, socioeconomically, and politically dynamic situation. I was told by Italians in other places, such as Venice, Bologna, and Milan, that Bergamo had a local dialect, Bergamasco – an ugly, crude-sounding dialect, many of them commented – that was still in use, although it, like all dialects in Italy, was fading in favor of increasing use of Italian. I heard that Bergamaschi, the local people, were rough, uncultured, hard workers whose economic efforts had led them into recent prosperity, although modern values, such as education, had not really caught on there, as Bergamaschi tended to leave school as soon as they could in order to get into the workforce. I was warned that the Northern League, which many Italians regarded as a reactionary and extremist right-wing political party, enjoyed strong support there, and that most Bergamaschi shared the League's xenophobic views toward Southerners and immigrants. I was told to get ready to eat a lot of polenta, the traditional staple of Bergamasco cuisine.

What I have found in Bergamo, of course, was more complex and variable than the picture painted by outsiders. I heard Bergamasco being spoken in a number of contexts, and although it differs from standard Italian in many ways, it would be wrong to describe it simply as “rough” or “ugly.” I met people who both violated and conformed to the stereotypes I had heard before I got there. Some Bergamaschi I met worked in factories, and had left school at 14, sometimes younger, while others were highly educated. A number owned and ran their own small businesses, specializing in textile or construction materials production, while quite a few were *impiegati* (clerks or office workers), white-collar workers in the service sector who make up the majority of the modern Italian workforce (Martinelli et al. 1999). I met teachers and engineers, librarians and students, bakers and bankers. Most were friendly and welcoming to me, even while they were telling me about the Bergamasco stereotype of being closed and reserved with strangers. Some Bergamaschi were indeed supporters of the Northern League,

and many others thought that certain of the Northern League's ideas made sense. Many, however, disapproved of much of the League's platform: secession of the north from Italy (since put aside, at least officially), opposition to immigrants, and at-times xenophobic views on southern Italians. And while polenta was still on the menu of every *trattoria*, most families ate a wide variety of Italian foods.

I went to Bergamo to undertake a project on language ideology; to study, in other words, the ways in which Bergamaschi viewed and used language – what they thought about Italian and Bergamasco and did to them, as well as how they spoke them. To date, no researcher had undertaken such a project in Northern Italy, and I quickly found that Bergamaschi themselves talked about their sociolinguistic situation in terms of shift and change, and, very often, outright loss, even when they admitted that they themselves spoke their vernacular regularly. They nearly always talked about Bergamasco in relation to Italian, and often not in flattering terms. There were also a number of people who demonstrated their support of the dialect and local ways of living through engaging in various types of cultural production activities, such as writing poetry in the dialect, participating in dialect theater, writing dictionaries in the dialect, or taking classes in how to write it.

At poetry readings and play practices, during interviews and everyday conversations, I often observed Bergamaschi react to and evaluate their own and others' use of language. This was as true for those who spoke Bergamasco and explicitly valued it, as for those who rarely thought about it and claimed not to speak a word of it. "What a beautiful word," someone might whisper under their breath to another audience member. Someone else might laugh about a particularly strong accent, while a director might correct an actor's pronunciation of certain phrases, implicitly reacting to and putting into motion linguistic ideological frames of evaluation. "I hope they didn't hear my accent," "my Bergamasco isn't very good because I only use it to speak to my grandparents," "that's not a real Bergamasco word," "her Italian isn't really very good," were all metalinguistic statements I heard in various contexts from diverse speakers: that is, talk about talk. These types of implicit and explicit cues illustrated that for Bergamaschi, as for many people, the form of their language use often mattered as much as the content.²

The Local Social Aesthetics of Language

I consider these Bergamasco linguistic and metalinguistic activities as discursive positionings within an ideological frame in which Bergamasco and Italian were associated with certain types of selves, time periods (past, future, present), activities, and values. Scholarship on the relationship of power and language in particular has recently been considered through the lens of language ideologies, dynamic sets of beliefs about language that are enacted and reproduced in everyday linguistic practice and interaction. Language ideologies are “the cultural conceptions of the nature, form, and purpose of language, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of a collective order” (Gal and Woolard 1995:130), and include large-scale sociohistorical processes that shape and are shaped by language. The study of language ideologies evolved out of linguistic anthropologists’ increasing interest in the points of articulation between language use and political economies and other hierarchical social structures (for overviews, see Gal 1989; Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin et al. 1998; Woolard 1998). In Bergamo, language ideologies generally coalesced in debates about the roles of Bergamasco and Italian, and reflections on how local speech played an active part in the ways various types of power were distributed, struggled over, contested, and reinforced.

Bergamasco language ideologies drew on, but were not reducible to, social distributions of value that contrasted notions of social solidarity with conceptualizations of status, power, and dominance long familiar to linguistic and cultural anthropologists (see, for example, Brown and Gilman 1972). Analysts have categorized speakers’ affective orientations towards languages according to these two axes of social differentiation, based on the concepts of power or prestige and solidarity or in-group authenticity in order to explore how speakers value their languages. The relative social value of language may be linked to the higher social position of a language’s speakers, indexing socioeconomic advancement, or based on the association of that language with particular literary genres or traditions which are valued as “high” culture with a social group (Dorian 1982; Gal 1979; Morford 1997). Value may also be built on the institutional support a language receives from national, regional,

and local forms of government, including efforts to standardize and circulate written forms of the language, ensuring its use in official contexts of use such as schools and government offices, as has been true for Italian (De Mauro 1972; Kramer 1983; Lepschy et al. 1996). Bringing a language such as Bergamasco into a classroom setting, where it has not been used previously, may be a bid to tap into this type of prestige and value.

