

Titsch, Töitschu, Deutsch! Walser idioms in the Aosta Valley

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ABSTRACT

Walserdeutsch is an Alemannic language that spread through the Alps with the migration of the Walser people during the Middle Ages. Today, it is seriously threatened with extinction due to the small number of speakers and to being besieged by other languages. The Walser of the Lys Valley speak two variants of German, *Titsch* and *Töitschu*, which date back to the 13th century. The linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of this German-speaking area in a region with strong Romance roots, the Valle d'Aosta, has been the subject of numerous studies, but only a few of them deal with Walser idioms. The research project *WaLys Isole di cultura. lo scrigno walser dell'Alta Valle del Lys*, 'WaLys Islands of culture: the Walser treasure of the Upper Lys Valley', launched at the University of Aosta Valley in 2022, describes the *Titsch* and *Töitschu* idioms and compares them with those of German. Within the lexicon, idioms were chosen as the object of this study because they preserve and hand down the words, knowledge and traditions of a people. This paper presents some of the materials developed within the framework of this project.

Keywords: Titsch; Töitschu; Walserdeutsch; Walser; phraseology.

1. The Upper Lys Valley: a linguistic island

The Germanic language minorities¹ in Italy are mainly located along the Alpine arc, in the north, in the regions of Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In the Upper Lys Valley of the Valle d'Aosta, there are Walser communities in the municipalities of Issime, Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinité.

The Upper Lys Valley constitutes a Germanic linguistic island within the Romance area (Zürcher, 1982, 51), i.e., a portion of territory in which the inhabitants or most of them, historically resident, have continued to hand down and protect their own language, in this case *Walserdeutsch*, which differs from

1 Cf. Caria (2018); Gilardino (2005); Telmon (1992); Zinsli (1968).

the official language of their town or surrounding geographical regions. The Walser of the Lys Valley are immersed in a context that, in addition to Italian and French², has contact with the Franco-Provençal variety of the municipality of Gaby, located between Issime and Gressoney-Saint-Jean.

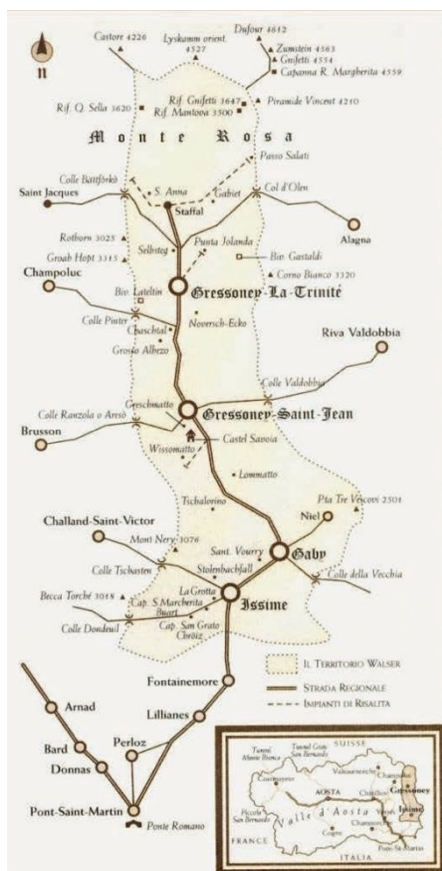


Fig. 1. Map of the Gressoney Valley with the upper Lys Valley highlighted³

Also contributing to the definition of a linguistic island is the connection of this alloglot community with its area of origin, which is particularly evident in the case of *Titsch*, and more nuanced in *Töitschu*. For historical reasons, *Titsch* has evolved over time in a similar way to German, thanks to the continuous trade with Switzerland, while *Töitschu*, slightly further downstream, has remained as it was in the past, although influenced more by the neighbouring

² The two official languages of the Aosta Valley, which is a bilingual region.

³ Sessarego and Giacoma (2023, 8).

Romance languages. *Titsch* and *Töitschu* are protected by Constitutional Law No. 2 of 1993, Art. 40bis.

