

The “Sportis” project: promotion of the Friulian language and investigations on the mental images held by students of the Udine University

L I N D A P I C C O *

Summary. In response to the contents of Law 482/99 and to draw university students closer to the theme of cultivating Friulian and other minority languages, CIRF (Inter-department Centre of Research on Friulian Culture and Language) has produced and distributed promotional material in *marilenghe* (Friulian language) on the different Faculties present at the University of Udine. On this occasion a questionnaire was also distributed to evaluate the opinions of the students in respect to some interesting themes relating to the case of minority languages and to determine the image and clichés held by young people of the Friulian language and Friulians in general.

Key-words. Friulian language, conservation and promotion, clichés and collective images.

1. Introduction. Law 482/99 establishes, among the other provisions relating to the conservation and promotion of minority languages in Italy, the allocation of funds to publicize the activities envisaged by the law itself. The purpose of the financing is to ensure visibility to all legislative measures, especially delicate matters such as safeguarding minorities.

Among other projects, CIRF in 2005 bought cloth bags and printed

the logos of the University and of CIRF, the corresponding law and a motto or proverb in Friulian together with the appropriate illustration regarding each single Faculty. The Centre was able to distribute 2500 bags among University students. All the students, no matter where they came from, were notified by e-mail of the free availability of these bags. The initiative also served to make CIRF known to the students. In fact many

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of them took advantage of the opportunity to ask about the project or have a look at the centre and enquire about its activities and aims. The project succeeded better than we thought: a second batch of bags was also quickly “sold out” and there has been a strong demand for a repeat of the initiative. To content as many students as possible, and lacking the funds needed to produce more bags, it was decided to use the same design, logo and motto on blocks of note paper and distribute this promotional material to the students.

Taking advantage of the great number of students at CIRF, we decided to give them a short questionnaire to fill in. The aim was to reveal their opinion on the Friulian language but also clichés and their mental images of the language and the people. We also asked some questions that had been put to the university students some years ago¹ in regard to the Friulian language and more in general the safeguarding of minority languages. We have thus obtained results that can be compared scientifically. The interesting results of this questionnaire formed the basis of our research.

2. Methods employed and the sample. The questionnaire (see Annex) consisted of 12 questions, most of which had been prepared and used previously. The questionnaire was in Italian, since it was decided that the students should answer in private. The researchers would therefore be unable to follow, in first person, the compilation, and help the students

who didn’t understand the text in Friulian.

Besides the normal personal data and level of knowledge of the Friulian language, the students were asked which was their most beloved language and their opinion on the undertaking of the University to promote the language of the region. Finally why had to answer some questions to reveal mental images and stereotypes of Friulian people and their language.

The questionnaires, 733 in all (29.4% of the students who came to collect the promotional gadgets), were gathered from September 2005 to January 2006. The greater part of those who took part in the investigation were women (80% of the samples). Half of the students came from the arts faculties, a quarter from economics and law and the remainder from the faculties of science. Students resident in the three Friulian provinces accounted for $\frac{3}{4}$ of the samples (in fact more than half of those interviewed came from Udine and Province) while the others came from different localities, mainly in Veneto (19.8%).

3. Results. The data regarding the Friulian language are not very different from those collected in 2004 among university students: a quarter of those interviewed usually speaks Friulian, but if we consider also those who occasionally speak it, together this accounts for half those sampled. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the interviewees have a slight knowledge of the language, while the remaining quarter do not speak or understand it. These data re-

flect the origin of the students, the percentage coinciding with that of students who come from beyond the borders of Friuli.

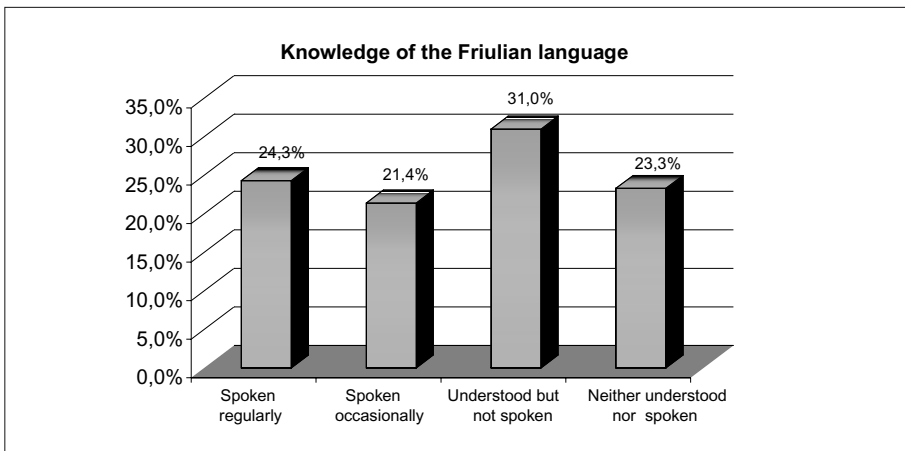
We also asked the students which was their preferred language – the one in which they felt most at home. About 7 students out of 10 chose Italian (68.4%), while 20.0% of the sample chose Friulian. Veneto was chosen by 4.1%, and other European languages (not including Italian) accounted for 2.8%, other languages or dialects 2.5% (other replies: 0.6%). Ultimately 1.6% were unable to decide between Friulian and Italian. It must be remembered that 1/3 of those sampled came from outside the region.