Alternately, value may be based on speakers' association of the language with intimate contexts such as in the home or among family or friends. This is what Trudgill (1972) and others have called "covert prestige" or solidarity (Heller 1995; Labov 1966a; Milroy 1987), valuing a language variety precisely because it lacks those other institutional and literary bases for prestige, but is the language of social bonding. Solidarity is often the most important – and sometimes only – form of value attributed to many minority languages like Bergamasco. Dorian's observation about Scottish Gaelic that "in the case of a strictly local-currency language of low prestige, lacking any institutional support whatever, the home domain is clearly crucial to the continuity of the language" (Dorian 1981:82) highlights the high value placed on the role of solidarity in maintaining a minority language. Bergamasco was, indeed, often described as the language of "*confidenza*" (social intimacy and emotional connection), the language of friendship and family, so much so that it was rare to hear anyone addressed in anything but its informal forms.³

Stressing such differences between Bergamasco and Italian paints a picture in which the languages were neatly distributed across diverse roles, values, speakers, and appropriate contexts of use. In this way, it is tempting to define Bergamo as a diglossic situation, in which the two languages are hierarchically ranked into a High language (H) of status and a Low language (L) of solidarity (Eckert 1980; Ferguson 1959; Jaffe 1999). Diglossia, however, describes a strict distribution of the H and L languages across speaking contexts, and so cannot fully depict the fluidity with which Italian and Bergamasco were used in most everyday life. In an effort to describe the Italian context more precisely, Berruto has used the term "*dilalia*," in which the H language can be appropriately used across all social contexts, while use of the L language is restricted to more informal, intimate contexts (1989, 1994).⁴ This simple binary of H vs. L,

however, still fails to account for the variability of language use across speakers and contexts or the extensive mixing of Italian and Bergamasco that often occurred in everyday conversation. There was a wide range of variation between standard Italian and pure Bergamasco that fell outside of this framework and called for analysis.

A defining characteristic of the Bergamasco sociolinguistic situation in the early 2000s was that it involved multiple languages and multiple language ideologies. In this sense it was what Bakhtin has called “heteroglossic.” Bakhtin recognizes that in essence all language situations involve heteroglossia, “the social diversity of speech types” (1981:263); in talking about Bergamo, the concept is particularly fruitful due to its attention not just to multiplicity, but to the specific local meanings of multiplicity. Bakhtin asserts that “all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (1981: 291–292). Different heteroglossic languages are motivated, in other words, by different ideas about the world and language’s place in that world, which exist in dynamic tension with one another.⁵

As Kathryn Woolard has recently noted, Bakhtin’s conceptions can be difficult to pin down ethnographically (2004). For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is the environment of every instance of language use, such that every utterance resounds with the various histories – or voices – associated with the words involved. Within this environment of heteroglossia, voices animate language varieties, such that using a particular language variety may be tantamount to an expression of a certain “conceptualization of the world in words.” However, Bakhtin posits that voices circulate within a community and are not the property of individuals, making it difficult to apply this concept to real live speakers, especially when, as was true in the Bergamasco situation, linguistic and ideological planes were not so tightly or unequivocally aligned. The continuum of mixed or bivalent language use between Italian and Bergamasco reflected, but was not easily reducible to, a wide array of social meanings.

The concept of indexicality engenders an analysis that captures this variability and tracks the heteroglossic deployment of linguistic varieties and ideologies of language across contexts and speakers.⁶

Indexicality is the capacity of language to signify non-referentially (referential meaning being the semantic sense of words), through causality or contiguity. As a smoke indexes – or points to – fire, so can language index contextual factors about speakers, settings, attitudes, orientations, stances, etc. Indexicals both presuppose certain features of context, and entail others. When an accent is indexically deployed, for instance, its use presupposes that participants in an interaction recognize the accent and the social values and stereotypes with which it is associated (otherwise it would be meaningless). Such use also reinforces or may act to alter – but, in any event, acts on in some fashion – these values and stereotypes and their links to the accent. Indexes are like delicate anchors that connect the non-referential forms of language and the context, both the immediate micro-context of speakers' relationships and unfolding histories, and the larger macro-context of politics, economics, and institutional power. Such anchors are never static, but instead are constantly being recast and reset.⁷

In Bergamo, speaking in a Bergamasco way indexed values such as home, family, and intimacy, but also peasant-ness, lack of education, and backwardness, while speaking Italian pointed to values such as personal refinement, educational achievement, and formality. The fluidity of the heteroglossic deployment of different ways of speaking, however, meant that the indexical potentials of any particular utterance were always multiple. Following Woolard, who argues for analysis that acknowledges “opposed values as simultaneously and equally present in many bilingual phenomena” (1999:6), I foreground instances in which languages and meanings overlapped, as speakers could speak bivalently, drawing simultaneously on the linguistic and symbolic resources of both languages. This possibility of simultaneity ensured that, however starkly the binaries might be described, in practice, divisions or categories were rarely so simple.