1.1 (Walser)deutsch, *Titsch* and *Töitschu*

German is today the third official language of the Upper Lys Valley, recognised by Regional Law No. 47 of 19/08/1998. However, its use dates back much earlier. In particular, it was the families of Walser origin, who continued to live between the Gressoney Valley and the large German-speaking centres (Bern, Zurich in Switzerland, and Augsburg, Munich in Germany), who made use of German for work purposes. The ‘Rial Mercantile School’ was established for young people in 1815 to train them in German as future entrepreneurs, merchants, notaries, secretaries, and priests (Rizzi, 2003).

Characteristic of this area is *Walserdeutsch*, a language of Alemannic origin that has extended across the centuries through the recovery of texts, documents, and testimonies, but also through the tradition of folk song and theatre.

This language takes concrete form in the *Titsch* of Gressoney and the *Töitschu* of Issime⁴. Although these municipalities are only a few kilometres apart, territorial continuity is interrupted by the municipality of Gaby, with consequences for the evolution of the local language.

Table 1 presents some words in *Titsch* and *Töitschu* compared with German, their *Dachsprache*.

Table 1. Comparison of *Titsch*, *Töitschu* and German

Titsch	Töitschu	German
e/en	eis	eins
isch	z'eisch	das Eis
ds tiar/tier	tag z'tschemes	das Tier
ds gras	z'gras	das Gras
der wold/woald	by woald	Der Wald

2. Walser idioms

Every language or dialect comprises idioms that often carry a double meaning. Alongside the compositional meaning, which derives from the sum of the meanings of the individual constituents, there is a second meaning, idiomatic or figurative, taken as a whole.

⁴ Cf. Dal Negro (2004); Gaeta *et al.* (2019); Giacalone Ramat (2007); Zürrer (2009).

Idioms are the part of vocabulary that most expresses the culture of a people, conveying ways of thinking, traditions, customs and, more generally, the *Weltanschauung* of a population. They also derive from experiences shared and reinforced over time and sometimes provide teaching. Usually, idioms are difficult to render in another language, with the sole exception of internationalisms that take the same fact as a model (total equivalence), as in the case of the *Töitschu* *Wenn d'chatzu ischt awek, d'möisch tanzun* 'when the cat is away the mice will play' (German: *wenn die Katze aus dem Haus ist, tanzen die Mäuse (auf dem Tisch)*); Italian: *quando il gatto non c'è, i topi ballano*). When switching from one language to another, a similar idiom is sought (*partial equivalence*). There are also idioms that have no equivalents in other languages and, therefore, recourse is made to a substitution or explanation, especially when they contain elements of the territory and culture typical or exclusive to the people who coined them (zero equivalence), such as *Töitschu* *I meje dchinn wëlje nümmi wissu van dar schul, un dchü nam dorre boei* 'in May, the children no longer want to know about school and the cows about dry hay'.

The Walser linguistic minority also has in its linguistic heritage a series of more or less typical idioms, both in *Titsch* and in *Töitschu*, which over time, through research and testimony, have been recorded in writing for their preservation and safeguarding. It is noticeable that some of them, the more purely local ones, use elements related to the mountain context. For example, there are idiomatic expressions referring to nature, animals, fruit, or even *Lys*⁵, or others referring to everyday village life, i.e., family, community, work. A series is dedicated, for example, to weather and climate, useful for managing work in the pasture or in the fields. For example, *Wenn d'mörbenò treit fackse en z'loch, z'wätter leidet*, 'if the groundhog brings wild hay to the burrow, the weather gets worse'. This event occurs in autumn, a time when the groundhog prepares for hibernation.

3. Research projects on the *Titsch* and *Töitschu* idioms

The project titled *D'Òberteilera chéemen énger o arrivurun d'greschuneiaara? Last call per il patrimonio idiomatico titsch e töitschu* is the natural continuation of the FICO! *Fraseologia In Contesto* project (Giacoma, 2019) carried out at the Department of Human and Social Sciences of the University of Valle d'Aosta in 2018, which in turn evolved from *Frasi fatte e ... disfatte* (Giacoma, 2017), undertaken in 2015 and 2016 in Germany, at the Technische Universität Dresden.

The aims of the projects on the *Titsch* and *Töitschu* idioms were not only to create a collection of drawings representing idioms that would be useful for teaching purposes, but also to define a methodological setting for the realisation

5 Name of the river that flows through the valley it is named after.

of these drawings and to make young pupils more aware of the richness of the idiomatic heritage of both their mother tongue and the languages they learn.