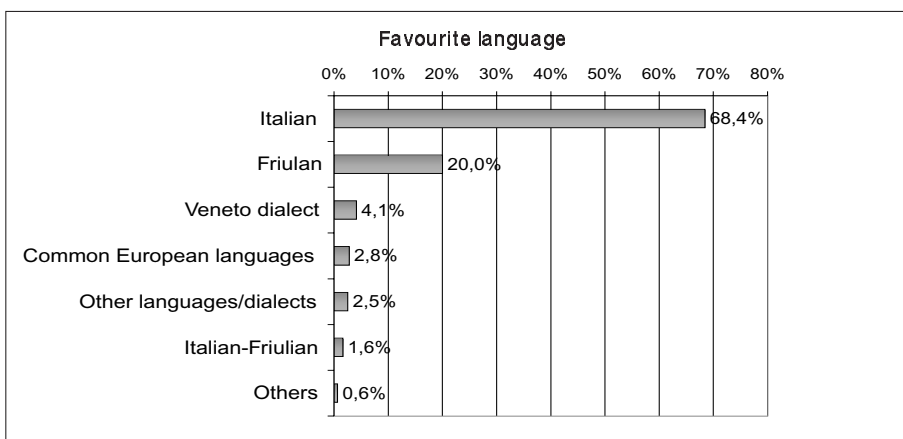
We asked the students their opinion on the commitment of the university in regard to Friulian language and culture. The same question had been asked to the teaching and non-teaching staff of the university². The comparison between the results can be seen in the following graph. The stu-

dents seemed to be more inclined to favour the protection and promotion of the language than the university staff.

It should be remembered that the young people who freely took part in this survey were in some way "self-selected". It is reasonable to believe that the people who came to CIRF to claim the gift were interested in that specific item, not just because it was free. We therefore expected that these students were sensitive to the issue promoted by the centre. Finally, it should be remembered that there are four years between the first and second survey and in this time Friulian became more visible both in the University and in various official boards. This means that one is used to hearing a minority language which is becoming more frequently used and so gradually accepts it as "normal".

The students who took part in this investigation appear to be decidedly open-minded about promoting minority languages even at an academic

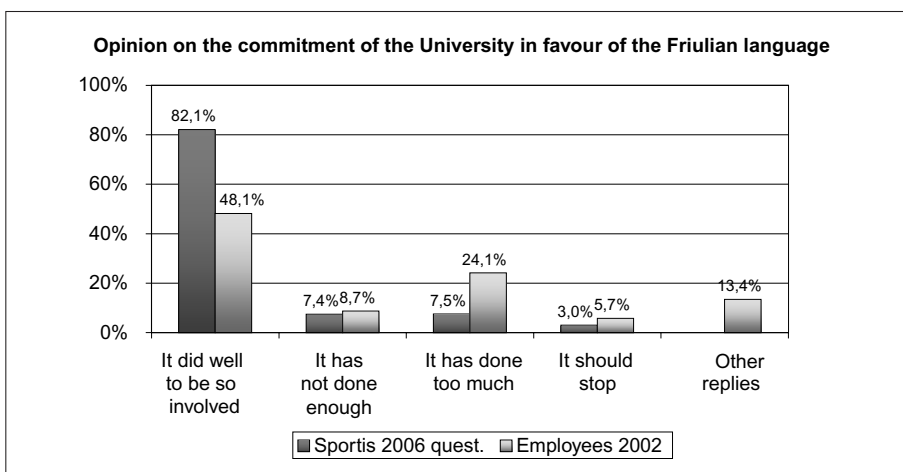


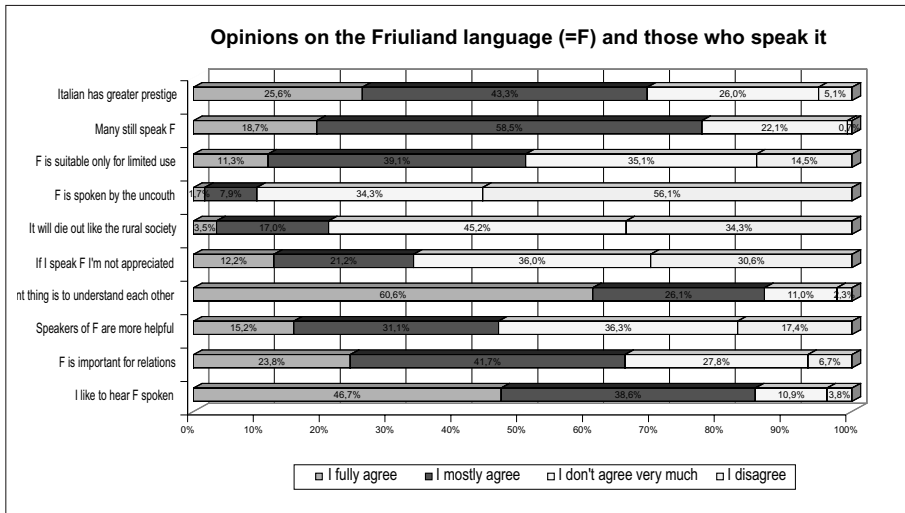


level. The next graph shows the answers given to a series of questions regarding Friulian and its use. In regard to this, the students had to express their opinions on a Likert scale, i.e. “very much”, “sufficiently”, “not very” and “not at all”.