The form of language in Bergamo dynamically resonated with multiple voices; orientations towards that form, such as the meta-linguistic commentary I mentioned above, were similarly various as well as remarkably common. Pervasive attention to the form or shape of language as well as to its function (what it does or means) indicates the utility of the concept of aesthetics in analyzing the Bergamasco language situation. For Bourdieu in his work on taste and distinction, perceiving aesthetically means attending to form

over function (1984). Bourdieu and others (Clifford 1988; Myers 1994, 2002; Shusterman 2000) have demonstrated how culturally specific aesthetic sensibilities are. Indeed, Sharman has argued that culture itself is “an aesthetic system, whereby meaning is produced and reproduced through the attachment of value to experience” (2006:842), while Coote maintains that all “human activity has an aesthetic aspect” (1992:246).

While aesthetics has a long, tangled history of focusing specifically on art and form, I use the term here in a more applied, quotidian sense, coupling it with “social” to emphasize this approach. Brenneis used the concept *social aesthetics* to describe a process that “fuses intellectual sense-making activity with local aesthetic criteria for coherence and beauty . . . and with ethnopsychological notions of personhood, emotion, expression and experience” (1987:237). He explored how, in the rural Fijian Indian village of Bhatgaon, local ways of thinking about certain verbal and musical genres and their performance went hand in hand with particular ways of feeling about these practices, which were in turn linked to ideas of the self and others. He emphasized that, “[i]t is indeed very difficult to separate ethnopsychological from aesthetic notions; in articulating the bases of their enjoyment or appreciation of particular events, villagers also articulate their sense of self and experience” (Brenneis 1987:238). Villagers’ ideas about themselves were intimately linked to how they felt about what they aesthetically responded to, such that there was an explicit link between linguistic and musical performance, ideas about these performances, and emotion.

People nearly always feel what they speak, not just during performances in which the right lines must be spoken or the alliteration of a phrase deliciously falls from the lips, but also in making choices about what and how to speak, speakers know when something feels right or wrong, beautiful or ugly. In linguistic anthropology and related fields, focusing on the form and performance of language has often occurred under the auspices of looking at poetics, another non-referential function of language (Banti and Giannattasio 2004; Bauman 1983, 2000, 2004; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Caton 1990). Jakobson (1960) stressed that the poetic function – in which there is a focus on the shape or sound of language – is always present in language, even when it is backgrounded. Here I want to push this observation to the heart of my analysis.

In order to do so, I introduce and explore the concept of the social aesthetics of language. A social aesthetics of language is the interweaving of culturally shaped and emotionally felt dimensions of language use and the extra-linguistic factors that rank people and their groups into hierarchies. The concept of the social aesthetics of language is meant to capture the texture of the discourses, practices, ideologies, sentiments, and socioeconomic and political constraints that produce and inform speaking and living. This texture is produced at the intersection of power and emotion. For many Bergamaschi, for example, feeling attached to Bergamasco and feeling like you should speak Italian to your children balanced the prestige and socioeconomic advantages of Italian with the socially valued privilege of sounding local in certain contexts. One of the central conundrums for those who study and ponder the aesthetic has been to describe the link between person and object; the social aesthetics of language describes how implicit and explicit metalinguistic activity can be analyzed to reveal exactly these links between people and what they speak.

Issues of power are always implicated in aesthetic systems. Wolf, discussing Sufism in Pakistan, has observed that, “the link between poetics and politics is strong” (2006:247), while Eagleton (1990) has stressed the intrinsic connections between aesthetics and power. Bourdieu’s conceptualization of distinction demonstrates that aesthetic systems are hierarchically ranked, implying the presence of differentially distributed socioeconomic power across classes (1984). In France, displaying one’s taste in art, food, and clothing, for example, is an embodied act that situates one within the class hierarchy. Without the necessary education and what Bourdieu calls “social origin,” one cannot simply walk into the Louvre and properly appreciate the art; this is a learned aesthetic activity. Similarly, in Bergamo, enjoyment of Bergamasco cultural productions – such as poetry readings or play performances – the satisfaction found in hearing a well-turned phrase in Bergamasco conversation, even the cringe evoked by a Bergamasco word spoken out of place in an Italian setting, hinged on the hierarchical positioning of Italian as the language of power and Bergamasco as the language of intimacy and *confidenza*. For most Bergamaschi, speaking anything but Italian in school or in a similarly formal, public setting was unthinkable and unpalatable; to do so would have been to make the speaker

sound old-fashioned and backward, unable to control the forms of speech that made one modern and economically successful. At the same time, speaking without some Bergamasco elements was equally unlikely and was met with varying degrees of censure from other speakers for sounding too formal and overly elaborate.

