The aim of this third chapter is to show how Gramsci’s positive relationship with cultural and linguistic heterogeneity contributed to shaping his political and intellectual profile. I shall begin with a recapitulation of some particularly significant elements, most of which have been discussed in the previous chapters.

Gramsci was born in a small town on the island of Sardinia. His first encounters with intellectuals interested in the island’s language, Sardinian, as well as its local varieties and literary products, took place during his childhood and early youth. In the village of Ghilarza, where he spent most of his childhood, Gramsci met a priest – Michele Licheri – who was also an amateur scholar of local history and dialects. One of Gramsci’s secondary school teachers, at the liceo where he studied in Cagliari, was the linguist Francesco Ribezzo; and another was Raffa Garzia – an important journalist, writer and philologist, who later taught Sardinian linguistics at Cagliari University. Traces of these encounters can be found in Gramsci’s letters and journalistic production. However, the most important linguist who directly contributed to Gramsci’s intellectual formation was Matteo Bartoli.

Bartoli was a prominent figure in early-twentieth-century linguistics. In 1911, Gramsci went to Turin to study at the university. Soon, Bartoli began to think that this young Sardinian student was destined to become a linguist himself, and encouraged him to collaborate

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1. See Appendix, section 4.2.1.
in the preparation of teaching and research materials. Significantly, Bartoli, like Gramsci, came from an area on the margins of the Italian linguistic domain, Istria, and he was well aware of the cultural and political issues which went hand-in-hand with the linguistic fragmentation of this area. Istria and the surrounding areas on the northern coast of the Adriatic Sea were (and still are) characterised by a high degree of multilingualism, with contacts between several varieties of both Romance and Slavonic languages. As early as 1915, at the beginning of his career as a journalist, Gramsci referred to Bartoli’s research on the linguistic areas of Dalmatia. It is probable that Gramsci’s own attention to the Slav populations originated from Bartoli’s work, although Gramsci especially developed the historical and political aspects of this.

Throughout his life Gramsci used Sardinian. He did so not only to converse with family and friends about traditional, regional matters and everyday life, but also – at least on some occasions – to talk about politics and contemporary non-Sardinian affairs. He repeatedly praised the virtues of dialects for theatrical dialogues. He never indulged, though, in overpraise, thus differing from those authors whom Tullio De Mauro would later call dialettomani, that is, extreme supporters of the preservation and promotion of dialects. The unification of language at the national and, over a longer period of time, also at the international level was, for Gramsci, a potentially progressive development from a political point of view, and thus worthy of being speeded up through purposeful interventions.

Both in Sardinia and at Turin, Gramsci was involved in various forms of translation, which I discussed in Chapter One. This practical activity constituted an early source for Gramsci’s interest in translation and translatability, which is

4. Cf. De Mauro 1991a, p. 307ff. and pp. 357–62. Gramsci never came to share a static conception of the counterposition between dialects, as the languages of spontaneous and nature-inspired art, and national languages, as the linguistic codes most suitable to expressing modern, rational worldviews. On the contrary, in the years 1930–3, some of his prison notes further problematised the distinction between lingua and dialetto. The history of languages, which are understood by Gramsci as socio-cultural collective products, shows that neither educated languages nor dialects are necessarily linked, by a sort of constitutive bond, to a certain worldview. On this point, he observes that in the sixteenth century, a ‘truly national-popular’ culture developed which was expressed ‘in the dialects, but in Latin as well’ (Gramsci 1975, Q5, §104, pp. 632–3); and that in Rome, from 1847 to 1849, ‘the liberals make use of dialect as a weapon; after 1870 the clericals do’ (Q3, §79, p. 359). Nor should the relationship between dialetto and cultura folclorica [folkloric culture] be understood in mechanical, absolute terms (see Q9, §132, pp. 1192–4; Q14, §15, pp. 1670–4). No immediate, necessary correspondences persist through history; in fact, when looking at the historical mutations undergone by both dialects and folklore, the latter turns out to be ‘more unstable and fluctuating than language [la lingua] and dialects’ (Q9, §15, p. 1105).