Andrea Abel, Chiara Vettori and Doris Forer*

Learning the Neighbour’s Language: The Many Challenges in Achieving a Real Multilingual Society—The Case of Second Language Acquisition in the Minority–Majority Context of South Tyrol

I. Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to use the example of the multilingual majority–minority situation in South Tyrol to illustrate the extent to which territorial and institutional multilingualism is reflected in individual multilingualism¹ and to outline the degree of pupils’ proficiency in the two largest neighbouring languages, German and Italian. In parallel, the challenges arising from the complex political and social structures influencing this multilayered minority–majority situation will be identified and analysed, and proposals for the promotion of positive attitudes between groups and effective plurilingualism will be put forward that may also be of significance outside the regional and local context. The remarks herein are based on the results of the project “South Tyrolean Pupils and the Second Language: A Linguistic and Socio-psychological Investigation” (KOLIPSI; addressed more fully in a following section) and introduced in this context following a quick overview of the particular language environment in South Tyrol.

* Andrea Abel is a linguist and the coordinator of the Institute for Specialised Communication and Multilingualism at the European Academy Bozen (EURAC; South Tyrol). Chiara Vettori is a linguist and senior researcher at the Institute for Specialised Communication and Multilingualism. Doris Forer is a psychologist and a PhD fellow at the University of Trento (in collaboration with the Institute for Specialised Communication and Multilingualism).

¹ Or ‘plurilingualism’ according to the terminology of the Council of Europe (CoE), e.g., See Language Policy Division, “Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe—From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education. Main Version” (COE, 2007), 10, at <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/Linguistic/Guide_niveau3_EN.asp#TopOfPage>; For further specifications on terminology see section III.

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II. BACKGROUND—the LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH TYROL

A. Language Areas, Historical Context and Legal Framework

The contribution relates to the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano–South Tyrol (for short South Tyrol) which has, since 1919, belonged to Italy and where about 500,000 people, predominantly mother-tongue speakers of the German, Italian and Ladin languages, inhabit a total area of approximately 7,400 km². According to the results of the most recent census from the year 2001, the German language group forms 69.38% of the population and lives both in the cities and the countryside (see Figure 1), whereas the Italian language group, which constitutes 26.30% of the population, lives mainly in the cities (see Figure 2). The possibility of “natural” contact between the two language groups, therefore, mostly occurs in the larger localities. The Ladin language group, comprising 4.32% of the total population, mainly resides in two valleys in the Dolomites (Gröden/Gardena and Gadertal/Val Badia).²

Figure 1: The German Language Group as a Percentage of the Total Population 2001

² The special situation of the Ladin-speaking population is not a major issue of this study and is therefore not treated further in this contribution. See Andrea Abel, “Die Südtiroler SchülerInnen und die Zweitsprache: eine linguistische und sozialpsychologische Untersuchung (Werkstattbericht)”, 32(3/07) Linguistik Online (2007b), 3-14, at <http://www.linguistik-online.de/32_07/abel.pdf>.