Such feelings are socialized and learned from childhood on. The field of language socialization (Fader 2000, 2001; Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Kulick and Schieffelin 2004; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin 1990, 2000) has extensively demonstrated how “linguistic and sociocultural knowledge are acquired simultaneously and are inextricably bound up with one another” (Garrett 2005:335). Clearly, aesthetic sensibilities and practices are part of what is learned in and through language as novice speakers, such as children, are socialized into culturally appropriate speaking practices, ideas, and subjectivities. Language socialization studies of bi- and multilingual communities have demonstrated that novices learn what languages mean together with how to speak them (Fader 2007; Kulick 1992; Paugh 2001). As a novice learner of Bergamasco, I was often the subject of instructive judgments about Bergamasco and Italian. For example, my tortured attempts at the blackboard in class were deemed extraordinary, implying that being an outsider – as well as a young female – made my efforts appear unusual but admirable to my Bergamasco classmates. At the same time, my frequent attempts to speak Bergamasco in everyday life were met with such extensive corrections and laughter that achieving verbal fluency through practice was essentially impossible. Such implicit resistances to my speaking it made it difficult for me to speak it; similar gate-keeping practices frequently prevented younger Bergamaschi from speaking it, as well.

Kulick and Schieffelin have noted that any theory of socialization or “becoming,” whether it is local or scholarly, includes affect, or “emotions, feelings, moods, dispositions, and attitudes associated with persons and/or situations” (2004:352). What Bergamaschi felt about and through language was constrained by the sociohistorical hierarchy in which Italian dominated Bergamasco and other local languages.⁸ To capture this dynamic, I use the terms emotion, affect, and sentiment in discussing Bergamaschi’s intimate, lived relationships with their languages. Emotion is a broad term to encompass the culturally defined categories of feeling that speakers claimed and

attributed to one another. Affect as I use it is the practice of emotion, a broader term without sentiment or emotion's implications of the interiorization of feeling (Besnier 1990). Focusing on affect directs attention to how emotions are constructed discursively, often co-constructed through interaction. In this way, the use of certain affective practices may involve constructing the self as a culturally appropriate feeling being. Sentiment is the hardest to define and most immediately intuitively understood of these terms. I shape my usage of sentiment on Steven Feld's use of the term (1990) as the expressive, embodied, shared, and practiced experience of emotions, expressed through song and weeping, shared through gesture and verbal comments, connected to cultural ideas about death, sadness, birds, landscape, and sociality among the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea (see also Abu-Lughod 1999 and Yanagisako 2002 on sentiment). Sentiments such as nostalgia often overcame Bergamaschi, linking them immediately to past experiences and images, and rendering language practices such as code choice and code mixing sentimentally informed. Speakers' metalinguistic observations demonstrated that affective concerns shaped how language was produced and responded to. Emotions such as embarrassment (*vergogna*) or humorous engagement (**fà quàter grignà**, lit. "do/have four laughs") could dynamically frame language use such that a sound or word or code choice could feel good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly (Sapir 1949[1927]). These sentimental frames were also aesthetic judgments, which in turn were linked to hierarchies of status and value.

Feld (1988, 1990) has demonstrated how aesthetics are emotionally and bodily experienced (see also, for example, Arno 2003), such that learning to speak and feel is bound up with cultural conceptualizations of aesthetic values and experiences. Power and emotion are also often intricately interconnected, for example, in terms of the appropriate distribution of emotion across a group, or in the role played by emotional display in achieving – or being shut out – of power (Irvine 1989, 1990; Kulick 1993, 1998). Abu-Lughod and Lutz have argued that emotional discourses are "implicated in the play of power and the operation of a historically changing system of social hierarchy" (1990:15) (see also Rosaldo 1984; Scheper-Hughes 1985, 1992). Affect and power intersected in the social aesthetics of language in Bergamo, shaping how people related

to Italian and Bergamasco, constructing a position of power through correct Italian, or building a sense of social closeness through using Bergamasco words or sounds.

A Modern *Questione della Lingua*

The modern social aesthetics of language in Bergamo is rooted in specific local, national, and European histories, and Bergamaschi were not alone in having complex relationships to their languages. Across Italy, the *questione della lingua* – language question – has been a vexed socioeconomic, political, and cultural issue since the time of Dante (Alighieri 1996). Some of the most potent obstacles faced by those who sought to unite European nation-states in the 18th and 19th centuries were internal divisions: regional and local minorities whose loyalties lay first with their own towns, provinces, or regions, and only then with larger, more distant and abstract political entities like the state. Language was one way in which these difficulties were expressed, for modern concepts of the nation-state included a shared national language, while most people spoke smaller local languages (Anderson 1991; Inglehart and Woodward 1972). From England to Spain, France to Greece, creating a modern nation-state meant establishing a suitably modern language which could then unite the masses – and then making that process seem natural and unforced (Grillo 1989; Judge 2007; Tsitsipis 1998). Most often, the language of the rulers became the language of the state: French is the language spoken in Paris, from which the French kings and Revolutionaries ruled (Crowley 1996; Weber 1976); Spanish (known as Castilian) is the language spoken in Madrid in the Castile region, still the Spanish national capital (Urla 1993b; Woolard 1989). These language varieties generally needed to be codified through dictionaries and grammars in order to demonstrate that they were suitable to be national languages, and then spread throughout the state via national institutions such as education and the mass media (Anderson 1991; Cameron 1995; Jaffe 1996; Swiggers 1990). Local languages were often depicted by governments and in schools and mass media as divisive and provincial, limiting individuals’

participation in the nation both politically and economically (Eckert 1980; Jaffe 1999; Kabatek 1997). Many European local languages became tarnished with the image of the backward peasant who had failed to modernize with the rest of his or her neighbors due to these efforts (Drysdale 2001; Kuter 1989; Timm 2001).