Commenting on the most obvious data, it can be seen that the students are completely in agreement with the statement “I like to hear Friulian spo-

ken”. They also believe that a lot of people still use this language. The widest agreement concerned the denial of any relationship between scarce education and the use of Friulian (90.4% disagree). Besides, as occurred during the survey of young Friulian people in 2003³, there is wide agreement on the statement affirming that “understanding each other is more important than the lan-





guage used” (86.7%). So it would seem that languages are seen solely as a means of communication, without involving further emotional values such as the identity or culture of a people. Likewise, no social stigma or stereotype was associated with any population or social context.

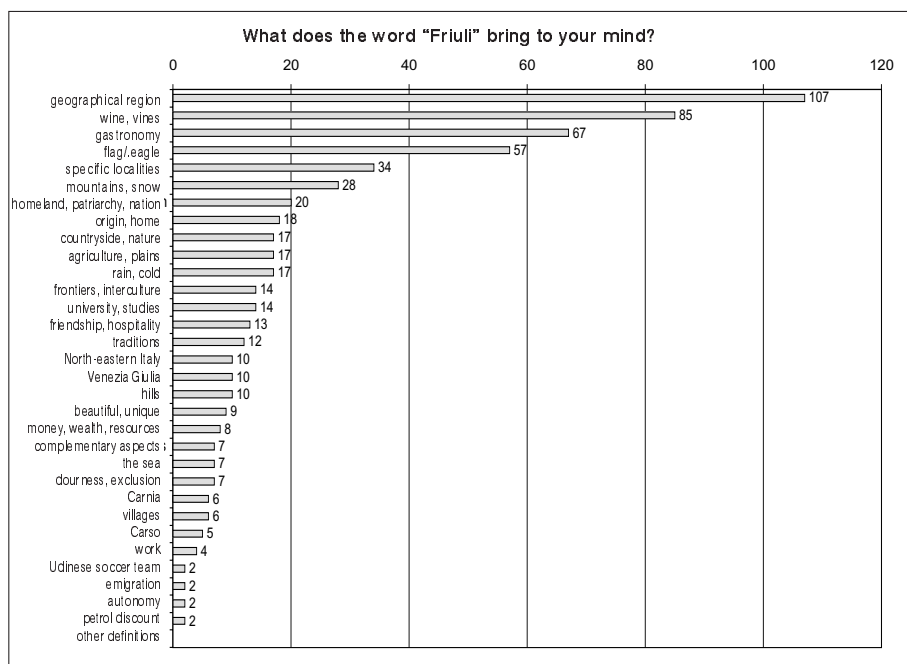
Thus what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: if on one hand this appears to mean disinterest in minority languages, on the other it would indicate that one language is as good as the other and so has the same right to be used and spread.

We also asked the students some “stimulus questions”: we wanted to know what would have been their first thought on hearing the words “Friuli”, “Friulian” and “Italian”. Also these replies clearly revealed the approachableness of those questioned regarding the Friulian language and people. It must be remembered that those interviewed were in

a certain sense “self-chosen” and probably quite sensitive to the issue investigated by the questionnaire.

Only rarely were disparaging or offensive words met with, and even the truly negative images or aspects denounced were very few. And still the questionnaire was anonymous, the students could fill it out quietly in another room – far from the eyes of the researchers – and then place it in an urn together with others. So it would appear that the answers were freely given without fear or expressing themselves or the need – as sometimes happens – to content the interviewer, who may have shown great kindness, for the sake of politeness or – as could have happened in this case – gratitude for the gift received.

