

Language variation and contact between closely related varieties:
Čakavian dialects in the Istria-Kvarner region of Croatia

Keith Langston (University of Georgia), Silvana Vranić (University of Rijeka),
and Zvezdana Vrzić (New York University)

Istria-Kvarner is a multilingual border region with a long history of contact between different Slavic and Romance varieties. The Čakavian dialects in this area differ significantly from standard Croatian and colloquial Štokavian varieties that have become increasingly influential beginning in the last century (in Istria proper, only after the end of World War II). There is also substantial variation among the Čakavian dialects in the region, which belong to different subgroups and exhibit differences that are highly salient to speakers of the individual local varieties.

The aspect of language contact that has arguably attracted the most attention from scholars since the 1950s, when the term first appeared in print, is code-switching (MacSwan, 2021, p. 88). However, code-switching has been conceptualized in various ways. Different authors use different terminology and attempt to draw distinctions between various types of language mixing behaviors (e.g., Muysken, 2000). Some approaches rely on distinguishing a matrix language into which elements from another code are embedded, and may treat borrowing as a separate phenomenon entirely (see Myers-Scotton, 1993), although there is a fundamental disagreement among researchers as to whether it is possible to make this distinction. As Poplack (2004) notes, nonce-borrowings are the most commonly observed type of language mixing. Many researchers have proposed various system-internal constraints on code-switching, but these are often contradicted by the data (see MacSwan, 2021 for a survey). There are, naturally, also competing theoretical models for the mental grammars of bi- or multilingual speakers.

Contact between closely related varieties remains relatively understudied. A fundamental distinction has often been drawn between the choice of variants from different dialects or registers within a single language (style-shifting) and from different languages (code-switching). However, given that different varieties cannot be characterized as representing dialects of the same language or different languages solely on the basis of structural similarities/differences or mutual intelligibility, the distinction between style-shifting and code-switching is questionable.

This paper analyzes sociolinguistic interview data from Čakavian dialects collected as part of a larger project to document endangered language varieties in contact in the Istria-Kvarner region. Speakers sometimes exhibit prototypical code-switching behaviors that can be accounted for by established theoretical models, but we also find many examples where it is difficult to define a matrix variety (for example) or stretches of discourse where the variety is ambiguous. There are also examples that blend phonological or morphological features from both varieties in the same word, which contradict some theoretical models. Speakers of these varieties exhibit complex patterns of variation that allow us to test different hypotheses about grammatical restrictions on code-switching and pragmatic and social factors that may influence this behavior.

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