When Italy was united as a nation-state in the 1860s, less than two percent of Italians spoke Italian (De Mauro 1972, 1994). For centuries previous, educated elites read and wrote various *lingua francae*, including Latin, French, and the variety of the Florentine dialect that was eventually chosen to be Italian, and everyone spoke their local languages during the course of everyday life. Although efforts were made to increase the number of Italian speakers after unification, through education and other means (Kramer 1983; Leoni 1980; Migliorini and Griffith 1984),⁹ the *questione della lingua* remained a national problem for many decades, taken up in various ways by different governing forces. National leaders blamed local languages for dividing citizens from one another and preventing their full participation in the nation-state; Fascists especially legislated heavily against local languages. Over the 20th century, Italy nonetheless slowly became more unified through a number of political and economic shifts. Foremost among these were the so-called economic miracle years that followed World War II, in which rapid industrialization, particularly in the north, led to increases in wages, improved living conditions and access to consumer goods, rural to urban and south to north migration, and greater than before participation in education (Besana 1997; Duggan 2007; Ginsborg 1990; Mack Smith 1997). Such changes contributed to a rapid increase in speaking Italian over the generations that participated in and followed these shifts. Over the past hundred years, massive linguistic transformation has occurred: according to the latest available statistics, 98 percent of Italians currently speak their national language (ISTAT 1997, 2007).

Bergamo's language situation must be understood vis-à-vis this politics of the *questione della lingua*, which has long set the interests of the national language in opposition to those of the many regional and minority languages spoken by Italians, helping to create and solidify these divides in the process. Since unification, Italian has consistently been promoted over and above local languages in the

educational system, in the media, and in national bureaucracies, such as civil services. Local pride of place has often been pitted against participation in the nation, and language is one of the most tenacious symbols for this conflict. As of 2006, roughly half of Italians spoke another language in addition to Italian, most a dialect (ISTAT 1997, 2007).

Italian local languages that, like Bergamasco, are descendents of Vulgar Latin are referred to as “*dialetti*” (dialects) or even just the generalized “*dialetto*” (dialect) in Italian, terms that automatically position such languages beneath the national language – itself a descendent of the Florentine dialect – in terms of prestige and status (Maiden and Parry 1997). Numerous language scholars have emphasized the social dimensions of distinguishing languages from dialects, sometimes turning to the old adage that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy to illustrate this (Auer and di Luzio 1988; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998; De Mauro 1994; Gal 1995; Gal and Woolard 1995; Haugen 1966). This is certainly true of the Italian situation, where the only Italian “language” is Italian, while the other Italo-Romance linguistic varieties that share its territory – including a number that have long histories of being written and used for numerous linguistic functions, such as Venetian, Milanese, and Sicilian (Beretta 1998; Burke 1987; Kramer 1983; Steinberg 1987) – are demoted to being “dialects” and have no legal protections (Dal Negro 2005; Orioles 2002). I refer to Bergamasco at times as a dialect because this term reflects Italian usage, for although Bergamasco is not a linguistic dialect of Italian, its position relative to Italian is an essential element in the meaning of Bergamasco to those who spoke it when I did my research. I also refer to Bergamasco and other local varieties as “local languages” or vernaculars when discussing them more generally to contest this positioning.¹⁰

Across Italy at the start of the new millennium, the so-called dialects were most often talked about as practices consigned to obsolescence, fast becoming things of the past. In Bergamo, people often pointed to how infrequently younger people seemed to speak it, especially when contrasted with their grandparents. Young people, indeed, often claimed to not speak it at all. My research, however, showed that it was too soon to tell, for patterns of use were varied and multiple. Ideas of loss, however, persisted.

My Place in Bergamo

Elizabeth Krause has argued that ethnography is “a mutually constituted ‘space of encounter,’” built on “a foundation of competence, practice, and sensibility” (2005:594), involving “structured spontaneity” (595). The following excerpt from my field notes demonstrates some of the structured spontaneity that occurred during my research, as well as how it was often a dynamic, interactional process. The excerpt describes part of an evening that my American *moroso* (boyfriend), who joined me in Bergamo in 1999–2000 to do his own research at the civic library, and I spent with two research consultants who also became friends. Federico was Bergamasco, Sara was from a small town in the south; he was an engineer, she a teacher. This was the first in what became a regular, frequent type of outing for the four of us. They had just met and become “*fidanzati*” (seriously dating, but not formally engaged), and we got to know them as they got to know each other.

Field notes December 2, 1999: The conversation became Federico telling us various typical Bergamasco words (like “**pòta**,” which means, “ahh, shit happens”) and phrases, which were proverbs and funny sayings, and mostly little word games. One meant, “look at that cow there go into that house there,” but was something like “**A! la ka al a a ka la**” – equivalent, in some ways, perhaps, to the *coca-cola con la conuncia corta corta* in Florence,¹¹ which I told them about. Sara told us how to say different things in her dialect, and it turned into a game: Federico would tell us how to say something in Bergamasco, Sara would give it in her dialect and we would give it in English.