When thinking about the word “Friuli”, most of the students (107) referred to the geographical map of the region, again confirming (see the investigation on the mental maps of



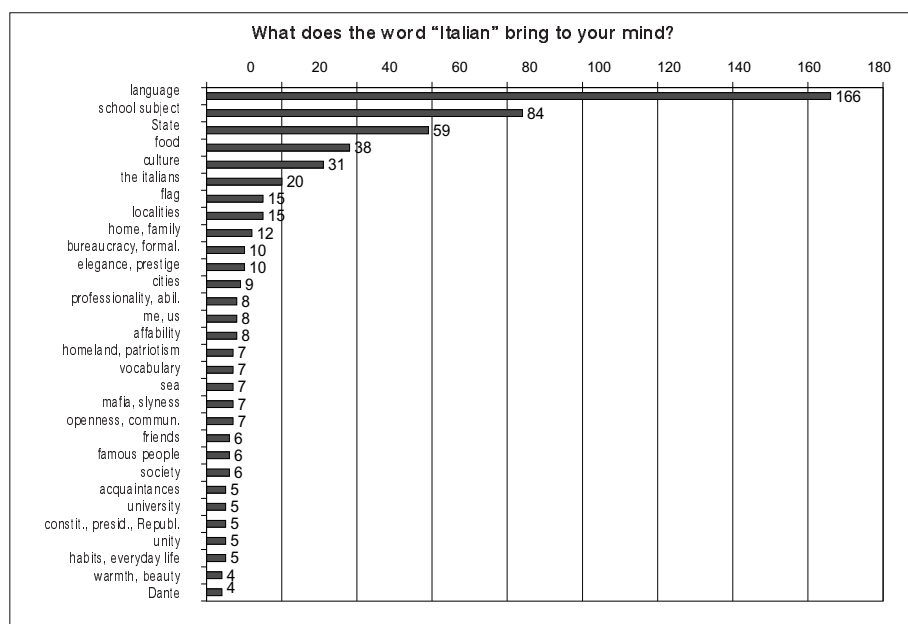
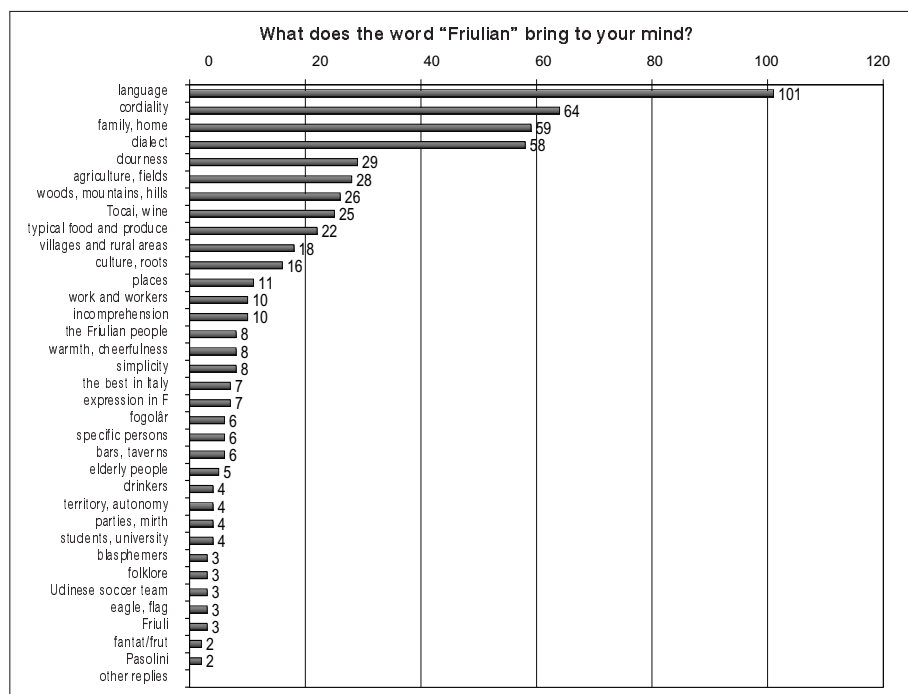
Friulian students)⁴ the ambiguity and inability to distinguish between historical, ethnic, linguistic and cultural concepts of "Friuli" and the geopolitical and administrative one of "Friuli Venezia Giulia".

A high number of indications (85) referred to the wine and also gastronomic specialities of the region (67). In 57 cases the first image brought up by the term "Friuli" was the Friulian banner with the eagle and its yellow and blue colours and in gradually decreasing numbers, counting only the images that had at least 10 indications, were memories of specific towns of the region, mountains, the concept of homeland and patriarchy, roots, environment, agriculture, rain, frontiers, university, welcome and tra-

ditions. The results are detailed in the following graph.

Thus the recall is fundamentally of a geographical dimension, but images linked to concepts of identity, of homeland and nation, culture and roots are not lacking. In reality wine and gastronomy won out: 152 indications in all, a clear indication that advertising and attention to the quality and variety of Friulian products condition residents and tourists alike, drawing them to a "typicality" and "distinctiveness" of a region which is expressed through its food and wine and the events promoting them.