The FAR3 research training project, funded for two years (June 2021-May 2023) by the European Social Fund, as part of the Youth Plan, has in its title *D'Oberteilera chéemen énger o arrivurun d'greschunciara?* 'Last call per il patrimonio idiomatico titsch e töitschu', two Walser idioms that have no equivalent in any other language. Two rare pearls that we feel obliged to save before it is too late. In fact, the entire idiomatic heritage of the Walser of the Lys Valley is strongly threatened by extinction given the scarcity of speakers, especially among the new generations. When it came to outlining the research project, it was decided to focus on the idioms of *Titsch* and *Töitschu*, since idioms are an important part of every language (hence: idiomatic) and its linguistic competence. Through them, words, knowledge, and traditions of a people are preserved and passed on.

The aim was to contribute to the preservation of the Walser language and culture of the Upper Lys Valley, to spread knowledge of it, and to increase its prestige; therefore, this project was initiated in the Aosta Valley, particularly in the Upper Lys Valley, which has been home to the Walser community for centuries, in collaboration with the primary schools of Gressoney-La-Trinité, Gressoney-Saint-Jean, and Issime, their teachers, and the Walser Kulturzentrum of Gressoney-Saint-Jean, with a focus on the idioms in *Titsch* and *Töitschu*.

The aim of the research was to describe the semantics, syntax, and pragmatics of each idiomatic expression repertorised and, in cooperation with the schools, to create prototypical usage situations that the children illustrated with a drawing. Subsequently, the drawings, adequately commented on to explain the use of the idioms in context, were accompanied by a literal translation and an idiom in Italian and German. The cards thus prepared formed a collection made available to the public through conferences, exhibitions, meetings, and publications.

3.1 Project phases

The project therefore developed over several phases. The initial phase was dedicated to the collection of Walser idioms that can be found to date, mainly drawing on the texts preserved in the Library of the Walser Kulturzentrum in Gressoney-Saint-Jean. A total of 1,087 Walser idioms were collected, in *Titsch* and *Töitschu*.

This was followed by a collaboration phase with the primary schools in the municipalities of the Upper Lys Valley, in which pupils were involved in the creation of some drawings, representing both the literal and idiomatic meaning of a selection of the idioms. A total of 62 were chosen, equal to the number of pupils who participated in the project.

The next phase was devoted to the creation of the comment cards for the idioms through careful metalinguistic research work involving not only *Titsch*

and *Töitschu* but also their roof language, German. When all the drawings were finished and collected, a concise description of each graphic representation was added to the cards of each idiom. We realised, in fact, their usefulness, as it is not always immediate for everyone to grasp the details of a drawing or to unequivocally understand the illustrative intentions of the person who made the drawing. Sometimes, cultural additions are necessary to fully understand a design.

At the same time, the organisation of an exhibition took place in Gressoney-Saint-Jean between 4 July and 31 August 2022 at Villa Deslex, where the Walser Kulturzentrum is located. After Gressoney-Saint-Jean, the exhibition moved to Issime (1-18 September 2022), in the Maison Vallaise building, and then to the Bruno Salvadori Regional Library in Aosta (24 April-22 May 2023).

The exhibition proved to be an excellent dissemination tool⁶ to involve adults and children, residents, and tourists. The project was also presented at numerous phraseology conferences⁷. In addition, a book containing materials from the exhibition was made available to those who were unable to visit it (Sessarego and Giacoma, 2023).

3.2 Illustrations

The German verb *illustrieren* ‘illustrate’, like its Italian equivalent *illustrare*, mean both ‘to show with images’ and ‘to explain’. This example makes one think about how important it is to explain something using an image. Images, which have long since entered education, first had a purely illustrative value, whereas they have now increasingly become tools for the transmission of knowledge and an integral part of language learning processes. Initially, these were static images introduced as early as 1658 by Comenius to facilitate foreign language learning. The success of his *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* was such that it had many emulators and sanctioned the introduction of images in foreign language teaching. Hence, the idea of illustrating idioms with drawings, one for the compositional meaning and one for the idiomatic meaning. To illustrate *Titsch angleitz wie es egerkoch* ‘dressed like an omelette’, an initial drawing was produced showing a child dressed in a yellow omelette (compositional meaning):