Many of our early interactions involved comparisons between our cultures. As the ethnographer, I paid close attention to the examples and comparisons that Federico and Sara offered as “data”; as a new friend, I offered my own examples and comparisons. As my research progressed, I was also able to contextualize them as exemplars of many things about Bergamo. For instance, many southerners have come to Bergamo to find work and many of these have married Bergamaschi. Such unions generated questions about, among other things, what the children would or would not speak. As a young

couple starting their lives together (for they married soon after), Federico and Sara faced questions about how to afford setting up a household, where to buy a home, what types of relationships to maintain with family and friends as they became a couple, what activities to spend their free time on – all common concerns for people their age in Bergamo and elsewhere. I eventually heard Federico’s tongue twister again and learned how it and many of the other sayings he told us that night were properly written and translated in Maestro’s class (**Ah! Chèla aca là l’à a la cà!** or Ah! That cow there is going in the house!). Federico and I had ongoing discussions about politics, especially the challenges and appeal of the Northern League; Sara’s brother, deeply engaged with local politics, often joined these discussions. Sara offered an insider’s view of Bergamasco schools, as well as her perspective on what it was like as an outsider in Bergamo. Our “mutually constituted ‘space of encounter’” was one in which cultural and personal interactions and understandings were constantly unfolding.

At the same time, I strove to build my research on “a foundation of competence, practice, and sensibility.” When I began fieldwork in Bergamo in the fall of 1999, I chose the Città Alta as the center of my ethnographic research, drawn by its role as the “old city” and symbolic heart of Bergamo. Although it used to be more crowded, at that time fewer than three thousand people lived there, most of them well-off. Whenever I told people in Bergamo that we lived in the Città Alta, they took it as a given: of course, foreigners would want to live in the most scenic and well-preserved – and touristy – neighborhood in town.

We rented an apartment there from a family – a prosperous and well-educated couple, Davide and Tullia, and their daughter, Marina, who was in college – who quickly became a second family to us. They fed us elaborate Sunday *pranzi* (lunches, the most important meal in Italy), taught us to play Bergamasco and Italian card games, and answered my endless questions about their town and way of life. The Città Alta became our neighborhood, the place where we bought bread, vegetables and meat, went for strolls, and ran into the same people day after day, slowly getting to know them. Many of the people who owned and ran businesses in the Città Alta also lived there, slightly apart from the wealthy more recently arrived residents. There was Maria, who owned and ran the bakery; Mariana,

who worked in the grand Civic Library and had recently married; and Giuseppe, who sold me newspapers every day and with whom I had long discussions about the complexities of Italian politics, to name just a few. Most were people who had lived in the Città Alta for decades, if not generations, so we got to know many working- and middle-class merchants and their families, whose children attended school with the children of the elite.

In addition to Sara and Federico and Davide, Tullia and Marina, there were a number of individuals and families with whom I spent more extensive and intimate time, most of whom you will meet on these pages. One of the most important was an iron-smithing family, who had a **butiga** (workshop; in this case, a forge) in the Città Alta. Father Paolo and son Roberto worked in and ran the butiga; their wives, Carla and Franca, were both extraordinary seamstresses. Both couples lived across the square from the butiga in apartments connected by a balcony. A sister of Paolo lived upstairs with her family; a son-in-law had his glass-blowing studio on the ground floor (and often used the butiga for various soldering jobs, etc.); Franca's brother worked with Paolo and Roberto in the butiga; and the whole family shared a *cantina*, or socializing room, with a



Figure 1.2 Paolo in his family's cantina (photograph by Karen Evenson).

full kitchen and long dining table, which was filled with Paolo's collection of Bergamasco puppets and other items.

Paolo, a well-known Bergamasco poet, was my self-appointed guide to a number of Bergamasco cultural events, and introduced me to numerous people who shared his enthusiasm for Bergamasco culture, the Città Alta, and the pleasures of good food, wine, and friends.

I also attended and participated in a number of explicitly linguistic and cultural activities, such as poetry readings, theater performances, and anything else that pertained to the dialect. In addition to Paolo, I met and spent time with a number of poets who wrote in Bergamasco, many of whom I interviewed, and attended multiple poetry readings that they conducted. The *Ducato di Piazza Pontida*, a social organization that promotes Bergamasco culture and language,¹² sponsors the majority of such events in Bergamo, and I soon got to know many of its members and leaders. The Ducato offered the yearly course in Bergamasco that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, in which I participated for the entire "school year" in 1999–2000 and for the first half of the 2000–2001 school year. During the fall of 2000, I also attended another course on Bergamasco, taught by a former attendee of Maestro's course, and sponsored by the *comune* (city administration) of a small town on Bergamo's southeast periphery. Both of these courses took place during the evening after the end of the workday, were relatively small (10–20 participants), and focused nearly exclusively on writing Bergamasco.