In regard to the term "Friulian", it can be seen at once that the most frequent images are those referring to language and dialect. In fact 101 indi-



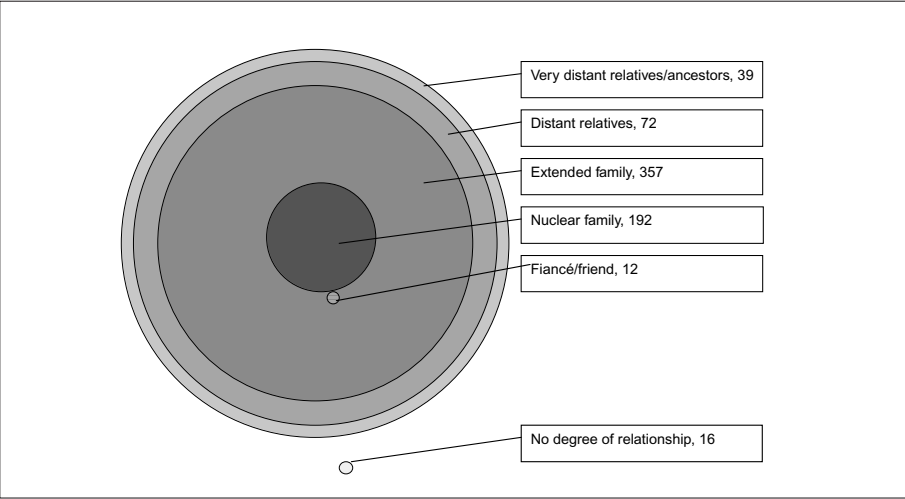
cations regard the language (and 58 a dialect); then 64 cordiality and 59 the family. Mountains, wine, food and typical products, specific localities and culture are more or less separated. The rest of the images had 10 or less indications each (the detailed results can be seen in the table below).

In essence then, “Friulano”, for the great majority of those interviewed is not an adjective but a noun and refers to that which locally is most visible and immediate: language. If then, as can be seen from the images evoked by the word “Friuli” the food and wine transmit a certain image of a more genuine Friuli, probably also the Friulian language is a return, an immediate link, an inseparable particular, or at least that which is most typical, visible and immediate.

For the sake of completeness, let us look at the following Table which summarizes the definitions linked to

the word “Italian”. Also in this case the most frequent concept (166 cases) is in fact the language. Then follow – but the boundaries are very labile in respect to the former definition – Italian as a school subject (84), then the nation, the food, literature, Italian people, the flag and specific geographical position. All the other concepts got 12 or less indications each, as shown in the following Table.

We also asked “If Friulian were a degree of relationship, who would it be for you?”. The question was aimed at revealing affection for the language. Most of those interviewed placed Friulian in the midst of close relatives – albeit not the nuclear family – such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, etc. (357). Then followed the indication the indication of a bond equivalent to that of a member of the family circle (192), distant relations (72), great-great grandparents or very distant relatives (39).



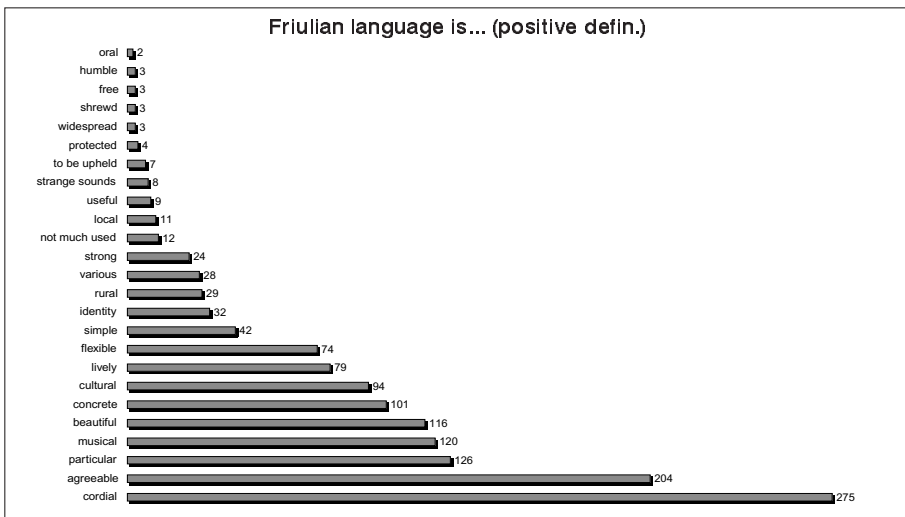
Friulian is an outsider and not a relation for 16 interviewees, while 12 said that it would be a fiancé or a close friend.

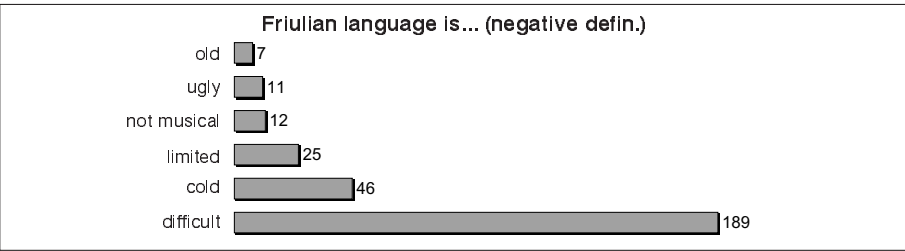
Thus Friulian has a place in the close proximity of the persons interviewed, though not in first place (meaning the family circle, such as parents or siblings of the interviewee). This is exactly the same group of relations who generally use Friulian with the person interviewed: from all the socio-linguistic studies carried out recently we know that the Friulian language is not used in the nuclear family, but is still used as the means of communicating with relations and intimate friends.