6 In March 2023, the project was also the subject of a RAI report aired during the Aosta Valley TGR.

7 We mention here the following international conferences: the ‘8th International Congress of Phraseology and Parethology. Phraseology and paremiology: models and dynamics’, Catholic University of Milan, 14-16 September 2022; ‘Beyond Borders | Jenseits der Grenzen. German-speaking Minorities in Italy and around the World. German-speaking Minorities in Italy and around the World. Deutschsprachige Minderheiten in Italien und in der Welt’, University of Trento, 6-8 October 2022; ‘Europhras 2023. New Trends in Phraseology: Languages and Cultures in Comparison’, University of Milan, 29 May-1 June 2023.



Fig. 2. Illustration of compositional meaning

A second drawing represents the idiomatic meaning, that indicates a haphazard way of dressing, without chromatic order, i.e., without a thought-out and chosen combination of colours, but by casually juxtaposing pieces and accessories. In the drawing, we see four quadrants represented. In the two upper quadrants, we have all the garments that can be worn: skirt and trousers, for the lower part of the body, and sweater and sweatshirt, for the upper part. In the two lower quadrants, we have on the left the sum of the garments and on the right a girl dressed in them, who therefore appears dressed without having selected what to wear.



Fig. 3. Illustration of idiomatic meaning

3.3 Comment cards

The most innovative part of the project described here is certainly the integration of information by means of an accompanying card for each pair of images. The card is divided into seven parts⁸:

1. The title of the card consists of the citation of the idiom preceded by the language *Titsch* or *Töitschu*. Ex.:

Titsch: **angleitz wie es ejerkoch**

2. A translation into Italian. Ex.:

Italian: *Vestito come una frittata* ‘Dressed like an omelette’.

3. A translation into German. Ex.:

Deutsch: *Angezogen wie ein Eierkuchen* ‘Dressed like an omelette’.

4. The explanation of compositional meaning. Ex.:

(It is) dressed like an omelette, i.e., with beaten egg.

5. The explanation of the idiomatic meaning. Ex.:

In the omelette one can put, besides eggs, countless other foods or even leftovers; to be dressed as an omelette means, therefore, to put on clothes of various kinds and colours without a precise matching criterion.

The idiomatic meaning contained in this phrase indicates a haphazard way of dressing, without chromatic order, i.e., without a thought-out and chosen combination of colours, but by casually juxtaposing pieces and accessories.

6. Pragmatics - explanation of the prototypical usage situation: Ex.:

This idiom is used when one wants to indicate that a person is overdressed and casual, and generally with a negative aesthetic result.

7. Synonyms, antonyms, proverbs and idioms of the same semantic area or simple curiosities. Ex.:

Synonyms:

- *Vestito alla carlona* ‘dressed shabbily’: (fig.) with little care, carelessly, in a messy manner (Quartu and Rossi, 2012, 74)

- *Vestito da Arlecchino* ‘dressed like Arlecchino’: (fig.) dressed in many colours, even with patches, even in a funny way (Quartu and Rossi, 2012, 22).

Curiosity:

There is a saying in spoken Italian ‘*fare una frittata*’, with the figurative meaning of making a mess. The image derives from the fact that when eggs are broken, they cannot be put back together again.

⁸ The text of the card is originally in Italian/German, but here it is translated into English.

3.4 An example of card

Below is a card for the *Töitschu* idiom *Cheen va chu chalb*, which shows the importance of the information it contains, especially in cases of zero equivalents in Italian and German⁹.