I also joined up with a local dialect theater troupe (*compagnia teatrale del dialetto*), called "*Tradizione e Novità*" (Tradition and Novelty). There were at least 20 such troupes in the province of Bergamo in 2000, each attached to a particular town, neighborhood, or parish. *Tradizione e Novità* came from the *Borgo Santa Caterina* (Santa Caterina neighborhood), which lies just below the Città Alta to the west. I attended most of their rehearsals and performances during 2000, tape-recording extensively, and, in October 2000, I even played a small part in one of their productions.

I met regularly with local experts on the dialect, history, and culture of the area, some of them repeatedly. In the local library, I read extensively about local modern history, language, and culture. Through routinely reading several newspapers and tuning in to local and national radio and television newscasts, I attended to local and

national media, keeping up with local issues and tracking media treatment of dialect and culture.

The Northern League was particularly active in the news and Bergamasco politics that year, and I attended a number of their rallies to get a sense of who participated, how large a crowd they consistently drew, and what language such rallies were conducted in (nearly exclusively Italian). I also attended the meetings of the *Associazione Linguistica Padana* (Padanian Linguistic Association), whose members were explicitly Northern League, although the group itself was not formally associated with the League. ALP, as they called themselves, was founded in 1999 and met several times over the next year and a half; I attended all of their meetings during this time, in which they discussed their goals to record as many northern dialects as possible, salvage whatever linguistic practices (such as story-telling) as possible, and linguistically analyze the similarities and differences among these dialects so that they could eventually produce a northern Italian *koinè*, or common language.¹³

I balanced my participation in dialect-oriented activities with others less explicitly concerned with the local. Bergamaschi, like most Italians, tend to participate in various types of social organizations or group activities, from bicycling troupes to amateur intellectual societies to formula car racing fan clubs. Eager to take advantage of these common forms of public sociality, I joined various groups, such as an organization that promoted and performed Renaissance and Medieval dance. The people with whom I danced, including Sara and later Federico, were mostly well-educated and interested in history and culture, but not necessarily in language *per se*. As such, their perspectives, comments, and attitudes provided good counterpoints to those of the many people with whom I spent time who were explicitly engaged in language issues. I also attended a women's knitting circle and helped out at a neighborhood center for the elderly. Both of these met in the Città Alta, and were attended by women (the knitting circle) or older people (the neighborhood center) from the lower as well as upper city. In both of these contexts, I got to know older people, mostly women from working- or middle-class backgrounds, who spoke primarily in Bergamasco and told me about how Bergamo used to be, or how their own lives had progressed. These life experiences and stories enriched my perspective on the town, its social

history, and the changing roles of women as mothers, grandmothers, and participants in the workforce.

I systematically interviewed people from all of these groups and contexts about their lives and linguistic abilities, viewpoints, and backgrounds, tape-recording them. I also conducted a number of informal, tape-recorded interviews with workers at a small family-run factory just outside of Bergamo, as well as several group interviews with high school students at a scientific high school in the lower city that drew students from all over the province. In all these interviews, I asked participants about their own and others' language skills, their views and attitudes about the dialect and related cultural productions (such as poetry and theater), as well as various current events and popular culture happenings.¹⁴

In all contexts, I tape-recorded and took notes whenever people let me – during play rehearsals, Bergamasco courses, public events, and everyday conversations. Some of these recordings were in Bergamasco; some in Italian; the majority in a mix of both.

Transcribing

As I discuss in more detail in *Constructing Transcripts: Orthographic Conventions and Transcription Processes*, I subsequently transcribed several of these recordings with native Bergamasco-speakers, which provided me with a few different advantages. First, as my Bergamasco was at variable stages during my time there, it enabled me to have native speakers listen to what was recorded and help me “get it right” in our transcripts. One of the most central and vexing issues about “getting it right” was being able to tell what was Bergamasco and what was Italian. Although some things were obvious to me, and most were clear to them, often there was no definitive answer for what language a word or phrase belonged to. These instances were always informative, because at each one we would be forced to be incredibly specific in offering reasons for why, when there were words or phrases that contained both Italian and Bergamasco elements, a word belonged to one or the other code. This process emphasized that transcription is always a process of selection (Edwards 1989; Ochs 1979), and transcribers need to

be explicit about the conceptions of and expectations about language that they bring to their task (Haviland 1996).

Second, as native speakers, these assistants often had metalinguistic information about interactions that helped me to understand what was going on beyond code choice and the referential meaning of the words. Besides decoding idioms and contextualizing certain expressions, these assistants provided constant commentary on the value and meaning of how things were being said, helping me begin to sketch the indexical frames within which such talk could be understood. “That woman’s Bergamasco accent is so strong it makes me laugh,” one of them would say, or “this is a common way to say that across northern Italy, not just in Bergamo,” another would say. Such observations demonstrated the indexical links between accents and humor, for example, as well as similarities and connections between Bergamasco ways of speaking and neighboring local varieties. Together, we could speculate as to why someone had used Bergamasco to say one thing and Italian to say something else, or what using a particular proverb had meant. Through these speculations, I learned a lot about what speaking *sounds like* to Bergamaschi themselves, as well as how it feels. As will become clear throughout this book, I treat transcribers’ comments as essential data in their own right, which in turn helped me make connections between linguistic patterns of use, language ideologies, and local conceptualizations of place, time, and self.