The final part of the investigation required the definition of up to 5 adjectives that could be linked to the Friulian language and people. The aim was to discover if there existed a stereotype image of Friulian people and their language. Moreover, we

wished to determine if in the collective image there were some ideas and stereotypes that had existed for years both as the Friulians see themselves and as characteristics observed by outsiders.

For the Friulian language there were about 1700 definitions, almost all positive. In 275 cases, the language was defined as domestic, cordial and reassuring; in 204 as funny and pleasant; 189 defined it as complicated; 126 original, unique; 120 described it as musical; 116 underlined its beauty and charm. In 101 cases the characteristics of concreteness, spontaneity and conciseness are underlined, and in 94 its link to tradition and culture. For 79 times it was defined as lively and happy and 74 students stressed its flexibility and richness. Then follow many other indications of features among which the only negative ones are harshness and dourness (46), limitedness (25), a lack of musi-



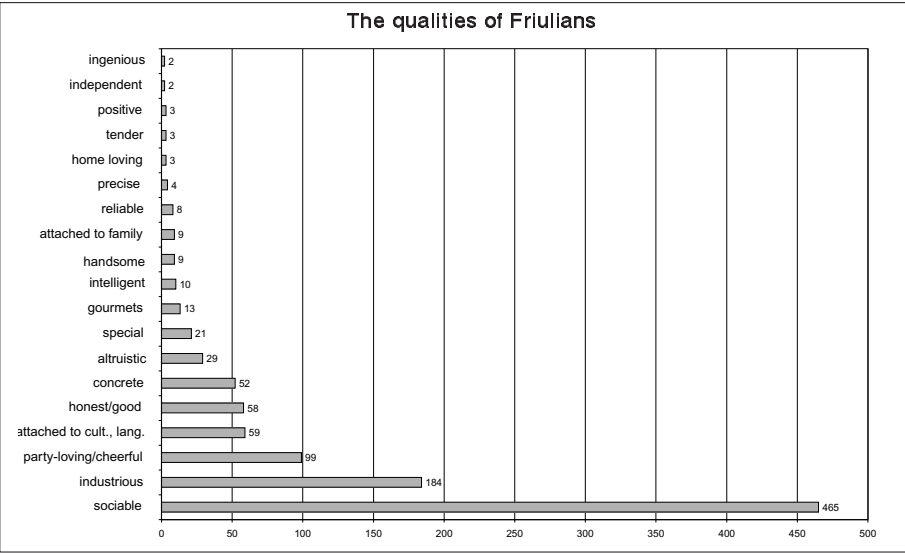


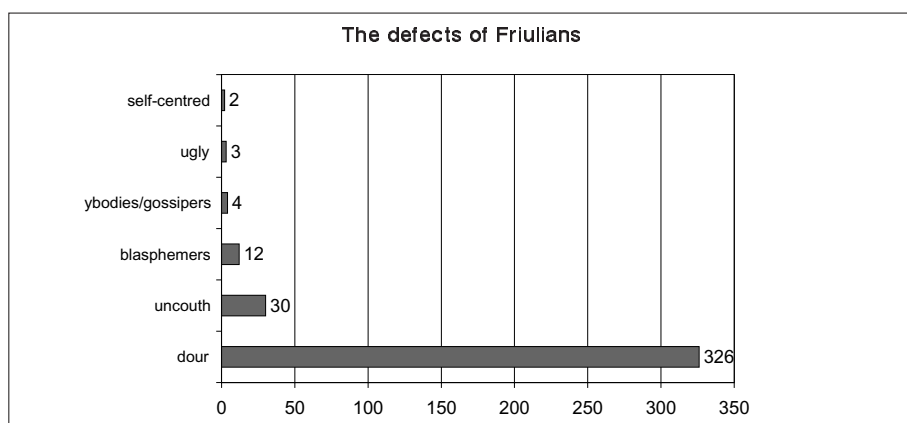
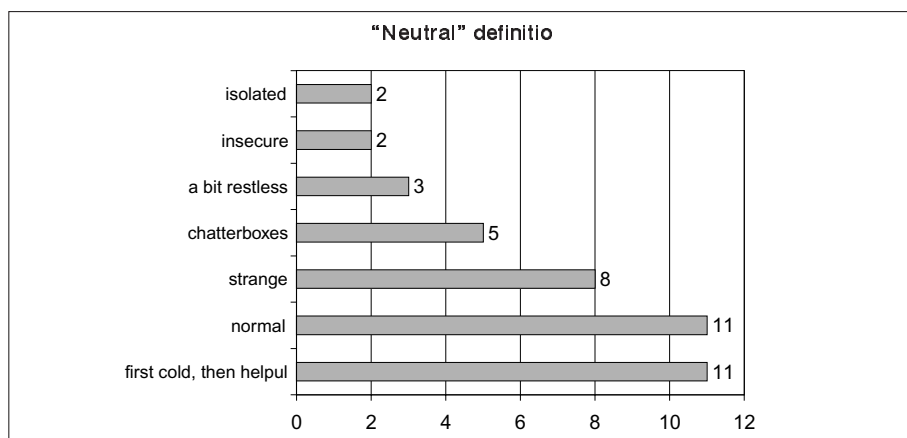
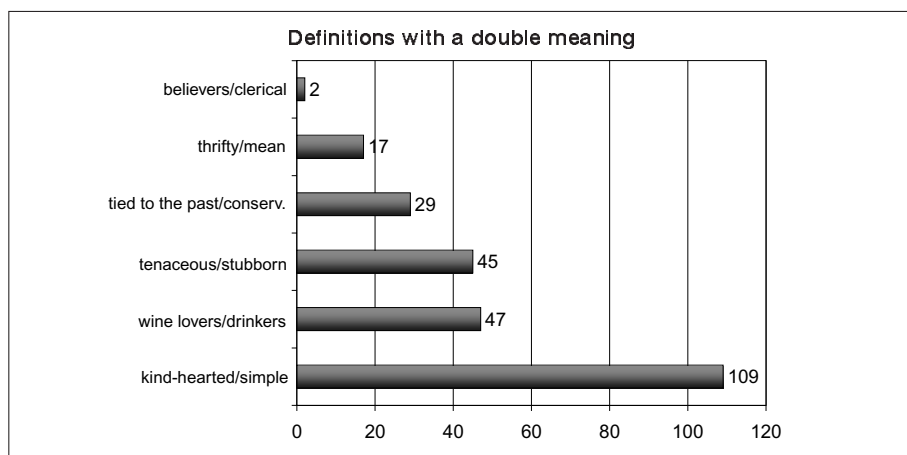
cality (12), ugliness (9) and passé (7).