<p>Töitschu: Cheen va chu chalb Italian: <i>Da mucca diventar vitello</i> ‘From cow to calf’ Deutsch: <i>Von der Kuh aufs Kalb kommen</i> ‘From cow to calf’</p>
<p>Explanation of compositional meaning: From cow to calf.</p>
<p>Explanation of idiomatic meaning: The idiomatic meaning of this phrase highlights the anomaly of regression in nature. According to what occurs in reality and the natural evolutionary development of life, the calf grows up and becomes an adult bovine. This saying indicates the reverse process: the adult bovine goes back in time and becomes young again. Going backwards is an indication of regression, degrowth, i.e., that reverse process whereby, instead of improving and advancing, one regresses and returns to lower levels.</p>
<p>Pragmatics - explanation of the prototypical usage situation: This idiom is used when one wants to indicate regressing, going backwards. In life, living beings have an evolution. They are born, grow, grow old, and die. The physical process is only in this direction: the reverse process is not envisaged by nature. The meaning of this phrase, therefore, refers to the mind or behaviour: to become small again, to regress, or to behave like a being of a lower age.</p>
<p>Synonyms, antonyms, proverbs and similar: Synonyms: <i>Andar vitello e tornar bue</i> ‘To go calf and come back an ox’: (fig.) to become stupider than before (Quartu and Rossi, 2012, 438) <i>Da cavallo ad asino</i> ‘From horse to donkey’: (fig.) about a strong regression, something that deteriorates or falls sharply in prestige, fame, privileges, etc. (Quartu and Rossi, 2012, 82) <i>Fare come i gamberi</i> ‘Make like a shrimp’: (fig.) go backwards, hence worsen, regress in general (Quartu and Rossi, 2012, 168). Antonyms: <i>Fare passi da gigante</i> ‘Make giant strides’: (fig.) improve, progress very fast (Turrini <i>et al.</i>, 1995, 234).</p>

⁹ The text of the card is originally in Italian/German, but here it is translated into English.



Fig. 4. Illustration of compositional meaning. In the drawing, we see an adult cow and a calf alongside. An arrow indicates the transition (transformation) from the first to the second

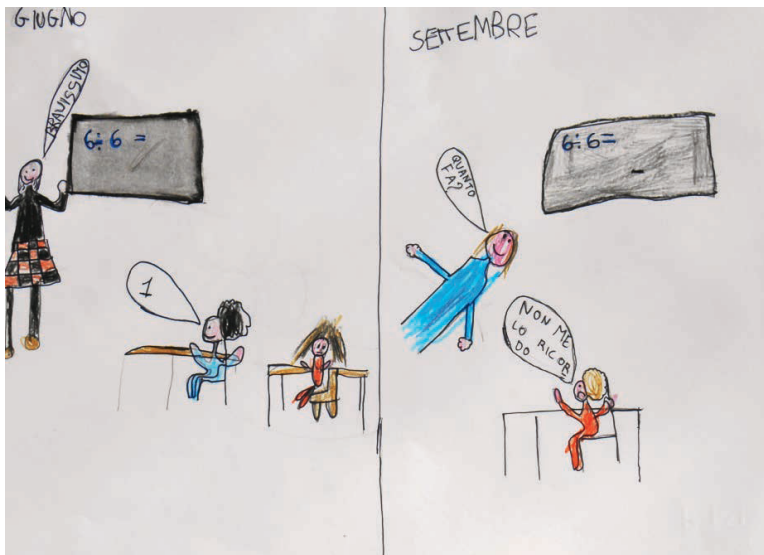


Fig. 5. Illustration of idiomatic meaning. In the drawing, we see the same situation represented at two different times. On the left, it is June and the child answers the teacher's question correctly. On the right, it is September and the child can no longer answer the same question correctly

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that a language, in order to be ‘alive’, must be handed down from where it is spoken to subsequent generations. When its use is, on the other hand, reduced or eroded by stronger and more widespread languages, we speak of a language at risk of extinction (cf. Dal Negro, 2004; Zürrer, 2009). In particular, dialects and minority languages are the most threatened forms, because they are often replaced by stronger languages in schools, politics, the media and, more generally, in public life. In the specific case of the Upper Lys Valley, *Titsch* and *Töitschu* are an important example of linguistic minorities at risk because they are ‘besieged’ by Italian, French and German. The presence of languages of Germanic origin in a region such as Aosta Valley, where Italian-French bilingualism prevails, cannot fail to arouse curiosity in the linguistics scholar. The small enclave of Gressoney and Issime, of Walser origin, must not risk losing the knowledge of its roots, of its language; therefore, it is necessary for the younger generations to be aware of their culture and the language that conveys it. The project presented here seeks to shine a spotlight on the Walser idiomatic heritage, involving the new generations through a playful-didactic activity in the school environment to allow them to get to know their own culture and origins better while having fun. Idioms, repertorised, illustrated, and enriched with descriptive cards acquire new life and, with it, a greater chance of survival.

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