Outline of Chapters

In the chapters that follow, I investigate several topics to explore the social aesthetics of language in Bergamo. I begin with the small details of everyday life, slowly widening the scope of my discussion to include larger contexts such as the national and international. Through gradually widening the analytical lens from the micro to the macro, I aim to create an intimate sense of the social aesthetics of language for the reader across various contexts as a foundation for understanding how this aesthetics is embedded within and informed by institutions and processes of power, such as the national government and increasing Europeanization.

In Chapter 2, “Bergamasco in Use: The Feel of Everyday Speaking,” I look at everyday language practices. I concentrate on a range of contexts and speakers, when speakers explicitly reflected on language but also when their attitudes and orientations were more implicitly expressed. Most everyday speaking involved use of Italian and Bergamasco, as speakers drew from both languages to orient themselves towards different types of speakers and contexts, express diverse selves and values, and align themselves with tradition and modernity, prestige and solidarity. Chapter 3 considers the role gender played in ideas about and practices of language use in Bergamo, as it aligned with conceptualizations of tradition and modernity, prestige and solidarity, roughness and refinement. Through the close examination of a number of transcripts in both these chapters, I explore what it felt like to speak as a Bergamasco person.

One of the places linguistic hierarchies become evident is through an examination of literary and performative genres, as certain genres mattered more than others within the social aesthetics of language of Bergamo. Chapter 4, “Bergamasco on Stage: Poetry and Theater,” focuses on Bergamasco poetry and theater, the most important genres in the dialect, demonstrating the intersection of power and emotion in Bergamasco language practices on stage. Bauman defines genre as “a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text,” which is “a constellation of systematically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse” (2000:84). Hierarchies of genres are often tied to hierarchies of taste and values as well as to social hierarchies (Caton 1990). As the most common forms of local cultural and linguistic production, poetry and plays played a central role in *Bergamaschità* (Bergamasco-ness), or local conceptions about what makes the place, people, and community unique. Bergamasco enjoyment of these genres, as well as the role they attributed to them as bulwarks against the loss of Bergamasco language and culture, meant that poetry and plays had power within the sociolinguistic landscape as well as evoked myriad emotional responses. Even those who did not participate in them recognized these activities as central to *Bergamaschità*, and an important site for its – and the dialect’s – reproduction.

Chapter 5, “Modern *Campanilismo*: The Value of Place,” connects language to another valuable symbolic resource in Bergamo: the place itself, and the Citta Altà, or Upper City, in particular. Just as the dialect on stage stood for Bergamaschità, a notion which combines contemporary and nostalgic ideas about local identity, so too did this place, whether as a distant silhouette glimpsed during a daily commute from below, as a destination for socializing on Saturday nights, or through its invocation in multiple poems about what it meant to be Bergamasco. By looking at the ways in which people talked about the Citta Altà, how it was represented in the media, as well as language used in the homes of several of its residents, this chapter scrutinizes connections between language and place, illustrating the parallels between Bergamasco and the Citta Altà, as well as how they were different types of symbolic resources.

Chapter 6, “Bergamo, Italy, Europe: Speaking Contextualized,” widens the lens to discuss the historical relationship between language and power in Italy and Bergamo and beyond. It briefly sketches the *questione della lingua* – language question – at the national level and then contextualizes local language politics in the events of the 20th century. These include local responses to Fascism’s anti-vernacular policies and contemporary debates involving the Northern League. I turn to broader political debates about language, in which Bergamasco and Italian stood as emblems of local and national communities, respectively, although the sets of values they pointed to varied across political contexts. I explore how, during the Fascist period, supporting Bergamasco was one allegedly non-political way to assert the importance of local ways of living against the totalizing vision of a united state pushed by the national government. More recently, due to the Northern League’s strident defense of Bergamasco, supporting local cultural traditions, including the dialect, sounded to many Bergamaschi like *de facto* support for the League and its right-wing positions on immigration and other topics.

Bergamo was not alone in facing complicated political, economic, and social challenges at the start of the new millennium, and Chapter 6 also links the language politics of Bergamo to larger currents in Europe. Explicitly nationalistic political parties like the Northern League had gained strength across the continent over the past several decades, even as nation-states were being economically

and politically integrated into the European Union. Increasing numbers of immigrants from North Africa and Asia were filling demographic gaps, but providing new cultural and political challenges. By scrutinizing these large-scale political and economic phenomena from the perspective of Bergamo, this chapter grounds these sometimes amorphous phenomena in the detail of everyday life.

The final chapter brings together the multiple strands of meaning that make up the social aesthetics of language. The politics of language, the socioeconomics of linguistic choice, the meaning of poetry, the appropriate flow of everyday conversation, nostalgia for the Bergamasco past, anticipation for the Italian and European future, the beauty of linguistic purity, the authenticity of conversational multivalency, the meaning of place – all play a part in what it meant and how it felt to speak in Bergamo. The social aesthetics of language has implications for Bergamasco and perceptions of its impending loss, and I argue that while there were multiple shifts in action, loss was not yet a foregone conclusion. Such an approach has broader application than just the Bergamasco, Italian, or European situations, as it brings together rich lines of inquiry to better understand speakers' everyday experience, the choices they make, and the results of these choices.