The 189 definitions regarding the difficulty of the language fall into a rather ambiguous position: they do not indicate a negative judgement as much as a typical and frequently met attitude in the studies of minority languages, according to which “difficult” is used to highlight the differences with the dominant language, defining its boundaries and uniqueness. Moreover, to define a language as “difficult” implies understandings

its intrinsic value: what we consider difficult is rarely thought of as banal or dull.

Finally, in regard to the Friulian people, there were more than 1700 adjectives. The majority defined them as welcoming, friendly and hospitable (465), while on the other hand 326 stressed their reservedness and dourness. In 184 cases industriousness is mentioned, and in 109 simplicity and modesty. In 99 cases Friulian people are thought of as cheerful and fun-





loving – then a complete break – proud and attached to their own language and culture (59). Friulians are also considered as honest and sincere (59), practical and reliable (52) and then – in this order – drinkers and lovers of good wine (47), stubborn and persevering (45). All the other definitions given account for a maximum of 30 indications each, some of which are negative or ambiguous such as: uncouth (30), conservative and tied to the past (29), thrifty/mean (17) and blasphemous (12).

In regard to the qualities of the Friulians, an outstanding point is their sociability (456), which leads by a great distance. The second is industriousness (184), followed by cheerfulness (99). Among the ambiguous definition the most popular are simple and kind-hearted (109), wine-lovers/drinkers (47) and stubborn/tenacious (45). Among the defects, those most cited are dourness (326) and the tendency to be uncouth (30). The remaining defects appear in very low numbers and are irrelevant.

4. Conclusions. In the light of what we found, although certain values and stereotypical characteristics of Friulians such as dourness, industriousness and, to a lesser extent, honesty appear in the results, for the rest the images held by the university students are very different from the “classical” ones, as could be expected.

In the collective imagination of young people and students (who represent a very particular sample and so the results cannot be generalized), Friulians on one hand are sociable,

warm-hearted, friendly and welcoming, easy-going, cheerful and party-loving; and on the other dour, wary, uncouth and shy.

The analysis of each single questionnaire often showed the simultaneous presence of two antithetic aspects in the one answer; the almost schizophrenic description of a people who at one and the same time can be dour almost to the point of intolerance of those outside their immediate circle, or welcoming, warm and friendly. On the other hand, in many cases the accent was placed on the absolute initial wariness of Friulians, followed then by a progressive opening from the moment it becomes clear that this is a person worthy of their trust. In fact this is the typical behaviour in the Christian rural world and is also said to be true of mountain people: they half-open the door, timorous and shy before outsiders, but once admitted into their house and in their grace, the guests are offered generous refreshments, their hosts sharing all they have with them.

Probably this combination of extremes is also linked to the personal experiences of the students: the decision to attend university for many young people represents their first time away from home and in contact with new people and places. The first impact of a situation like this can often appear as one of rejection. In contrast, a larger number appreciate the hospitality, openness and warmth of Friulians. Probably their experiences were different: what for some is warm willingness, for others could be a cool or indeed cold attitude. Not by

chance those that most often encounter the narrow-mindedness and coldness of Friulians are students from the region Veneto who are well-known and acknowledged by the Friulians themselves to be generally more friendly and sociable.

In regard to the absolute novelty of the cheerful and party-loving character attributed to Friulians, we can deduce that this image derives from attending the places of entertainment preferred by students: parties, village festivals, gatherings, bars and other favourite meeting places. As you can imagine, the music in these places is adequate and the company too: you laugh and joke and the evening flies, light and amusing. Thus it is easy to associate the idea of cheerful and entertaining evenings with that of people just as cheerful and amusing: probably interviews with people who spend their free time in other ways would give different results, depending on whom they frequent and the characteristics of the chosen meeting place.

Essentially we can say that the traditional clichés regarding Friulians are not shared by the sample we interviewed. There still exist stereotype ideas, probably inherited from collective imagination, but absolutely new images have been grafted onto them.

The difficulty of commenting on this rests on the fact that at the mo-

ment we do not know if this vision is true for most Friulians or is typical of only this type of person and age group. To find out if the collective image and self-perception of the Friulians has really been changed by phenomena that can be partly destabilizing for such a small territory as Friuli, for example immigration, changes in economy and politics, secularization, widespread education, an investigation of a more heterogeneous sample is needed with different age groups and socio-economic background. In the meantime we can confirm that the "salt, onest e lavorador" (firm, honest and hard-working) Friulian no longer exists, at least as far as young people are concerned. Probably this should be taken into account when speaking of the identity and characteristics of a population: evidently the speed with which changes shake up and completely reset discussion on modern society should make us wary of peremptory definitions. In fact some identifying elements and typical features of the Friulian people (for example, religiousness, attachment to the family and land, localism, etc.) that were evident as clear points of reference until only a few decades ago, if not properly reconsidered, discussed and understood could nowadays represent serious limits or, in the worst cases, crushing delusions.

¹ L. Picco, *I students de Università e la tutele des lenghis minoritariis*, Cîrf 2004 (to be published).

² L. Picco, *Opinions e ategjaments dai dipendents dal Ateneu furlan su temis che a riviuardin la lenghe furlane*, CîRF 2002 (to be published).

³ L. Picco, *Zoventût, fantats e mularie. Partignin-*

ce e identitât linguistiche tra i zovins in Friûl, Cîrf 2003 (to be published).

⁴ L. Picco, *Mental maps: une ricercje su la percezion dai confins dal Friûl intun campion di students des scuêlis mediis superiôrs furlanis*, CîRF, 2001 (in press).

Annex 1

**INTER-DEPARTMENT CENTRE OF RESEARCH ON FRIULIAN
CULTURE AND LANGUAGE
University of Udine**

We would be most grateful if you could spare a few minutes of your time to fill in this questionnaire. As you can see it is anonymous: the data gathered will be treated exclusively in an aggregate form and used solely for scientific purposes.

PERSONAL DATA

1. Gender

| | |
|---|---|
| M | F |
|---|---|

 2. Year of birth:

| |
|------|
| 19__ |
|------|
3. Town of residence:

| |
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| |
|--|

 4. Faculty:

| |
|--|
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5. Could you please indicate your level of knowledge of the Friulian language?

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | I understand it and speak it regularly (quite often and/or most of the time) | |
| 2 | I understand it and speak it sometimes | |
| 3 | I understand it but do not speak it | |
| 4 | I neither understand nor speak it | |

6. Of those spoken, which is the most important for you, the one you like best, "your" language?

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Friulian Italian | Other. Please specify:..... |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|

7. What is your opinion of the University's commitment in favour of Friulian language and culture?

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | The University of Udine is right to work so hard on these issues. | |
| 2 | The University of Udine has not done enough: it should start more efficient programmes and invest more money in it. | |
| 3 | The University of Udine has already done too much, taking resources away from more important activities. | |
| 4 | The University of Udine should stop being involved in these issues. | |

8. How much do you agree with the following statements:

| | Very much Quite a lot Not much Not at all |
|---|--|
| 1. I like to hear Friulian spoken. | |
| 2. I consider Friulian to be an important factor for human relationships. | |
| 3. When I meet people who speak Friulian I imagine them to be more helpful and easygoing. | |
| 4. It is more important to understand each other, independently of the language used. | |
| 5. Young people who know Friulian but don't speak it, do so because they are afraid that people would think less of them. | |
| 6. Friulian is doomed because the rural society that nourished and supported it is now dead. | |
| 7. Friulian is mainly spoken by people with a low level of schooling. | |
| 8. Given its nature and features, Friulian can only be used for colloquial purposes, with the family and friends. | |
| 9. Many are those who still speak Friulian. | |
| 10. People think it is more "prestigious" to speak Italian. | |

9. Below is a short list of words. Without thinking too much, write down beside each word the object or idea that comes into your mind.

| | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Friuli | |
| 2 | Friulian | |
| 3 | Italian | |

10. If Friulian were a degree of relationship, who would it be for you?

11. Using a maximum of 5 adjectives, describe the Friulian language.

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12. Using a maximum of 5 adjectives, describe the Friulian people.

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